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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### THE PUERTO RICAN PARADOX: Colonialism Revisited

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*FOREIGN IN A DOMESTIC SENSE: PUERTO RICO, AMERICAN EXPANSION AND THE CONSTITUTION.* Edited by Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. Pp. xv+422. \$79.95 cloth, \$25.95 paper.)

*ISLANDS OF RESISTANCE: PUERTO RICO, VIEQUES AND U.S. POLICY.* By Mario Murillo. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001. Pp. 90. \$9.95 paper.)

*MILITARY POWER AND POPULAR PROTEST: THE U.S. NAVY IN VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO.* By Katherine T. McCaffrey. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Pp. xvii+218. \$60.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.)

*THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN PUERTO RICO.* By Amílcar Antonio Barreto. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. Pp. xiv+221. \$55.00 cloth.)

*PUERTO RICANS IN THE UNITED STATES.* By María E. Pérez y González. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. Pp. xii+186. \$45.00 cloth.)

*THE PUERTO RICAN NATION ON THE MOVE: IDENTITIES ON THE ISLAND AND IN THE UNITED STATES.* By Jorge Duany. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Pp. xv+341. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, October 2005

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*PUERTO RICO: NEGOTIATING DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE.* By James L. Dietz. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003. Pp. viii+219. \$49.95 cloth, 19.95 paper.)

*REPRODUCING EMPIRE: RACE, SEX, SCIENCE, AND U.S. IMPERIALISM IN PUERTO RICO.* By Laura Briggs. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. xi+278. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*UNDERSTANDING MAINLAND PUERTO RICAN POVERTY.* By Susan S. Baker. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi+235. \$69.50 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

Puerto Ricans live in purgatory, trapped between Anglo North America and Latin America. And this no-man's-land is epitomized by the perennial debate over the island's political status.

Amílcar Antonio Barreto (3)

As a colonized minority citizenry, Puerto Ricans face a unique marginalization that neither affords them the benefits of full citizenship . . . nor allows them to adapt through normal immigrants channels.

Susan S. Baker (120)

A colleague once quipped that the end of the Puerto Rican political status question would also mean the end of many academic careers. Although American policy makers steadfastly refuse to recognize that Puerto Rico is a colony or that the United States is a colonial power, the unresolved question of the Island's political status continues to be a dominant theme of intellectual endeavor. Officially, Puerto Rico is a "possession" of the United States defined in American jurisprudence as belonging to but not being a part of the United States. That is, "foreign in a domestic sense," as the title of Burnett and Marshall's book aptly puts it. In spite of the claim that the creation of the political formula called "commonwealth" (*estado libre asociado* in Spanish) in 1952 ended Puerto Rico's colonial status, mainstream and radical research continues to document the dialectics of colonial domination and resistance in United States-Puerto Rico relations. Long-winded debates over language and population control policies, American military presence, culture, identity, migration, and the juridical standing of Commonwealth carry on.

Whether it is formally recognized or not, American colonialism has had, and continues to have, an enormous impact on both Puerto Ricans and Americans. The troublesome and contradictory outcomes of the relationship between the colony and the metropolis are revisited and scrutinized from every conceivable conceptual, social, and political perspective in the books reviewed here. After reading these books the reader will wonder why Puerto Ricans do not vote for independence or statehood and put an end to this uncertainty, or why the U.S. Congress and president do not take action to resolve the problems created by trying to manage and conceal the realities of colonialism.

The fact is that there is an ambivalence among Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis the United States, and among Americans vis-à-vis Puerto Rico. On the one hand, Puerto Ricans know that they are a distinct people, different from Americans, but they also believe that they are better off being citizens of the United States. Most Puerto Ricans would not consider themselves American or anti-American. They seem to agree with the view once expressed by a Caribbean leader before a U.S. Congressional Mission to Barbados that, “the worst thing than being exploited by the Americans is not being exploited by the Americans.”

Americans, on the other hand, believe that Puerto Rico is, and should continue to be, linked to the United States. Although the U.S. Congress has expressed great reluctance to admit a Spanish-speaking territory as the fifty-first state of the Union, most Americans do not comprehend why Puerto Ricans rejected statehood in the 1993 and 1998 plebiscites and take it as a sign of nationalist affirmation and hostility towards the United States (See Cockburn 2003). Americans are not inclined to give Puerto Rico independence either, and the federal government has persecuted pro-independence sympathizers since the 1930s. Thus, the Puerto Rican status question is caught in a quagmire: neither independence nor statehood with Spanish as the main language (“Creole statehood”) are acceptable. Thus Commonwealth lingers on as the only viable—albeit less than optimal—alternative.

#### IMPERIALISM AND COLONIALISM REVISITED

It is not surprising, then, that the issues of colonialism and imperialism dominate this new wave of post-cold-war-era research on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, even though previous reviews of end-of-the-century studies on Puerto Rico (*LARR* 35, no. 3 and 37, no. 1) anticipated a surge on research dealing with issues associated with postcoloniality, such as sexuality, transnational identities, translocality, and transmigration. The exceptions to this are *Reproducing Empire* by Laura Briggs and *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* by Jorge Duany. Briggs examines how gendered ideologies and sexuality shaped American colonialism, making women’s bodies and families the central terrain of constestation of colonial discourses. Duany’s book is a study on the making of transnational identities and the redefinition of the concept of nation. Yet they both address the issue of colonialism as the basis of the construction of discourses on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans.

Taken as a whole, the books reviewed attempt to explain aspects of what could be termed the “Puerto Rican paradox”: how is it that Puerto Rico continues to be less developed and poorer than any state of the Union and Puerto Ricans continue to be second-class citizens stuck on the bowels of the “American underclass” after more than one hundred

years of U.S. presence on the island and over half a century of being an American “Commonwealth?” As the studies of Victor S. Clark (1930) and Bailey W. and Justine Diffie (1931) did in the 1930s, these current authors try to understand and explain how American colonialism has effected Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans.

To look for adequate answers to the Puerto Rican paradox, many of these twenty-first century scholars revisit concepts and issues raised by theories of imperialism and colonialism that were in vogue during the 1970s: national identity, economic marginalization, racial discrimination and segregation, oppression, and cultural assimilation. Reading these books one after another would lead the reader to conclude that Puerto Rico is a colony and the United States is its metropolis (its empire), and that American colonialism, in spite of official statements to the contrary, is the root cause of: (1) cultural and political identity conflicts; (2) the emplacement of Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens; (3) pervasive poverty among Puerto Ricans both on the island and the mainland; (4) stunted economic development; and (5) oppressive militarization.

All this is said in multiple ways, but it is presented as the only logical explanation to the stubborn paradox that after more than a century under the American flag, Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans are far from realizing the promise of the “American Dream.” Such a promise was made by General Nelson A. Miles, heading the invading army on July 28, 1898: “to promote your [Puerto Rico’s] prosperity and bestow upon you the guarantees and the blessing of the liberal institutions of our [the United States] government” (Berbusse 1966, 79).

In reviewing these texts I group them into four great recurring themes: culture and identity; second-class citizenship; development and poverty; and militarism, although, the underlying common theme concerns the implications of American colonialism.

#### CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Jorge Duany’s *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* is perhaps the most ambitious of the pieces reviewed in terms of both research and interpretation. The book studies the construction of the Puerto Rican national identity and the forging of cultural nationalism on the island and in the United States during the twentieth century. Duany proposes an alternative view of the concepts of nation and identity, arguing that Puerto Rico is a “stateless nation,” a “nation on the move” not based on a sovereign state but on the collective consciousness of a translocal community (1–5). Following the lead of Arlene Dávila (1997, 2, 33–8), Duany argues further that Puerto Rico may be considered a “postcolonial colony” with a well-defined sense of national identity developed

during the second half of the twentieth century through the activism of the Commonwealth government and its Creole intelligentsia gathered around the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (39, 134–5). Puerto Ricans are thus a people with a strong sense of national identity but with little desire to become a nation state (4).

If cultural nationalism was forged during the 1950s in opposition to the American imperial narrative of the first half of the twentieth century (chapters 2–4), the Puerto Rican national identity in the twenty-first century is being shaped by the influences of its diaspora and the phenomena of circular migration or transmigration. The reluctance of Puerto Ricans to assimilate into the American mainstream; their continuous identification as Puerto Ricans, not Americans or Puerto Rican-Americans; and the continuous flow of people, commodities, and ideas between the island and its diaspora all define Puerto Rico as a nation on the move. The traditional links between language, territory, and culture, once considered markers of national identity, are now seen in a different light as permeable, elastic, and malleable boundaries of the Puerto Rican nation. Puerto Rican identity in the twenty-first century thus perhaps prefigures the shape of emerging transnational identities (37).

Even though the traditional markers of national identity have been redefined to configure the “Puerto Rican nation on the move,” language continues to be a key issue in Puerto Rican identity politics. In *The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico*, Amílcar Antonio Barreto sets out to explain the political rationale behind the language issue. From 1902 to 1991 Puerto Rico was officially bilingual, with Spanish being the language of every day life and English being the language of business and the imposed medium of education until the 1930s. In 1991, the ruling Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) passed a controversial law declaring Spanish the official language of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Traditional political theory would consider such a move “irrational” as it contradicts the logic of vote getting by bringing a divisive ideological issue to the center of the political debate.

Using the concept of “nested games,” Barreto explains how language is used to achieve political goals that may not appear to be part of a rational vote-getting strategy (5). After a long contextualization of language and cultural politics in Puerto Rico, Barreto explains that this apparently irrational behavior was aimed at influencing Congressional thinking on the status question. Moreover, this political game was used by the two main parties. By adopting Spanish as the official language of the Commonwealth, the PPD hoped to steer Congress away from endorsing statehood, knowing that Congress would be reluctant to admit a Spanish-speaking territory to the Union. To counter this policy, the pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista, repealed the 1991 “Spanish only” act—as it was dubbed—and reinstated bilingualism. Thus both parties

were acting rationally within the framework of a “nested game,” where ulterior motives dictate the rationality of political actions (chapters 8–11).

Barreto would agree with Duany that English and Spanglish (a combination of code switching and using anglicisms in conversation) are rapidly becoming the dominant medium of communication among Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. However, Spanish still is a central component of the Puerto Rican national identity, even for the “English-dominant” diaspora. The figures presented by Barreto show that less than 50 percent of Puerto Ricans on the Island speak English and only 23.6 percent speak it with ease (21). On the Island, English is mostly confined to the higher echelons of the corporate world and the federal agencies. Among the diaspora, Puerto Ricans whose first language is English (English-dominant) still hold Spanish in high regard and deem it a valued symbol of cultural pride (146).

Although Duany and Barreto realize that for island-born Puerto Ricans Spanish is their first language, they do not realize fully its importance in forging a translocal or transnational Puerto Rican identity. If English and Spanglish are indeed part of Puerto Rican contemporary culture, Spanish continues to be the Puerto Rican vernacular. For the Puerto Rican diaspora it is the language of resistance. Switching to Spanish in the middle of a conversation or interjecting a word or phrase in Spanish provides a way of identifying with the Puerto Rican ethos for English-dominant Puerto Ricans. One need not speak Spanish fluently but just know some key phrases or popular sayings and how to throw them in at the right time. For English-dominant Puerto Ricans, Spanish could be compared to Hebrew for American Jews of the younger generation. To be “initiated” as a bona fide member of the community, the new generation needs to know enough of the vernacular to be able at least to speak it for their bar mitzvah. Spanish is thus the language of the “initiated,” the full members of the Puerto Rican nation. To be a “real” *boricua* (Spanish colloquial for Puerto Rican derived from the Taino name for the Island, Borikén), one needs to be able at least to sing along with a salsa song or make a witty comment in Spanish.

## SECOND CLASS CITIZENSHIP

Issues of citizenship are deeply intertwined with those of nationhood, culture, and identity. If Puerto Ricans are a “people” or a nation, what kind of people are they? The volume edited by Burnett and Marshall, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*, deals with the origins of the ambiguous status of Puerto Rico as a territory and Puerto Ricans as a people. In a well-crafted collection of essays, the view that, to Americans, Puerto Ricans are “foreign in a domestic sense” is explained from its roots to its consequences. The legal doctrine that distinguishes

incorporated from unincorporated territories is a juridical construct that, by design or chance, determined that Puerto Rico would remain indefinitely in a constitutional limbo within the American federal system. The construction of the notion of unincorporated territory meant that some territories were not acquired with the intention of becoming a state of the Union (12, 67–68, 377). The destiny of these territories lies outside the federal constitution, which explains why Puerto Rico remains a colony in spite of the decline and international rejection of colonialism after the Second World War. Even after conferring U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans and redefining federal relations through Commonwealth—an apparently “extra territorial” formula—the status of Puerto Rico remains at the mercy of the U.S. Congress, where sovereignty over Puerto Rico still resides (17). This juridical ambiguity is the root cause of the contradictory understandings of Puerto Rico as a nation and Puerto Ricans as “second-class citizens.” As Roger Smith states it in the concluding essay:

But if Puerto Ricans can therefore plausibly be termed a “nation,” Puerto Rico has nonetheless never been an independent nation-state as a matter of international law. . . . And because, in terms of international law, independent nationhood and independent statehood tend to be virtually synonymous, that legal and political history is the strongest argument against Puerto Rican nationality (384).

Smith is not arguing against the cultural definition of Puerto Rican nationality. He is arguing against the validity of speaking of a Puerto Rican citizenship as a legal category vis-à-vis American citizenship. Nonetheless, this kind of ambiguity between legal and sociological realities constitutes the basis of the confusion that informs the behavior of both Puerto Ricans and Americans in their relationship. As Mark S. Weiner argues, the very creation of the doctrine of “unincorporated territory” was enveloped in ethno-juridical premises about the racial inferiority of the Filipinos and Puerto Ricans as people unfit for government, and the racial superiority of the Teutonic races (Burnett and Marshall, 63–7).

In *Puerto Rican Poverty*, Baker observes that “foreign appearing, and yet American citizens, Puerto Ricans have been marginalized on both the island and the mainland” (43–4). Puerto Ricans do not fit the traditional patterns of either Latin American or European migrants, nor those of African Americans (110–11). Puerto Ricans are the poorest of the poor, and this is the result of “disrespect and exploitation” based on the “colonial status of the island and the second class citizenship forced on its people” (43, 203). In *Puerto Ricans in the United States*, espousing the minority view that cast Puerto Ricans as “new Americans,” Pérez y González concurs with Baker: “In specific ways their [Puerto Ricans’] struggles are unique; their colonial situation, U.S. citizenship, and linguistic, cultural, and religious differences set them apart from the dominant groups” (75).



Other studies extensively document that since the first migration waves Puerto Ricans were treated as unwanted newcomers and discriminated against. While Puerto Rican authorities helped Puerto Ricans search for work in the Northeast, U.S. authorities worried that precisely because these immigrants were citizens, they would stay on after their labor contracts ended. While settling on the mainland was an outcome that the Puerto Rican government favored, it was not the desired outcome for the American communities in which Puerto Rican migrants worked or the policy makers who first promoted contract labor during the 1940s (Whalen 2001, chapter 3). Puerto Ricans were referred to as *Spiks* and *pork chops* and experienced discrimination in housing, employment, bars, and other places (Whalen 2001, 77).

The poignant effects of second-class citizenship are observed in the analyses of Baker, Briggs, and Whalen on the construction of discourses on Puerto Rican women. From different perspectives they agree that women have been the most impacted by the process of industrial decline leading them and their families to unemployment, poverty, and reliance on welfare, as heads of the poorer families. Yet, rather than being represented as displaced workers, they are portrayed as “welfare mothers” and blamed as the agents that reproduce the “culture of poverty”—and the pathology associated with it—among Puerto Ricans (Baker, 134–39; Briggs, 4–9).

Puerto Ricans are thus set apart from other groups in American society by being legally domestic but culturally foreign. This is the paradox that lies behind the status of Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens, and it is grounded on the ethno-juridical and cultural assumptions that framed American imperialism in 1898.

#### DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY

In *Negotiating Development and Change*, James Dietz presents a detailed analysis of the rise and fall of Operation Bootstrap. The main failure of the Bootstrap program was its virtually total reliance on non-local (American) direct investment to promote industrial development. Dietz compares the experience of the “East Asian tigers” and Puerto Rico to demonstrate how by promoting local entrepreneurship the former outperformed the latter in spite of being similarly small open economies. Relying on foreign direct investment (FDI) as the engine of development, resulted in “adverse path dependence” for Puerto Rico. By contrast, the East Asian tigers followed a “virtuous path dependence,” using FDI to stimulate local entrepreneurs to become internationally competitive (66, 83–87).

Dietz’s diagnose of the failure of Operation Bootstrap sums up the economic component of the Puerto Rican paradox: in spite of over fifty



years of industrial development, the performance of the Puerto Rican economy lags behind comparable small economies. Moreover, as Dietz observes, citing Fernando Lefort (2000), Puerto Rican economic performance is not converging either with that of the states of the Union. While Dietz attributes this failure of reliance on American FDI and knowledge, Lefort attributes the suboptimal economic performance to Commonwealth status (135). The choice of words may be different, but either way the status question is brought back to the center of the debate on economic performance.

In recommending that the Puerto Rican government promote policies similar to the East Asian tigers and that the Island becomes “the Singapore of the Caribbean” (186) to stimulate economic growth, Dietz assumes that the Commonwealth government has the ability to promote national or quasi-national economic policies. He is not unaware of the colonial constraints but he believes that they can be overcome through skillful policy making, taking advantage of what he terms “the silver linings” of the clouds generated by the end of the Bootstrap era (184). Yet current events show the constraints that prevent the Commonwealth government from formulating an autonomous development policy. In August 19, 2003, the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Vocero* reported that Secretary of State Colin Powell requested Bolivia not allow the Puerto Rican government to participate in the thirteenth Ibero-American Summit without the express permission of the United States. Eventually the stern request turned into a call to coordinate any international initiatives of the Puerto Rican government. Powell’s admonition, however, was a stark reminder of the express juridical impediments that prevent the Puerto Rican government from participating in international affairs.

Even after settling in the United States, Puerto Ricans, however, find it impossible to realize the “American Dream.” Susan Baker’s *Mainland Puerto Rican Poverty* is a ground-breaking, eye-opening study that compares the socioeconomic situation of Puerto Ricans with other minorities. Using census data, Baker deconstructs the label of Hispanic and presents a socioeconomic profile of the three major groups: Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. Some of the key findings of this study are: (1) “Puerto Ricans have the lowest median income and the highest rate of poverty of the three main Hispanic groups” (66, 199); (2) Puerto Ricans suffer greater inequality and powerlessness than African-Americans—although African-Americans suffer greater racism (202); (3) “the financial returns of education for Puerto Ricans at all levels of education were not nearly as great as for the white majority” (200); (4) the explanation for Puerto Rican poverty cannot be found in the human capital characteristics of individuals (66); (5) the feminization of Puerto Rican poverty results from declining rates of labor force participation in conjunction with industrial decline in the Northeast (201, 203);

(6) Puerto Ricans have higher unemployment and lower labor force participation rates than the other Hispanic groups (200).

Underlying the reality of Puerto Rican poverty, according to Baker, are the “colonial status of the island and the second-class citizenship forced on its people” (203). Baker further argues that, “U.S. business concerns destroyed the indigenous economy of the island and substituted a system that could work only with massive migration” (203). Although this phrasing may seem exaggerated, the fact is that migration became a condition for the viability of Operation Bootstrap as demonstrated by Stanley Friedlander (1965).

The economic component of the Puerto Rican paradox can be summed up by paraphrasing Lefort (2000, 24): Puerto Rico is better off than Venezuela but worse off than Mississippi. In the 1950s, Puerto Rican governor Luis Muñoz Marín stated that by the 1960s Puerto Rico’s income should be two-thirds that of Mississippi, the poorest state of the Union. At that time, the island’s income was about one-third that of Mississippi’s. According to the 2000 census, however, Puerto Rico’s income is still about half of Mississippi’s, some distance off the 1960s target.

#### MILITARISM

Historically Puerto Rico’s geopolitical location on the northeastern corner of the Caribbean Basin, placed at the crossroads of the Atlantic ocean and the Caribbean sea, has conferred on it the role of strategic pontoon. Both Spain and the United States have used the Island as a military base, and have been willing to subsidize its dwellers—with the *situado mexicano* and federal transfers—to ensure the economic viability of such a prized strategic post.

*Military Power and Popular Protest* by Katherine McCaffrey and *Islands of Resistance* by Mario Murillo are complementary pieces that chronicle the history and conflicts of U.S. military presence in the Puerto Rican island-municipality of Vieques. McCaffrey documents the ebb and flow of the conflict between the U.S. Navy and the people of Vieques and of Puerto Rico, while Murillo analyzes the recent events leading to the Navy’s withdrawal from the island.

Both McCaffrey and Murillo understand that the Vieques conflict is rooted in Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Until 2003, Vieques was the target range for the Roosevelt Roads naval complex, the largest American naval base outside the continental United States now closed. Since the 1940s the Navy occupied two-thirds of Vieques, having purchased the land from absentee sugar landowners and forcibly evicting its residents, which had no title to the land where they and their ancestors lived.

In Vieques, American security interests confront Puerto Rican claims to national identity. Perhaps in no other place is the Puerto Rican

ambivalence towards the United States more evident. As McCaffrey perceptively remarks, "Although Vieques's underlying conflict is fundamentally rooted in Puerto Rico's status as a U.S. colony, protestors have consistently framed their grievances in a way that consciously sidesteps the politically sensitive issues of sovereignty and independence" (9).

The confrontation between national security and national identity in Vieques can be said to have ended in a draw. On the one hand, after much maneuvering the Bush Administration was compelled by domestic and international public opinion to honor the Clinton Administration's commitment to withdraw from Vieques on May 2003. This represented a major victory for the Puerto Rican people, who stood united across ideological and political party lines on their claim of "peace for Vieques"—different from the radical anti-imperialist claims of the 1970s, "U.S. Navy out of Vieques." On the other hand, as Murillo points out, the new strategic interest of the United States in the Caribbean have shifted to counter-drug operations (67–70). The Navy may have been forced out of Vieques by the united resistance of Puerto Ricans, but as long as Puerto Rico is a U.S. colony, the Island will play a role in national security. In the end both sides got what they wanted: the Puerto Ricans got Vieques, while the Americans still got Puerto Rico.

#### THE PUERTO RICAN PARADOX

The books reviewed contribute in different ways to the understanding of the Puerto Rican paradox. They allow us to look at the colonial puzzle from three intersecting angles: (1) cultural resistance; (2) political ambiguity; and (3) economic inequality.

The various authors agree that the endurance of the Puerto Rican nation defies the logic of both the melting pot and cultural diversity ideologies. In the melting pot, all ethnicities ultimately assimilate into the "American mainstream." In the logic of diversity, ethnics and even the dominant white "majority" become hyphenated Americans: African-Americans, European-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans. But Puerto Ricans did not melt and, with few exceptions, do not identify themselves as Puerto Rican-Americans, not even with the satiric Ame-Rican created by one of the premiere poets of the Puerto Rican diaspora, Tato Laviera.

To search for an explanation to this part of the paradox we may consider James Blaut's proposition that Puerto Ricans are not simply ethnic or national minorities but a colonial minority (Blaut 1987, 155, 166–70). Neither Italians nor Poles nor Mexicans nor Cubans come from a colony; Irish immigrants were native English speakers which facilitated assimilation, albeit not without conflict. Chicanos and African-Americans grew up as ethnic minorities. The exclusion of Puerto Ricans

from the American mainstream—termed ghettoization in the 1970s and 1980s—compelled them to foster a coherent cultural space across the sea that clearly differentiates the Puerto Rican experience from other groups (Blaut 1987, 163–69). Puerto Ricans born in the United States for whom English is their first language will remain Puerto Ricans as long as they feel discriminated and rejected, and as long as circular migration—*la guagua aérea*—provides a sense of belonging to an imagined community where they are accepted in spite of tensions.

Puerto Rican resistance, not reluctance, to assimilate should not be construed as mere resentment or reaffirmation of emotional ties to the Island. Claims to a Puerto Rican national identity are ultimately constructions to a common foundational myth that opposes the Puerto Rican people to “the other”—whether “the other” is Spanish, American, or Dominican. The foundational myth may be told from different perspectives of class, gender, race, etc., and claimed in contested terms, but its different versions represent an imagined common ground. For Puerto Ricans, the Island—as the Torah for the Jewish—provides the fulcrum that affirms Puerto Rican national identity. On the Island, Puerto Ricans are not a minority, and Puerto Rican culture flourishes there as an autonomous force on equal terms with other world cultures. Thus the imagined foundational myth(s) may not be fixed but constitute a point of reference which all Puerto Ricans can “evoke” in constructing their version of national identity. The cultural contributions of Tainos, Africans, and Spanish may be assigned different degrees of importance but they will be present in any Puerto Rican identity narrative. Others may even add the contemporary contributions of Americans to Puerto Rican culture, but the core of the foundational myth will be the background for the reinterpretation and reformulation of the foundational narrative.

The second angle of the paradox is the political ambiguity of Commonwealth. The genesis of any nation as an imagined community is articulated as a political project of “nationhood” by social groups vying for power (e.g., the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the aristocracy in Europe). The body of research known as *la nueva historiografía puertorriqueña* (the new Puerto Rican historiography) which started in the 1970s, concludes that in the nineteenth century, the Puerto Rican elites developed two political projects of nationhood: a reformist one (autonomy) and a revolutionary one (independence). Both of these political projects of nationhood articulated the notion of the great Puerto Rican family as a foundational concept. But since the political project of nationhood was never tied to only one political alternative, Puerto Rico’s dominant groups continued to develop their cultural endeavors on the margins of the U.S. colonial government attempts to Americanize the island after 1898.

The struggle for independence was not a necessary condition for the construction of a national identity. Moreover, illiteracy and poverty

hampered the Americanization efforts while allowing the strengthening of the popular culture. The Puerto Rican elite may have been racist, as Duany points out (22), but it was able to tap into the popular culture sufficiently to articulate its cultural projects. The poetry of Luis Palés Matos and the music of Juan Morel Campos illustrate this point (Quintero Rivera 1988, 69–80). Thus the ambiguity of Commonwealth and the treatment of Puerto Ricans as “foreign in a domestic sense” allowed the development, consolidation, and popularization of cultural nationalism through the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture after the 1950s.

The economic aspect of the paradox can be captured in the phrase “better off than Latin America and worse off than the states of the Union.” This is the logical outcome of a policy that selectively includes Puerto Rico in federal programs. While federal transfers maintain an average standard of living on the Island higher than Latin America’s, inclusion at funding levels lower than that of the states have resulted in maintaining the economic gap between Puerto Rico and the mainland, as well as maintaining sharp inequalities on the Island. (According to the 2000 Census, Puerto Rico’s poverty rate is 48 percent, while it is less than 13 percent in the United States, as a whole and not higher than the 20 percent mark for any individual state.)

The Puerto Rican paradox reflects the contradictions of maintaining a colony in postcolonial times. In the age of colonialism, the contradictions of cultural ethnocentrism, racial discrimination and segregation, second-class citizenship, economic inequality, and military occupation, would have been rationalized by oxymoronic logic such as that encapsulated in the doctrine of “foreign in a domestic sense.”

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