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Culture, Identity, and Policy

The eleventh chapter of Genesis narrates the mythical nascence of languages. According to the saga, the Creator imposed linguistic diversity in order to deliberately partition humanity into unintelligible collectivities as a form of punishment. A common medium of communication facilitated collaboration; linguistic incongruity obstructed it. Beyond interaction, languages also denoted group affiliation. In the thirteenth chapter of Nehemiah we are informed that non-Hebrew speakers were regarded as foreigners and marriage with them was a sin. To employ another idiom as a mother tongue was a sign of exclusion determining the degree of acceptable social interaction. These biblical narratives illustrate that for long ages communicative media delineated barriers. Next to observable phenotypic characteristics, linguistic peculiarities are among the most frequently employed traits used to separate “them” from “us.”

Cultural traits not only differentiate but also reinforce socioeconomic hierarchies. In a given community, commercial translations take place in a common form of speech. However, in a multilingual society the question remains “Which language?” Scholars agree that the language affiliated with the wealthier social group usually has the upper hand. Yes, languages are communicative instruments, but they also serve as group labels burdened with social baggage. The words spoken by the dominant group acquire greater prestige than those uttered by subordinate groups. Grammar is not at issue; it is a matter of social prestige intertwined with economic prowess.

This association between language and socioeconomic status is reinforced when a society’s dominant group controls the state and bureaucratic apparatus. Over the past couple of centuries, the public sector has expanded remarkably. Services previously provided by other institutions—often charitable organiza-

tions or houses of worship—now are administered by the state. Public education, health programs, and social welfare are among many examples. Using a common medium of communication has facilitated the administration of large bureaucracies. Naturally, economic and social mobility will depend on fluency in the state's language. At the same time, those who do not speak the language are marginalized and shoulder the burden of learning it. Indeed, even when members of minority groups learn the majority's language, their accents and other linguistic idiosyncrasies repeatedly stigmatize them as outsiders. When one understands that most states are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous, it becomes abundantly clear that tensions over language, socioeconomic status, and public policy are exceedingly common and intertwined.

In contemplating cases of linguistic conflict, societies in emerging market and developing economies come to mind. For example, hundreds of languages are spoken in Nigeria and Papua New Guinea; postindependence leaders in both places were forced to determine how many of them would be accorded official status. India's independence marked a new era when the former British colony was administratively redivided roughly along linguistic boundaries. Yet in the course of the past few decades, the emergence or resurgence of public debate over language status had redirected the spotlight onto various western democracies including Belgium, Canada, and Spain. Undeniably, the renewed interest in proclaiming English the official language of the United States shows that not even this presumably unilingual country is free from linguistic anxieties.

The United States always has been a multilingual country, and it has consistently been an English-dominant society. However, rather than being embraced, linguistic diversity has all too often been seen as a problem needing a solution. Proficiency in English became a litmus test for determining one's loyalty to the United States. Immigrants, whether German speakers in the eighteenth century or Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first, have been slated for linguistic assimilation. Government policy and social attitudes are reflected in the country's motto, "E pluribus unum"—out of many comes one.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English took root wherever the Stars and Stripes flew. This linguistic juggernaut hit a snag as the country expanded beyond the North American continent. During the Spanish-American War of 1898 the United States invaded several Spanish colonies in the Pacific and Caribbean. The colonies were densely populated and far from the mainland, and linguistic assimilation proved a challenge. Not long after that

war Cuba gained its independence, and the Philippines was freed in the 1940s. More than a century later the United States still controls Guam and Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico represents the most populous US territory and one of the few American jurisdictions where English is not the vernacular.

To this day, the continued use of Spanish as the mother tongue of most Puerto Ricans remains a fundamental issue in the island's relations with the United States. Cultural identity and language policy in Puerto Rico are inextricably tied to the debate over the island's fate. They occasionally have surfaced in assessing Puerto Rico's status as an American commonwealth. These issues are most volatile, however, when the question of statehood comes to the foreground. Statehood is the one status option that asks how Puerto Ricans view themselves and how American society assesses the compatibility of a culturally distinct state in its otherwise Anglophone union.

On the one hand, these Caribbean islanders are proud of their cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis mainland Americans. Their pride was fueled by a half-century *mêlée* against the federal government's policy of cultural assimilation. The policy was intended to reshape the island's cultural milieu to reflect Anglo-North American norms and traits; instead, a struggle ensued that elevated the Spanish language to the top of Puerto Rican cultural icons. Notwithstanding more than a century of US dominance, fluency in English is the exception rather than the rule.

On the other hand, Puerto Ricans associate the English language with socioeconomic mobility. It is the dominant medium of communication in international commercial transactions. Most trade between Puerto Rico and the US mainland is conducted in English. American multinational corporations dominating large segments of the local economy employ English, especially in their corporate upper echelons. Additionally, English is the unofficial language of the federal government, the regime subsidizing a significant portion of the local administration. English is the language most often heard on US media and in many forms of popular music. English and the patois Spanglish are also needed to communicate with relatives living stateside. While Spanish whispers to Puerto Rico's heart, English tugs at its wallet. And this no man's land is epitomized by the perennial debate over the island's political status.

Language policy, an issue usually discussed among pundits and intellectuals, suddenly took center stage in the 1990s. And to this day it continues to affect federal-territorial relations. At play in the 1990s, the opening act for this drama, was not the status of Spanish in Puerto Rico but the symbolic status of English.

Unlike the US mainland, the dispute here was not over the merits of “English only” but rather official bilingualism versus the codification of Spanish as the sole official language. For decades, few dared to question the status of English as one of Puerto Rico’s official languages. Something changed in the early 1990s, and traditionally timid lawmakers suddenly took up the banner of the Spanish language and fought to institute official unilingualism. In the final analysis, the debate over official unilingualism versus official bilingualism has as much to say about linguistic attitudes and cultural identity in the United States as it does in Puerto Rico. Throughout this drama media focused on the island’s official language debate. However, the proponents of competing language policies were less interested in appealing to Puerto Rican islanders than in shaping federal discourse over language and the meaning of American national identity. To those interested in the study of language, culture, and ethnicity, Puerto Rico provides a fascinating case study.

Beyond historical peculiarities, in this book I explore a fundamental question in the social science literature. Puerto Rico presents a serious problem for the universal applicability of one of the most respected and frequently employed theoretical approaches in the study of legislative action. Standard political science premises boldly assert that politicians are rational actors who focus on one thing—winning elections. According to some of the classic works in the field, politicians do not care about issues but about augmenting their electoral base. In order to wield power, one must win public office, and this means pleasing the electorate. Scholars employing this approach say that rational actors will logically modify their public stances on major issues to appeal to the median voter.

If their assumption is true, Puerto Rico represents an anomaly. Through interviews with key political figures and archival research, it becomes abundantly clear that the 1991 law establishing Spanish as the lone official language was enacted even though its proponents were aware of its electoral pitfalls.¹ Well-publicized surveys clearly showed that although only a minority of islanders could speak English well, most wanted to retain it as an official language. The pro-commonwealth government, which promoted the unilingual law in 1991, was swept out of office the following year, and a new pro-statehood administration lived up to its promise to restore official bilingualism.

Subsequently, this pro-statehood administration drafted a proposal to fortify the teaching of English in the public school system. True, most Puerto Ricans wanted to maintain English as an official language, but they were also proud of their own language. The government was proposing to employ English as a

medium of instruction. Additionally, the local Education Department was planning to contract teachers from the mainland in its drive to augment the number of Puerto Rican bilinguals. The last time these policies converged was when the federal government actively pursued its program of cultural assimilation. At that time, teachers rallied against that directive and responded by promoting a cultural nationalism that resonates to this day.

Since the early 1990s rival Puerto Rican administrations have promoted particular language policies that could risk their standing with the electorate. Are Puerto Rican politicians fundamentally irrational? Are these examples of self-defeating tendencies in Caribbean politics? Perhaps standard political motivation theory is inapplicable to the island because of its uniqueness, a play on Puerto Rican exceptionalism. Furthermore, we might even consider heeding the advice of some who suggest that the search for universal explanations of social phenomenon should be abandoned in favor of local or particular explanations.

Instead I use the case of Puerto Rico to test a novel approach to the study of political behavior. Conceivably Puerto Rico's unique setting involving the intersection of language, politics, and cultural identity can shed light on socio-political phenomena beyond the confines of the Caribbean. It is possible that we see in Puerto Rico a pattern frequently found in societies engaged in ethnic mobilization and the politics of nationalism. What superficially appears to be a case of electoral politics is, in fact, a set of facets of a much larger and more complex calculus that downplays the role of holding office in favor of a more significant prize. Students of ethnic conflict are often quick to point out that the politics of nationalism go beyond holding office. Nationalist parties in Catalonia, Quebec, and Ulster have not focused exclusively on elections. Their ultimate goal of altering center-periphery relations obliges them to always keep an eye on the political machinations in Madrid, Ottawa, and London, respectively. Like a matryoshka doll, the figure we see conceals others within it. Politicians here may be engaged in what some call a "Nested Game." Thus, the Puerto Rican language controversy may represent a manifestation of a common rule rather than an irrational exception.

By unmooring the language debate from its long confinement in the 1990s, Puerto Rican politicians, unbeknown to them at the time, laid the groundwork for a secondary nested game. The subsequent one is performed in Washington. This congressional nested game pulls at the very fabric of the American civic creed, the country's official tenet proclaiming that Americanness is based on ideological principles such as liberty and democracy rather than ethnocultural

characteristics. However, the heated congressional debates over Puerto Rico's status question and intersection with culture and language challenge the creed's universal applicability. On the floors of the US House and Senate lawmakers routinely profess a commitment to the civic creed, all the while outing themselves as adherents to an ethnic interpretation of American identity. This non-civic alternative situates a shared English vernacular, a broadly defined Anglo-Saxon ethnic culture, and by implication, a shared sense of whiteness at the apex of American authenticity.

Nineteenth-century politicians openly lauded their presumed Teutonic origins. While demographic changes forced their successors to embrace broader notions of whiteness, people of color remained secluded outside the boundaries of authentic Americanness. In the wake of the civil rights movements, mainstream politicians eschewed such ethnocentric and bigoted language, at least in public. But that prohibition has changed in recent years. With the ascent of the "birther" movement, the Tea Party, and the vitriolic rhetoric from Donald Trump and some Republicans we are witnessing a return to the bare-faced ethnocentrism of previous eras. These crucial debates point to the possibility that Americanness is itself a nested identity: a civic layer of frosting masking an ethnoracial tort. Ultimately, debates over the nature of American identity will have greater impact than the will of the island's voters on Puerto Rico's status and language policies.

Before embarking on a study of universal phenomena, I begin with the particulars of Puerto Rico and examine under what conditions the links between language and identity were forged.