

Culture and statehood: A debate

Last April, political commentator Juan Manuel García Passalacqua pronounced publicly his endorsement of "Hispanic Statehood," but stating that if such option was not possible (in his "Hispanic" terms), "territorial disposition" of Puerto Rico should be the road to follow. The "Hispanic" qualification of García Passalacqua's statehood was chosen in opposition to the "Anglo-Saxon" influence accompanying full incorporation to the U.S.

Along with this proposal and in a cumbersome elaboration, García Passalacqua wrote that aside of politics, we should "reconstruct our discursive universe" and work in the "sphere of thought — in academia." The field of Cultural Studies, of which he was a self-proclaimed leader, was vital in this task. Yet, in his exposition, García Passalacqua not only confused three leading intellectuals in the field of Cultural Studies (U.S.'s Frederic Jameson, Jamaica's Stuart Hall, and Wales' Raymond Williams), but ignored the work of scholars that for years have done Cultural Studies in Puerto Rico.

In June, I criticized and corrected the veteran political analyst's views as anachronistic and ill-informed. His anachronism was two-fold. First, "Hispanic Statehood" seemed nothing different from "Jibaro Statehood" or "Radical Statehood," none of which is new. Second, his discovery of Cultural Studies was significantly late, since this field had been in existence since at least the 1970s.

Regarding the first issue, I raised questions about the nature of a "Hispanic Statehood" that privileges one cultural background over Puerto Rico's diverse heritage. Further-



Jorge L.
Giovannetti
Commentary

more, the "Hispanic" surname of García Passalacqua's statehood not only simplified such diversity, but assumed the defining categories of the metropolis in acquiescence to colonial power. I also condemned the naïveté of conditioning statehood's cultural influence (exclusively "Anglo-Saxon" for García Passalacqua); when such influence has been with us for decades in many forms.

On the second issue, I corrected García Passalacqua, clarifying the national and ethnic backgrounds of the intellectuals mentioned (and unmentioned) by him, and stating their institutional affiliations (Hall's tenure at the University of Birmingham) and intellectual contribution (William's "structure of feeling"). More importantly, I questioned the relevance of Cultural Studies thinkers to the average resident of Puerto Rico and whether his proposition could end up been a potentially elitist one.

The lawyer's response was swift, yet not properly addressing the issues raised. First, he argued I had misunderstood him by relating the "Hispanic Statehood" and Cultural

Studies as "two agendas." I cannot quote his column here at length, but it will suffice to note that, in his April pronouncement, he aligned himself with cultural critic Ilan Stavans' exposition of the "Hispanic condition." Now, if the option of "Hispanic Statehood" is grounded in a change of mentality that relates to that "Hispanic condition," isn't there a relation between García Passalacqua's political option and his intellectual project?

Second, he rejected the link of these "two agendas" stating that he had presented "two options of public policy" to solve the status issue. But here, it is García Passalacqua who seemed to have misunderstood my critique. When I mentioned "two agendas" I clearly stated that I was referring to his political endorsement of "Hispanic Statehood" and his promotion of Cultural Studies. My questions over the other public policy option of "territorial disposition" were different, giving the lawyer credit for bringing it into the debate, yet asking for further clarification as to its current relevance.

Third, and "forced" by my published critique, García Passalacqua elaborated on his role in developing Cultural Studies, explaining a "roundtable" course to faculty members of the University of Turabo. Yet, such explanation neither justifies ignoring established practitioners of Cultural Studies in Puerto Rico, nor does it explain how someone who proclaims to be leading Cultural Studies in the country can confuse Stuart Hall, arguably the foremost pioneer in the field. In short, García Passalacqua did not seem as immersed in the academic world of Cultural Studies as one would expect from

his claim.

Probably that is why, in his June response, he mentioned that between 2004 and 2005 he made the "transit from Cultural Studies to Postcolonial Studies." Here again, García Passalacqua seems to be late, because "Postcolonial Studies" dates back over a decade, with the works of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Ann Stoler, and others.

The important question in this debate remains the same: How many voters know, read, or care about the intellectuals name-dropped by García Passalacqua, either Jameson and Stavans in April or Immanuel Wallerstein and Hayden White in June? As a teacher in Puerto Rico's leading university who teaches many students that rarely read — let alone understand — their assignments, I doubt that the solution to the status question is to be found in foreign intellectuals. Nor do I think that a reified conception of culture will solve the issue. Culture cannot "decide" a political status; people do, as political actors.

In conclusion, what is left of García Passalacqua's response to my clarification? First, nit-picking minute specifications as to what "can be" Cultural Studies, without acknowledging that works on this field "can be" also considered history, sociology, and literature. Second, raising questions about my publishing record, but as a good scholar would know, this can be found in library catalogues and periodical indexes.

Jorge L. Giovannetti is an associate professor of Sociology at the UPR and Book Review Editor, Caribbean Studies