The Paradox of Citizenship in American Politics

Mehnaaz Momen

The Paradox of Citizenship in American Politics

Ideals and Reality

palgrave
macmillan

Mehnaaz Momen
Social Sciences
Texas A&M International University
Laredo, Texas, USA

ISBN 978-3-319-61529-5 ISBN 978-3-319-61530-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-61530-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017946740

Cover illustration: © Frederick Bass / Getty Images

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Abba

Foreword

Sometime between the American Revolution and the American Constitution, Immanuel Kant wrote that "out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." James Madison and Thomas Jefferson would have agreed, for as they crafted their new nation, they observed that "if men were angels, no government would be necessary," and that "man is the only animal which devours his own kind." Jefferson seemed resigned to the darker failures of all nations, revolutions, and political projects: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." Now, during this moment when the colonists were finally freeing themselves from British rule, many Americans were quite giddy and thrilled, like the patriot Samuel Adams, who voiced the possibility that the United States was going to be exceptional: "Our contest is not only whether we ourselves shall be free, but whether there shall be left to mankind an asylum on earth for civil and religious liberty." Adams conceded that the United States was not going to be perfect, but he and many others hoped aloud that this nation might be far less crooked than whatever existed in Europe and elsewhere. He was certainly not the last American to believe that the United States was destined for greatness.

In our own time, after five or six decades of ethnic studies scholarship, much of which has fundamentally revised our understanding of the Revolution and the Constitution, we know that the people who might have agreed most with the pessimism of Kant, Madison, and Jefferson may have been those who were never invited to the Constitutional Conventions. Native Americans on the frontier, especially in the Ohio River Valley, saw

the American victory over the British as a catastrophe. African American slaves, those being held by masters like Madison and Jefferson, had to endure this execrable institution for three decades longer than the Africans under the British empire. For members of both groups, the white folks were devils indeed, devouring people and lands as fast as possible, and otherwise making a mockery of their lofty claims that "all men are created equal." Why am *I* in chains, then, and why are you claiming *my* lands for yourselves?

From these perspectives and with these histories in mind, we agree now that there was nothing straight at all about the American Revolution, the American Constitution, or the United States. The creation and extension of this nation accelerated removal, increased enslavement, and manured the earth with blood, and by the end of the nineteenth century, more than one hundred years after the Revolution, Native Americans were still being removed. The Spanish and the Mexican governments had attempted to subjugate the Native Americans too, but without question the Americans were the most successful, conquering the Mexicans, and then the Apache, the Sioux, and the Comanche as well.

This alternative, darker view of the United States as a rolling, ongoing catastrophe has come to us fairly recently. Even in the mid-twentieth century, the great British philosopher Isaiah Berlin used that Kantian phrase, "the crooked timber of humanity," as a lens to criticize the criminal naiveté of various idealisms of the twentieth century, including fascism, totalitarianism, and communism. It's one thing to imagine a workers' paradise, or *lebensraum* for a national socialist state lasting for thousands of years, Berlin noted, but the realities of communism and Nazism were so horrible that no one should believe a Stalinist or a Nazi. Never again. Such idealism could kill, it was dangerous. In the postwar world, when communists were still a threat, Berlin and others suggested that the Western liberal democracies, with all of their flaws and incomplete citizenships, were much better, perhaps more grown-up and knowing and less idealistic, or at least less prone to ideals that brought only pain and death even to their truest believers.

Were the Western democracies in fact better? Was the United States bending, like an arc in a moral universe, toward justice? During the civil rights movement, some said that the United States *was* progressing toward justice, toward an inclusive republic free from tribalism, racism, and exclusion. Here was Barbara Jordan, the first African American woman to serve on the Judiciary Committee in the House of Representatives, in 1974:

"My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total." Against President Nixon, embroiled in scandal, she said, "I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution." Her words were so striking, but the context was even more remarkable—she was an African American woman in Congress, a lawyer herself, rebuking publicly a very white American President. She did this while proclaiming her love and devotion to the nation's founding document, perhaps almost forgiving or forgetting the flaws in it that had once enslaved her ancestors. No historian could imagine this scene in 1794, and so in 1974, many Americans saw this as progress, as a direct sign of a radical bending toward a new nation, more just and fair than ever before.

Yet in 1974, the United States was still fighting a war in Vietnam, a war that would consume three million Vietnamese lives, North and South. This was not the first war, of course, that the Americans had fought in Asia. Vietnam was preceded by the Filipino "insurgency" following the Spanish-American War in 1900, the Pacific War against the Empire of Japan in 1941, and the Korean War in 1950. These wars were all strangely related: the Japanese had attacked the Americans in the Philippines at the same time as they were attacking Pearl Harbor, but then American planes took off from Japanese bases in their attacks on Korea, and then the Koreans fought alongside the Americans in Vietnam, where at least four thousand Korean troops died under joint South Korean and American command.

All that time, from Jim Crow to the civil rights movement, the United States was fighting wars in Asia. The Americans still have bases throughout Europe and Asia, in the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea (but not in Vietnam). So many Americans have since come and gone through Korea, and so many Koreans have come and gone through the United States, that in a place like Seoul, it's sometimes easy to forget that it's not Koreatown in Los Angeles. War, migration, and citizenship are part of a single story: I am Korean American because my family migrated from Korea to the United States, but I'm certain that that would not have happened unless the Americans had come to Korea first.

After 1975, in the month when my family arrived in Los Angeles and Saigon fell, some might have said that the American wars in Asia were coming to an end, that this was it. No more would the United States pursue foolish adventures to promote democracy in foreign places, as though they were naive enough to think that they could spread their ideals as if

they were napalm or defoliant. But we now know, of course, that that did not happen: Vietnam has since been succeeded (or has it been repeated?) by Iraq and Afghanistan, where Filipino American, Korean American, Vietnamese American, African American, Mexican American, Native American, and white American soldiers have fought and died together. Has this been "progress"? Is it progress when a person of Filipino ancestry—whose very ancestors may have been "insurgents" in the eyes of other Americans—is now killing "insurgents" in Iraq or in Afghanistan, in military efforts to make these places safer for American ideas and principles? Was it progress when the author of a few of the more infamous "torture memos" during the war on terror was a Korean American law professor? These questions raise at least the possibility that race-based inclusions have their downsides, that whatever arc there is in the universe, it might need to go a lot further to get anywhere near the universe of justice.

In the prologue to his study of the Vietnam War, or rather his study of how we remember the Vietnam War, the novelist and literary critic Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote: "I was born in Vietnam but made in America. I count myself among those Vietnamese dismayed by America's deeds but tempted to believe in its words." Even for those of us who are here as American citizens because of American imperialism, because of its wars, the promise of the United States remains compelling, its words and ideals have become our own. It's strange to belong now to a country that had sent so many soldiers to kill people who look just like me, and it's even stranger still when I go abroad, to Europe or even to Asia, where no one has mistaken me for anything other than an American. In public, in Europe and in Asia, I too have praised the Constitution, believing in its words, forgiving or maybe forgetting those many times when its ideals didn't come close to reality.

This book by Professor Momen is so stimulating and interesting because it measures so well the distances between the histories that we Americans would like to celebrate and the actual deeds that still cause so many of us dismay, between how we would like to think of ourselves and how we are, and the future we would like to imagine against the nightmares that might still come true. The United States remains a nation that embodies paradox. We are more open than ever before, at least to immigrants with skills and capital, and we also deport more people than ever, hundreds of thousands every year. We allow anyone to vote without respect to race or national origin, but we also disenfranchise people who've lived here for more than a decade. We have been on the leading edge of the information

technology revolution, and yet we wince at every presidential tweet. Technology is wonderful, but as any yeoman farmer might agree, a series of all false, half false, and screed-like tweets in the wee hours of the morning isn't healthy for any tree, including the tree of liberty. It's just too much manure.

All kidding aside, in a profound way these days, many of us are revisiting those concerns about the crooked timber of humanity and how men are not angels. We may be more critical than ever of the original framers, but what might they say of us now? They might wonder whether the United States could still be an asylum on earth for civil and religious liberty, or whether that will not be true. They might worry that some Americans have misunderstood them entirely—they meant "if men were angels, no government would be necessary," not that "government is not necessary." And when they said, "man is the only animal that devours his own kind," they didn't mean for this to be a prescription. For all American citizens—however we got here and whatever our color—the American experiment seems to be endangered, more fragile than ever before. This book is so valuable for this moment because it calls its audience to be more than idle spectators. Perhaps we should try idealism all over again, to rethink our common citizenship, even though dismay and disappointment are real possibilities, as they always have been in this strange and contradictory nation.

John S.W. Park
Professor of Asian American Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara
May 30, 2017

Preface

This book has been not only an academic exercise for me, but also an inquiry into where I stand as a professional and where I belong as a citizen. I came to America as an international student and went through the various transitions from being an immigrant with a work visa to a permanent resident to a citizen. Most of the phases I went through happened during the shift from the INS to the Department of Homeland Security, so I had first-hand experience with bureaucratic black holes and the Kafkaesque absurdity of the whole system. As someone who grew up outside the United States, I have also had a very different take on US foreign policy and globalization issues. However, as a student of government, my theoretical basis for understanding government has always been deeply rooted in US history and political ideologies.

The last twenty years since I have been living in America have also displayed a contrast in terms of communication: from the days of writing letters and making very expensive and poor-quality international calls to having free, easy, always-accessible multiple modes of reaching anyone anywhere in the world. While I can look up almost any songs, poems, or movies on YouTube, buy any ingredients that I pine for, and feed my nostalgia in so many different ways, I am not so sure whether the notions of the melting pot and cosmopolitanism are opposites, or whether there are overlaps, or whether we need completely new notions to capture our realities.

Another huge source of confusion and motivation brewed because of Laredo, the border city where I live and teach, as many of our premises about belonging and boundaries are always being challenged in everyday

life here. My students are well aware of the history that always glosses them over, the political issues that miss their reality, and the cultural visibility that pushes them into a pre-assumed category.

In all my classes, whether it was a freshman level government class, an upper level elective class on immigration, or a graduate level class on ethics, I tried my best to bridge theory and reality, which are often locked in their own domains. This book, in many ways, reflects my struggles to capture these anomalies and ambiguities, as they add color and tone to the story of citizenship, which often remains hidden and neglected.

The journey of writing this book has been long and winding, and I have a number of people to thank for not giving up on me. The person who would have been the happiest to see this book would have been my dad, but I was too late to hand him the product. Throughout the editing process, I kept remembering how I had helped him once in preparing the index for his book, and how frivolous I had been in that role.

My professors at the University of Dhaka and Cleveland State University always had enormous confidence in me. Special thanks to Helen (Dr. Helen Liggett) for showing me how to find meaning from texts, photographs, and real-life events. My heartfelt thanks to Dr. John S.W. Park, Dr. Aziz Rana, Dr. Saskia Sassen, and Dr. Kevin R. Johnson for their kind words and valuable time.

Thanks to my colleagues at Texas A&M International University for long enduring the conversation about my book, and thanks also to the writing center, the library, and our student assistants for lending a helping hand. Much of the research for this book was done at the University of Texas at Austin library and I thank that institution as well.

My mother, sister, and friends also kept up the pressure to finish the book and get it published. Thanks to Nausheen and Moniza for always being there for me.

The other person who was involved with the book, from its inception to publication, from being my hardest critic to my inspiration, is my partner Anis. Thanks for the questions, confusions, and the keen eyes during editing.

Mehnaaz Momen
Associate Professor
Texas A&M International University
Laredo, TX
May 25, 2017

Contents