The Illusion of Citizenship and Sovereignty in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to analyze the aspirational universality of the terms "citizenship" and "sovereignty" by focusing on the nature of these terms in the Caribbean. This is accomplished by establishing the traditional definitions of sovereignty and citizenship before comparing the central tenets of these definitions with case studies from the Caribbean which challenge, contradict, or negate these conventional definitions. Specifically, this essay will discuss the promises of birth-right citizenship entrenched in the constitution of the Dominican Republic in contrast with the statelessness and non-citizenship that those of Haitian descent experience in the Dominican Republic. Next, sovereignty is complicated when its traditional definition is compared to the Caribbean's history of foreign intervention, specifically in Haiti and Jamaica. This concludes that sovereignty and citizenship are situation-specific constructs and illusionary in the Caribbean. These illusions' prevalence is contextualized by building off the work of Yarimar Bonilla and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who grouped these terms as "North Atlantic Universals" to reinforce the non-existence of citizenship and sovereignty, according to their traditional definitions in the Caribbean.

Introduction

The terms "citizenship" and "sovereignty" are quintessential concepts that often come with the implication of being static and universal. However, what would it mean to think about citizenship and sovereignty as situation-specific constructs? This essay will argue that citizenship and sovereignty in the Caribbean are contradictory illusions when one compares the state's promises of citizenship and sovereignty with its reality. The concept of citizenship will be disproven by contrasting birthright citizenship and promises of inclusion with the exclusionary policies seen in the Dominican Republic towards those of Haitian

descent. Similarly, the concept of sovereignty will be disproven by first looking at the traditional promises of sovereignty against the inability to self-govern brought about through foreign intervention, as seen with Haiti and Jamaica. These case studies will discuss how citizenship and sovereignty are "North Atlantic Universals," as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Yarimar Bonilla discussed, which points to their illusionary nature.[1]

Citizenship

The prospect of citizenship comes with the promise of inclusion by being part of a community. Traditionally in sociology, citizenship has been defined by T.H. Marshall as "a status which is enjoyed by a person who is a full member of a community."[2] This definition also comes with the understanding that citizenship implies an entitlement to the civil rights of individual freedoms, the right to participate in the politics of a community through voting or holding office, and the social right to a particular standard of living, achieved through the access to supports such as welfare or educational services.[3] Citizenship comes in different forms, such as birthright citizenship. As its name implies, this concept refers to citizenship being granted to all born in a nation-state. Within the Caribbean context, the idea of birthright citizenship appears in the constitution of the Dominican Republic. The 1865 Dominican Constitution included the following section, "all those that have been born or will be born in (Dominican) territory (are Dominicans), whatever the nationality of their parents."[4] The context in which this constitution was written, recently after the Dominican Republic and Haiti fought against their Spanish occupiers, promoted the unity of both nations and their peoples.[5] This paints the picture that the state welcomes and will provide for all born under its domain. However, interpreting and enforcing such laws reveals that this may not be the case.

The reality is that from the 1980s onwards, the government of the Dominican Republic began to withhold identification documents from those with suspected Haitian descent.[6] This served as an example in which citizenship was withheld or denied based on the recipient's skin colour, accent, clothing, or occupation.[7] Despite the constitutionally entrenched policy of birthright citizenship, the judges of the Dominican Constitutional Tribunal ruled that Haitian immigrants who originally crossed the border to work on sugar fields were labelled as temporary visitors "in transit," thus making them. Even their children born in the Dominican Republic are no longer eligible for Dominican citizenship, suspending the citizenship of all suspected Haitians born after 1929.[8] Labelling the Haitian workers as "in transit" strategically bypassed the citizenship their children would be entitled to via the birthright citizenship policy from the 1865 Dominican Constitution.[9] By being unable to attain an identification document, these Dominican-born non-citizens of Haitian descent also do not have access to the rights of a citizen, such as to vote, get married, travel abroad, or receive higher education.[10] This exclusion was strategically done to define the Dominican Republic in opposition to Haiti, depicting the country as whiter and thus more "civilized" in contrast to the proudly black nation of Haiti.[11] This shows a clear divergence from the citizens initially promised in the Dominican Constitution through strategic methods of exclusion and the denial of citizenship.

Additionally, definitions of citizenship do not mention the reality of the state's preference for the ideal citizen shaping who gets to be a citizen. The colonial legacy in the Caribbean left behind the idea of a "coherent nation" without considering the racial and hierarchical nature of the Caribbean.[12] This created the illusion of a united nation which simultaneously hid the reality of stratification along racial and social lines. These conditions exacerbated the division between the favoured or ideal citizen and the denial of

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[1] Yarimar Bonilla, "Ordinary Sovereignty," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (2013): 158.
[2] John Scott, "Citizenship," in *A Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford University Press, 2014.
[3] Scott.
[4] Amelia Hintzen, "Permanently in Transit: Blackness and Non-Citizenship in the Caribbean," *Translation (Kampala, Uganda)*, no. 127, (2019): 219.
[5] Hintzen, 219.

[6] Hintzen, 216.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Hintzen, 217.
[9] Hintzen, 224.
[10] Hintzen, 226.
[11] Hintzen, 220.
[12] Aaron Kamugisha, "The Coloniality of Citizenship in the Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean," *Race & Class* 49, no. 2 (2007): 24.

citizenship to those who did not match the state's criteria. The Caribbean postcolonial state was conceived to be belonging to the Caribbean middle class, as they were considered to have the social and cultural capital to rule.[13] This was because the middle class emulated the consumption of the West, making them corrupt as such consumption is incompatible with the Caribbean.[14] Overall, the archetypal citizen in the Caribbean is the middle-class male, who, in turn, reproduces the nation.[15] For example, despite the entitlement of all citizens to political participation, the vast majority of those involved in parliament, business, and the courts are men.[16] Thus, citizenship is primarily focused on the state's view of the ideal citizen, resulting in an uneven expression of citizenship in the Caribbean.

Sovereignty

The pattern of the divergence of traditional definitions of citizenship with the realities of citizenship in the Caribbean follows similarly in the case of sovereignty. According to Bonilla, the "modern sovereign state" is imbued with a form of power that is *singular, absolute, territorially confined within the nation's space*, and vertically rooted in the apparatus of the state. The Treaty of Westphalia holds that *national governments have supreme authority over their internal affairs* and that the *other states cannot intervene* under the exception of threat or obligation of the alliance."[17] Such a definition implies that sovereignty signifies that a state has authority, agency, and power over its internal affairs without the intervention of foreign powers.

The existence of sovereignty in the Caribbean is complicated, as seen in the example of Haiti. Sovereignty is not inherently gained at the moment of independence. Instead, a state must have dedicated leadership and funds to establish and maintain its authority and control, which this essay will argue was absent in Haiti at its inception due to foreign

influence. Following a successful slave revolution and fight for independence from France, Haiti was declared the first free Black nation on 1 January 1804.[18] However, by 17 April 1825, France demanded that Haiti pay a reparation of one hundred and fifty million francs to acknowledge Haiti's independence and as indemnity for the loss of the profits earned from its former colony.[19] Haiti's "independence debt," as Craemer phrases it, was intentionally created to be ten times the amount of Haiti's revenue, estimated to be 15 million as of 1823, necessitating the young state to take out loans to pay the debt.[20] The debt took 156 years to pay, and considering that 80 percent, as of 1915, of Haiti's revenue, was dedicated to servicing this debt, the development of the country's infrastructure and education and healthcare systems were also stunted.[21] This is the first of many examples in which a foreign power, such as France, intervenes with Haiti and hinders its ability to have "supreme authority over their internal affairs."[22] Other powers, such as the United States during its occupation of Haiti between 1915-1934, may create the illusion of providing infrastructure and a centralized government. Still, they had little interest in establishing long-lasting economic or governmental development.[23] Thus through repeated foreign intervention, Haiti is intentionally kept in a state of underdevelopment due to the West's fear of Haiti inspiring other states with its insurrectionary action.[24]

Despite the definition of sovereignty as a self-contained state, within the Caribbean, sovereignty is intentionally undermined by, and in justification for, foreign intervention. In the case of Jamaica, structural adjustment and neoliberal globalization have depleted the state's ability to provide social services for most of the population.[25] Described as an "uneven alliance" by M. Jacqui Alexander, the conditions attached to the funds given to a nation forcibly open the country to foreign investment and exchange, which

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13 Kamugisha, 24.
14 Kamugisha, 25.
15 M. Jacqui Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review* 48, no. 1 (1994): 7, 20.
16 Kamugisha, 31.
17 Bonilla, 156. Emphasis added with italicization to highlight areas of the definition that will later be problematized.
18 Thomas Craemer, "Estimating Slavery Reparations: Present Value Comparisons of Historical Multigenerational Reparations

Policies," *Social Science Quarterly*, 96 (2015): 643.
19 Craemer, 643.
20 Craemer, 652.
21 Craemer, 639, 643.
22 The quotation draws upon the definition of sovereignty found in Bonilla.
23 Robert Fatton Jr., "Haiti: The Saturnalia of Emancipation and the Vicissitudes of Predatory Rule," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): 128.
24 Fatton, 117.
25 Kamugisha, 34.

simultaneously reduces the consumption of local goods in favour of its foreign counterparts.[26] Similarly, rather than provide for its citizens, the needs of Caribbean citizens are sidelined in favour of the tourist economy, focusing once again on foreign visitors rather than the country's citizens.[27] Such conditions stifle a state and hinder its claims to and expression of sovereignty. Using the example of Haiti's supposed "exceptionalism," Bonilla argued that the sovereign nation in the Caribbean is an imagined construct strategically imposed on the Caribbean.[28] Foreign powers have used the "failure" of sovereignty in Caribbean states to justify their continued intervention under the guise of "freedom, democracy, and human rights."[29] The reality is that the "failure" of sovereignty results from intentional sabotage by foreign intervention, undermining the very conception of sovereignty as a state's uninterrupted individual rule.

Analysis

The case studies discussed in this essay have shown that the realities of exclusionary citizenship and the undermining of sovereignty through the crippling of self-determination negate the existence of traditional citizenship and sovereignty in the Caribbean.[30] Instead, this essay argues that these concepts exist in complicated and contradictory forms in the Caribbean because the expectation that conventional citizenship and sovereignty exist stems from Western ideals' imposition on Caribbean society. In reality, citizenship and sovereignty, according to Bonilla, are North Atlantic Universals that, as argued by Trouillot, depict themselves as universal while also serving as "thinly veiled attempts at establishing a normative vision of the world."[31] This point refers to the idea that sovereignty and citizenship are terms defined by their realities in North Atlantic or the West but are understood to be universally applicable, then used as frames of reference for the rest of the world. The issue in this situation is that the Western societal and economic worldviews, and thus their aspirations, are incompatible with that of the Caribbean.[32] While

theorizing citizenship, Marshall noted a "tension between the principles of citizenship" and its reality in a capitalistic setting and his def. His citizenship has been criticized for its Eurocentric and idealistic view.[33] Additionally, birthright citizenship was largely prevalent in the West following the abolition of slavery as a nationalist tactic to unify the children of formerly enslaved people with pre-existing citizens, making it an inherently Western construct.[34] Alternatively, the Caribbean is an inherently racially hierarchical, patriarchal, and heteronormative society, influencing its implementation of citizenship.[35] As for sovereignty, Bonilla argues this concept is more a "provincial myth" used to justify foreign intervention, which ultimately controls the Caribbean without being accountable.[36] As a result, traditional citizenship and sovereignty appear to be contradictory "failures" within the Caribbean. These concepts are aspirations depicted as the universal norm when they are culturally-specific illusions.[37]

Therefore, this essay has argued that when the traditional definitions of citizenship and sovereignty are compared to the realities of the Caribbean, these terms are illusions. This was achieved first through a discussion of citizenship and exclusion in the Caribbean, namely seen with the denial of citizenship to those of Haitian descent, despite the promises of the Dominican constitution. Similarly, the individual and absolute rule implied by sovereignty is problematized by considering examples of foreign intervention in Haiti and Jamaica, which crippled the ability of each nation to be self-sufficient. This culminated in a discussion of how the disjunction between the expectations and realities of citizenship and sovereignty in the Caribbean indicates the imposition of incompatible Western ideals onto the region, creating the illusion of Caribbean "failure" regarding citizenship and sovereignty.

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[26] Alexander, 16.
[27] Kamugisha, 28-29.
[28] Bonilla, 153.
[29] Bonilla, 162.
[30] The term "traditional" refers to citizenship and sovereignty in accordance with the definitions mentioned earlier in this essay.
[31] Bonilla, 158.

[32] Kamugisha, 25.
[33] Scott.
[34] Hintzen, 219.
[35] Kamugisha, 26.
[36] Bonilla, 164.
[37] Ibid.

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