

The Colonial Margins of Citizenship

By Samuel Hayat

By studying political and legal debates over citizenship through the prism of the colonial situation in the nineteenth century, in the metropole as well as the colonies, Silyane Larcher proposes a new genealogy of citizenship and asks us to rethink how the French Republic was constructed.

Reviewed : Silyane Larcher, *L'autre citoyen. L'idéal républicain et les Antilles après l'esclavage* (The Other Citizen: The Republican Ideal and the Caribbean after Slavery). Paris, Armand Colin, 2014. 384 p.

The abolition of slavery in 1848 marks the moment when 160,000 slaves in Guadeloupe and Martinique joined the French national community. Yet this emancipation constituted neither the inaugural act nor the endpoint of citizenship's history in France's first colonial empire. By placing this event within a longer historical trajectory, extending from the 1791 Constitution to the failure of an 1890 bill that sought to incorporate the French Caribbean into the metropole, Silyane Larcher's book offers a new history of citizenship—or, to be precise, two parallel histories of this concept.

On the one hand, the author retraces the history of parliamentary and legal debates relating to citizenship in the colonies as they pertain to the central question of reconciling an exceptional legal, social, and political situation with the universalism constitutive of post-revolutionary citizenship. On the other, Larcher sheds lights onto the hidden history of citizenship as an autonomous demand formulated by the colonized, who consisted of “free coloreds” (i.e., mestizos) and slaves, in addition to former slaves—categories whose very definition was integral to colonial governmentality.

Thus we have two histories, though they are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to give one precedence, either logically or chronologically: slave revolts and the demands of Caribbean or Guadeloupean legislators were not merely the results of debates in the metropole, but followed their own distinct logic and were realities with which the colonial state had to grapple. Thus Larcher has written not only a history of citizenship in the colonies, but also and most importantly a history of citizenship as it was shaped by colonial circumstances, the need to integrate former slaves while confining them to a subordinate status, the necessity of preserving social peace against seemingly constant threats, and the construction of racial policies assumed to be compatible with the universal principles of 1789.

The Hegemony of a Discourse of Exception

The author has collected an impressive range of documents from written and oral sources in Cuba, the United States and Sierra Leone. His detailed narrative relies on the constant analysis of his sources, of their reliability, their interpretation, and their impact on their contemporaries, both of Western and African origin. As a very well written work, this book reads like a novel, while manifestly not being one: every detail is backed up by reliable information and the story, although it has a “happy ending”, is terrifying.

The facts, as we recall, were popularised in 1997 by a Steven Spielberg movie. When she clandestinely sailed away from a Sierra Leone fort –situated in British territory where slave trading had been outlawed since 1807–, the *Amistad* ship was transporting more than fifty slaves – many of them being of Mende and Temne origins, from the inland. There were a few women and about ten children, among whom three little girls. The ship was headed for the slave island of Cuba.

The prisoners did not belong to the upper classes of society; some of them were already slaves when they boarded the *Amistad*. Born into societies with common cultural traits and religious beliefs, they learnt collective self-organisation from the moment they were led to the factory where they were penned up like cattle. During the dreadful Middle Passage, they developed a very strong bond and they became close companions, cooperating to ensure their survival. This bond was fostered by their belonging to a powerful West African secret society that existed in their home region, the Poro, and by the extraordinary persona of the man who was to become their leader, Cinqué.

Citizenship in the Hands of the Colonized

Yet the story of this hegemony is peculiarly complicated when one’s gaze shifts from parliamentary circles in the metropole to the colonies themselves. One of the great strengths

of Larcher's book is the way it upsets the narrative of the triumph of the colonists and their connections in the metropole by bringing attention to the resistance of the colonized. The subject of the second chapter is the political struggles of the slaves and free coloreds—which were not necessarily identical—prior to the 1848 revolution. It seeks, in this way, to shed light on the longstanding tradition of “subaltern politics” (p. 95). Slaves did not passively endure political change arriving from the metropole: highly specific information networks, centered on ports, apprised them of events and their own interpretations of these incidents could spur autonomous political mobilization. For instance, by understanding the Declaration of the Rights of Man “as a *descriptive* text” (p. 104), slaves demanded, as early as August 1789, the freedom they believed this document promised them. The 1830 Revolution reignited the free coloreds' movement for civic equality, which they achieved in 1833, and brought them into the legal realm by stipulating that colonies, in some domains, would be ruled by law rather than decrees or regulations. But Larcher also demonstrates the political character of cruder modes of expressions: songs, cries, rifle shots, and other symbolic acts, like the slave who borrowed the revolutionary slogan for defending the constitutional Charter (*Charte*) by crying, while holding a dead cat, “Long live the cat (*chatte*)!” (p. 120)—a striking subversion of words and gestures in the name of freedom.

1848 and its Consequences

The abolition of slavery in 1848 and the adoption of universal manhood suffrage directly raised the question of the type of citizenship that would be offered to former slaves—a question that Larcher addresses in chapters 3 and 4, which consider the metropole and the colonies, respectively. Indeed, the status of freed slaves presented members of parliament with a problem: in the Indian, Senegalese, and Algerian colonies, the issue was incorporating into a community of citizens individuals governed by specific set of civil laws—an impossible task, resulting in the separation between “natives’ [*indigènes*], who were French subjects and non-citizens, on the one hand, and citizens of the French empire” (p. 139), on the other. In the colonies as well as the metropole, the accession of proletarians, who were often described as modern slaves, to active citizenship meant that the social question and legal and political issues were often closely intertwined. In the Caribbean, the 1848 revolution resulted in an insurrection, demands, and ultimately to the civil rights—notably the right to be included on civic registers and to marriage, to which Larcher devotes illuminating passages. These events underlined the importance, for the newly emancipated, of “the right to have rights” (p. 202).

The failure first of the social Republic, then of the Republic *tout court*, pushed leaders after 1848 to seek new means to contain the citizenry's emancipatory aspirations. In chapter 5, Larcher explores the way in which this project took shape at several levels: parliamentary representation for the colonies, won in 1848, was rejected by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in 1852; local institutions in the colonies were chosen by an electorate that excluded most former slaves and were controlled by a state-appointed governor; and the principle was adopted of legislation specific to the colonies, approved by the *Corps Législatif* (i.e., the

parliament) and adopted by decree. In each case, the principle of exception (*“régime d’exception”* [p. 203]) was supported by the same anthropological-historical discourse: on the one hand, a history of slavery meant that the colonial world was divided, unstable, and always teetering on the verge of civil war; on the other, former slaves had “become free, but the shadow of their former chains still loomed over their social identity” (p. 228), which rendered impossible—or pushed back to an infinitely receding horizon—the creation of a community of equals.

Justification of Exclusion

Finally, the last chapter is devoted to the Republic’s return, following the Empire’s collapse in 1870. The aspiration for liberty was reborn—though this was not enough to ensure the success of assimilationist projects. In Martinique, on September 22, 1870, the news of the Sedan defeat provoked an insurrection, the assassination of a White Creole planter, and dozens of fires, along with cries of “Long Live the Republic! Long Live the Prussians!” (p. 266). This reaction is explained by the massive inequalities that had emerged under the Second Empire and the resulting climate, in which racial and social contestation were indistinguishable. In the following years, White Creoles, former slaves, and Black elites participated—not without resistance—in local elections, schools, and parliamentary representation, yet some aspects of the principle of exception were maintained, notably in labor legislation. As under the Second Empire, these exceptions were justified by “the politicization of historical and social legacies that had effectuated a veritable production of otherness” (p. 309), the idea that past experiences of slavery had been inscribed into the very bodies of Black people—a form of racialization that was anthropological and historical, not simply biological. In this way, the new Republic, rather than bringing about the social emancipation of former slaves, based its colonial policy on the “sophism” that “freed from one master, former slaves, more than others, nevertheless required a master’s authority” (p. 310-311). Henceforth, this master would be the State.

A New Direction for the History of Political Ideas

By always hewing as closely as possible to the actors’ own discourse, the meaning and logic of which Larcher meticulously reconstructs, the work combines historical density and philosophical depth. This twofold orientation is evident in the references she uses to support her analysis, in addition to numerous colonial and nineteenth-century historians: Pierre Rosanvallon’s work on the conceptual history of the political, and particularly citizenship, in the nineteenth century; “post-emancipation studies,” which retell the story of slavery by placing slave agency at the forefront of their arguments; Étienne Balibar, the author of the book’s illuminating preface, on the tension between universality and particularity; Michel Foucault on governmentality; Aimé Césaire on revolutionary universalism’s impact in the

colonies; and, finally, Jacques Rancière whose name is invoked throughout the book to make the point that colonialism turned citizenship into an occasion for disagreement and a constantly recurring dispute about the contents of equality.

In this way, Larcher's book participates in a welcome renewal of political theory and the history of ideas, founded on a decentering from recognized scholars, an historical examination of sources (which, in this instance, are numerous and varied—printed works, parliamentary archives, national overseas archives, and so on), and the reintroduction of social groups into analytical frameworks. Its argument remains centered on discourse, but to the extent that it shapes law, participates in apparatuses of governmentality, and supports resistance. It seeks, in this way, through “a conceptual genealogy of French citizenship from the standpoint of the Caribbean margins” (p. 21), to shed light on a theoretical problem: to reflect on the paradoxes of Caribbean citizenship, without resorting to overly facile arguments such as unsurpassable internal contradictions or the mendacity of the dominant class. For this theoretical problem was primarily posed by individuals who were debating citizenship during the nineteenth century and who tried to conceive of forms adapted to the exceptional circumstances of the colonies. The various actors in this story were, of course, motivated by interests—White Creoles vs. the metropole and the Blacks, free colored men v. the Whites and, at times, the slaves—but the negotiations, deliberations, and protests in which they participated shared a common language: that of citizenship. This language was mobile and flexible and could justify numerous exceptions, but it was nevertheless a language of universalism, one that, as Larcher repeatedly demonstrates, cannot be reduced to a tool for legitimating colonial authority, if only because it also contributed to the revolts and demands first of slaves, then of former slaves, as well as their allies.

In addition to its important historiographical contributions, the book thus offers new and powerful philosophical considerations on the dialectic between the universal and the particular, emancipation and domination, and the same and the other that occurs around citizenship. Its genealogical approach provides thoughtful assistance at a time when racism and anti-racism are being reconfigured and scholars and activists are interrogating the way that France (and Europe more generally) have been shaped by their colonial past. Two lessons in particular emerge. First, it would be a political and historical mistake to reject universalism as nothing more than a mask for colonial domination. One must, to the contrary, tear universalism away from the permanent lie that is its use by established powers (most notably the state) to justify their oppression of the colonized's posterity—by controlling how they dress, congregate, and make demands. Second, colonial racism, beginning in the nineteenth century, drew not only on discourses relating to the Other's body, but also on its culture and history. The New Right's belief in ethnic difference, which maintains that one must recognize and preserve each people's cultural specificities by refusing mixture and immigration, is pervasive in contemporary politics and media. It is not, however, a recent phenomenon: its origins lie in the way the colonial regime of exception was justified on the basis of the past history of the colonized, and notably—irony of ironies—on their former status as slaves. Larcher, through this book, offers a welcome reminder that it is only by liberating our identity from the essentialisms that constrain it that emancipation can be achieved.

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