

Federica Morelli, Free People of Color in the Spanish Atlantic. Race and Citizenship, 1780-1850, New York and London, Routledge, 2020

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Free People of Color in the Spanish Atlantic. Race and Citizenship, 1780-1850 (2020, New York and London, Routledge) “tells the story of «almost citizens»¹ - the free people of African descent who were deemed neither citizens nor aliens in the Spanish Atlantic” (p. 1).

Through these few words, Federica Morelli, author of the book and Associate Professor of History of the Americas at the University of Turin, clearly highlights and summarizes the fundamental question addressed by her study: the status of “almostness” that free people of color experienced in the Spanish Atlantic from the late colonial period to the first decades after independence from Spain. Still, as the title explains, the book deeply analyzes and deconstructs the two complex and multilayered concepts of “citizenship” and “race”, as well as their mutual interconnections, to which this status of “almostness” is strictly related.

Morelli defines “citizenship” as “a divisible and flexible bundle of rights and obligations in relation to a political entity. [...] (It) entails belonging to some sort of political collectivity” (p. 5), highlighting the fundamental “horizontal dimension” of modern notions of citizenship that are discussed in the book.

¹ As Federica Morelli states, “This expression is taken from the title of Sam Erman’s book, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018” (p. 11).

Whereas, with regard to “race”, the author focuses on racial categories’ consequences and effects, rather than on their meaning, tending

to de-essentialize the concept of race [...] and highlighting in the meantime its constructed, relational, and processual character. It is not a fixed category, but a set of discourses and practices with variable capacities to build social hierarchies or generate identifications (p. 7).

More specifically, through analysis of the *sociedad de castas* system – a racially and socially stratified pyramid present within the Iberian colonies – the book clearly shows the power of race to order people hierarchically in accordance with their attributed racial categories/*castas*; and, at the same time, the fluidity and flexibility of these same racial categories, since a person’s *casta* could change throughout his/her life in relation to various elements, such as physical appearance, social recognition, economic status and employment.

Morelli’s “investigation joins the growing scholarship on the history of the African diaspora in the Americas, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America” (p. 2), activating a fertile dialogue with a rich and diverse literature. Nevertheless, focusing on free people of color, on their social and political status and on the strategies and practices of negotiation that they activated to better their lives, the author sheds light on “an important but understudied aspect of African diasporic agency” (p.3).

Moreover, the book brilliantly deconstructs a certain “linear” narration of the journey toward citizenship of free people of color, describing, on the one hand, the colonial period as one of social and political exclusion, because of the *casta* system; and on the other, independence from Spain as the end of this discrimination and the starting point of the recognition as citizens of free people of color. But, as Morelli argues, “Actually, the relationships between race and citizenship are far more complicated and ambiguous than the transition from colonial to republican regimes leads us to believe” (p.3). And the analysis of these relationships is undoubtedly a focal point of the book.

The sources used by Federica Morelli to inform her study are “petitions, constitutional articles and debates, laws, institutional records and correspondence” (p. 8), from different archives in Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Argentina. In this respect, the petitions from free people of color examined by the author are most interesting documents thanks to which it is possible “to hear” free people of color’s voices and to understand “their ideas about citizenship and rights” (p. 9), while the use of these particular sources is also one of the book’s major strengths.

With regard to the book's structure, its four chapters are organized chronologically, from the late colonial period to the first half of the XIX Century. Chapter 1, *Seeking Spaces for Mobility*, focuses on the social and demographic relevance of free people of color in the late colonial period. "By 1800, free people of color outnumbered slaves in most parts of Latin America" (p. 16) and challenged the dichotomic slave system that was rigidly divided into free whites and black slaves. In this context, *castas*² were strongly discriminated against and forbidden to attend university, to enter the priesthood and to hold public offices. Nevertheless, this chapter highlights the existing "spaces for mobility" and legal mechanisms that free people of color could strategically use during the late colonial period to raise their social and political status.

Among these mechanisms, Morelli underlines a military career as a way for free people of color to obtain privileges generally reserved to whites. Yet, "Mobility for people of African descent relied on a legal tradition that granted monarchs the ability to alter a person's status" (p. 24). The *gracias al sacar*, the so-called decrees of legitimization analyzed by the author in this chapter, are a clear example of this "royal ability". Although existing for centuries, "it was only in 1795 that a royal decree [...] established that people of mixed ancestry could «purchase» whiteness" in the Americas through payment and the submission of a petition, which had to include "documentation concerning their birth, evidence of their service to the king, and letters of reference and recommendations from distinguished citizens" (pp. 44-45). However, "the implication that one's color might be removable through payment not only undermines biological theories of race, but also reveals the social and legal construct of citizenship during the colonial era" (p. 45).

Here, Federica Morelli dialogues directly with Ann Twinam (2015), whose work has also focused on the whitening *gracias al sacar*. Nevertheless, Morelli's study specifically tries to understand which "merits and social criteria" petitioners and judges considered essential for free people of color to purchase whiteness, "in order to assess the similarities and differences between the free coloreds' petitions of *gracias al sacar* and the applications for citizenship during the liberal Spanish regime" (p. 47).

In this respect, Chapter 2, *The Revolutions of the Hispanic World. New citizenship rights?*, begins with the crisis of the Spanish monarchy – due to the French invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807 and the Bourbon abdication of 1808 – but specifically focuses on the publication of the Cadiz "liberal" Constitution in 1812, which, as the author argues according to Marixa Lasso (2006),

² As the author explains, not only is this term used to identify the colonial socio-racial categories, but it can also be used to identify the persons to whom these categories refer.

had also been the “foundational moment for the history of race relations in Spanish America, since it was there that racial equality became emotionally linked to American patriotism” (p. 90), and the “liberal” meaning of citizenship had been shaped.

Nevertheless, citizenship was still based on XVII and XVIII Century concepts of *vecindad* and *naturaleza*, as Morelli explains:

In Spanish America *vecindad* became a status based on reputation, which had a social significance. (...) This local and social aspect of citizenship also determined its vertical and political dimension, since those who were recognized as *vecinos* (citizens) were, by extension, natives (*naturales*), that is, subjects of the kingdom (p. 73).

The Cadiz Constitution made a distinction between Spaniards (natives/*naturales*) and Spanish citizens (*vecinos*). But, if *vecinos* were automatically also *naturales*, the author shows that the contrary was not true, since only integration in local communities allowed the recognition of these individuals as both citizens and natives. Thus through her profound analysis, Federica Morelli explicitly underlines the fundamental relationship between the horizontal (social) and the vertical (political) dimensions of citizenship, understood, in this context, as a “process” rather than a status (p. 74).

However, thanks to the survey of the constitutional debates between Spanish and American deputies about the definition of “citizenship” that would appear in the Cadiz Constitution, Morelli demonstrates that this definition depended also on a “geopolitical” question. “Since the number of the deputies in the Cortes was proportional to the number of the citizens, the issue of citizenship for people of Indian or African descent would determine the proportion of American deputies” (p. 79), who could have outnumbered the Spanish ones.

These debates, therefore, led to the distinction between two groups: the *mestizos*, people of purely Indian and Spanish descent; and the *mulattos* and Africans, people of partial or complete African descent. While the former were recognized as both Spaniards and Spanish citizens, the latter were recognized only as Spaniards (natives) and could purchase citizenship only under specific circumstances (p. 81), as required by Article 22³ of the Cadiz Constitution.

³ “To Spaniards who through whatever line are considered and reputed to be natives of Africa, the door of virtue and merit is open for them to become citizens: as a consequence, the Cortes will grant a letter of citizenship to those who have performed qualified services to the country or are distinguished by their talents, application and conduct; on the condition that they be the legitimate offspring of free parents, married to a free woman, resident in the Spanish kingdoms, practice some useful profession, office or industry, and have their own assets (Article 22 of the Cadiz Constitution, 1812)” (p. 1).

Nevertheless, Article 22 “proved to be flexible and susceptible to multiple interpretation because of its ambiguous formulation” (p. 92), since it defined people of African descent as those “*reputed and considered to be of African origin*” (p. 89, my emphasis).

With this in mind, Chapter 3, *Between Grace and Right*, focuses on the practices that free people of color developed to acquire citizenship rights between 1812 and 1823. Examining various petitions pursuant to Article 22, Federica Morelli highlights that, even if they seemed to follow the same patterns as the *gracias al sacar* – using “the language of privileges rather than that of rights” (p. 121) – another conception of citizenship was emerging, “not only related to concepts like honor and reputation, but also to those of property and labor”, more closely related to the modern idea of “citizen” (p. 123). Moreover, the contents of the petitions were different, and “the values that were considered essential to be a citizen varied according to the local setting and the petitioners’ social background” (p. 128).

However, one of the most interesting issues that Morelli addresses in these pages is that, in spite of their formal exclusion from citizenship rights, free people of color seemed not to understand Article 22 as simply limiting their rights, since they also used its ambiguous language to take advantage and be recognized as citizens (p. 137), strategically interpreting and negotiating the meaning of the constitutional article. Indeed, this peculiar form of agency performed by free people of color that Morelli highlights, recalls the notion of “postlegislative negotiation” developed in the contemporary context of Brazil’s Northeast by Jan Hoffman French, who argues:

In the process of open-ended postlegislative negotiation, the impact, consequences, interpretations, and even the meanings of any given law are often determined only *after* it is enacted. That determination is made at the levels of the populace, police, judges, lawyers, government officials, and the press (French, 2009, p. 6).

Furthermore, Federica Morelli underlines that participation in the struggles for independence was of crucial importance for both enslaved and free people of African descent – as had been the military career in the late colonial period. The “majority of them attained freedom and citizenship” (p. 147), particularly those who participated in the revolutionary forces, like “the soldiers in the Bolivarian army (who) were automatically transformed into citizens with the right to vote” (p. 151). From this point of view, the author shows that these soldiers not only became citizens, but, being of different and mixed descents, they also formed the

new “mixed” body politic of the independent nation (the Colombian Republic), based on which Bolivar imagined the “new” American identity.

Bolivar’s sense of identity did not rest in the Madre Patria of Spain, but neither was it founded on the pre-Colombian roots of the indigenous people of the region: the sameness or commonality of all Latin Americans stems from a combination of differences. For Bolivar the identity question was fundamentally political (p. 153).

In this regard, Chapter 4, *Race and Equality*, specifically concentrates on the “new” notions of citizenship – somehow related to this “new” American identity – drafted in the constitutions of the independent states. With this in mind, Morelli argues that, even if they recognized racial equality for the *castas* and eliminated all ethnic distinction, the constitutional charts of the independent territories contemplated other requirements that de facto, excluded the *castas* from the right to vote i.e., recognition as *vecinos*.

More specifically, the author shows that the “modern idea” of the abstract and universal individual (citizen) frequently superimposed over other “more traditional ideas”, such as that of *vecino*, strictly interconnected with a communitarian vision of society (p. 166). “Rather than being based on an objective process, early nineteenth-century citizenship thus depended on a local and qualitative judgement regarding the nature and quality of each individual” (p. 168).

Federica Morelli, here, demonstrates that the Cadiz Constitution had a great influence on the new constitutions, in spite of the fact that most literature has to some extent underestimated its legal legacy. In the new independent states free people of color were still “almost citizens” or “second rank citizens”, as defined by Morelli. Their recognition as *vecinos* and, then, as *ciudadanos* was not automatic, depending on the multilayered relationship between race and citizenship that still characterized not only Spanish America but, more generally, most of the American territories, such as the United States and Brazil.

Focusing on the Republic of Colombia, particularly on the coexistence of the myth of “racial harmony” with discriminations against people of African descent, Federica Morelli clearly shows the new constitutions’ “contradictions”. As the author argues, the myth of “racial harmony” that emerged in that period, was linked to the ideas of national identity, racial equality and unity, which had been fundamental to the struggle against the Spanish. “However, political consensus about the virtues of racial equality did not mean agreement on the specific implications that this new equality would have for political and social relations” (p. 175).

In this context, rumors of race war (*guerra de razas*) became an integral part of the political discourse and, as Federica Morelli underlines, “they surfaced when

pardos and mulattos rose to positions of local authority and tried to impose their authority on the local white elite" (p. 176). Not accepting this "new" situation, whites thus started to speak about race war and to "legally" attack, accusing them of sedition and enmity, those free people of color who occupied important political and military positions, as the exemplary cases discussed in this chapter highlight.

Still, an important consequence of this situation has been the emergence of one of the most embedded characteristics of Spanish American racial structure, that is, "the absence of overt racism from state politics" (p. 185), as Morelli argues in accordance with Marixa Lasso (2007), and the transformation of "allegations of racism in a cultural and political taboo" (p. 186), and even in an unpatriotic practice, because of the pervasiveness of the myth of "racial harmony".

The book's fourth and last chapter thus shows that, instead of a certain narrative which has described independence as the beginning of free people of color's recognition as citizens, "the legal equality declared in the constitutions often remained only a principle. [...] In some cases, there was merely a change from explicit exclusion to ambiguous inclusion" (p. 187).

Coming toward the end of this journey through the pages of *Free people of Color in the Spanish Atlantic. Race and Citizenship, 1780-1850*, it should be reiterated that one of its major qualities is undoubtedly that of shedding light on an understudied group, the free people of color, whose "hidden" histories, practices and agency are of fundamental importance for the development of the History of the Americas as a whole.

Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated here, this book also deconstructs and thus helps to understand better the unstable and multilayered concept of "citizenship", its history and its complex and ambiguous relationships with that of "race". These issues are relevant not only to understand Spanish Atlantic colonial contexts and the newly independent American states, but also our contemporary societies, since as Federica Morelli herself affirms:

This book is guided by questions that are resonant in our present day. [...] Today, like two centuries ago, there are people living among us whose formal relationships to rights and citizenship remains unsettled and a recurring subject of political debate. [...] We might say that (free people of color's) situation was not so different from today's unauthorized immigrants and their children, who not only live in a situation of uncertainty regarding their access to rights, but could also be subject to expulsion (p. 7).

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