

Comment

Response to Padilla Peralta, Dan-el. Citizenship's Insular Cases, from Ancient Greece and Rome to Puerto Rico. *Humanities* 2019, 8, 134

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Abstract: Dan-el Padilla Peralta's exquisite exploration of citizenship and displacement across two millennia draws on sources from ancient Greece and Rome as well as modern empires, including the U.S., and proposes two creative heuristic devices—the “insular scheme” and “radical inclusion”—that enable us to better understand both the marginalizing experience and the animating possibilities of immigrant citizenship. In my response to his piece, I assess the relevance of these ideas to the history of Puerto Ricans in relation to the United States. Puerto Ricans, caught in the “insular scheme” of U.S. citizenship since American citizenship was imposed on them in 1917, are the most obvious exemplars of “differentiated citizens” in the nation and have struggled in multiple ways with the question of inclusion as citizens. I examine the ways that Puerto Ricans have used the language of recognition as a way to explain the aspiration of equitable citizenship, a vision of belonging in the nation that sounds much like Padilla Peralta's “radical inclusion.”

Keywords: citizenship; migration; displacement; recognition; empire; Puerto Rico

We tend to think of citizenship as a fixed position—a place of safety, one to which the luckiest of immigrants may eventually cross—and we may also assume that, as a long-established set of rules and practices, it rests on a stable historical foundation. But citizenship, as both a historical idea and a civic condition, is more accurately described as a moving target. When I was writing a book about how Puerto Ricans in the U.S. navigated their political status in the 20th century, I got bogged down in mapping a genealogy of ideas about citizenship in the modern nation state. It was an enterprise that, as Dan-el Padilla Peralta notes in “Citizenship's Insular Cases, from Ancient Greece and Rome to Puerto Rico,” zigzagged through an assortment of experiments with empire, and connecting those dots yielded less insight than I'd hoped as I tried to track Puerto Ricans' political goals as citizen-immigrants.¹ So I changed course, deciding to “follow the things” that mattered to people—in this case, ideas about status defined not by the state, but by the people who lived in a particularly odd place, legally speaking, on its margins.² I will say more below about this historian's journey into political theory—landing at the politics of recognition, a more concrete thing, in many respects, than citizenship itself—and will explain that journey's notable parallels with the “ideational insular scheme” that Padilla Peralta traces

¹ I sometimes refer to early Puerto Rican migrants in the U.S. (between 1917 and about 1945) as “citizen-immigrants” because, although they were U.S. citizens after 1917, they experienced their lives in the U.S. much like other immigrants did when they migrated to the U.S., adjusting to an unfamiliar language and culture and being treated as foreigners. This presumption and experience of foreignness shifted after the massive mid-century migration from the island; the majority of migrants continued to land in New York City, where they could settle into well-established communities of other Puerto Ricans, diminishing some of the impact of cultural foreignness.

² This phrase is borrowed from Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value” in Appadurai (2011, p. 5). Mine is a loose adaptation of Appadurai's directive, since he was concerned with objects, not ideas, as “things.”

here as a metonym for citizenship, especially as it pertains to migrants.³ First, though, I want to reflect on how Padilla Peralta's essay leads us towards a precise assessment of the transhistorical dynamics of citizenship and what actually happens to those who pursue it from outside.

1. Differentiated Citizenship

In his meandering account of citizenship spanning 2500 years, Padilla Peralta emphasizes the dynamics of citizenship—the process and the relationships involved in the creation of insiders and outsiders—rather than locating citizenship as a status, a static base of civic personhood. He argues for regarding citizenship as an “insular scheme,” in part because it is open to some and closed to others, producing an endless reaching for shore, “a fantasy of connectivity across distance.” This scheme entails the sorting of people into a chain (archipelago) of statuses depending on each group's value and relationship to the metropole, and has done so for millennia. Padilla Peralta tells us that certain communities in the Roman empire were granted “partial citizenship,” which required military service but no right to vote or hold office at Rome. “In this fashion,” he writes, “differentiated citizenship was born—and it was not long before tensions materialized in its wake.”⁴ If we were to substitute here “Puerto Rico” for “certain communities” and “the U.S.” for “Rome,” this passage could hardly provide a more accurate summary of how the U.S. laid the foundation of its new empire at the turn of the 20th century.

Another key feature of citizenship that interests Padilla Peralta is its endless repetitions, as both a historical and an ideational phenomenon.⁵ Padilla Peralta asserts that the continually bounded nature of citizenship makes its “insularity” more than a metaphor. In laying out his argument, he invokes the Caribbeanist literary scholar Antonio Benítez-Rojo, whose book *The Repeating Island* stands as the reigning manifesto of the Caribbean's fractal geographies and historicity. Benítez-Rojo describes his investigation of the Caribbean's “historiographic turbulence” as part of a “never-ending tale”; the parallels Padilla Peralta draws between ancient Rome and Puerto Rico bear out this claim. Indeed, Puerto Rico's 20th-century experience with citizenship repeats elements of a case from 306 BCE, described by the Roman historian Livy, wherein a community refused the offer of Roman citizenship on the grounds that “... citizenship would of necessity be a type of punishment.”⁶ Luis Muñoz Marín, one of Puerto Rico's early nationalist leaders, made precisely the same point 2222 years later (in 1916) in testimony before the U.S. Congress: “My countrymen, who, precisely the same as yours, have their dignity and self-respect to maintain, refuse to accept a citizenship of an inferior order, a citizenship of the second class, which does not permit them to dispose of their own resources nor to live their own lives nor to send to this Capitol their proportional representation.”⁷ Padilla Peralta ends his description of the Roman case with a question whose relevance has not faded over two millennia and that Puerto Ricans have been asking since before they were yoked with U.S. citizenship in 1917:

³ Because I use both “migrant” and “immigrant” in this essay—in a way that is intentional but may seem haphazard—I'll offer some explanation of my usage. “Migrant” is a general term that describes both people who move from one region to another within a country *and* people who move across an international border, from one country to another. (Two U.S. examples of the former are “Okies”, poor farmers—mostly White—leaving the Dust Bowl during the Depression and looking for better opportunity in California, and African Americans who fled the violence and poverty of the South during the early 20th century Great Migration to the North and West.) Many migrants who move across international borders may be accurately called “immigrants”, a term that implies a voluntary move from one country to another; but, if the migrants are fleeing their homeland, they are “refugees” or “asylees”, depending on where and how they declare their need for asylum. Despite these distinctions and for the sake of simplicity, I use “immigrant” in this essay as a general term to describe foreign-born people in the U.S., even if some of those people may be actually refugees or asylees. Finally, Puerto Ricans who move to the mainland U.S. are migrants, not immigrants, since they do not cross an international border; however, as I explain in the first footnote, I sometimes refer to early 20th century Puerto Ricans as “citizen-immigrants” as a way to signal their unique experience as U.S. citizens who were also considered foreigners.

⁴ (Padilla Peralta 2019, pp. 4–5).

⁵ (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 1).

⁶ (Benítez Rojo 1996, pp. ix, 3; Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 5).

⁷ (*Congressional Record* 1916, p. 7472).

“Under what conditions does the state’s assignment of second-class citizenship do double work as a species of punishment?”⁸

Padilla Peralta explores how the punishments that outsiders and Others experience within the citizenship regime is delivered via a continual process of displacement, deferral, and exclusion, taking examples from ancient Greek and Roman sources, mid-century American author Richard Wright, and from Padilla Peralta’s own life. The migrant embarks on what turns out to be an endless quest to “earn the polity’s trust,” to win the elusive equality promised by citizenship. For Puerto Ricans in the early 20th century, before the Jones-Shaforth Act settled the question in 1917, deferral was the only option. Bernardo Vega, a Puerto Rican labor leader who migrated to the U.S. from Puerto Rico as a young man in 1916, recounted in his memoirs his bewilderment at the process of seeking the protection of U.S. citizenship. Attending evening classes to learn English, Vega asked his teacher, “How can I become an American citizen?” “Just follow the steps,” she told him; she had explained the bureaucratic procedures of applying for citizenship to students from many different nations. But Vega knew there were, then, no “steps” that Puerto Ricans could follow, since the question of Puerto Rico’s legal and territorial relationship to the U.S. remained unresolved.⁹

After 1917, the experience of displacement and deferral for 1,250,000 Puerto Rican islanders and about 15,000 Puerto Ricans living in the United States continued, though in different form. Congress extended what they called American citizenship to Puerto Ricans, though it was in fact a partial citizenship: residents of the island could be drafted into the U.S. military but could not vote in federal elections, and their representation in the U.S. Congress was not proportional nor equal to that of other U.S. citizens.¹⁰ Puerto Rican migrants in New York—who supposedly possessed the same rights as their mainland neighbors—began to deploy their U.S. citizenship to demand sovereign status for their island and to protect themselves from the increasingly visible prejudice they confronted in their neighborhoods and workplaces. They engaged in what Padilla Peralta refers to as a “politics-on-the-move” of a dispersed and displaced people, trying to generate greater political visibility by creating belonging within “a network of islands” to counter the boundedness and exclusions of the citizenship they were reaching for. Anthropologist Michel Laguerre refers to such networks as “diasporic citizenship,” wherein migrants bring their distant preoccupations into the metropole and try to leverage their location there to influence both “the politics of here” and the politics of home.¹¹ In this way, Puerto Ricans in New York worked to get their East Harlem Congressional representative to support independence for their island in the 1920s; they organized protests against their exclusion from Home Relief and employment programs in the city during the Depression; and in the 1940s, many enlisted in the military, expecting that fighting on the side of democracy and liberty would give them a louder voice in the debates over worldwide decolonization, including Puerto Rico, that exploded during the war. Yet, by the time a massive postwar migration began bringing 50,000 migrants a year from Puerto Rico to New York, it was clear to residents of the diaspora that three decades of differential citizenship had yielded only deferred aspirations.

2. Recognition and ‘Radical Inclusion’

By the 1950s, after repeated episodes of articulating rights-based claims to equal protection as American citizens, and confronting over and over the denials of what historian Rebecca Scott has called “the dignitary components of citizenship,” Puerto Ricans in the U.S. tired of arguing over what their

⁸ (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 5).

⁹ Until 1898, Puerto Ricans were Spanish colonial subjects; between 1900 and 1917, they were defined as U.S. nationals; in 1917, they became United States citizens. See (Iglesias 1984, p. 27).

¹⁰ This remains the case. Puerto Rico’s Resident Commissioner serves as the island’s single representative in Congress, representing 3.2 million constituents—compared to about 700,000 in the average U.S. congressional district—and is not allowed to vote on final versions of bills on the House floor.

¹¹ (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 9; Laguerre 1998, pp. 8–13). On the “politics of here”, see (Thomas 2010, p. 36).

citizenship was supposed to do for them.¹² Instead of chasing the elusive dream of equal citizenship, civic leaders began to speak in terms of claims for recognition. What did that mean? “Recognition” sounds less concrete than citizenship as a goal of civic life; but looking more closely, we understand that the social and interpersonal dynamics of recognition—and the politics of pursuing it—are at least as real and specific as any everyday experience of “citizenship.” When writer and activist Jesús Colón noted in the mid-1950s that “the community is struggling to express itself more forcefully, to unite itself, to gain recognition and the rights it is entitled to, in the city at large,” he referred to a series of actions.¹³ After residents of El Barrio, in Puerto Rican East Harlem, exploded in a riot following protests against police violence in 1967, a young community organizer named Ted Vélez spelled out to a journalist the result of aspirations deferred: “Violence comes out of frustration, nobody listening, not having organizations effective enough, not having recognition, respect, dignity,” he explained.¹⁴

These were not invocations of a theoretical approach. They were sharp articulations of experience, descriptions of responses to “the shattering realization that one is a disposable subject,” as Padilla Peralta puts it.¹⁵ Puerto Ricans, migrants and children of migrants, knew by mid-century that their citizenship did not protect them from invisibility and disposability, and demanded what G. W. F. Hegel, the 19th-century philosopher of history, had identified as human agents’ need for “intersubjective recognition.” Invoking recognition, Colón and other political leaders insisted on being acknowledged as “full partners in social interaction” (Nancy Fraser) and heard as they recounted “the collective experience of violated integrity” (Jürgen Habermas); Vélez and his cohort of community organizers laid out the “grammar of social conflict” (Axel Honneth) and called attention to the consequences of “misrecognition” as a form of oppression (Charles Taylor).¹⁶

It is important to note here the wide range of possible outcomes of “misrecognition” and “violated integrity”—to acknowledge, that is, that the silencing of a group’s collective voice is different from, though connected to, the many forms of violence that may be inflicted on group members in a society marked by racism and xenophobia. While the racism African Americans experience in the U.S. is unique, distinct from that encountered by foreign migrants, Black and Brown people—and Asian Americans and Indigenous people—have shared the differentiated citizenship designed to prevent them from being heard when they describe how the schema of exclusion actually operate in their lives. Writer James Baldwin wrote in many places about the violence that both preceded and resulted from the “misrecognition” that continued to plague African Americans after they became U.S. citizens; among his last words on the subject were found in the notes he made for an unfinished book, *Remember This House*: “You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourselves. And furthermore, you give me a terrifying advantage. *You never had to look at me. I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me.*”¹⁷

One crucial element of actualizing recognition is the acknowledgment of violence done to marginalized groups in the past—both real, physical violence and the violence of silencing their histories.¹⁸ “In order to be knowingly in each other’s presence we must somehow share each other’s past,” wrote anthropologist Johannes Fabian on the eve of the formation of the Democratic Republic

¹² (Scott 2005, p. 256). On the “institutionally embedded social practices” of citizenship, see also (Somers 1993).

¹³ (Colón 1955).

¹⁴ (Kihss 1967, p. 20; 1960; Thomas 2010, p. 13).

¹⁵ (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 19).

¹⁶ (Hegel [1910] 2003, pp. 106–9; Fraser 2000, pp. 107–20; quote from pp. 113–14; Habermas 1994, pp. 108, 110, 113; Honneth and Fraser 2003, pp. 137, 208). Note that Honneth borrows the phrase “moral grammar of social conflict” from Hegel; see (Honneth 1995); see Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition” in Taylor (1994, pp. 26–36).

¹⁷ These materials for Baldwin’s book in progress were compiled and edited by Raoul Peck under the title *I Am Not Your Negro*; see (Peck and Baldwin 2017, p. 103). Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Such acknowledgement is one of the primary goals of the dozens of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) that have been convened around the world in the last forty years to address histories of state-sponsored political and racial violence in the 20th century as well as genocide against indigenous peoples and other racial or ethnic minority groups. Most TRCs’ approach to restorative justice relies on the principles outlined by theorists of recognition. See, for example, (Yashar 2012).

of the Congo, a nation that had passed through a post-colonial transition as Zaire following its independence in 1971 from Belgian colonizers, whose brutality had been pointed out by a few White observers but almost entirely excised from their historical record until the late 20th century.¹⁹ Fabian was born at the start of World War II in a German town that was soon occupied by the Soviets before it became part of Poland after the war, and his personal experience must somewhere underlie his conviction that, in order to understand any nation's past, we need to be able to track how intersubjective recognition operates to connect the psychic (memory) and the societal (history) into a living story in which every person can locate themselves. Padilla Peralta's investigation insists on the necessity of tracing such connections. We cannot understand differentiated citizenship, he says, without acknowledging the immigrant's subconscious and thereby seeing how their experience is shaped by not just their role within the state—as citizens or non-citizens—but by the vision they assemble of the nation itself.

Padilla Peralta describes his own experience as an immigrant to illustrate his concluding argument that “the insular case of imperfectly realized citizenship is a head case: the Sisyphean labor of having always to retrace one's journey across uneven terrain and fragmented domains.” In the course of this brief “undocumented psycho-biography,” Padilla Peralta notes that he embraced the opportunity to study Latin and Greek in high school because he understood how such knowledge and the prestige it lent could lead him toward the possibility of civic belonging in the U.S. Surely he has been asked why a Dominican immigrant in the U.S. studies ancient Greece and Rome, the assumption being that immigrants and other marginalized people who gain entry into the academy will primarily “study themselves.”²⁰ Padilla Peralta answers that freighted question in his essay, showcasing the wisdom and necessity of connecting far-flung stories by tracking the transhistorical conditions—interpersonal, societal, historical—that work to erase biographical narratives like his.²¹

In the final segment of his essay, titled “The Fever Dream of Civic Belonging,” Padilla Peralta argues for replacing differentiated citizenship, the reigning model for 2500 years, with a citizenship model based on what he calls “radical inclusion,” the best way he can see to push back against the repeated denials he and other immigrants experience in their adoptive country.²² We can discern two meanings of *radical* here, the first coming from its Latin origin and pointing to the idea that inclusion is supposed to lie at the root of the social experience in the United States. Puerto Rican writer Jack Agüeros addressed the failed promises of this foundational ideal in a 1971 account of his 1940s New York childhood titled “Halfway to Dick and Jane: A Puerto Rican Pilgrimage.” Agüeros described encounters with police who herded dark-skinned children off street corners and surveilled their play in city parks, demanding, “What are you kids doing in this neighborhood? Why don't you kids go back where you belong?” Agüeros recalled his 10-year-old outrage, tinged with the irony of understanding that his rhetorical questions were dangerously naïve: “Where we belonged! Man, I had written compositions about America. Didn't I belong on the Central Park tennis courts? Couldn't I watch Dick play? Weren't these policemen working for me too?”²³

Agüeros let that last question fall without comment, though it crackled at the time of his writing with outrage over a suspected police murder of a Puerto Rican man, imprisoned in Manhattan's municipal jail—“the Tombs”—in late 1970. I imagine Agüeros and Padilla Peralta and so many thousands of others reflecting on this question today and summing up their grim response: *differentiated citizenship is deadly*. This answer underscores the urgency of the second meaning of radical, upending the order of the status quo, a figurative play on the Latin meaning that emerged in the early 19th century. Radical inclusion would mean providing undifferentiated protections to eradicate the violent

¹⁹ (Fabian 1999, p. 68); see also (Fabian 1983, pp. 34–35, 177).

²⁰ (Judt 2010, p. 15).

²¹ (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 17).

²² (Padilla Peralta 2019, p. 17).

²³ (Agüeros 1971, p. 94).

exclusions of the insular scheme of American citizenship. The possibility may seem as remote now as at the dawn of Reconstruction, when the 15th Amendment guaranteed full U.S. citizenship to all Americans regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude; or, nearly a hundred years later, when the passage of both the Voting Rights Act and the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 suggested the federal government's willingness to challenge the old exclusions of U.S. citizenship. Some degree of cynicism is the only logical response to this history in 2020, as the public lynchings first publicized by Ida B. Wells in the 1890s have morphed over a century into something different but related, and as the suppression of Black and Brown voters and the imprisonment of immigrants at our southern border stand, 55 years after the 1965 watershed, as among the most pressing issues in our domestic politics. Still, upholding and fighting for the ethics of radical inclusion is a powerful way forward. It is the only way to ensure that democracy—whose Greek root reminds us of its true meaning, the sovereignty of the people—will actually work for all of us.

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