

The Humanitarian Crisis in Puerto Rico. The Voice of Playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda

The Irony of 'Hamilton' Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda's Advocacy For Puerto Rico

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As the economic and humanitarian crisis has worsened in Puerto Rico in recent months, playwright and actor Lin-Manuel Miranda, has given voice in [interviews](#) and [Op-Eds](#) to the severity of the crisis among ordinary Puerto Ricans. Miranda called the island's debt crisis a matter of "[life and death](#)," saying, "I have a lot of family who are struggling in Puerto Rico, that's not an abstract issue to me." He humanizes what the statistics - \$73 billion in debt, \$19,500 median household [income](#), 11.5 percent sales tax, 64,000 people [leaving](#) per year - can not. Puerto Rico is a [debt colony](#) whose function as a political entity is to service its creditors. Ironically, Miranda achieved the celebrity he's now using to advocate for the Puerto Rican people by glorifying and aggrandizing the most ruthless champion of creditors in American history.

Miranda has become an elite pop-culture sensation as the creator and star of the award-winning and immensely popular Broadway play *Hamilton*. The hip-hop musical has been as successful with critics as it has with Broadway theatergoers, dominating the Tony awards and selling out [months in advance](#). The Harvard Business Review argues its \$849 tickets are [priced too low](#).

The show's namesake is, of course, Revolutionary War commander, George Washington adviser, and first Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Miranda focuses on the rags to riches story of Hamilton - a poor immigrant who triumphed against all odds by using his intelligence and relentless hard work to fight British oppression and guide his new country to independence and greatness. In *My Shot*, Miranda's title character raps:

*Hey yo, I'm just like my country
I'm young, scrappy and hungry
And I'm not throwing away my shot!*

Miranda has praised Hamilton and the other "Founders" for their ability to translate a revolutionary vision into a nation that embodied the liberal principles it supposedly stood for.

"They did a remarkable thing in sticking the landing from revolution to government. That's the hardest thing to do. You can go across the ocean to France, where they totally fucked it up and then got stuck in a cycle of revolution and tyranny," Miranda told [Rolling Stone](#).

Miranda also praised Hamilton's financial program of creating a national debt by assuming the debts of individual states: "His thinking was, if we are entrenched in each other's

finances, we're stuck with each other."

The problem with Miranda's reading of history is that he assumes the liberal notion of a united nation, devoted to the common goals of freedom and equality, was any more real 225 years ago than it is today. Post-revolutionary America was never a utopia where everyone shared financially in the spoils of independence. It was a political association organized along the lines of feudal societies and their stark divisions between creditors and debtors.

A wealthy, colonial elite had managed through a massive propaganda campaign to enlist the poor to fight to overthrow British rule. The masses slogged through years battling horrid conditions in the woods and back country to survive combat, hunger, and the elements. They were paid in worthless paper they would later sell to speculators for a fraction of its face value after returning to their farms and their families upon gaining their "freedom."

The landholders and mercantile class had sat by idly as the "exceedingly dirty and nasty people" (in [George Washington](#)'s words) did the real work of putting their lives on the line. The financiers then used their political connections to try to turn their investments into a profit by not only receiving interest on the paper debt but getting payment on its full value. There was no one more willing to oblige this massive transfer of wealth from common workers and peasants to the elite, ruling class than Hamilton.

The concentration of economic power into the hands of the few was the desired outcome, and the reason for Hamilton's dedication to the federalist political system. As the political battles raged between the federalists (Hamilton, James Madison and others) and the Republicans (Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, who would later kill Hamilton in a duel), Hamilton sought to consolidate power into a centralized state that could enforce the feudal relationship between those who would pay and those who would collect.

As University of Massachusetts Amherst historian Leonard Richards writes in [Shay's Rebellion](#),

"(Hamilton) intended to strengthen the national government at the expense of the states by diminishing the ties of state creditors to the states and binding them to the central government. If their future wealth and well-being was linked to the success of the federal government, rather than to the states, their hearts and minds would follow." [1]

Hamilton was not trying to unite citizens together through mutual financial responsibility, as Miranda claimed. He was trying to unite the elites in dependency to the national state. To accomplish this, Hamilton "wanted to reduce - or, better yet, eliminate - the power of states. He also wanted to diminish the influence of farmers and artisans and enhance the power of landlords and merchants," Richards writes. [2]

What became known as Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts, in which a popular "regulation" revolted against the state's new political system which had taken power out of the hands of local councils and removed the influence of citizens distant from the financial and political center of Boston, provided a pretext for the Federalists to ram through their centralized national organization of government in order to crush potential future insurrections.

Installed as Treasury Secretary in the new federal government, Hamilton immediately implemented his policy of creating an astronomical federal debt. His solution for providing the money to actually pay these financial promises was the Whiskey Tax.

This excise tax had further aims that would help reorganize American social and economic life. William Hogeland writes in [The Whiskey Rebellion](#) that Hamilton designed the law to favor large producers over smaller ones. The tax would undercut the prices of independent distillers and self-employed farmers, driving them out of business and “into the factories of their creditors.” Hogeland writes:

The goal was industry consolidation. Hamilton had learned from the English that commercial agriculture and large industry, when publicly chartered, given tax breaks, and financed by large loans, might turn the United States into an industrial empire to compete with England’s. The labor power dissipated on small family farms and in artisan shops could be gathered up, deployed at factories and diversified commercial farms, and boosted through efficient organization. [3]

It is not clear whether Hamilton intended to provoke an insurrection, so he could then use the military power of the newly formed government to crush it and serve as an example to others who sought to challenge its dictates. But if Hamilton did indeed want the revolt that logically followed by those impacted by the tax, he was rewarded soon thereafter.

Hamilton not only argued for a military response to the uprising, the Treasury Secretary *actually took command* of a militia led by George Washington to the mountains of western Pennsylvania’s Allegheny Valley. His goals were more far-reaching and strategic than merely to implement compliance and enforce the law. He sought to make an example of the organizations and protesters of the consequences of challenging federal authority. As Hogeland writes, “Hamilton was out to remove the hear of the people’s movement he’d been struggling with for more than a decade, not to prosecute individuals.” [4]

As commander of the military force that sought to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, Hogeland writes that Hamilton sanctioned large-scale plunder:

He made theft legal. The quartermaster corps, he announced would impress civilian property along the way. Now families watched helplessly as bayonet-wielding soldiers – no longer freelancing thieves but officials, authorized by the president – commandeered hard-won winter supplies of grain, meat, firewood, and blankets on behalf of the government of the United States. A steady, freezing rain meant the arrival of winter. Families whose sustenance was carted away faced grim months ahead. [5]

When Hamilton’s forces reached the rebels, they terrorized the local population with night raids that resulted in mass arrests. Prisoners were threatened with hanging and left shackled, freezing and nearly starved. In the end, only 20 prisoners were brought back to Philadelphia for trial. All except one were found innocent. The one conviction was later overturned.

Naturally, this history is absent from Miranda’s sanitized version of Hamilton. Instead, there is a feel-good, liberal version of Hamilton that fits the propaganda needs of the present-day American empire.

As Paul Street wrote recently in his CounterPunch article "[Miranda, Obama, and Hamilton: an Orwellian Menage a Trois for the Neoliberal Age](#)", Miranda's Broadway spectacle is a "brilliant ahistorical monument to Orwellian, fake-progressive bourgeois identity politics in service to the very predominantly Caucasian financial elite and ruling class hegemony."

Miranda also ignores the structural social and economic forces that, since the founding of the United States, have kept the elite rich and the landless poor. Instead, he propagates the illusion that a person's success (or lack thereof) are based on meritocracy. This is a convenient narrative for apologists of inequality.

"Adding to the 'valorization' of the American System," Street writes, "Hamilton's 'Bootstraps Immigrant Narrative' (McMaster) feeds Caucasian capitalism's timeworn victim-blaming story line on why some few folks succeed in climbing up the nation's steep racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic pyramids while most fail."

The reality in Puerto Rico is that the population is suffering due to the same financial empire Hamilton was instrumental in designing and implementing. Like the small farmers and artisans whose livelihoods were crushed by Hamilton's policies that transferred their wealth to the financial elites, Puerto Ricans are being forced to keep paying their ever-shrinking incomes to service the claims against them.

One can imagine Hamilton delighting in the privatization of Puerto Rico's highways and airports, as well as the stipulation in the [PROMESA bill](#) that would allow an un-elected junta appointed by the U.S. Congress to lower the minimum wage.

While Miranda advocates for more flexibility for Puerto Rico to restructure its debt and help stabilize social life on the island, he doesn't seem able to recognize that Puerto Rico's problems are rooted in its political status as a colony conquered by the U.S. empire.

The fiction that Puerto Rico is anything other than a colony was put to rest recently when the Supreme Court's [Sanchez Valle](#) ruling acknowledged Puerto Rico does not have sovereignty and the U.S. Congress holds all political authority over the island. As a colony ruled by outsiders for their own benefit, the population of Puerto Rico is powerless to change the socioeconomic system imposed on them through the political process. This is exactly how Hamilton would have wanted it.

For Miranda, who talks eloquently of the problems facing his family and the people of Puerto Rico, there should be no greater symbol of the dispossession and social destruction that appear to be reaching a breaking point in Puerto Rico than Alexander Hamilton and his feudal politics that stripped people of their livelihoods and turned them into little more than commodities whose station in life was to produce wealth for others.

Notes

[1] Richards, Leonard L. *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Kindle edition.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Hogeland, William. *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty*. Simon and Schuster, 2015. Kindle edition.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

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