
Puerto Rican Nationhood and the Diverse Nature of Collective Identity Construction

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Abstract: *Human rights vocabulary and institutional operations conceptualize people and society abstractly and in universal terms; this universal approach does not address the pluralities and intricacies of human experience or how colonized nations experience inequality within the UN system and within their colonial relationships. The Puerto Rican case troubles the universal human rights approach by demonstrating how collective identities are diverse in nature, rather than universally experienced, and how nations under colonial rule face heightened inequalities within the human rights system. The pages below engage with Arlene Dávila's Sponsored Identities and Hilda Lloréns' Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family to explore the complexities of Puerto Ricanness as a collective identity. I analyze the diversities within Puerto Ricanness as a collective identity in order to critique universal human rights approaches.*

Key words: Puerto Rico; collective identities; colonialism; universalism; human rights

Introduction

Puerto Rico has endured colonization for over four hundred twenty years and is the oldest colony in the world that is still under colonial rule. The Island was first colonized by Spain in 1493 and later by the United States in 1898. In 1952 the United States (US) declared Puerto Rico a commonwealth, which allowed the islanders to elect an Insular governor, operate an Insular judicial system, make select policy decisions, design a constitution which required US approval, and elect senators to the local government who do not have voting power in the US federal political system (Lloréns 2014). The United States does not recognize Puerto Ricans' right to self-determination and complete democracy despite these being basic international human rights (Bosque-Pérez and Colón Morera 2006). Moreover, the United Nations Charter declares that only states can become members of the United Nations (UN). Puerto Rico is not a sovereign state however Puerto Ricans share a strong (yet intrinsically diverse) collective identity based on culture and nationhood. Although Puerto Rico is not an independent nation-state, its residents envision Puerto Rico as a nation formed through culture. Since Puerto Rico is a nation and not a nation-state, the UN does not permit the Island to become a member of the institution. Therefore, Puerto Ricans cannot equally participate in the construction of international human rights norms or be equally protected by the norms. Countries with the greatest power in the United Nations generally have the greatest ability to shape the framing, design, and expected implementation of human rights. Less powerful nations, such as Puerto Rico, are coerced to lobby for their rights in the UN system despite not being awarded equality within the system. In general, human rights vocabulary and institutional

operations conceptualize people and society abstractly and in universal terms; this universal approach does not address the pluralities and intricacies of human experience or how colonized nations experience inequality within the UN system and within their colonial relationships (Kennedy 2004). The Puerto Rican case troubles the universal human rights approach by demonstrating how collective identities are diverse in nature, rather than universally experienced, and how nations under colonial rule face heightened inequalities within the human rights system. The pages below engage with Arlene Dávila's *Sponsored Identities* and Hilda Lloréns' *Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family* to explore the complexities of Puerto Ricanness as a collective identity. I analyze the diversities within Puerto Ricanness as a collective identity in order to critique universal human rights approaches.

Constructing the Puerto Rican Collective Identity

Have you heard the saying *a picture is worth a thousand words*? Photography, like human rights, socializes people and their understandings of identities. However there are power hierarchies among who can create, possess, and distribute photos. In *Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family*, Hilda Lloréns finds that US colonialism in Puerto Rico shaped photographic imaging of Puerto Ricanness. Within the first half of the twentieth century people on the Island who possessed cameras and who controlled what images were captured and distributed were generally colonialists who were wealthy, powerful, and white (Lloréns 2014). Often camera owners paid Puerto Ricans to stage photos and then commodified the photos to market transnationally for personal profit (Lloréns 2014). The images represented the islanders in simplistic manners and portrayed them as incompetent compared to colonialists. These socializing images encouraged people who encountered the photos to perceive Puerto Ricans in simplistic terms. However, Puerto Ricanness is diverse in nature and photos cannot adequately represent this diversity, especially when people producing and commodifying the photos are imperialists. Nevertheless, Hilda Lloréns interrogates the photos by deconstructing them and probing their historical contexts. She pinpoints how photographers and photo distributors had agency over which Puerto Ricans were chosen to represent the Puerto Rican identity and nation in photos, for who, and in what ways. Colonialists' photos were reminiscent of the colonial gaze that assumed colonial subjects were barbaric, of low intelligence, and inherently dependent. Images produced in the first half of the twentieth century regularly portrayed Puerto Ricans as tropical yet dependent "others," women were portrayed as laborers which conflicted with US ideologies that stigmatized women working in the public sphere, and black islanders were portrayed as protagonists (Lloréns 2014). These representations reflected US racist, classist, and sexist ideologies.

Puerto Rican artists also participated in constructing how the collective identity was framed through visual representations. Artists' representations of Puerto Ricanness reflected evolving and diverse ideologies about race, gender, modernity, and nationhood which were impacted by national, international, and global relationships (Lloréns 2014, xxiv, xxiii). In the early twentieth century no museums existed on the Island where artists could display their work (Lloréns 2014, 60). Thus, art about Puerto Ricanness circulated throughout the Island in networks of commerce, gift giving, and exchange. Just as there were power hierarchies within the production and distribution of photographs, there were also inequalities within who could construct and distribute art due to the required resources for such actions. Wealthier Puerto Ricans who generally were Creole had the greatest power over the production and distribution of art. Creole elite commonly framed themselves as opposing US colonialism, and portrayed the Puerto Rican nation as a white nation from Iberian descent rather than from Anglo-Saxon descent (Lloréns 2014, 21). Creole elite influence over the production and disbursement of representations of Puerto Ricanness worked to omit black islanders and non-Creole islanders from definitions of Puerto Ricanness.

While US imperialists and elite Creole islanders framed the Puerto Rican collective identity in narrow terms that reflected discriminatory ideologies, contestations over the identity were prevalent among diverse communities on the Island. Puerto Ricans had divisive opinions about who should be included in the identity, what the identity meant, and how relationships should be structured within the identity. These contestations symbolize the complex nature of power, that is, power is a “multiplicity of force relations” in which “struggles and confrontations [transforms] and strengthens, or reverses” power dynamics (Foucault 1978, 92-93). Collective identities, in the Puerto Rican case as well as in general, cannot be understood in monolithic terms, instead, they must be understood as complex categories that are neither static nor all encompassing. The identities are constantly being shaped and reshaped by various actors who claim the collective identity as well as by outside actors who gaze upon the identity and produce representations of it for personal motives. Actors who claim the collective identity due to intersections with people in the group rubric are diverse and at times have conflicting views and experiences with each other. Moreover, transnational relations, especially in cases where colonialism exists, impact how identities are shaped by outsiders and how they are perceived by outsiders.

In *Sponsored Identities* Arlene Dávila furthers the notion that collective identities are complex and rife with contestations. Similar to Lloréns, Dávila documents how visual representations of Puerto Ricans construct the Puerto Rican identity. She examines advertisements and images collected by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, founded in 1955, which is the Island’s first government institution responsible for defining the Puerto Rican identity. “With respect to national identity construction in an increasingly global context, the Puerto Rican case illustrates that what is of interest is not the prospect for the development of new identities... but rather the potential for these constructions to transform restrictive definitions of identity” (Dávila 1997, 250). Dávila challenges that there is a monolithic all encompassing Puerto Rican national identity, and instead delineates that there is no consensus on the collective identity’s meaning (Dávila 1997). She finds that the national identity was and is co-constructed by US based corporations’ marketing schemes for profit, grassroots political groups and activists, and the Island’s political parties that resist US colonialism through advocating for either revisions to the Island’s commonwealth status, for pro-statehood, or for pro-independence. These actors are in a constant power struggle among each other to define the Puerto Rican identity for personal motives.

The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture’s artifacts illustrate how grassroots political organizations asserted the Puerto Rican identity as aligned with other Latin American nations in regards to a shared language, colonial history, catholic religion, and cultural trends. Nevertheless, grassroots organizations in Puerto Rico have articulated conflicting views about Puerto Rican nationhood which makes efforts to essentialize the nation problematic. Grassroots organizations have commonly aligned with the views of either the Popular Democratic Party, the Independence Party, or the New Progressive Party. The Independence Party, which has not gained substantial support compared to the other two parties, argues that Puerto Rico must become independent from the United States in order to obtain full autonomy and access self-determination. The Popular Democratic Party (despite promoting the Island as a distinct nation through cultural markers such as the Puerto Rican flag and national anthem) argues that the Island should remain a commonwealth yet have increased agency and power (Dávila 1997, 32). The New Progressive Party insists that Puerto Rico must become the next US state. The conflicting approaches to Puerto Rican self-determination articulated by the political parties and grassroots political organizations demonstrate that there is disagreement among Puerto Ricans about the collective identity’s needs.

The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture’s artifacts also make clear that corporations have intervened in constructing the identity through marketing ploys for profit. For example, corporations

have become key sponsors of cultural activities on the Island and corporate funding of cultural events is only increasing (Dávila 1997). In her book Dávila includes a scene from a photo that is not rare: in one cultural festival (referred to as the Criolla del Panapén) there are giant balloon advertisements of light beer and Winston cigarettes that are five times the height of an average human. The advertisements shade the festival attendees while they discuss their cultural heritage. The event is held to represent and cherish the Puerto Rican collective identity, and to provide a space for local individuals and grassroots organizations to discuss the group rubric, yet the event is rife with US corporate advertisements towering over the attendees. Over \$12.2 billion dollars of corporate products are imported to the Island each year, which inundates islanders with marketing campaigns that frame and influence Puerto Ricans' needs and wants (Dávila 1997). Hegemonic influence over the wants and needs is designed by US based corporations to produce profit for the companies, not to preserve Puerto Rican culture, to advance human rights or democracy on the Island, or to promote the islanders' self-determination.

Analyzing Arlene Dávila's *Sponsored Identities* and Hilda Lloréns' *Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family* reveals that the Puerto Rican collective identity formed and is continuously reformed through contestations among a variety of forces, for example colonialists with personal motives, the US government, Insular government agencies, Insular political parties, grassroots political groups, and corporate greed. The list continues. The diverse actors' continuous exchanges produce a dialogue about Puerto Rican culture, nationhood, and identity, and prove that the collective Puerto Rican identity is diverse and ever-evolving. The identity cannot be articulated in simplistic terms, and outside influence over the identity must be recognized. People do not experience being Puerto Rican in exactly the same manner nor is the group rubric void of imperialist influence for the benefit of actors outside of the identity. How then, can the collective identity be defined simplistically and in general terms? What is lost when this task is attempted?

Conclusion

International human rights universalize identities with the goal of providing basic human rights to all people. While this ambition for human rights practitioners is generally kind natured, the theoretical design of universal human rights is too simplistic to adequately protect all people's humanity due to the ignorance of intricate human difference. Various people's needs are marginalized while others are prioritized regardless of who is most in need of human rights protections. Generalizing identities in human rights assure that people who are most powerful, and comparatively the least in need of human rights attention, influence humanitarian goals and procedures. Human rights are designed by elite actors (people with the resources and prestige to participate in the construction of human rights), and these actors are often far removed from the people they are responsible to help (people suffering extreme exploitation and subjugation). Therefore, human rights produce identity based power structures while striving to combat other structures of power that are adverse to humanity.

The Puerto Rican case troubles universal human rights even further. Human rights determine that all people have the right to democracy and self-determination, however, due to US colonialism and the UN's requirement that members to the institution must be states, Puerto Ricans are granted neither right comprehensively. Although the United States rarely ratifies human rights treaties, the state is an influential power holder in the UN system. In fact, the United Nations headquarters is in New York City and the United States is one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council which is responsible for admitting new members to the UN and assuring global security. The United States, then, is a dominant figure responsible for monitoring the safety of Puerto Rico and for considering Puerto Rico's

admittance into the United Nations. This is precarious considering the United States' colonial relationship to Puerto Rico.

Human rights are poorly designed for UN member states' citizens. Puerto Ricans are further burdened by US influence over the United Nations and US colonialism which prevents Puerto Ricans from effectively using the UN system to demand the rights to democracy and self-determination. The Puerto Rican case calls attention to the inadequate design of human rights and pinpoints how colonized nations endure heightened vulnerability in the UN system. Thus, it is evident that human rights based on universalized identities are problematic. Arlene Dávila's *Sponsored Identities* and Hilda Lloréns' *Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family* contribute to this discussion by exploring representations of Puerto Ricans by US actors and conflicting representations of the collective identity among Puerto Ricans. The publications reveal that Puerto Ricanness cannot be monolithically defined, and that a variety of forces shape constructions of the collective identity which is rife with contestations and contradictions and is ever-evolving. If Puerto Ricanness cannot be defined in universal terms for people under the group rubric, how can all of humanity be defined under universal human rights? Any attempts to define humanity or human groups simplistically are problematic.

Looking forward, new rights approaches must be designed. Human differences must be a central focus in the construction of human rights. People should ally in solidarity to conceptualize a revised human rights system attuned to diversity. Power structures should be disassembled. Colonialism should be recognized as illegal regardless of the colonizer's influence in the United Nations, and all people should have access to shape human rights goals. In the meantime, Puerto Ricans are left to strive to have their human rights recognized under the rule of US colonialism and within a broken UN system inapt to recognizing human complexity. When will these obstacles end?

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