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2 Political Cultures of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States

Nothing is so hotly contested as the past. In discussing the political experience of the Puerto Rican left in the United States during the 1960s and the 1970s, we face a number of problems that we do not encounter when discussing the North American, or for that matter, the international Left. Primary among these problems is the dearth of written accounts regarding experiences of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States. Except for a few articles, mostly about the Young Lords, there is no book-length treatment to be found. Such organizations as the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, U.S. Branch, the Young Lords Party, El Comite–MINP, and the Puerto Rican Student Union have not left a clear record of what they accomplished or the impact that they had—either on the lives of Puerto Rican people in the United Sates or even on those of their own membership. The Puerto Rican left (defined as the social actors and the organizations that they created) did, however, have a significant impact not only amongst Puerto Ricans but also on other oppressed groups and on the North American Left, and indeed, on the country as a whole. In the absence of an adequate body of writing on the experience of Puerto Rican radicalism, any attempt at analysis of that experience is necessarily tentative and provisional. However, this limitation notwithstanding, the undertaking is well worth the effort. The usefulness of any historical reconstruction is in the measure by which it acts as an open door through which multiple reflections and debates are facilitated, thereby serving to further our understanding of the past, present, and future.

At this time, there exists a hunger for the sharing of memories of Puerto Ricans in the United States. This hunger is an effort to appropriate a past that gives meaning to our community's existence and serves as a resource in asserting a positive and an affirming identity. Hence, the search for oneself in history is closely connected to the question of the construction of identity. While in the past this hunger has been most characteristic of youth, today it cuts across the generational divide and even in a limited way across certain sociological and ideological divisions. This hunger reveals the need to look at how the past is appropriated by oppressed groups in everyday life. There also exists a hunger for the political-intellectual

resources required for understanding the present and for the construction of political identities through which to undertake change-oriented action on the part of activists and youth who are seeking to become involved in political struggle.

Any project of historical reconstruction must be critical if it is to be useful. Nostalgic and celebratory histories have no place in the intellectual project this essay proposes. As Perry Anderson points out: "The notion of history as an album of values to be bequeathed from individual to individual is nevertheless not a Marxist or even a specifically socialist one. Roll-calls of past lives, as moral exemplars for present struggles or aspirations, are a feature of very many political movements of the most opposing character—conservative or liberal as much as radical. Their original source is the romantic nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century, which very early patented resonant recollections of a ceremonial line of dead heroes."[1]

Self-serving liberal and neonationalist myth-making have come to dominate the way in which the histories of Puerto Rican radicalism are being presented in a number of political and academic settings. In reconstructing the past we should be careful not to fall into nostalgic romanticizing. Hero worship is a common phenomenon within nationalist historiography, as within politics, and has proven damaging to both.[2] Moreover, the hero, as representative of the aspirations of any group or as embodying an ideal, offers the opportunity to submit to an authority above and beyond the people who are the makers of history. The potential for creativity is lessened as submission to the hero tends to generate submission to a potentially repressive authority.[3]

This is not to say that the Puerto Rican women and men who were the actors in the movement and who took to the historical stage should not be recognized. In fact, it is their activity that is the focus of our investigations. Nevertheless, when considering the activities of these actors it would be useful to keep in mind Marx's view that "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[4] It is within the context of those "circumstances directly encountered" that I wish to ground the activities of these social actors and their organizations.

The social movement that these individuals and collectivities created is best analyzed as a process in formation. All social life can be seen as a combination of action and construction, forms of practical activity that are informed by some underlying projects. Most often implicitly and even unconsciously, social action is conditioned by the actors' own "frames of reference" in constant interaction with the social environment or con-

text. Action is neither predetermined nor completely self-willed; its meaning is derived from the context in which it is carried out, from the understanding that actors bring to such action, and from the emphasis on the creative role of consciousness in all human action, individual and collective. For these reasons, the focus of this essay is an attempt to transcend notions of linear progression in the constitution of political subjectivities and social movements.

The essay will also map out and explore the contexts and the interactions of a sector of the Puerto Rican community who emerged and engaged in the cultural, sociopolitical, and economic struggle from the 1960s until the early 1980s, historicizing and problematizing the political culture and identities of those who stood within a varied political spectrum on the Left. I argue that the shaping and constitution of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States was produced in a process of complex and contradictory historical conditions through which the so-called dichotomies between American–Puerto Rican, conservative-radical appear, disappear, and implode. Therefore, the historical experience of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States transcends dominant and traditional notions of history and radicalism. It is in the sixties that this political movement presents its most striking development, and it is this period that is my contextual reference.

In accounting for the historical development of the Puerto Rican radical generation of the 1960s–70s, I will look at selected factors that shaped the emergence of Left political culture: the transformations of the sociopolitical context of the Puerto Rican community in the postwar era and the impact of political repression; the decline of the Old Left, the university, Black Power, and Third World liberation movements; and the prison system.

Another way of viewing the object of this chapter is that it explores the process of political socialization its members underwent. Fred I. Greenstein offers a working definition of political socialization: "Narrowly conceived, political socialization is the deliberate inculcation of political information, values, and practices by instructional agents who have been formally charged with this responsibility. A broader conception would encompass all political learning, formal and informal, deliberate and unplanned, at every stage of the life cycle, including not only explicitly political learning but also nominally nonpolitical learning of politically relevant social attitudes and the acquisition of politically relevant personality characteristics."[5] This essay will operate under the broader definition by examining some of the formal and informal ways in which the political attitudes were learned, articulated, and transformed.

Political socialization took place for the generation of 1960s Puerto

Rican radicals in a variety of formal institutional settings (e.g., the family, school, playground, church, union, job, welfare programs, state agencies, etc.). Puerto Rican engagement in these institutional settings was conditioned by several factors; primary amongst these were the unequal relations of power that existed between Puerto Ricans and members of the dominant society, as well as amongst Puerto Ricans themselves (i.e., gender, race, class, sexuality). Within each of the institutional settings in which Puerto Ricans have found themselves, they have been confronted with a need to struggle against different forms of oppression. These struggles have taken the form of passive and active resistance and range from withdrawal from these institutional relations to the founding of alternative institutions and organizations.

The conflicts that took place within such arrangements made for a transformation of consciousness and behavior. Below I examine a number of these struggles within such institutions during the immediate postwar era. However, before proceeding it is important to situate the emergence of such struggles within the Puerto Rican community in the two decades following the Second World War.

THE POSTWAR TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

The Puerto Rican community of the fifties and sixties must be viewed as a diverse entity intersecting with the complex ways of the dominant society. If it is true that the American working class is stratified by skill, occupation, gender, race, and nationality, racialized groups or nationalities are far from homogeneous even within class boundaries. In looking at the sites of political socialization for the emergent generation of Puerto Rican radicals, a social world of greater complexity emerges and undermines any essentialized notion of what it meant to be a working-class Puerto Rican during the 1950s.

When looking back at the situation of Puerto Ricans in the United States during the 1950s, there is a tendency to imagine and describe the community as made up almost exclusively of poor or working-class families. Speaking little or no English, immigrants from Puerto Rico arrived in increasing numbers to the slums of New York, Chicago, and other U.S. cities are portrayed as unskilled and in possession of little or no "cultural capital." While it is certainly true, then and now, that Puerto Ricans have tended to be working-class and poor, it does not follow that *all* Puerto Ricans were either poor or working-class. Neither was it true that working-class Puerto Ricans were bereft of cultural capital. In fact, Puerto Ricans in the United States, while overwhelmingly working-class, were

far from homogeneous. Class differences existed within the Puerto Rican community, and such classes were themselves stratified. For example, among workers there existed differences of skill, industry, education, etc. The same can be said of other social classes (e.g., professionals, merchants, the petty bourgeoisie, and so on). With the influx of tens of thousands of migrants from the island this internal stratification would increase.

While the postwar era marks the beginning of the mass migration, newly arrived Puerto Ricans did not construct a Puerto Rican community from scratch. In New York City, there already existed a significant Puerto Rican community dating back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The organizations of the Puerto Rican community, together with agencies of the state, provided the infrastructure for the incorporation of the newly arrived. Many who came did so with the assistance of family or extended family members. However, during this period the pressures exerted by the massive influx of immigrants, and the political social, and economic transformations then underway, would result in the dissolution of the earlier political culture of the Puerto Rican community.

The Puerto Rican community dating from the turn of the century up until the post–World War II era participated in the construction of working-class public spheres, both by joining and supporting the organizations of the labor and socialist movements and through the establishment of their own organizations and cultural spaces.[6] The development of this working-class cultural sphere wherein a socialist political culture can exist is not dependent only on explicitly political and economic factors but also on a wide range of cultural, social, and educational movements. Taken as a whole, these movements constitute communities that serve as a basis of resistance to capital and the State. These communities created forms of collective identity and collective subjectivity by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world—different, that is, from the characteristic worldviews and self-concepts of the social order that they were challenging.

Throughout this period, while continuously challenged by conservative elites, leadership of the Puerto Rican community was exercised from the bottom up by the labor movement and the Left. A similar situation existed in other communities in the United States prior to the Second World War. Paul Buhle, writing about the political culture of Italian-American immigrants, describes a situation similar to that which existed among Puerto Ricans and other working-class groups in New York City.

> Historians have failed to grasp the complex interactions of class and ethnicity within the ethnic community—divided against itself by class fissures but united at some points in a rough solidarity against the outside world. Immigrant radicals looked first to their communities, participating in industrial

> union movements and class-conscious economic cooperatives foremost. Conservative ethnic forces, divided between the preservation of their own Old World prerogatives and their hopes for amicable relations with the American business community, were momentarily thrown on the defensive. The communities at large took a middle range position, supporting unions when they promised success, and defending ethnic victims of repression.[7]

As in the case of the Italian-American community that Buhle analyzes, the leadership of the early Puerto Rican community was effectively dominated by its most radical sectors. From the turn of the century this role was filled by members of progressive unions and organizations, such as the Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Party of America. By the decade of the thirties Puerto Ricans would join the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) and participate in many of the organizations its Puerto Rican membership helped to establish. One example is the International Workers Order (IWO). Founded in 1930 by the Communist Party and left-wing members of the Workmen's Circle, the IWO was a multinational and multiracial order that was dedicated to providing affordable insurance and other services to its members and was dedicated also to the class struggle. The IWO organized campaigns in support of the unemployed, played an active role in the early years of the CIO, and provided aid to republican Spain. By 1947 the IWO had 187,226 members. The Spanish section of the IWO totaled more than ten thousand members, over half of whom were Puerto Rican.[8]

Within the Puerto Rican and other working-class immigrant communities, anarchist, trade unionist, socialist, and communist ideologies acted as counterhegemonic universals. While a national identity existed, it was not seen as central to the political identity of worker activists but as the modality through which a working-class identity was experienced. For Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, including Spaniards, the term *Hispano* inferred more than a common national history and language. It implied belonging to the working or popular classes as opposed to the rich immigrant class from Latin America.[9] The newspaper *Pueblos Hispanicos*, edited by Bernardo Vega, is an example of the meaning with which the term *Hispano* had been invested.

However, by the 1950s the combination of suburbanization, the internationalization of capital, Fordism, the pact between capital and American labor, the rise of the welfare state together with the emergence of mass culture and political repression was to signal an end to the old world of socialist working-class political culture. Moreover, in the postwar era there also occurred a rearticulation of race, which tended to displace class as the central component to the political identity of immigrant groups. In this period "ethnicity" increasingly replaced popular class identities as the