

Robert McGreevey. *Borderline Citizens: The United States, Puerto Rico, and the Politics of Colonial Migration.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 264 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-1614-0.

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On January 8, 2019, in a prime-time address from the oval office, President Donald J. Trump argued that the existence of a “humanitarian crisis” required the funding of a wall on the US-Mexico border. Central Americans seeking refuge in the United States faced dangers from sexual assault and “vicious coyotes,” he explained, though the immediacy of this tragedy paled next to Trump’s warnings about the importation of illicit drugs and the shedding of “American blood” by undocumented migrants.[1] House majority leader Nancy Pelosi also described a “humanitarian challenge” in a televised response to the president’s speech, referring to the travails of “women and children at the border.”[2] Strikingly, both the president and his challengers conceptualized “humanitarian crisis” in domestic terms: something that happens when outsiders seek to come inside. Neither addressed the humanitarian crisis that provoked migration in the first place: the high rates of poverty and violence in Central America. Doing so would have forced a reckoning with the legacy of US intervention in this region dating back over a century. It would force, in other words, an acknowledgment that migration is an issue of foreign policy as much as domestic politics.

In recent years historians have highlighted the connections between immigration and Ameri-

can empire, revealing the mutual constitution of these two phenomena.[3] Robert McGreevey’s fine new book, *Borderline Citizens*, provides an important contribution to this literature by focusing on early twentieth-century Puerto Ricans, who traversed space that was simultaneously domestic and international. In highlighting the relationships between domestic politics, colonial migration, and imperial design, McGreevey highlights the imperial histories behind contemporary border crises and humanitarian challenges. He finds foreign policy and migration deeply entangled: “key decisions that determined the status of Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico emerged as a result of the dilemmas created by the migration of working-class Puerto Ricans to the mainland,” he argues (p. 43). The same pattern existed in reverse: overseas empire reshaped the United States itself by generating migration flows from colonial holdings marked by US law and US capital. In focusing on migrants, *Borderline Citizens* highlights the agency of colonial subjects and citizens-in-the-making. Grounded in research in US and Puerto Rican archives, it is a sterling example of how legal, colonial, and migration histories can be combined to reveal the domestic legacies of American foreign policy.

McGreevey divides his book into a clear narrative across six well-organized chapters. He be-

gins by demonstrating that Puerto Ricans began leaving the island almost immediately after annexation largely because they had little choice: US occupation and annexation had wrecked their economy. Puerto Rico's booming coffee sector, which supported many small landholders, collapsed almost immediately when the end of Spanish rule put the island's two main export markets (Spain and Cuba) behind tariff walls. US shipping laws that forbade foreign ships from serving the San Juan to New York route made trade and transportation overly expensive, and Puerto Rican farmers found themselves unable to compete with Brazilian coffee exports in the US market. A fierce hurricane in 1899 destroyed crops in the fields. In its wake came US investors who established large sugar plantations, employing seasonal labor in horrendous conditions for low wages. To add insult to injury, whereas Puerto Ricans had been able to elect delegates to Spain's legislature, they lost these rights under US rule. Migration to the US, McGreevey suggests, while voluntary in principle was in practice coerced by the misery that stalked the island.

US capitalists also directly encouraged Puerto Rican migration. Recruiters came to the island to find cheap workers, and soon Puerto Rican contract laborers could be found toiling in sugar plantations in Hawaii and cordage factories in St. Louis. These arrangements—which amounted to near indentured servitude—often ended with mistreated Puerto Ricans begging officials for money to return home. In a particularly fascinating and heartrending section, McGreevey uses records from federal, state, colonial, and local officials, along with letters from the migrants themselves, to tell the story of thousands of Puerto Ricans recruited and shipped to Hawaii. Facing low wages and difficult working conditions, hundreds deserted, protested, and even rioted. A few sought arrest intentionally: at least in jail they would have food. In spite of these outcomes, recruiters grew busier after 1904, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Gonzalez v. Williams* that Puerto Ricans

were “nationals” rather than citizens or foreigners. This meant that the Foran Act of 1885, which banned the immigration of alien contract laborers, did not apply.

US organized labor, long a foe of American colonial expansion, also contributed to Puerto Rican migration, albeit indirectly. McGreevey points out that the anticolonialism of the American Federation of Labor and its chief, Samuel Gompers, was largely motivated by a fear of incorporating nonwhite workers who would degrade working conditions and wages. Having failed to prevent the annexation of Puerto Rico, Gompers tried to improve the plight of the island's workers in hopes that doing so might prevent them from migrating. Thus, when colonial officials arrested Puerto Rican activist Santiago Iglesias for organizing a general strike, the AFL protested and paid his \$500 bail. Later they provided funds to striking sugar workers. Gompers himself toured the island in 1904.

As it turned out, however, labor mobilization in Puerto Rico affected US politics in ways that encouraged migration. In 1915, sugar workers across the island organized a series of strikes, which local authorities suppressed, often with brutal violence. These clashes received widespread attention in Washington. President Woodrow Wilson sent a commission to investigate and Congress held hearings. These hearings—in which Puerto Rican workers testified—“exposed the breadth of the political and economic crisis on the island and made the question of citizenship in Puerto Rico a legislative priority in Washington” (p. 113). In response, Congress passed the 1917 Jones Act, granting Puerto Ricans US citizenship. McGreevey admits that other factors were also at work, perhaps most importantly American leaders' concern about the nation's international reputation during World War I. Yet in making a case for the role of labor mobilization in the passage of this seminal legislation, McGreevey turns this episode into an example of how “stateless people

have worked to challenge and transform the legal status imposed on them by the metropole” (p. 95).

American citizenship both failed to solve the island’s economic problems and also created new opportunities for Puerto Rican workers. As citizens, Puerto Ricans were now eligible for federal government work. During World War I, the Department of Labor transported twelve thousand Puerto Ricans to the mainland to labor on military bases and factories. Moreover, new legislation that restricted foreign immigration made Puerto Ricans increasingly desirable for agricultural interests seeking cheap labor. Sugar planters in Louisiana and cotton growers in Texas and Arizona recruited Puerto Ricans to take the place of Mexicans. When Hawaiian growers feared limits on Filipino migration, they again looked to Puerto Rico.

Despite being American citizens, Puerto Ricans faced continuing discrimination in the United States. Much of this stemmed from racism. McGreevey’s text is littered with the racist pronouncements of American officials who deemed Puerto Ricans (especially those with darker complexions) inferior. Economic concerns compounded this problem. During the Depression local officials seeking to trim relief roles repatriated scores of Puerto Ricans.

Legal barriers also continued. Many of these resulted from Puerto Rico’s anomalous position in the American constitutional framework. In particular, Puerto Ricans lacked identification documents that would allow them to prove their citizenship to skeptical local officials. The government refused to issue passports, arguing that transit from Puerto Rico to the mainland was not “foreign” travel. In 1920 the War Department issued a circular titled “Porto Ricans Are American Citizens” but its unclear language (necessitated in part by the fact that a few hundred Puerto Ricans had decided to maintain Spanish citizenship) muted its impact.

Puerto Ricans did not accept these problems passively. In his final chapter McGreevey shows how they mobilized through strikes and by petitioning officials and charities. Moreover, by moving to the mainland they grasped a fuller citizenship that included the right to vote. By the mid-1930s, the more than 150,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York City began to elect state and federal lawmakers who represented their interests, despite the state’s attempts to suppress their votes. This relatively optimistic observation serves as a fitting conclusion to a work that seeks to highlight Puerto Rican agency.

Borderline Citizens makes an important contribution to the literature on US law and empire. As many scholars have shown, in *Downes v. Bidwell* the Supreme Court legitimated colonialism by categorizing Puerto Rico as “foreign in a domestic sense,” in the infamous words of Justice Edward D. White.^[4] Reversing earlier constitutional interpretations, this ruling—and the others of the so-called *Insular Cases*—removed judicial boundaries on congressional control over US territories, thus permitting them to be held as colonies indefinitely.^[5] Scholars have shown how these legal decisions reflected the clash of interest groups (especially sugar producers and refiners) and how they fit into broader colonial discourses.^[6] McGreevey pushes this topic forward in important new ways. By examining law at a more granular level, he shows how the law hung loosely over political realities. It presented Puerto Ricans with a set of opportunities and limitations particular to their situation. Puerto Ricans were not the only people who migrated to the United States in the wake of empire: a similar story might be told for Dominicans and Haitians, Vietnamese, or Central Americans. In this sense, distinctions between “formal” and “informal” empire are misguided. Yet because US control over Puerto Rico was grounded in constitutional law and congressional legislation, the Puerto Rican experience was different. Conditions during the 1920s and 1930s are a case in point. Mexicans and other

Latin Americans pretended to be Puerto Rican in order to avoid deportation; in their eyes Puerto Ricans' American citizenship offered clear privileges. Puerto Ricans' liminal status brought disadvantages, too. "While the citizens of other countries have their consulates and diplomats to represent them," lamented a columnist in a Puerto Rican newspaper, "the children of Borinquen have not one" (p. 162).

McGreevey's nuanced account also highlights the instability of law. Apparently clear distinctions between "citizen" and "noncitizen" become much fuzzier upon closer inspection. Laws promulgated by federal officials are not always applied at state and local levels, and often lead to unexpected outcomes.^[7] There are many detours on the road from the courthouse to the state house.

Indeed, McGreevey might have pushed this destabilizing impulse further. Given the multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory interests at play, not to mention the disparate outcomes, does it make sense to speak of an "American colonial regime" as he does (p. 144), or to wonder whether Puerto Ricans voting in New York managed to "undermine colonial rule" (p. 171)? McGreevey's careful research offers the chance to reach for a deeper reconceptualization of the colonial enterprise altogether, one that recognizes the impossibility of severing the colonial and domestic.

More attention to politics on the ground would also be welcome. After chapter 1, developments on the island itself receive relatively little coverage, outside of detailing a few key strikes. How Puerto Ricans viewed connections between economic opportunity and political citizenship, and how this might have changed between 1898 and 1940 thus remains somewhat vague. Similarly, the final chapter dealing with Puerto Rican political mobilization in New York City delves only into the shallows of local politics. And more details about the congressional maneuvering that

led to the Jones Act would help to cement McGreevey's claims about the importance of Puerto Rican labor mobilization to this legislation. At a svelte 177 pages of text, exclusive of notes and bibliography, there is room for more of this kind of analysis. Still, brevity is a blessing, and this is a satisfying read.

With its combination of creative research, incisive argument, and timely contribution, *Borderline Citizens* would be an excellent text for graduate courses in immigration and in the history of the United States and the World. For scholars of empire and migration, this should be essential reading.

Notes

[1]. "President Donald J. Trump's Address to the Nation on the Crisis at the Border," January 8, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-address-nation-crisis-border/>.

[2]. "Full Transcripts: Trump's Speech on Immigration and the Democratic Response," *New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/politics/trump-speech-transcript.html>.

[3]. For an overview and an argument for more work on this front, see Paul A. Kramer, "The Geopolitics of Mobility: Immigration Policy and American Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (2018): 393-438.

[4]. *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901), 182 US 244, at 341.

[5]. For analysis and criticism of this reasoning, see Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, "Between the Foreign and the Domestic: The Doctrine of Territorial Incorporation, Invented and Reinvented," in *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*, ed. Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-36. For an explanation that places the

treatment of Puerto Rico alongside the transformation of Reconstruction-era ideas about citizenship, see Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6]. On sugar, see Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Insular Cases and the Emergence of American Empire* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006); and April Merleaux, *Sugar and Civilization: American Empire and the Cultural Politics of Sweetness* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). On colonial connections, see Sarah H. Cleveland, "Powers Inherent in Sovereignty: Indians, Aliens, Territories, and the Nineteenth Century Origins of Plenary Power in Foreign Affairs," *Texas Law Review* 81, no. 1 (2002): 81-162.

[7]. For some disparate examples of how laws' impacts diverge from their initial intentions, see Karen M. Tani, *States of Dependency: Welfare, Rights, and American Governance, 1936-1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Benjamin A. Coates, "The Secret Life of Statutes: A Century of the Trading With the Enemy Act," *Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (2018): 151-72.

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