

University at Albany, State University of New York

Scholars Archive

Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino
Studies Faculty Scholarship

Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino
Studies

Fall 1985

Puerto Rican Studies: New Challenges and Patterns

Pedro Caban

University at Albany, State University of New York, pcaban@albany.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lacs_fac_scholar



Part of the [Latin American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Caban, Pedro, "Puerto Rican Studies: New Challenges and Patterns" (1985). *Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Faculty Scholarship*. 9.

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lacs_fac_scholar/9

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS PUERTORRIQUEÑOS

HUNTER COLLEGE

of The City University of New York

• 695 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10021 • *newsletter* **FALL 85**



EDUCATION: NEW CHALLENGES

GUEST COLUMN

PUERTO RICAN STUDIES: NEW CHALLENGES AND PATTERNS

By
PEDRO CABAN

Fordham University

The establishment of Puerto Rican Studies departments was a major achievement which displayed our community's capacity to organize politically in order to exert a role in its own intellectual reproduction. The significance of this achievement transcended the immediate concerns of the University to pacify the politically conscious and vocal Puerto Rican community. Puerto Rican Studies departments and programs were initially seen by many of us as liberated zones that drew sustenance from the community, but which operated within an academic institution that was characterized by its profound insensitivity to our people's history and struggles.

However, from the outset departments of Puerto Rican Studies were assigned an inherently contradictory task. On an ideological level they served to legitimate the urban university and to diffuse the intensity of student activism by directing it in to the classroom. But on the social and political level the departments were invariably propelled toward a troubled relationship with the University administration. Those of us who view pedagogy as inherently political recognized that our task was to reinterpret the distorted and culturally denigrated history of our community, to directly repudiate entrenched notions that our community consisted of a passive and subservient people, and to demolish the racist stereotypes which demeaned our past and discredited our presence in the United States.

In this task each of us employed perspectives derived in part from diverse professional, political and class backgrounds. Admittedly profound differences in epistemological and ideological orientations separated us, but we were collectively engaged in a process of intellectually empowering our students. However, in this task we drew sustenance and gained knowledge from those we purported to teach; for often our experiences as professional intellectuals differed markedly from the life experiences of our students. We were constantly challenged to draw the practical connections between the material and social reality our students confronted daily and the lessons which we drew from our studies, research and involvement in the community.

What was particularly invigorating during these formative years was our sense that an important chapter in our history was being written and we approached our studies, as students and instructors, with a particular urgency. Individually and collectively we worked to devise curricula which attempted to deal with a complex of seemingly disparate social and

intellectual phenomena. Despite our different approaches and backgrounds, there was an integrative thread which unified and brought coherence to the various themes in the diverse literature. We viewed our current reality as heavily affected by the legacies of Spanish colonialism as well as the overwhelming power of the United States presence, by the forces of migration, by the quest to assimilate while retaining the essence of what we perceived was our heritage and culture, and most profoundly by a class structure which denied our identity.

As a result of student and community activism an opening was breached and a potentially viable mechanism was created which could be used to undermine institutionalized racism within academe. But this opening was slender, and the mechanisms of the Puerto Rican Studies departments proved to be tenuous and constantly besieged.

Although Puerto Rican Studies departments were not expected to function as traditional academic units, their establishment did appear to represent a valuable opportunity for our community. The belief was that over time, and as a consequence of dedicated work, the departments would gain in stature and acquire a permanent and respected role in the urban university. A multitude of specialized responsibilities were simultaneously assigned to the departments. But nonetheless it was widely felt that these academic units provided access for scholars and researchers who had been effectively barred from teaching because their professional interests were judged as too narrow or parochial for the traditional social science and humanities departments. Moreover, the Puerto Rican Studies departments served as vehicles through which Puerto Rican academicians could be given a realistic prospect for tenure. And as I noted earlier, the departments were seen as indispensable in creating and disseminating a new consciousness.

In reality the Administration retained substantial discretionary authority to impose criteria for assessing the tenurability of teaching personnel in Puerto Rican Studies departments. While many of us envisioned the departments as liberated zones through which we could conduct an intellectually rigorous program of study and research, the Administration conceived of the departments as expendable units useful for recycling the Puerto Rican intellectual. The departments were functional from the administration's point of view because they contributed to the mystique of the University as a liberal institution, satisfied affirmative action requirements and because they served to mollify the student body.

Even more damaging was the progressive realization that the University viewed Puerto Rican Studies departments as politically necessary, but temporary concessions to a community whose willingness to engage in struggle came as an unanticipated and unwelcomed challenge.

Similarly, while we never questioned the academic integrity or validity of what we taught, Puerto Rican Studies departments were cynically viewed by traditional departments and the administration as devoid of academic integrity, and invariably portrayed as myopic and hopelessly insular. While Puerto Rican Studies could be useful in generating cultural enrichment and ethnic pride, they were relentlessly plagued by the hysteria of professional relevance. What can you do with a major in Puerto Rican Studies? was repeatedly echoed.

In reality we were indirectly being told that the University may have changed but the wider socio-political environment remained inflexible and resolute in its demands for a homogenized cadre of educated people who uncritically internalized the prevailing normative and behavioral orthodoxies. Being Puerto Rican wasn't all that bad, but spending too much time learning about your past, present and capacity for future transformation interfered with your ability to acquire the smarts to make it in the system.

Thus, Puerto Rican Studies emerged as a contradictory phenomenon; its establishment was a grudging recognition by the University that it could not exist in splendid isolation from the community, but at the same time the University (seen not only as a formal structure, but as a complex of ideas, values and behavioral norms) undermined the departments' very legitimacy and capacity to develop.

Puerto Rican Studies departments labored under additional constraints. These departments and programs were established in virtually every unit of the City University system and in a few metropolitan private colleges. This significantly expanded the short term employment opportunities for Puerto Rican academicians and provided greater access for students to acquire an understanding of Puerto Rican reality. This development responded in part to the structure of the CUNY system as a series of autonomous colleges comprised of relatively independent academic departments.

However, the proliferation of academic departments also worked against our long term task of nurturing and sustaining the intellectual reproduction of our community. Operating as academic units virtually isolated within the colleges, and lacking internal sources of political and administrative support, the departments emerged as relatively weak bureaucratic actors. Budgets were always miniscule, faculty and instructional staffs were minimal, and tenure track lines were few. Moreover, a myriad of additional service functions were excessive.

Despite this overload, each department, often consisting of only a few individuals, some of whom were working toward the doctorate, sought to do justice to the richness and complexity of the Puerto Rican experience. This invariably meant teaching in disparate fields, acquiring a functional knowledge of distinct intellectual traditions and mastering a broad body of literature.

Moreover, given the pervasive tendency of the Administration to view Puerto Rican Studies as fulfilling some type of service function because of the "specialized needs of their specific student constituency," the departments' teaching personnel were compelled to engage in a variety of activities that went beyond the classroom. While these service-related activities were undoubtedly important for our students, they nonetheless dissipated the teaching staffs' academic productivity which in turn undermined our prospects for tenure and gave comfort to those who claimed that Puerto Rican Studies was devoid of academic merit. In addition, enormous amounts of human energy were routinely expended in acquiring the most rudimentary and basic support services from the Administration, further eroding the capacity of professional staff to pursue research and publication. This was an essential task, not because it meant professional advancement, but precisely because the fundamental project of Puerto Rican Studies departments was to reexamine our history and disseminate its findings and reinterpretations. Also, the long term survival of the departments was contingent upon its teaching staff satisfying the traditional criterion of publication.

I would venture to speculate that this was what many in the University feared most: that competent Puerto Rican intellectuals, if given a realistic opportunity, would satisfy the traditional criteria for conferring tenure. As a consequence a permanent and vital community of socially conscious and politically active intellectuals would penetrate the University and slowly transform its role viv-a-vis our community.

Thus the segmentation of Puerto Rican Studies into discrete relatively isolated units, which were viable in terms of their bureaucratic, financial and faculty resources, and overburdened as well by a plethora of demands, undermined their capacity to realize the principal task of contributing to the intellectual empowerment of our community.

Although possessing limited faculty resources, the departments sought to provide a broad coverage of the subject matter while concentrating almost exclusively on the dynamics of the Puerto Rican reality. Little opportunity existed for examining the profound similarities which shaped the experience of other Third World peoples. In reality this was not one of the departments' proscribed tasks, and if any of us ventured to equate the experience of Puerto Ricans to that of other Caribbean and Latino peoples, intense political rivalries and accusations of encroaching on another department's turf forced us to retreat to the exclusivity of our departments, an unfortunate factor which impeded intellectual cross-fertilization and limited the opportunities for building political alliances across departments.

The Puerto Rican Studies departments and their curricula were inherently defined as responding to the academic and service needs of a specific ethnic group not because the University

(Con't from page 10)

necessarily felt it had a social responsibility to this student body, but essentially because this constituency had proven troublesome. However, the vibrant political atmosphere that gave rise to Puerto Rican Studies departments, and which sustained them in their struggles with the Administration, has fallen victim to a new era of intolerance and insensitivity. The social base, which was indispensable in fortifying the departments as they struggled to evolve into viable academic programs responsive to community needs, has been held in check. Puerto Rican Studies departments confront a new and somber reality: while the activist social base appears to have been temporarily subdued, the institutional impediments to the maintenance of the departments are now more profound and insidious than before. Demands for departments to justify their relevance, and indeed their necessity in the University, are more vociferous and gaining legitimacy among Administration personnel.

Opponents cite the rapid demographic transformation of the urban Latin community as a justification for restructuring the Puerto Rican Studies departments. Given the history of entrenched resistance this really means the gradual decomposition of Puerto Rican Studies. But nonetheless, it is true that there is a new reality which we must address. The non-Puerto Rican Latino population has dramatically increased since the late 1960's. Given the traditional commitment of Puerto Rican Studies to progressive causes, I perceive a growing concern among many of us that the departments must assume some role in addressing the vital needs of this evolving community. X

This is a valid concern, but I believe it is the function of the University to recognize its responsibility to the changing ethnic and racial populations that attend its colleges. This should be palpably obvious given the reality that the formation and evolution of CUNY is inextricably woven into the struggles of the urban working class.

This does not mean that Puerto Rican Studies departments should insulate themselves from the legitimate claims of our Latino brothers and sisters. We have learned much from the long and arduous struggles to establish a presence in the University. Undoubtedly we stand committed to sharing the benefits of our experiences in order to ease the task of other marginalized sectors of our Latino community. And this must be done not solely because of a deep sense of social responsibility and fairness. One of the most precious lessons we learned was the indispensability of solidarity and unity in action. Similarly we learned that our struggles as Puerto Ricans are the struggles of all who have suffered from the racial and ethnic degradation that is endemic in this society. Another liberating lesson was a realization that no matter how culturally repressed, politically excluded and socially marginalized Third World peoples are, the human resources and talent to wage a campaign for realization and fundamental justice cannot be extinguished.

The responsibility of Puerto Rican Studies departments is not to transform their curricula or to devise new forms of servicing the perceived needs of the growing contingent of non-Puerto Rican Latino students. Our responsibility is to fortify the bonds with an emerging Latino student and community leadership and to unite with them in the struggles which will invariably arise.

We all realize that the history of other Latin and Caribbean peoples is every bit as valid a subject of teaching and research in the University as that of the Puerto Ricans. But we in Puerto Rican Studies must not presume, no matter how genuinely dedicated we are, that we can appropriate a role as the primary source of cultural and historical knowledge of the non-Puerto Rican Latin experience.

In the late 1960s we demanded that the University hire instructors of Puerto Rican Studies who had both a functional knowledge of the subject matter, and a genuine understanding and appreciation for the particularities of the Puerto Rican experience. Similarly we must join with the Latino community in demanding that the University employ additional faculty who are intellectually equipped to play this role. To assume that Puerto Rican Studies departments can shoulder the responsibilities of researching and relating the Puerto Rican experience as well as that of other Latin peoples discredits the validity of our earlier demands and can potentially alienate us from those we seek to unify with.

Moreover, there are a series of very practical considerations which weigh against Puerto Rican Studies assuming a comparable role toward the broader Latino community as it has for the Puerto Rican. As we all know, we are currently engaged in a struggle for our very institutional survival. The limited resources that we can mobilize are almost depleted as we wage a campaign to protect the integrity of the departments. I think it is unrealistic and beyond the capabilities of the Puerto Rican Studies departments to transform their traditional function and role in an attempt to respond to the legitimate needs of a more heterogeneous Latino community.

Within the University structure Puerto Rican Studies departments can play an invaluable role in establishing a framework for a reasonable and responsible Administration policy. But this must be done in alliance with students, community representatives and academicians from the broader Latino community. I think we all implicitly recognize that the future of Puerto Rican Studies may very well depend on how it defines its role in the rapidly shifting demographic and socio-economic structure of the city. This future will also be affected by the alliances we can build.

Finally, we have to be very careful in the strategies we devise in an effort to survive within the University, lest we provide additional ammunition to those who seek to discredit

Puerto Rican Studies. One of the persistent critiques, as I noted above, is that Puerto Rican Studies responded to a particular moment in ethnic and class struggle, and thus inherently lacked the requisite academic integrity to confer it legitimacy within academe. Our willingness to transform our role in order to respond to the legitimate needs of other Latino peoples can be readily cited as evidence to support the validity of this nefarious argument.

The challenge to Puerto Rican departments lies not in devising a curriculum that can expand its student enrollments (although this is an important consideration for Administrators who assess the validity of a program of studies on the basis of enrollments). Rather the challenge lies in transforming the institutional structure of the University which seeks to ghettoize Puerto Rican Studies, and subtly attempts to portray the departments as marginalized units of questionable academic integrity that are becoming increasingly anachronistic in a professionally oriented system of higher education.

The challenge is to build our fragile institutional base, to organize across campuses and aggressively reassert those demands that comprised our earlier struggles, and most fundamentally to reassess the nature of our relationship to the community.

It is a painful reality that as Puerto Rican Studies departments struggle to realize a tenuous existence within the University, the dynamic and rejuvenating ties with the community are eroding. To a very real degree refortifying our ties to the social base is among the most crucial issues which Puerto Rican Studies currently faces.

How we go about this is a complex task that requires a careful and deliberate collective plan of action, thus, it is somewhat premature at this stage to elaborate a strategy to realize this important project. However, certain considerations should guide our reflections.

It is obvious that all departments should participate in this. Although they share common legacies and confront similar obstacles the departments also have dissimilar developmental experiences within their respective colleges and universities. There is much to learn from a careful evaluation of the particular histories of each department.

Secondly, it is crucial that a reassessment not be confined to input provided by the teaching and instructional staff, but must draw students and community leaders into the process. This is of particular importance because what we as researchers and teachers define as relevant may in fact bear little relationship to the basic necessities and aspirations of our community. The procedures for reaching out and tapping into a creative pool of ideas and adjusting to a changing reality are numerous. They range from open meetings in community centers, social, cultural and tenant groups and more established organizations

to outreach programs into the junior and senior high schools.

What is at issue is developing a more concrete appreciation for the reality which confronts our community and reassessing our continued relevance as instructional/academic units in terms of that reality. We must candidly address the issue of the relevance of the Puerto Rican Studies experience for the professional development of our students. This issue is both ideological and organizational. On the one hand we must strive to dismantle an institutionally propagated belief that Puerto Rican Studies is functionally irrelevant; a view which some students are tragically accepting as a lamentable, but irrevocable, reality. On the other hand we must devise ways of more fully integrating what we teach to a broader intellectual and political tradition. We must clearly demonstrate that acquiring a fundamental appreciation of Puerto Rican historical, cultural and political evolution is vital for our students' and community's intellectual and personal development.

Pedro Cabán, Ph.D., Columbia University, 1981, is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Fordham University and director of the Puerto Rican and Latin American Studies Program at Fordham. His recent research is on the colonial state and capitalist development in Puerto Rico. An article on this subject appeared in Latin American Perspectives, Summer 1984.

