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# The rise of Puerto Rico's 'crisis-citizen' | openDemocracy

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Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia

Debate around Puerto Rican migration and political-economic problems heralds the emergence of a new 'crisis-citizen', compelled to lead the way into a better future, one individual at a time.

The island of Puerto Rico, whose cash recently ran dry, has stepped out of its more usual geo-political obscurity and confusion ('is it the US or isn't it?') to become relevant in the global theatre of financial crises. [Comparisons](#) between its [\\$58 million bond default](#) (and \$70 billion debt) and the Greek situation now abound, making its case – as well as the austerity and restructuring pursued by the local government, with the pressure of [Wall Street](#) and its [hedge and vulture fund managers](#) – more relatable to a world already saturated in the media language of default-debt-crisis.

This is not just because of the obvious reason that Puerto Ricans on the island cannot vote for the American President despite holding an American passport. It is also because in moments of deep and prolonged recessions like the one the island has been experiencing since 2006, wealthy Americans (and local elites) appear to benefit from the most desperate moves, like making the island "[a new age tax haven](#)", while many locals already struggling to subsist are losing jobs or incomes while being taxed anew. While this dynamic has been a constant since the US set foot in PR, it only surfaces with force during moments of pronounced struggle and collective despair.

Channeling the growing frustration and unease towards what appears to be a monumental impasse in the history of the 'commonwealth', and the economic inequalities and '[democratic deficit](#)' that sustain it, well-known commentators suggest that the only way out of the financial mess is to solve the political status question. It may very well be true that a long overdue [change in political arrangements](#) – a real de-colonial movement – will help make things, at the very least, clearer. My concern here is not with the island's population taking a more definitive political position, but with how – in the process of taking that stance – a series of old but newly reworked cultural precepts and practices of difference and belonging can be re-instated in the name of a great nation-yet-to-be.

In other words, while the fear of failure ("

[a death spiral](#)") and panic generated by crisis-mode can be the harbinger of much needed transformation, we must be vigilant as to how – in the name of change – societal divisions are reproduced, strengthened or created. A quick solution can detract us from looking at the grammar of crisis, and the discursive infrastructure that supports it. To me, this becomes evident when we look closer at the way in which leaving or staying in the island – migration – has recently been debated in social and traditional media.

It is now well known that as the financial crisis has deepened in "[the island of lost dreams](#)", migration, particularly of the educated professional middle classes, has [increased](#) and is being characterised with the globally problematic language of an '[exodus](#)' of '[droves](#)' (mainly to Florida, but also Texas). Despite the apparently straightforward economic reasons for these moves, some argue (and fear) that leaving may be considered a treachery of sorts, an abandonment by the weak or morally insufficient; whereas staying is a badge of willpower and commitment, a choice to be proud of. The main message is 'yes, we're in the pits, but we should make the most of it' – as if everyone that stayed and left belonged to a homogenous group of opposed positions. There is a curious mixture revealed here of Puerto Rico's long-standing colonial affair with 'the American Dream' – its abiding belief and pride in the individual

'making it' despite all odds – and of a local cultural (and Roman Catholic) attitude that favours 'letting it go' and being grateful for what one's given.

For those that stay, there are many messages about what 'making the most of a bad situation' actually means. It can be [keeping a shop open](#) in the midst of a closing down environment; opening a business or being entrepreneurial (a new key buzzword equated with modern states of being) in a way that sees the crisis as an opportunity [rather than an obstacle](#) for making and improving business; or holding on to a badly paid job in the hopes and expectation of better times to come. For others, the only or last resort is to [leave to the mainland](#) to find a job, get better pay or start a company. Those that go don't feel they had a choice. They lament it, blame the economic situation and create a diaspora connected by a nostalgic sense of resignation and hope, fuelled in equal measure by the American Dream, and the Puerto Rican nightmare.

Framed in the language of being caught between a bad option and a better one, the decision to leave or stay is discursively entangled with highly traditional and gendered arguments regarding loyalty and sacrifice to family and nation. In this way, mobility strategies and choices become a new moral (and entrepreneurial) yardstick against which to measure proper citizenship and belonging.

But despite the apparent opposition between migrants and those who 'choose' to stay, they are still fundamentally bound by a common belief in the capitalist economy-as-is and a conviction that the choice to move or stay should be based on making your own economic situation better – making your own way. This argument is a powerful unifier in an island dominated by a neoliberal capitalist ethos. Like the political 'solution' touted as the cause of the overall crisis, this faith in personal economic effort as the way out of individual failure is simplistic, elusive and problematic on a number of levels.

Firstly, the individualistic undertones of the migration debate allow for a manageable theatre of public opposition, where taking 'sides' distracts us all from examining the more complex historical contingencies upon which the current situation, and ways out of it, are based.

Second, it completely ignores the ways in which the causes and effects of Puerto Rican migration have always been structurally connected to the island's colonial condition – [rooted in a shameful history of depredation, abuse and imposition](#) by the US.

Third, a point related to the second, by redirecting our emotions from the large to the small scale, the individual rather than the institutions and political-economic entanglements structuring our life-work experiences are seen as the culprit of trouble and failure, as well as the agents responsible for success, liberating the powers-that-be from all sorts of obligations. This requires, at its core, a reformulation of the dimension of the problems as collective – not individual. The debates and the discussions that are taking place are undoubtedly collective, and *collectivizing*, but the focus of those talks are more often than not harking back to the individual.

Fourth, by framing the migration question as one of active choice, it renders invisible the fact that many who would like to leave cannot do so because they do not have the economic or social resources with which to pack up and go, or they have nowhere else to go. Alternatively, there are those who want to stay and can, but are getting forcefully displaced from their already precarious homes, moved involuntarily to areas (local and foreign) that threaten to impoverish them further, or to break the crucial social networks that keep them and their livelihoods afloat. Increasingly, forced evictions are happening at the hands of American investors pumping billions into luxury real estate and developments. In both of these mentioned cases, choice does not play a role.

And finally, connected to the point above, those that don't embark on an individual, explicitly economic solution – whether it's in the island or abroad, at the small or large scale – become the ultimate insult to the proper 'crisis-citizen'. In this context, those who had already been regarded as public pariahs due to a perceived sense of economic inactivity or lethargy – public housing residents, Dominican immigrants, those on welfare or disability, poor single mothers on benefits and prisoners – are now susceptible to further forms of stigmatisation and discrimination with new rubrics of self-respect and

responsibility attached to their existence.

The dualistic stasis-migration debate and its underlying economic precepts suggests a need to inhabit space where complex, uncomfortable truths are explored, debated and worked on rather than brushed aside for the sake of what appears, at first glance, to be clarity. This clarity is a substitute for inquiry, and deceives us with a moral logic of order (of what constitutes

failure and success) – where we know where the good-positive and bad-negative lies.

Put simply, diverting our attention about the crisis to a debate about staying or leaving is a divisive trick that does little to deepen our understanding of what's going on and gives way to the contemporary post-colonial 'crisis-citizen', and its neoliberal language of individualistic entrepreneurial belonging. Some key voices are beginning to uncover, with great and insightful detail, some of the threads sustaining these webs of entanglement.