



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Ricardo Padrón is Mapping Spanish Exploration of the Pacific

The UVA Spanish Professor dives into the literature and cartography of European expansion, including the colonial history of early modern Spain and the transpacific, and reflects on the Renaissance and themes that remain relevant today. Plus he discusses how he views maps as context-rich stories of subjective interpretations made by cartographers.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Lawrence: Today I'm excited to welcome Professor Ricardo Padrón, who is professor of Spanish at the University of Virginia. Professor Padrón is a noted specialist in the literature and culture of the early modern Hispanic world, who is published extensively on questions of empire, literature, cartography, and the geopolitical imagination. His book, *The Spacious Word: Cartography, Literature and Empire in Early Modern Spain*, has become a touchstone for the study of early modern Hispanic cartography. His recent monograph, *The Indies of the Setting Sun: How Early Modern Spain Mapped to the Far East as the Transpacific West*, challenges established narratives of the invention of America by looking at the various ways that 16th century Spaniards attempted to imagine the New World and Asia as connected spaces. Welcome, Professor.

- Padrón: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.
- Lawrence: Were you always interested in languages as a kid or is this something that you came to later?
- Padrón: I was always interested in books and in reading. It wasn't so much that I was interested in languages because I grew up bilingually, speaking both English and Spanish. So the materials I'm teaching are in a language that is native to me as a native of Ecuador. So the kind of work I do, I think of myself as very much like a professor of English literature or of cultural studies. It's just that I work with Spanish language materials and I work with students who are working very hard to understand these materials in their original language, which is something I really admire.
- Lawrence: When you're talking to students about this foreign country of the past to be discovered, to be understood, do you think of it in terms of its relevance to today or as a time in and of itself, to be understood on its own terms?
- Padrón: I think a little bit of both. I give a lot of thought to why it is that we do history. I go back and forth between those two rationalizations. On the one hand, visiting the past, the work of the historian is something like the work of an anthropologist, taking us somewhere different, getting us into a very different mentality, a very different culture. On the other hand, I think that the work of a historian is helping us understand where we come from as people in the 21st century. And I would say that both in my scholarly work and in my teaching, I move back and forth between those two things. Something like Don Quixote, I want my students to appreciate that as this late Renaissance, early Baroque masterpiece, but I also want them to appreciate it as a reflection on a series of themes that are still very much relevant today.
- Lawrence: So let's focus a little bit on the choice of a period. Why the Renaissance and early Baroque?
- Padrón: What's interesting for me, as much as I've talked about Don Quixote, my research really isn't on the literature of what we used to call Golden Age Spain. It's more on the literature and cartography of European expansion, and I really think that for someone like me who studies the Spanish speaking world, this is a period in which Spain was very much at the forefront of the building of what became the modern world, both for good and for ill. I'm not trying to celebrate this or monumentalize it, but it's a time where the kind of things that Spaniards are doing, the things that they're writing, the things that I'm reading, they really seem to matter. They really seem to have long-term consequences. Things like the discovery of the Americas, the conquest of the Americas, Colonialism, the creation of the Atlantic world, the creation of this transpacific space that is at the heart of my current research. It's really the beginning of the sort of globalized world that we live in today.
- Lawrence: So just a year or so after that fabled 1492 year, Pope Alexander VI issues the celebrated line of demarcation and essentially divides what they'll call the New World, what we would call the western hemisphere between Spain and Portugal. Rather remarkable that

he thinks he can do that and rather remarkable, those are the two countries that he chooses. But the part of the story that always is astounding to me is how within a couple of centuries, Spain goes from clearly being on the cutting edge of the entire project of what we could call globalization, speaking anachronistically, to something of a backwater by the 18th, 19th century. What happened?

Padrón: Well, I don't know if we can talk about it as a backwater, so I'm going to give you a little pushback on that.

Lawrence: Please.

Padrón: When we think of the Spanish Empire, it's one of the longest lived and most successful of all the European empires. Begins in the 15th century, and it lasts really until the early 19th century with a few bits and pieces lasting beyond that. So there's tremendous longevity and stability. It lasts a lot longer than the French Empire, than the English Empire. What the Spanish do in the New World is very much a model for what the English, the French, and the Dutch do later on, and again, in both good and bad ways, they're models of very bad behavior, and again, I'm not trying to celebrate colonialism here, but it's simply a fact of the last 500 years of history. The other side of the coin of the history of the Spanish Empire is that even though Spain declines as a power in Europe, its American empire is actually remarkably long lived and remarkably transformational.

Padrón: The very fact that Spanish is the official language of all the countries of, what we call, Spanish America, most of what we call Latin America, attests to the social, cultural and religious impact of Spain on that part of the world. Now, it's a very interesting phenomenon, what happens in the 17th century. Spain starts to expend tremendous resources in holding on to parts of its empire that it probably should be letting go of or approaching differently and I'm thinking of Holland. The number of resources expended in trying to repress the Dutch revolt is economically devastating to Spain. It becomes closed off ideologically in an attempt to preserve Catholic Orthodoxy. It really takes some very real measures to keep certain modern developments at bay, modern developments in the sciences, modern developments in philosophy. But I think it's a real lesson in how, if you are the major world power, you don't have a lot of incentive to innovate.

Padrón: And so the question is not so much, why does Spain decline? I think we have plenty of interesting answers to that question. The real question is why do England, France, and Holland have this accelerated development? And I think a lot of the answer has to do with the very marginal position that all three of those countries occupy in the 16th century. England is sort of a marginal player in European affairs. France is torn apart by the wars of religion. The low countries are subject to the Spanish crown. They need to innovate in order to insinuate themselves into a world that is dominated, and not exactly by Spain, but really by China, India, the various Muslim gunpowder empires. They have to innovate technologically, they have to innovate scientifically, they have to innovate economically on the level of social and political organization. All these things, if they're going to come from behind.

Lawrence: Let me ask you a question about Renaissance studies as a field. I know you serve on the board of directors of the Renaissance Society of America, the professional group for the study of the Renaissance. How has the field, how has the study of Renaissance as a period, changed over time? And what I have in mind, particularly in many fields of history, we have gone from a top down approach, the great people approach, looking at the kings, looking at the major writers, the major figures, to a bottom up approach, looking at the people who actually created these cultures, created these countries. Has there been a similar kind of movement in Renaissance studies over the past decades?

Padrón: There is a type of Renaissance studies that is still very much the study of the great humanistic and artistic accomplishments of the 15th and 16th centuries, which is almost inevitably a study of elites who are primarily white and male and so forth. So that's still going on. But we do see a lot more attention to women, to the poor, to working class, to enslaved people. All of that has certainly happened in Renaissance studies. But one of the more exciting things that has happened in the last, say 20 years, is the globalization of the Renaissance and looking at the way in which what we used to call the Renaissance, what we might call the culture of early modern Europe, travels around the world, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries and produces these very interesting scenes of encounter. And sometimes, as in the New World, those are violent colonialist processes.

Padrón: But then there's the counterexample of the Jesuits in China where there's certainly no hope of imperial conquest or colonization, and the encounter between Europe and this non-European society, this non-European culture, is carried out in peaceful terms. And there's much more dialogue and exchange going on than we see in the New World. And all of that is the global Renaissance at work, sometimes in its colonialist manifestations, sometimes in these manifestations that are carried out through missionary, diplomatic, and economic enterprises.

Padrón: So for example, one of the texts I'm working on right now is a Latin dialogue that is published by the Jesuits in the city of Macau in 1590 for consumption by the Japanese. When we think about the Renaissance, one of the things that's going on in the Renaissance, it's the flourishing of vernacular languages, but it's also the rediscovery of Latin and the cultivation of this kind of classical Latin. There's work on neo-Latin scholarship, and so this dialogue is a neo-Latin text. But when we think of neo-Latin, you might think of Florence, you don't necessarily think of Macau and you don't think of a Japanese readership for a Latin dialogue. And that's the kind of thing that is surfacing. How is humanism turning up in unexpected contexts, unexpected places, doing unexpected things? This is one of the things that we're discovering in the work of the global Renaissance.

Lawrence: In a recent piece of yours on the Spanish encounter with the Japanese, you have this wonderful term, "the glass ceiling of Eurocentrism." What do you mean by the glass ceiling of Eurocentrism?

Padrón: It was a particular piece that I saw. One of the things that we see developing over the course of the 16th century is that even when these encounters are peaceful, there's a

strong sense of Eurocentrism that has brought along, some of my colleagues would say white supremacy, to use a language that is more oriented to the language of race and racialization. This whole idea that Europe and especially Christian Europe or even Catholic Europe is at the top of the pile of the world's cultures, and the Spanish Jesuit, José de Acosta, is one of the first people to really articulate this in a very clear way. The Europeans are at the top, then come the Japanese and the Chinese, then come the major civilizations of the Americas, so the Inca and the Mexica, and then everybody else. And this has to do with levels of literacy levels, the use of written language, it might have to do with life in cities, things like that, these senses of hierarchy.

Padrón: But there's this one Spaniard, Rodrigo de Vivero, who ends up shipwrecked in Japan, and the way I read his account of that trip is that, for him, the Japanese do not look inferior at all. He's incredibly impressed by Japanese art. He's incredibly impressed by the piety of these Japanese religious sites that he's taken to visit, and what I see in his text is this grappling, he knows as a good counter reformation Catholic, that the Japanese are supposed to occupy this second tier because they're highly civilized but not Christian. And yet he struggles with that because he's seen people that he sees that are very much his peers in a lot of respects. And to get back to this whole question of the Renaissance, one of the things that he says about this giant bronze Buddha that he sees in the city of Kyoto is that he considers it to be a better representation of the human figure than anything he has seen in Italy or Spain.

Padrón: He's actually comparing it with the masterpieces of the European Renaissance and the early Baroque. But so that's what I mean by this glass ceiling, that's the one point in all the things I've written where it seems that the Japanese are going to crash through that ceiling and become the peers of Europeans, at least in the opinion of this one man. But whether for personal reasons or to not get in trouble or for whatever motivation, the text ends up reimposing that sense of hierarchy and sort of insisting, despite the man's personal experience, that the Japanese have some work to do, let's say. They have to learn the true faith.

Lawrence: Even as he's making observations that actually push on that paradigm?

Padrón: Exactly. Exactly. So that's what is so interesting about his narrative of his trip to Japan, is that he really seems to be grappling between his experience of Japanese culture and the way he knows he's supposed to think about Japanese culture.

Lawrence: One of your Visiting Scholar lectures as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar this year examines the Spanish exploration in the Philippines and the encounters with Ming China during that time. Can you tell us a little bit about those encounters?

Padrón: Yeah, this is actually a part of the history of this period that I think is very little known outside of the Spanish speaking world. And frankly, I don't know how well known it is within the Spanish speaking world. We all know that Columbus discovered the New World when he was trying to find a route to the Indies, and we usually learned that what happened was that once the Spanish figured out that the New World was an interesting place in its own right, then that assumed prominence in Spain's interest in

the building of overseas empire, and to some extent that's true. The flip side of it, though, is that the project of getting to the East by way of the West was never abandoned, and there were several expeditions that set out across the Pacific trying to discover a usable route from the New World to the East Indies and back.

Padrón: And they didn't succeed until 1565 when a man by the name of Miguel Legazpi set up a Spanish colony in the Philippines and his companion, Andrés de Urdaneta, discovered this return route that had eluded others. I've given the credit to a man named, Andrés de Urdaneta, there's a recent book that plays up the role played by another pilot, another navigator, who was actually of Afro-Portuguese origin. So once again, getting to this whole question of are we telling this same old story of great white men, or are we unpacking the roles played by groups that were once ignored? Pacific exploration is one of these fields where we're unpacking the roles of people who are once ignored.

Padrón: But what's so very interesting about this is once the Spanish are in the Philippines, you have the very first transpacific trade route that is built by Europeans for Europeans. The Pacific had been crossed many times by native inhabitants of South Pacific Islands, but this is the first time that you have a trade route that's connected with the global networks that the Europeans are building in both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. To give you an idea, it's now possible, once this happens, once the Spanish are in the Philippines, it becomes possible to circumnavigate the world on regular shipping. It'll take about four or five years to do, but you can go around the world on ships that sail on a regular basis. And that's something tremendously new in the experience of the world.

Padrón: This is why it's the beginning of globalization, because you actually have stable roots that connect all of the known continents and that create all of these very interesting exchanges between the Americas and Asia. Things that have really only been studied in the last 30 or 40 years or so. When the study of the Spanish Pacific has begun to flourish, we see American silver feeding the Spanish economy. We see Chinese silks and Asian luxury goods coming to the Americas and transforming the artistic world of the Americas. We see corn go to China. We see coconuts travel to Mexico. People coming both ways. The first Asian American populations are actually in Mexico. It's this world, this transpacific space, that comes into existence because the Spanish built this trade route.

Lawrence: You have studied history, you've studied culture, you've studied literature. You have also become an expert in cartography, the study of maps. So where did that interest come from? Does that go way back? I was one of those kids who always was the navigator when we went on family trips, because I always found maps to be fascinating. Still do, they have a certain kind of magic to them. But I wonder what your route to the study of maps was?

Padrón: I was that same kid. I was the navigator. I loved maps for their own sake. In the seventh grade, I fell in love with Tolkien's books, largely because of the map and the idea that I could have a map of an imaginary world. I used to play board games that involved all kinds of maps. So it was a passion of mine, but it never occurred to me that it could be an objective study until I got to graduate school, and I ended up writing an essay about

this Ecuadorian novel from the 19th century that I had picked arbitrarily from the syllabus because I wanted to study an Ecuadorian novel, being a native of Ecuador. But the thing that intrigued me was its setting in the Amazon region of Ecuador, it set it apart from other books of its kind that were being written in 19th century Latin America.

Padrón: It's the lesson of a good library. I found out that the man who had written the book had also written the first geography textbook for the Ecuadorian public schools that he was trying to found in the 1840s and 50s, and that led to my first dabbling into the idea that the telling of stories could be intimately related with the drawing of maps and that just as stories have their cartographies, sometimes explicit ones, sometimes implicit ones, so maps have their stories as well. As someone who grew up in the United States, I look at a map of the United States and I immediately see this sort of westward movement to it. I know that the 13 colonies are in the East. That map acquires a direction and a narrative, and that's how I think spaces become meaningful to us, by getting invested with stories of all kinds.

Lawrence: One might think that maps are a purely descriptive exercise. The perfect map is a perfect description of the reality of the landmass, topography, existence of roads, whatever else the map tries to contain. Or one could say that a map is an inevitably, unavoidably, normative exercise. It draws boundaries. It says things that are relatively important and relatively less important, and that's included and not included. So can we think of maps as one way or the other, or has that changed over time as well?

Padrón: There's a wonderful Borges short story called, *On the Rigor of Science*, in which Jorge Luis Borges imagines a far away kingdom in which the science of cartography has reached perfection and the cartographers of the empire have chosen to make a map on a one-to-one scale because you would need for a map to have a one-to-one scale in order for it to be the perfect representation of a territory. But then of course, it's an absurd map. It covers the entire country. So Borges does this to get us, I think one of the things that he leads us to reflect on is that maps always involve selection. The reason that they are valuable is precisely because they model a territory, they don't reproduce it perfectly. And I think that it used to be that you could talk about progress in map making. So even if the map wasn't universally complete, no map is. No map has that one to one scale.

Padrón: It could be accurate to the point of it being perfectly transparent, being perfectly objective, perfectly scientific, and one of the things that happened in the study of maps is I think people gave up on the idea that maps would be transparent and that the story of maps is one of increasing accuracy because maps always involve selection. What am I going to include? What am I going to exclude? How am I going to represent the things that I do include? Then those choices get caught up with all kinds of interests, with ideologies, with cultural bias, all sorts of things. And this is what makes maps so interesting, that these images that seem so innocent are actually so loaded and so in need of unpacking and of interpretation.

Lawrence: Seemingly just descriptive, and yet as Borges teaches us, that it would be absurd to have a purely descriptive, perfect map and therefore the rest of it is an exercise of relative weight, of what's more important, what's less important, what's going to be necessary for the user of this map, and perhaps what's necessary for the producer of this map for what she or he is trying to accomplish.

Padrón: Exactly.

Lawrence: Well, one of the things I like to ask my guests on Key Conversations, since this is after all a Phi Beta Kappa program and Phi Beta Kappa members are big book readers, book acquirers, if you could help us build our reading list? I wonder, in your wide range of interests, a couple of suggestions for someone with some background in the field who's looking to go further, and for those of us for whom this is a subject of interest but not a great deal of background yet?

Padrón: The books that opened up the reading of maps to me in the 1990s are still very relevant. There was a lot of theoretical work done on how to read maps back in the nineties that I don't think has been supplanted. And so the essays of the key figure, John Brian Harley, have been collected in a book called, *The New Nature of Maps*. There's also a wonderfully accessible book called, *The Power of Maps*, by Denis Wood and John Fels that's come out in a second edition, and that's really designed to help a reader who thinks of maps as transparent and objective and start getting them to think about maps as these very complicated representations that always serve some kind of interest.

Padrón: On Pacific exploration there are two recent books. One of them is a book on Magellan by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. Fernandez-Armesto is probably the preeminent historian of exploration in the English speaking world today. He's also an extremely engaging writer. There's also a historian of California by the last name of Resendez, who has written *Conquering the Pacific*, and I sat and read it all in one afternoon. It's a really engaging story about the final conquest of the Pacific by this Legazpi expedition, which really highlights the contributions made by this Afro-Portuguese pilot.

Padrón: I'll point you to my new book, *The Indies of the Setting Sun*, which is all about the way that the Spanish imagined the Pacific. But there is a very fertile field of Pacific studies. We might think of Matsuda's *Pacific Worlds* or *The Great Ocean*. There is a wonderful collection of essays, *Pacific Histories* by David Armitage and Alison Bashford, which is a great introduction to Pacific History in general, but not necessarily this whole Spanish scene that I've been talking about.

Lawrence: I'm grateful to have you as part of the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar program this year, and thanks so much for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Padrón: Thank you so very much. It's been a pleasure.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC, Paulina Velasco is managing producer, Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Jan Perchek. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting

Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "Ricardo Padrón is Mapping Spanish Exploration of the Pacific." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, December 12, 2022. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

