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The Development Paradox

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The Mameyes landslide in 1985 (WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

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A century of inconsistent development plans has left Puerto Rico in a perpetual state of vulnerability.

The deadliest landslide in North American history took place in 1985 in the Mameyes neighborhood in Ponce, Puerto Rico. At least 129 people died in the landslide and 30 other people perished after three days of heavy rainfall caused widespread flooding, washing out bridges and roads in the south of the island. At the time of the disaster, Ponce and the rest of Puerto Rico were undergoing major infrastructural developments through U.S. federal funds, including construction projects to upgrade bridges, build a dam, and create an artificial lake. The

landslide itself was likely propelled by a sewage water pipe rupture and a leaky water main. It appears that the tropical rains were disagreeable to the infrastructure and ongoing construction necessary to keep up Puerto Rico's consistent pace of development.

Several decades later, when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, U.S. Geological Survey sensors tracked the flow of water throughout the island. These sensors had been installed in an attempt to mitigate dangerous floods. When the water levels were high enough to threaten the northwestern

Guajataca dam, sensors and tracking devices enabled a timely evacuation that prevented a devastating loss of human life. The dam, water main, sensors, and other preparedness infrastructure reflected both the island's technological development as well as its historic relationship to the United States. By this account, compared to its Caribbean counterparts, Puerto Rico should have had a high degree of resilience against vicious hurricane forces. But this past hurricane season showed that Puerto Rico, despite once being exalted as a model for U.S. development during the 20th century, seemed to be less-prepared and fared worse than some of its other Antillean neighbors, like Cuba, for instance.

Hurricane Maria exposed the cracks of U.S.-led development and planning. Such projects were conceived under antiquated political economies of imperial governance—colonial governments fashioned to serve the mercantilist, military, and socio-political interests of empire. Historically, natural disasters have paved the way for transformations that have brought Puerto Rico closer in form and image to the U.S. mainland, which may make it even more vulnerable in the future. The U.S. government's development of weather-resistant techniques can then be seen as both symptom and cause of disaster. Do the aggressive planning efforts and political-economic configurations elaborated for the island make it more resilient, or more vulnerable? These questions speak to the manmade nature of such disasters due to infrastructural, programmatic, engineering, political, and managerial human failures.

Disaster and Development in the 20th Century

Large-scale projects that implement ideas and practices of development and planning have often followed natural disasters. For instance, political discourse and debates from the first decades of the 20th century sound unnervingly similar to the current



A resettled family in front of their hurricane-proof house on the La Plata project in Puerto Rico in 1944 (JACK DELANO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

ones around defining Puerto Rico's trajectory post-Hurricane Maria. On September 13, 1928, Okeechobee, also known as San Felipe II, a powerful Category Five hurricane, crossed the island of Puerto Rico southeast to northwest. Okeechobee was one of the deadliest Atlantic storms in history, causing thousands of deaths throughout the Caribbean, and 312 in Puerto Rico alone. Four years later, in 1932, San Ciprián, a Category Four hurricane, crossed the entire length of the island east to west, foreshadowing Hurricane George's path in 1998. Following Okeechobee and San Ciprián, the U.S. government created the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA), and then the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA) in 1935 as an extension of U.S. New Deal programs. The PRERA/PRRA's explicit mission was to rehabilitate rural areas following the 1928 and 1932 hurricanes and acquire urban land or property to develop the island's infrastructure. Indeed,

post-hurricane efforts to create a more developed, modern, and better “prepared” Puerto Rico became increasingly aggressive after 1932.

In March 1934, Rexford Tugwell, who would become the second to last U.S.-appointed governor to Puerto Rico in 1941, visited the island. Tugwell’s crew flew to the island with Eleanor Roosevelt, who went down to inspect the island with a crew of “newspaper-women.” Tugwell derided the state of affairs that the U.S. had produced in the island, treating it as a colony to benefit from and neglecting to provide aid. He observed that “relief was something which the Congress made Puerto Rico beg for, hard, and in the most revolting ways, as a beggar does on a church step, filthy hat in hand, exhibiting sores, calling and grimacing in exaggerated humility,” he later wrote in his 1946 book about Puerto Rico, *The Stricken Land*. “And this last was the real crime of America in the Caribbean, making of Puerto Ricans something less than the men they were born to be.”

In a letter to then-Secretary of Agriculture and subsequent vice president of the United States, Henry Wallace, Tugwell also wrote about the consequences of migration on the U.S. national character due to the federal government’s refusal to intervene in Puerto Rico. Characterizing Puerto Ricans as the “next wave of the lowly” and positioning them as “worse” than “the Irish, Italians, and Slavs,” Tugwell warned Wallace, “They make poor material for social organization but you are going to have to reckon with them.” Tugwell’s comments implicitly pointed to the use of development schemes as an important tool to not only build modern infrastructure and adequate housing, but also to keep Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and to stave off migration to the U.S.

Eleanor Roosevelt, for her part, advocated for a benevolent intervention in Puerto Rico, noting that “conditions...seemed slightly better” in the Virgin Islands than in Puerto Rico. In her autobiography, Roosevelt wrote about her advocacy in Puerto Rico: “On my return, I begged my husband to send down some labor people and industrialists to look over the situation. Some of my friends have since gone there to develop new industries and I think several small industries are going successfully.” President Roosevelt himself visited the island in July of 1934. At a public address during that visit, Roosevelt told the crowd that he had visited Puerto Rico 30 years earlier and that while “a great deal of progress has been made,” more intense efforts at modernization were necessary. “Your problems here

on the island are very much the same kind of problems that we have in many other parts of the United States. They are social problems and economic problems, and the same methods that we use to solve them in other parts of the country will be applied here in Puerto Rico,” he said. “I am looking forward to the solving of these problems here in the island just as quickly as we shall solve them in the continental part of the United States.” The visits of Tugwell, Eleanor Roosevelt, and later President Roosevelt in 1934 following the hurricanes of 1928 and 1932 marked important turning points for the island. Development with an American hallmark would thus pave the way for Puerto Rico’s 20th century version of modernization.

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Several policy changes followed. In 1934, the federal government established the Puerto Rico Policy Committee, headed by University of Puerto Rico chancellor (and subsequent head of PRRA) Carlos Chardón, who had left the island following the 1918 San Fermín earthquake. Chardón soon created the Chardón Plan, a land-based approach to economic development on the island that sought to enforce a little-known clause in the Foraker Act of 1900: a 500-acre limit to land-ownership by American corporations in the island. Following this clause, the Chardón Plan proposed to limit the size of land ownership to corporations and distribute small lots to workers. Secondly, Puerto Rican affairs were transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior. The federal government also created an Inter-Departmental Committee as a first effort to reshape the colonial economy. Finally, Ernest H. Gruening, formerly Managing Editor of *The Nation* and a well-known Latin Americanist, was appointed to head a new Interior division called Territories and Island Possessions. All these appointments came with the broader goal of pushing the Chardón Plan onto the Puerto Rican people. The Plan, however, never came into fruition.

Once Tugwell became governor in 1941, his term heralded more aggressive development projects. In the summer of 1939, Tugwell had taken a trip to Key West with his family after the impending war prevented their summer vacation to Europe. He wrote that during this trip, he came to the conclusion that the Caribbean was an important bulwark territory in the war. He wrote: “Had we not a real and immediate interest in the tranquility, even the loyalty of its people?” In 1941, at the request of the U.S. government, Tugwell conducted an investigation that found that multinational corporations had disregarded the Foraker Act’s land tenure limits, and had accumulated up to 60,000 acres of land.

When appointed governor, Roosevelt’s charge to Tugwell was to find out “whether we have got rid of the slums; and whether there is any place on the island to get a safe drink of water.” Tugwell was critical of how the federal government had handled its relationship with Puerto Rico until then, noting an “indifferent” attitude from both country and Congress, which he saw as a demonstration of the “failure of all our efforts to outpace, with schemes for housing and public works, the forces of disintegration so powerfully at work on [the] island,” as he wrote in *The Stricken Land*.

With Tugwell as governor, “socioeconomic reform became a shared goal of the new political leadership of Puerto Rico,” writes historian Arturo Morales Carrión. Tugwell worked in close collaboration with Luis Muñoz Marín, who would go on to become Puerto Rico’s first democratically-elected governor. Tugwell and the Puerto Rican technocrats he worked with pushed New Deal-style reforms that they felt would improve the lives of the poor, laying the groundwork for a new public administration system: a powerful planning agency, a modern budget organization, and two economic development agencies—the Puerto Rico Development Company and the Development Bank of Puerto Rico. When Eleanor Roosevelt visited Puerto Rico again in March 1944, she noted, “Puerto Rico was seething with activity and did not seem to me at all like the quiet, restful spot I had visited ten years previously. Rex Tugwell was the governor of the island at the time of my second visit, and he was trying out some of the ideas he had become interested in during his first survey.”

Massive infrastructural and development investment in Puerto Rico marked the following decades. In fact, by the mid 20th century, Puerto Rico had become a site of expertise in urban planning, serving as

the model society for global urban development work. Puerto Rico’s planning agency and its technocrats like Rafael Picó, a mentee of Tugwell and one-time president of the American Society of Planning Officials—the organization that later became the American Planning Association—provided leadership in infrastructure development and city and regional planning worldwide. By the late 20th century, Puerto Rico had electricity, fast roads, cable TV, the largest mall in the Caribbean, and the highest square footage of commercial space in the world. Compared to nearby islands like the Dominican Republic, where in the 1980s it was more common to notice when the lights came on than when they went off, Puerto Rico had fast food companies, investors, multi-national companies, and reliable electric power. Capital too, flowed into Puerto Rico, and investors felt confident to invest in the government’s growing debt. Puerto Rico’s per capita GDP rose rapidly and consistently from \$718 per person in 1960 to \$28,704 per person in 2013, according to World Bank data. In contrast, the Dominican Republic’s GDP rose more slowly from \$204 in 1960 to \$6,027 in 2013. In the same period, Jamaica’s per capita GDP rose from \$429 to \$5,006. From 1960 to 1990, Puerto Rico had some of the highest production, productivity, and per capita GDP and median incomes in Latin America.

Development and Progress—for Whom?

These measures of development suggest a privileged status for Puerto Rico relative to the rest of the Caribbean. Indeed, in the context of the current neoliberal era, immigration flows have offered Puerto Ricans a mobility shelter, as their U.S. citizenship places them in what may be considered an enviable position compared to many other workers in the Caribbean. Yet, the reality is more complicated. Development and its relationship to progress is an imprecise calculation in policy, practice, and experience. In his study of development, Gilbert Rist notes that definitions of “development” often waver between a “wish to live a better life, which deliberately seeks to ignore the fact that the concrete ways of achieving it would run up against conflicting political choices” and actions that “are supposed eventually to bring greater happiness.” At the same time, he writes, development is “the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of market exchange, to effective demand.” That is, development, and therefore



A municipal housing project in Ponce, Puerto Rico in 1941 (JACK DELANO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

Today, Puerto Rico sits politically and economically challenged by the pull of not being “developed” like the U.S. yet not being “underdeveloped” like other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America.

growth, is part of capitalist production, and usually designed and deployed by powerful entities. The U.S. prefigured as the main distributor of development in Puerto Rico and in many other parts of the world in the 20th century through organizations like the League of Nations, the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. As John Bellamy Foster noted in the *Monthly Review* in 2007, “Class exploitation, imperialism, war, and ecological devastation are not mere unrelated accidents of history but interrelated, intrinsic features of capitalist

development.” Citing Pontecorvo’s 1969 film, *Burn!*, about a fictional Caribbean island, Bellamy Foster quotes its protagonist: “That is the logic of profit...one builds to make money and go on making it or to make more sometimes it is necessary to destroy.”

Today, Puerto Rico sits politically and economically challenged by the pull of not being “developed” like the U.S. yet not being “underdeveloped” like other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. Starting in 1990, as countries like the Dominican Republic and Jamaica began to grow economically and developmentally, boosted by international configurations of development, Puerto Rico’s growth stagnated. After the 1990s, Puerto Rico’s GDP growth rate lagged behind Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica. By 2013, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands had the lowest GDP growth of all the Caribbean economies. As in the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rico’s infrastructure, the one bolstered and built throughout the 20th century, and animated by Tugwell, FDR, and Muñoz Marin, declined. Even during its period of growth, infrastructure slowly deteriorated as U.S. public policy decisions shifted funds from public investment to consumption, and altered U.S. insertion in the global economy. If it is true that at one point Puerto Rico could boast about having the most modern, “developed,” and ostensibly resilient infrastructure in the 20th century Caribbean,



An abandoned sugar mill in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

during the 21st century, its political relationship to the U.S. has prevented it from navigating the contradictions of its development.

Puerto Rico shares convergent stories of decay and deindustrialization with cities like Detroit and New York City, although it was not provided the same economic or political protections. Fifty years before, Puerto Rico looked much like these growing cities, receiving the same levels of investment in public housing, road and bridge construction, and a federally-supported construction industry. But it is important to note that according to social and economic indicators, even after Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's infrastructure is better than in some other Caribbean countries, which have not afforded its residents potable water, consistent electricity, adequate housing, education, public medical facilities, labor opportunities, or a minimum social safety net.

Post-Maria discussions about how to remake Puerto Rico harken back to the first decades of the 20th century, when Tugwell and Eleanor Roosevelt lamented the “indifference” of the U.S. government. A few things have changed, however. There is no FDR in power, no New Deal, no public conscience to deploy all the resources of government toward citizen welfare—toward upholding life. A neoliberal approach to growth has taken over, and “development” today is disbursed privately. As the present government of Puerto Rico, under the lead of Ricardo Rosselló, undoes public institutions and any sense of public responsibility—with the support of Trump’s Washington—Puerto Rico cannot be destined toward a path of development by consignment. Advocates claim that the U.S. has a responsibility, given the massive monetary profits it has collected over the years from Puerto Rico, perhaps the same responsibility that Tugwell demanded for the island in 1934.

But what if Puerto Rico confronts an era where its relationship to the U.S. must be redefined, if not by choice, then by circumstance? Much anti-colonial discourse proposes that Puerto Rico’s troubles can only be alleviated through decolonization. But simply being “sovereign” is not a solution, at least not in and of itself. Governments in the region classified as both independent republics or colonial departments still endure imperial conditions to varying degrees. Whether “sovereign” or “non-sovereign” bodies, these nations all shuffle suffering and manage social, political, and economic challenges endemic to global colonial conditions. Furthermore, these Caribbean societies that

have experienced delayed economic and productivity growth, whether under independent governments, departments, or colonies, also often experience extreme social inequality. Such is also the case for Puerto Rico, where ironically, but unsurprisingly, U.S. federal transfers mitigate poverty and inequality. Sadly, elites have been the only Puerto Ricans to benefit from any sense of self-determination. Corruption, inefficiency, and ties to multinational organizations often override the promise of the liberties and equalities that decolonization and independence might promise. Thus, beyond decolonization, as historian Gordon Lewis has proposed, it is crucial to examine the terms under which self-determination is exercised and to what end, and what political-economic configuration would have value in a more just and more egalitarian society.

Looking to the past, the mid-20th century offered policy solutions to improve quality of life. What policies might work today, and what could they achieve? These aren’t questions of rhetoric, but questions of concrete policymaking, programs, and actions; about the pavement that must be set in a path to recovery. The question of sovereignty is necessary but not sufficient, and should not be primary in addressing Puerto Rico’s present juncture. From a practical perspective, the Caribbean and Puerto Rico have very different ecological realities from the U.S. Acknowledging these differences beyond FDR’s and Tugwell’s benevolent approach to Puerto Rico, which sought to build the island in the image of the U.S., is crucial moving forward. Inspiration for sustainable planning and development could be drawn from pre-Columbian times, when Taínos had already developed an architectural form resilient to hurricanes. Notably, this architecture was light and adaptable, the complete opposite of the heavy, inflexible and perma-durable cement infrastructure that characterized 20th century development. Perhaps then, recovering and making Puerto Rico and the Caribbean prepared for climate disaster means refocusing priorities to address how we build societies—socially, physically, and programmatically—in a way that accentuates the lives, liberties, and rights of the most pressing present and local realities. ■

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