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Puerto Rico, Colonialism In

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PUERTO RICO, COLONIALISM IN. Puerto Rico has been a colonial possession of the United States since 1898. What makes Puerto Rico a colony? The simple answer is that its people lack sovereignty and are denied the fundamental right to freely govern themselves. The U.S. Congress exercises unrestricted and unilateral powers over Puerto Rico, although the residents of Puerto Rico do not have representation in that body. Its people are subject without their consent to thousands of federal laws that they have had no role in drafting. Federal legislation supercedes and can negate laws enacted by the popularly elected local legislature. Puerto Rico's young men and women are subject to military draft and deployment to combat zones although Puerto Rico's people have no say in selecting the leaders who make the decisions to take the United States to war. Puerto Rico cannot control its immigration policy, cannot sign international treaties, and has no legal representation in international organizations. According to the respected Puerto Rican jurist José Trías Monge, "There is no known non-colonial relationship in the present world where one people exercises such vast, almost unbounded power over the government of another" (p. 163).

Establishing the First U.S. Colony

The United States obtained Puerto Rico from Spain as the spoils of war. The United States defeated the Spanish armed forces in Cuba and the Philippines, then on July 25, 1898, U.S. forces landed on Puerto Rico in the Caribbean coastal town of Guanica. The Spanish army was quickly defeated, and an armistice was signed in August. A U.S. military government took control of Puerto Rico in October 1898. In December 1898 Spain signed the Treaty of Paris, ceding Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the United States and relinquishing sovereignty over Cuba, which became a U.S. protectorate.

When the United States invaded Puerto Rico, the small island nation had been a colony of Spain for over four centuries. It was a poverty-stricken society, and the conservative Spanish authorities closely monitored economic, political, and cultural activities. In 1898 the Spanish Caribbean was in political turmoil. A destructive war had crippled the Cuban economy, and autonomist forces in Puerto Rico were demanding major changes in Spanish policy. In order to quell the revolution in Cuba and retain the loyalty of its subjects in Puerto Rico, Spain enacted the Autonomous Charter, which granted both of its colonies significant autonomy over domestic affairs as well as the right to enter into international agreements. However, the United States did not recognize the validity of the charter or the substantial powers of self-rule it conferred on Puerto Ricans.

Under the Treaty of Paris, Puerto Ricans lost their Spanish citizenship but did not acquire U.S. citizenship.

They automatically became subjects of the United States without any constitutionally protected rights. Despite the humiliation of being denied any involvement in fateful decisions in Paris, most Puerto Ricans welcomed U.S. sovereignty, believing that under the presumed enlightened tutelage of the United States their long history of colonial rule would soon come to an end. Puerto Rico's cosmopolitan elite expected the United States to quickly either grant their country independence or incorporate it as an equal member into the Union. More than a century after the U.S. invaders landed in Guanica, Puerto Rico remains a colony of the United States, in the words of Trías Monge in *Puerto Rico*, "the oldest colony in the world."

Until May 1, 1900, U.S. Army generals ruled Puerto Rico and reported to the War Department. Using their arbitrary powers, they issued hundreds of decrees that fundamentally altered Puerto Rico's institutions. The political system established by the Spanish was disbanded; the U.S. laws and legal system were imposed, giving federal courts jurisdiction in Puerto Rico; a system of universal public education was established; and English language instruction was mandatory for all children. Many of Puerto Rico's political, economic, and cultural elite were opposed to military rule, which they criticized as undemocratic and accused of destroying the local economy and way of life. U.S. officials in turn treated Puerto Ricans as a primitive people unfit for self-government and lacking any appreciation for how Anglo-Saxon democratic institutions functioned. U.S. officials embraced notions of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and felt it their God-given mission to spread their nation's values and institutions throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The change in sovereignty generated profound economic difficulties for Puerto Rico. Its export products, coffee and sugar, lost their European and Caribbean markets, and the island was subjected to punitive U.S. tariffs. A devastating hurricane, San Ciriaco, struck the island in 1898, killing three thousand people and causing enormous damage. It virtually destroyed the coffee industry. In addition, new economic measures imposed by the military government diminished the wealth and landholdings of Puerto Rico's capitalist class. Although military rule was short-lived, the changes imposed during this period signaled the U.S. intention to convert the Puerto Rican people into bicultural, bilingual, loyal subjects under permanent colonial rule.

In 1901 the U.S. Congress enacted the Foraker Act, which established a civilian administration to rule Puerto Rico. The law strengthened the federal government's control over Puerto Rico and denied Puerto Ricans any meaningful role in governing their country. The U.S. president, with the advice and consent of the Senate, appointed the governor of Puerto Rico. The governor's cabinet consisted

of six departments whose heads were also appointed by the president. These six men along with five other men, who were "native inhabitants" of Puerto Rico, composed the Executive Council. The council served as a nonelective upper house (comparable to the Senate). The House of Delegates (comparable to the House of Representatives) was made up of thirty-five elected officials who served two-year terms.

The Foraker Act established a profoundly undemocratic government in which political power was highly centralized in U.S.-appointed administrators. Puerto Ricans were denied representation in Washington, and all laws enacted by the Puerto Rican House of Delegates required the endorsement of the Executive Council, the majority of whom were appointed U.S. officials. The governor, Congress, and the president could annul any legislation adopted by the legislature. The Foraker Act also created a supreme court whose members were appointed by the president. Puerto Ricans were not granted U.S. citizenship, and under the Foraker Act, Puerto Ricans lost many of the freedoms and powers Spain had granted in the Autonomous Charter of 1898. The act retained the tariffs imposed during the military period of rule that enforced on Puerto Ricans a system of taxation without representation. The Foraker Act clearly established that "Puerto Rico belongs to the United States, but it is not the United States, nor a part of the United States" (Fernández et al., p. 143).

The Foraker Act sustained two of the most important initiatives undertaken by the military government, the Americanization of Puerto Rico and its people and the transformation of Puerto Rico's economy through the creation of profitable investment opportunities for U.S. corporations. Sugar and tobacco firms and suppliers of agricultural and manufacturing equipment benefited greatly from the pro-business policy of the U.S.-controlled government. Puerto Rico's human and land resources were rapidly absorbed into an agricultural economy that produced sugar and tobacco products exclusively for export to the United States. In addition to converting Puerto Rico into a sugar bowl, the goal was to transform the island into a stable and loyal outpost from which the U.S. Navy could guard the crucial shipping lanes to Mexico and Latin America and protect the forthcoming Panama Canal. The Americanization program, which included mandatory universal language training in English and knowledge of U.S. history, was pursued aggressively throughout the island. The Foraker Act was a regressive legal measure that antagonized much of Puerto Rico's political elite and gave rise to an independence movement.

Puerto Ricans continued to agitate for independence or annexation as a state of the Union with equal and full citizenship rights. The U.S. Congress ignored these petitions for equality and political dignity. Luis Muñoz Rivera, one

of Puerto Rico's most important political figures, declared, "For sixteen years we have endured this system of government, protesting and struggling against it, with energy and without result" (Wagenheim and Wagenheim, p. 127). It was not until the eve of U.S. entry into World War I, in the context of increasing political agitation and activism in support of independence, that the federal government relented. The Jones Act of 1917 established a new colonial administration and conferred U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans. The Jones Act reasserted the unlimited powers of the federal government to administer Puerto Rico as a territorial possession and affirmed that Puerto Ricans were incapable of governing themselves. Although the Jones Act eliminated the despised Executive Council and established a locally elected bicameral legislature, it concentrated even greater political powers in the appointed government and gave the president direct oversight over key agencies of the Puerto Rican government. The president continued to appoint the two most important positions, the commissioner of the department of education and the attorney general, and he also retained veto power over any laws enacted by the Puerto Rican legislature.

The Jones Act imposed collective U.S. citizenship on Puerto Ricans. Congress enacted a new statutory citizenship of a second-class order, which did not grant Puerto Rico's people representation in Congress or the right to vote for the president. The rights of citizens of Puerto Rico were not comparable to the rights of citizens of the states of the United States. Citizenship was imposed to quell agitation for independence and to affirm that Puerto Rico would remain a permanent colony of the United States. Permanent possession of Puerto Rico was crucial. Congressman Cooper expressed the views of many U.S. legislators when he endorsed citizenship for national security. He declared, "We are never to give up Puerto Rico, for, now that we have completed the Panama Canal, the retention of the island becomes very important to the safety of the Canal, and in that way to the safety of the nation itself" (Maldonado-Denis, p. 106).

Economic Growth and Poverty

While U.S. colonial rule was immutable and Congress zealously guarded its unlimited constitutional powers over Puerto Rico, the economic changes unfolding on the island were historically unparalleled. The Puerto Rico economy, always dependent on a limited number of agricultural export products, had by the 1930s become excessively reliant on raw sugar exports. By 1935 sugar exports accounted for 60 percent of Puerto Rico's export earnings. Moreover, U.S. corporations dominated the sugar-based economy. Four U.S. firms controlled over 23 percent of sugarcane lands and accounted for 51 percent of raw sugar production. Sugar was a source of extraordinary wealth, "the Dance of

the Millions," for the U.S. sugar corporations and their investors. However, the exploitive practices of these firms left the majority of the island's population in a state of permanent penury and near starvation. Commenting on the progressive Americanization of Puerto Rico and its conversion into a Caribbean sweatshop, Luis Muñoz Marín wrote: "The American flag found Puerto Rico penniless and content. It now flies over a prosperous factory worked by slaves who have lost their land and may soon lose their guitars and songs" (Wagenheim and Wagenheim, p. 154). Indeed Governor Theodore Roosevelt observed: "Poverty was widespread and hunger almost to the verge of starvation, common. . . . Every city or large town had its slum, where squalor and filth was almost unbelievable. . . . The island was disease ridden. Tuberculosis had reached an astonishingly high rate" (Cabán, p. 230).

By the mid-1930s Puerto Rico, once referred to as "the great social laboratory" of the United States, was on the verge of social revolution. American tutelage, hailed as a force for modernization and democratization, had instead enforced on Puerto Rico's hapless colonial subjects economic bondage and penury, authoritarian rule, and cultural debasement. These conditions spawned nationalist and independence movements that progressively became more militant and violent. During the 1930s the Nationalist Party, led by Pedro Albizu Campos, waged a fervent campaign of political agitation to incite popular opposition to colonial rule. The U.S. response was a combination of repression and intimidation and economic reform and welfare. General Blanton Winship, a military officer, was appointed to quell the rising discontent. On March 21, 1937, the insular police killed twenty people and wounded more than one hundred when the Nationalist Party marched in Ponce. The American Civil Liberties Union, called upon to investigate the attack, concluded that the police actions constituted a massacre.

In an effort to ameliorate the widespread human suffering, the New Deal was extended to Puerto Rico, where the programs were similar to those implemented in the United States. They provided much-needed emergency welfare relief, but the programs were unable to achieve the larger goals of agrarian reform and state-sponsored industrialization. Although this unprecedented action by the federal government did mitigate much suffering, it failed to substantively diminish the level of poverty, landlessness, and unemployment. The foreign control of the sugar economy, the source of inequality and social instability, remained unaltered.

World War II led to major changes in Puerto Rico's relations with Washington and in its economy. While the sugar firms continued to dominate the economy during the war years, the federal government supported the Puerto Rican government's efforts to pursue agrarian

reform, state-promoted industrialization, and infrastructure development. The reforms were spearheaded by Rexford G. Tugwell, one of the most progressive U.S.-appointed governors, and the legislature controlled by the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), led by Muñoz Marín. During the 1940s the Puerto Rican government became directly involved in economic development and took measures to break the sugar corporations's stranglehold over the economy. However, Puerto Rico was unable to break its utter dependency on sugar for earnings, employment, and investment.

World War II and a New Model of Growth

During the 1940s the U.S. military became aware of the indispensability of Puerto Rico as a strategic asset and the island's centrality in national security. The islands of Vieques and Culebra were expropriated by the U.S. Navy for defense purposes and as a potential base for the British Royal Navy if Germany invaded England. Other military installations, including Roosevelt Roads, one of the largest U.S. military bases, were built during the war. With the onset of the cold war, the establishment of a militantly anticapitalist government in Cuba, and the beginning of national liberation wars in Central America, Puerto Rico's strategic role as a stable Caribbean base to project U.S. naval and military strength in the region was reaffirmed. Under colonialism Puerto Rico was used as a staging area for U.S. interventions in the Caribbean. Despite economic reforms and unprecedented U.S. spending on the island, the impact of the war on Puerto Rico's people was remarkably harsh. Food shortages led to hunger and near starvation for hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans.

With the end of World War II, Puerto Rico's program to diversify the economy also came to an end. By 1945 the legislature was firmly under the control of the PPD, which, with the active support of the federal government, initiated an ambitious industrial development program called Operation Bootstrap. Commonly referred to as the industrialization by invitation program, Operation Bootstrap provided U.S. firms generous incentives to establish manufacturing plants on the island. These incentives included ten- to twelve-year tax-free holidays, direct grants and subsidies, low wages, and virtually no environment or workplace regulations. The government maintained labor peace and created an investment climate that yielded high profit margins for U.S. firms. A successful industrial development program that attracted hundreds of U.S. corporations, Operation Bootstrap transformed Puerto Rico's agricultural economy into a manufacturing economy by the 1960s. While Puerto Rico was no longer an agricultural country, its role in the U.S. network of production remained basically the same. U.S. capital owned or controlled Puerto Rico's resources and employed its labor

at wages dramatically lower than those of U.S. workers. The role of the Puerto Rican government did not change either; during the sugar era and Operation Bootstrap it facilitated the growth of industry through various measures. In both economies U.S. corporations determined what was produced, what was charged for these commodities, and where these goods were sold. The government chose not to subsidize domestic firms to build a productive capacity that was independent of U.S. capital. Puerto Rican officials did not consider the country's economic needs in developing its policies and assumed a never-ending supply of capital investments from U.S. corporations.

By the 1960s Puerto Rico had been converted into a highly profitable Caribbean sweatshop that produced what it did not consume and consumed what it did not produce. In 1929 Muñoz Marín wrote: "Puerto Rico is a land of beggars and millionaires. More and more it becomes a factory worked by peones, fought over by lawyers, bossed by absent industrialists. It is now Uncle Sam's second largest sweat shop" (Cabán, p. 250). Writing in the late 1990s, Trías Monge wrote: "The people of Puerto Rico for the most part belong to one of two groups. The larger portion of the population is abysmally poor, drug-ridden, in poor health, insufficiently educated, and unemployed and a smaller group is prosperous, well-schooled, hard working and enterprising" (Trías Monge, p. 161). The condition of Puerto Rico on the eve of the second millennium was remarkably similar to Muñoz Marín's graphic portrayal of a destitute island over seven decades earlier.

By the mid-1970s it was apparent to all that Puerto Rico's much-heralded Operation Bootstrap had run out of steam. Labor-intensive firms were no longer gravitating to Puerto Rico. The government had no option but to attract high technology firms, such as pharmaceuticals, that required relatively little labor. While hundreds of sophisticated technologically based firms and financial service companies came to Puerto Rico, partly drawn by the favorable U.S. Section 936 tax codes, these firms did little to alleviate the high levels of unemployment and glaring inequality.

A closer examination reveals that Puerto Rico's industrial incentives program essentially sought to attract those sectors of capital that had reached the limits of their profitability in the United States. These firms needed to lower the costs of production (wages, environmental regulation, taxes, utility costs) and to do so in a politically stable environment with strong state support. Puerto Rico provided such a favorable investment climate. Some economists have noted that, because of special fiscal legislation, Puerto Rico had become a massive money laundering operation for giant multinational corporations wanting to reduce their tax liabilities in the United States. As long as Puerto Rico proved more competitive and profitable than other countries, U.S. capital

would continue to migrate to the island. However, beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the early twenty-first century, Puerto Rico no longer occupied a favored position in the U.S. economy. Globalization seriously tarnished Puerto Rico's image as an incomparable investment site for U.S. corporations.

In the early twenty-first century, unemployment and poverty levels are much higher than in the United States despite the infusion of billions of dollars from the federal government. Over two-thirds of Puerto Rican families live below the poverty level. Per capita income is lower in Puerto Rico than in any state in the Union and has slipped dramatically below levels in a number of other Caribbean and Latin American countries.

The Myth of Decolonization

In the immediate postwar period the United Nations became an important force for global decolonization and identified Puerto Rico as a non-self-governing territorial possession. The classification of the United States as holding colonies undermined the credibility of its self-proclaimed leadership of "the free world." Two seemingly momentous changes to Puerto Rico's colonial status were implemented to alter the perception, if not the reality, that Puerto Rico was not a nation. In 1948 Puerto Ricans were allowed to elect their own governor, half a century after the United States acquired Puerto Rico. Muñoz Marín, one of the founders of the PPD and a proponent of Puerto Rican autonomy, was elected Puerto Rico's first governor. In 1950 Congress passed Public Law 600, which permitted Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution. This law led to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico or *Estado Libre Asociado* in 1952. The commonwealth status proclaimed that Puerto Ricans had acquired complete responsibility for their self-government. Although the commonwealth was portrayed as a compact or treaty between two legally equivalent political entities, this new status did not alter Congress's constitutionally delegated plenary powers over Puerto Rico. Neither did it prevent federal government veto of locally enacted legislation. In fact none of the powers reserved for the federal government in the Jones Act was diminished. After Congress and the Puerto Rican people approved the commonwealth status, the United Nations removed Puerto Rico from the list of non-self-governing territories.

The establishment of the commonwealth provoked militant and violent reactions from the Nationalist Party, including failed assassination attempts on President Harry Truman and Governor Muñoz Marín, an armed attack against the House of Representatives when it was in session, and an uprising and fire in the mountain town of Jayuya. The federal and local authorities were

forceful and indiscriminate. Not only Nationalists but also Independence Party and Socialist Party members were subjected to arrest and intimidation. The elimination of internal dissent was necessary to eradicate the perception that Puerto Rico was anything less than a democratic, self-governing territory that had voluntarily assigned a compact of permanent association with the United States.

The Costs of Economic Dependency

Puerto Rico's transition from a sugar-addicted economy to a vast island of foreign-owned maquiladora sweatshops, then to a paradise for the pharmaceutical industry, and subsequently to a profitable off-shore corporate financial and service center has been achieved at great human, social, and environmental costs. Since the United States acquisition of Puerto Rico, U.S. officials have declared that Puerto Rico suffered from overpopulation. In reality these officials meant that the job-creating capacity of the economy was never sufficient to alleviate high levels of unemployment. Puerto Rico's people have always faced the problem of relative surplus population. More potential workers are available than jobs.

In an effort to alleviate the problem of relative surplus population, Puerto Rican laborers were sent to Hawaii, Arizona, and other agricultural states during the first two decades of rule by the United States. In addition Puerto Ricans were sent to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba as contract laborers, and some were encouraged to settle permanently in these countries. While emigration was an integral component of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States, the period of great migration began in the immediate post-World War II era. The movement of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to major industrial centers in the United States was not the result of the operation of market forces. The government of Puerto Rico worked closely with federal and state agencies to provide a steady stream of cheap, exploitable Puerto Rican laborers for the farms and factories of the United States.

In fact a key measure of the success of Operation Bootstrap was the extent to which it reduced the grinding poverty associated with unacceptably high levels of unemployment. However, policy makers knew they could only achieve acceptably low levels of unemployment through population control. Emigration, particularly of women of childbearing age, was one proposed solution. Other controversial and highly dangerous procedures included widespread sterilization of women and the use of experimental birth control drugs and pills. Women, who had virtually no representation in government, were victimized by policies conceived by men intent on controlling their bodies and reproductive role in society.

Need for a Change

Puerto Rico's dominant political parties share equal responsibility for the economic, environmental, and social crisis that afflicts the country. The colonial relationship is unacceptable to the Puerto Rican people and to the U.S. government. However, little is being done to effect a change. While all sides profess to support self-determination, Congress has been reluctant to concede Puerto Ricans the authority to decide their country's political destiny. How to effect a permanent change in Puerto Rico's political status acceptable to the United States and to the majority of Puerto Rico's people remains one of the most vexing problems of the colonial relationship.

See also Albizu Campos, Pedro; Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico; Foraker Act; Jones Act; Lebrón, Lolita; Maquiladoras; Muñoz Marín, Luis; Operation Bootstrap/Section 936; Public Law 600; Puerto Rican Independence Movement; Puerto Rican Nationalist Uprising; Puerto Ricans; Treaty of Paris, 1898; and Vieques and Culebra.

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PEDRO CABÁN

PUERTO RICO AND THE ENVIRONMENT.

Environmental issues and movements in Puerto Rico in the early twenty-first century can best be summarized by first providing a brief historical overview. Public recognition of environmental problems in Puerto Rico first arose during the 1960s in response to issues related to Puerto Rico's political and economic development. Puerto Rico's "Commonwealth" political status (known in Puerto Rico as "Estado Libre Asociado," or associated free state) continued the island's 1900 designation as an "unincorporated territory belonging to but not a part of the United States." As such, Puerto Rico falls under the jurisdictions—sometimes conflicting—of both U.S. federal environmental regulations and Commonwealth laws. At the same time, the