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Puerto Rico in Crisis and the Shifting Dictates of Empire

PEDRO CABÁN

ABSTRACT

This article compares two conjunctures in Puerto Rico's modern history: 1928 through 1940; and 2006 through 2020. The first created conditions that led to Puerto Rico's post-World War II economic growth. The second is marked by a watershed moment in which a massive peaceful popular uprising forced a governor out of office. In both conjunctures, the federal government and the insular administration failed to anticipate and manage the crisis, and also failed to lift a traumatized Puerto Rico from the ravishes of economic depressions and hurricanes. The 1928-40 conjuncture resulted in a realignment of the insular political and economic order that endured for decades. A colony in crisis moved the United States to intervene to restore stability in the 1930s. Although the 2006-20 conjuncture resembles the first, its transformative impact on Puerto Rico's political future is uncertain. However, unprecedented protests in summer 2019 revealed the depth of popular antipathy to the prevailing political order and rejection of the traditional political parties. The colonial situation is so vexing that Congress may be compelled to rework the antiquated colonial formula. [Keywords: colonialism, summer uprising, New Deal, PROMESA, Vieques, Section 936]

Puerto Rico is immersed in a prolonged crisis that is redefining society. Since 2006, it has been mired in an economic depression. Almost half the population lives in poverty, outmigration has reached unprecedented levels and the people are suffering the physical and psychological trauma that are the legacies of Hurricane María and recent earthquakes. In the summer of 2019, massive popular protests, at a scale and intensity never witnessed in Puerto Rico, upended politics as usual. Puerto Ricans are frustrated with an economic depression that lingers, an unaccountable financial control board and its austerity measures, government corruption and incompetence, the virtual collapse of public services and the Trump administration's demonstrable disdain for them.

It's tempting to think that Puerto Rico's current crisis is unprecedented, but it is not. From 1928 to 1940, Puerto Rico suffered a similar political and economic ordeal that was marked by a popular opposition to the colonial order. In 1929, Luis Muñoz Marín, arguably Puerto Rico's most prominent political figure, wrote that the United States had turned his country into "a land of beggars and millionaires. More and more it becomes a factory worked by peons, fought over by lawyers, bossed by absent industrialists, and clerked by politicians" (Muñoz Marín 1929).

Muñoz Marín's moving depiction of Puerto Rico ninety years ago seems apt for today's Puerto Rico, except that today factories employ only a small percentage of the labor force and absentee industrialists have been replaced by hedge fund speculators, multinational pharmaceutical corporations, and export service firms. But the basic dynamic of a colony that is the source of wealth for foreign capitalists at the expense of its people has not fundamentally changed. The notion of a beleaguered, but self-reliant, population under colonial rule is as resonant today as it was a century ago.

This essay compares two historical conjunctures in Puerto Rico's modern history: 1928 through 1940, and 2006 through 2020. The foundations for the

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Commonwealth (Estado Libre Asociado [ELA]) and post-World War II industrialization were set during the first conjuncture. The second conjuncture is marked by popular protests that deposed the governor, and by the erosion of the colonial regime's legitimacy. In both conjunctures, the government failed to lift Puerto Rico from the ravishes of economic depressions and catastrophic climatic events. In both, the federal and insular governments failed to manage an evolving political crisis that destabilized the colony. But the critical distinction between these two conjunctures was a fundamental change in Puerto Rico's role in the American empire. From the late 1930s through the end of the Cold War, Puerto Rico served the strategic, geopolitical, and ideological objectives of the United States. American colonial policy was shaped by these international factors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Puerto Rico ceased to have international import, and colonial policy was primarily shaped by changes in the U.S. domestic political economy.

Puerto Rico was a victim of catastrophic weather events during both conjunctures. Hurricane San Felipe (category 5) struck Puerto Rico in 1928, and four years later Hurricane San Ciprián (category 4) hit the archipelago. During the second conjuncture Puerto Rico was struck by hurricanes and earthquakes. Puerto Rico escaped major damage when Hurricane Irma (category 5) skirted the main island on September 7, 2017. Just three weeks later, on September 27, Hurricane Maria (category 4) struck. It caused more death and destruction than any recorded hurricane in Puerto Rico's history. While hurricanes are relatively frequent occurrences in Puerto Rico, earthquakes are unusual. Puerto Rico was last struck in 1918 by the San Fermín earthquake. In January 2019, two major earthquakes rocked the southwest of Puerto Rico and caused extensive damage. Smaller shocks continued throughout January. Both sets of catastrophic climatic events damaged the economy, tested the capacity of government to manage emergency relief and recovery and revealed the resilience and resolve of the Puerto Rican people.

In the first conjuncture, the U.S. recognized the inherent liabilities of its colonial policy, which had created profound economic inequalities leading to widespread labor strikes and political violence. In response to the turmoil in its strategically valuable colony, the U.S. embarked on a campaign of reform and repression to reimpose stability and reclaim the legitimacy of the colonial regime. The second realignment is marked by a fifteen-year

economic depression, a public debt that Puerto Rico remains unable to pay and sustained popular opposition to the government.

Much of this current crisis is attributable to changes in U.S. colonial policy. During the 1928-40 conjuncture, Puerto Rico experienced a destabilizing political realignment that would determine the archipelago's political economy for decades. While the enduring transformative effect of the 2006-20 conjuncture is uncertain, it is apparent that the 70-year-old Commonwealth has deteriorated into a dysfunctional relic of an earlier phase of the American empire and that statehood for Puerto Rico is as elusive as ever. The changes in colonial policy and consequences for Puerto Rico during these two conjunctures reflect the shifting imperial priorities of the United States.

The First Conjuncture: 1928-1940

Between 1928 and 1940, Puerto Rico underwent a relentless series of shocks that set the stage for the eventual establishment of the Commonwealth and its rapid industrialization post-World War II. This conjuncture was bookmarked by Hurricane San Felipe, which struck Puerto Rico on September 13, 1928, and the inauguration of Admiral William D. Leahy as governor on September 11, 1939. Roosevelt appointed Leahy ten days after Germany invaded Poland and the official outbreak of World War II. These two events had significant economic and political repercussions for Puerto Rico. The destruction wrought by the hurricane intensified the economic impact of the Great Depression and fueled an incipient political crisis. Leahy was charged with reasserting political stability and overseeing the construction of military defenses, which poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the colonial economy (Rodríguez Beruff 2007).

After World War I, Puerto Rico became a neglected outpost of the American empire under the supervision of the War Department. Puerto Rico was governed by a civilian administration whose executive officers, including the governor, were appointed by the president of the United States. However, the Bureau of Insular Affairs (BIA) of the War Department managed the affairs of the colony from 1909 to 1933. The Bureau "supervised and reviewed all matters under the jurisdiction of the War Department relating to the civil government," including fiscal affairs (United States. National Archives and Records Service 1971). The BIA actually functioned as an independent finan-

cial control board, and in effect ruled Puerto Rico, exercising considerable influence in shaping U.S. colonial policy in Puerto Rico and the other territorial possessions. The Secretary of War opposed the involvement of other executive branch departments in Puerto Rican affairs. The problems existing there are of such duration that they might properly be called “chronic” (Clark 1975, 106). Although the War Department appeared to be apathetic to the deteriorating economic conditions, its records provide a detailed and positive assessment of its emergency response to the hurricanes.

San Felipe crippled the island's rudimentary health and sanitary systems

Hurricane emergency relief was an impromptu amalgam of private and public funding sources. Private humanitarian relief programs, most prominently the American Red Cross, were vitally important in mitigating the humanitarian crisis that overwhelmed the archipelago. U.S. Army units stationed in Puerto Rico, as well as the National Guard, were deployed to provide assistance and security. The Army distributed surplus stocks and supplies to the municipalities. Congress approved funds for road construction and repair, and for the restoration of plantations and farms. The War Department reported that Hurricane San Felipe, which struck on September 13, 1928, was “the most devastating hurricane in its history,” which in a few hours “obliterated the results of private and public enterprise.” The hurricane killed 312 people and left a half a million Puerto Ricans—about a third of the population—homeless and destitute. Governor Towner observed that “in all respects the history and record of the island have been seriously modified and changed” by the hurricane (Puerto Rico. Governor 1928, 1). San Felipe crippled the island’s rudimentary health and sanitary systems. As disease spread, death rates skyrocketed from 21.9 deaths for each thousand inhabitants to 35 per thousand by December 1929 (United States. Bureau of Insular Affairs 1930, 13).

Congress responded to the crisis by creating the Porto Rican Hurricane Relief Commission in December 1928 with a \$8,150,000 appropriation to provide loans for rehabilitating coffee plantations, reconstruction, and road building. The Red Cross was once again the single most important organi-

zation providing emergency relief. It quickly expended \$30,000 to provide food to people on the verge of starvation (van Deusen 1929, 19). The Red Cross was indispensable to the relief effort; without its assistance, the BIA reported “it would have been impossible to meet demands” (Puerto Rico. Governor 1928, 7). The Puerto Rican diaspora in New York organized the Puerto Rico Relief Committee to collect donations and supplies for shipment to the stricken island (Clark 1975, 106).

Puerto Ricans, whose way of life was shattered, immediately began working on the archipelago’s recovery. The governor reported that Puerto Ricans cared for their sick and injured, cleared roads, and helped clear the debris. The War Department described a population that was “undismayed and undiscouraged,” and “bending every effort to create from the ruins a greater Puerto Rico” (United States. War Department 1928, 3). Elizabeth Kneipple de van Deusen, a writer, educator, and long-time resident of Puerto Rico, wrote that “no *norteamericano* could display in such painful conditions more optimism and resolve than those manifested by our Puerto Rican brothers” (van Deusen 1929, 19). As Puerto Rico struggled to recover from San Felipe’s devastation, it was struck by Hurricane San Ciprián on September 1932. Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., reported that that the category 4 hurricane “had far reaching effects” for the entire economy, but “especially upon the condition of the laboring classes.” The hurricane killed 257 and injured 4,820. According to the governor, “The number of injured who died later as a result of their injuries has not been determined.” More than 400,000 Puerto Ricans, about a third of the population, were left homeless (Puerto Rico. Governor 1933, 39).

The emergency response to San Ciprián resembled the response to San Felipe. The insular administration “designated the American Red Cross as the official relief agency” (Puerto Rico. Governor 1933, 39). The Puerto Rican Hurricane Relief Commission disbursed \$6 million the Congress had appropriated for loans to restore destroyed and damaged farms (United States. Bureau of Insular Affairs 1933, 35). While damages caused by San Ciprián were estimated at \$85 million, the damage from both hurricanes totaled at least \$175 million (Burrows 2014, 35).

Between the time San Felipe hammered Puerto Rico in 1928 and the start of Roosevelt’s administration five years later, the BIA seemed oblivious that America’s prized colony was descending into chaos. The BIA had

failed to manage the unfolding economic and political crises. Governor James Beverly reported to President Roosevelt that the situation in Puerto Rico was chaotic. He warned that labor riots would spread from the sugar cane fields. The BIA was warned by “a committee of citizens” that “a state of anarchy exists” (Santiago-Valles 1994, 189-190). Years later, Governor Rexford Tugwell wrote in his memoirs “that Roosevelt has inherited what was very nearly a civil war from the intransigent Mr. Hoover” (Tugwell 1977, 70). The BIA, chastened by the mounting criticism, sought to dissuade the incoming Roosevelt administration from ordering the agency to relinquish control over Puerto Rico. Former BIA chief Major General Frank McIntyre penned a remarkable article in the influential *Foreign Affairs* journal to remind the incoming Roosevelt administration that an island “acquired primarily for naval purposes does not differ greatly from a war vessel or fleet at anchor.” He emphasized that the War Department has “peculiar advantages,” and is prepared “at all times to take over the administration of occupied territory,” in fact, to become the government (McIntyre 1932). However, Roosevelt was unmoved, and shortly after taking office in 1933, he transferred jurisdiction from the War Department to the Department of the Interior. Once stripped of its authority to set colonial policy, the War Department could not interfere with Roosevelt’s plans for Puerto Rico. The transition from military oversight to civilian administration would set in motion notable changes in colonial policy. The most immediate change was the federal government’s decision to extend New Deal programs to Puerto Rico to mitigate widespread destitution and to stabilize the deteriorating political situation.

U.S. colonial authorities were not prepared for catastrophic climatic events. The destruction caused by the hurricanes revealed the tenuous condition of Puerto Rico’s human and physical infrastructure. The War Department’s emergency response to the post-hurricane economic and humanitarian crises was essentially triage. Its mindset was to treat the casualties of natural disasters. Congress authorized funding for infrastructure repair and provided loans and grants to agricultural producers. But Congress’s priority was to restore the colony’s economic contribution to the expanding American empire. San Felipe and San Ciprián exposed the fragility of the built environment, the limitations of emergency relief approaches, and the challenges the government confronted in managing post-hurricane rehabilitation.

While San Felipe exacerbated the impact of the Great Depression on the insular economy, Puerto Rico “suffered less than other countries from the effects of the general economic depression.” Despite the relatively favorable commercial situation, the government acknowledged that “the living conditions of the average family have always been too low” (Porto Rico. Bureau of Commerce and Industry 1931, 3). The impact of the economic downturn was greatest on the working class. From 1929 to 1933, salaries and wages dropped to \$95 million from \$131 million (Dietz 1986, 163). Per capita net income declined from \$122 in 1929-1930 to \$86 in 1932/1933 (Perloff 1950, 31). By 1933, unemployment stood at 65 percent of the half-million-person work force (Johnson 1997, 33). Yet, income from rent increased, and owners of equities and bonds did not suffer losses. Industry profits declined by almost a fifth, but the sugar corporations increased their profits during the crisis (Dietz 1986, 163).

The sugar industry bounced back quickly because it had ready access to capital, guaranteed market for its product, surplus stocks of cane, a favorable tax regime, and federal government support. The sugar industry continued to absorb much of Puerto Rico’s land and labor throughout the 1930s. Sugar and its by-products made up 69 percent of the total export value in 1940, and 41 percent of crop lands were planted with sugar cane (Perloff 1950, 67). Sugar corporations were unusually dependent on U.S. subsidies and beneficial tariff laws, not unlike manufacturing firms that established operations in Puerto Rico after World War II. The sugar industry depended to “an extraordinary degree” for its financial health on political decisions made in the United States (Ross 1976, 77). In a seeming reversal of long-standing support for U.S. sugar monopolies in Puerto Rico, President Roosevelt signed the Jones Costigan Act into law in 1934. The law protected U.S. domestic sugar cane and beet sugar producers by imposing tariffs and quotas on imported sugar, including sugar from Puerto Rico. The goal was to limit imported sugar production to levels that corresponded with domestic demand. The law was fiercely opposed by the sugar monopolies. The *New York Times* reported that the Jones Costigan Act “has had consistent opposition from many interests in the island” who feared that the quota assigned to Puerto Rico “would prevent marketing the full production and disposal of surplus stocks.” Puerto Rico’s Governor Winship travelled to Washington

to lobby the Secretary of Agriculture for an increase in Puerto Rico's sugar quota (Special to *The New York Times* 1934). While the Jones Costigan Act did not target the sugar monopoly firms in Puerto Rico, the law did signal that their political influence in Washington was waning.

The hurricanes leave not only indelible memories in the popular imagination, but are catalysts for social, economic, and political transformations that might not have occurred otherwise.

The sugar industry had an overwhelming economic prominence and was very profitable, but the economic conditions of agricultural workers did not improve. Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., reported that “the amount of poverty, malnutrition and unemployment has been distressing in spite of the fact that the year saw the largest crop of sugar ever raised in the island—over 992,000 tons” (Puerto Rico Governor 1932, 7). In 1935, Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, expressed his frustration with the sugar corporations’ unrestrained reign over Puerto Rico: “There is today far more widespread misery and destitution and far more unemployment in Puerto Rico than at any previous time in its history.” He wrote that Puerto Rico was “the victim of the laissez faire economy, which has developed the rapid growth of the great absentee owned sugar corporations” (Mathews 1960, 215). While monopoly capital demonstrated its resilience, the conditions of the working class became more precarious. The continuing deterioration of export sectors not linked to sugar generated a permanent unemployed labor force with little prospect of finding jobs without government assistance.

Hurricanes and economic crisis are intertwined in Puerto Rico's modern history. The hurricanes leave not only indelible memories in the popular imagination, but are catalysts for social, economic, and political transformations that might not have occurred otherwise. Their most immediate impact was to inflict further damage to the economy and to intensify existing inequities. Puerto Rico's enduring poverty and high unemployment were not merely the unfortunate consequences of a monocrop export economy or of hurricanes. The economic precarity of the worker is concomitant with the logic of accumulation

under monopoly capital, and the impact on labor is particularly acute in a small insular economy. Puerto Rico's poverty was a permanent structural attribute of its economy, and government officials realized that substantial federal funding was necessary in the short term for "relief for the destitute unemployed" (Burrows 2014). But the federal government needed a development policy to mitigate labor's precarity caused in part by the unregulated actions of sugar monopolies with the support of the colonial administration. The hurricanes prompted the federal government to take unprecedented action. Hurricanes San Felipe and San Ciprián were a watershed in U.S. colonial rule, and they set in motion a change in U.S. policy towards its prized colony.

In 1933, the federal government established the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA) as a temporary "dependency of the insular government." During its brief period, the PRERA expended about \$20 million and provided relief to 43 percent of the population (Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration 1937, 5). Although short-lived, in that PRERA was dissolved in 1935, the agency did temporarily mitigate the scope of privation that afflicted the majority of Puerto Ricans. The agency also served a critically important ideological function when the colony seemed on the verge of collapse. PRERA helped recast the colonizer's image as a benevolent overlord who was concerned with improving the deplorable conditions of their colonial wards. (Rodríguez 2011, 12). In 1935 the Roosevelt administration replaced PRERA with the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Administration (PRRA). The PRRA provided direct relief and sought to reduce unemployment through agrarian reform and construction projects. The PRRA was the first federal government agency with a mandate to address poverty, landlessness, and unemployment (Burrows 2014, 175). Unlike the PRERA, the PRRA was a federal administrative agency that was "responsible only to Federal authority" (Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration 1937, 3). PRRA was insulated from the machinations of Coalición that hoped to control the agency's patronage and funding. PRRA officials cooperated with members of the Liberal Party (many of whom would form the leadership of the Popular Democratic Party) to develop and put in place an economic reconstruction plan for Puerto Rico (Mathews 1960; Burrows 2014, 35).

Despite the promising expectations, the PRRA failed to materially reduce unemployment and poverty. A federal agency that studied the results

of PRRA concluded that “by the end of 1938 the situation had become so critical that popular sentiment developed throughout the Island for some kind of concerted action against the forces threatening destruction if its agriculture, industry and commerce.” The PRRA “proved effective in alleviating gross want, providing temporary employment at its peak to fairly large number... but... the result is that there had been little or no abatement of the economic crisis” (Zimmermann 1940, 24).

The hurricanes contributed to the political upheaval of the 1930s. The hurricanes set in motion a political realignment that, by 1940, led to the dissolution of the dominant political party coalitions into warring factions (Anderson 1965, 32). The period between 1928 and 1940 was a politically chaotic and turbulent era in Puerto Rican history. Politics was a perennial contest between competing political factions that were divorced from the grim reality that defined the lives of the vast majority of Puerto Ricans. Political parties were nominally distinguished by their advocacy for a particular territorial status: statehood, independence, or some type of autonomy. With the possible exception of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, under the leadership of Pedro Albizu Campos, the dominant political parties lacked discernable political ideologies. Factionalism was an endemic feature of the political party system. Internal political party strife was routine. The political parties formed electorally opportunistic alliances that often failed to survive beyond the election cycle. While the political parties represented distinct class interests, they often operated as highly centralized personalistic organizations. Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., (1929-1932) derided the political party system as “kaleidoscopic,” a constantly transforming array of political organizations usually centered on one strong personality (Clark 1975, 106).

The Alianza and Coalición were the dominant electoral forces from 1928 through 1940. The Alianza was formed by the Union Party and the Republican Party, and was in power between 1924 and 1932. The Alianza, a proponent of autonomy, barely eked out a victory in 1928, a disappointment for its members given its overwhelming electoral victory in 1924. By 1929, the Union Party, wracked by internal divisions, abandoned the alliance and resurfaced as the pro-independence Liberal Party. The disaffected Union Republicans joined the Socialist Party and formed the Coalición. The Coalición, an alliance of two seemingly ideologically incompatible political parties, shared an unwaver-

ing resolve to gain statehood for Puerto Rico. It won a convincing victory in 1932. The *Coalición* won the resident commissioner's seat and control of both houses of the legislature, and won 51 of the 77 municipalities races (U.S. BIA 33, 19). It prevailed in the 1936 elections as well.

The *Coalición* was closely allied to the sugar corporations and shared responsibility for corporate land concentration, escalating unemployment, labor strikes in important industries, widespread poverty, and the turbulence of the 1930s. The Socialists and its labor wing, the Free Federation of Labor, lost the support of much of the rank and file. Striking rural workers rejected the leadership of the Socialist Party for its "collaboration with the colonial regime" and turned to the militant Nationalist Party for support in its struggle against capital (Pantojas García 1990, 31). Muñoz Marín accused the Socialists of abandoning its ideals in pursuit of patronage jobs in the colonial state (Córdova 1993).

Political opposition to U.S. rule and labor unrest reached its zenith during the 1930s. Workers in a number of industries organized eighty-five strikes between July and December 1933 (Dietz 1986, 163). Sugar cane workers, longshoremen, and tobacco workers mounted large-scale strikes (Ayala 2007, 96–7). The 1934 sugar cane workers general strike was the largest in Puerto Rican history and pitted striking workers against the police (Santiago-Valles 1994, 189–90). In the throes of its most violent political period, elected officials neither had solutions to the all-consuming crisis, nor were they aware of the extent of popular revulsion of the prevailing order. During this turbulent period, marked by an inept, corrupt, and non-responsive colonial state, political opposition to U.S. rule was at its height.

Political violence, labor agitation and eroding legitimacy of the colonial regime threatened to undermine Latin American confidence in Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. The Nationalist Party was a fearlessly defiant organization that frequently clashed with colonial authorities. They threatened to destabilize U.S. colonial rule. Roosevelt appointed retired army general Blanton Winship governor in 1934 with the expectation that he would restore social order. But, in fact, opposition to colonial rule intensified during Winship's disastrous reign as governor. Winship deployed a newly militarized insular constabulary to suppress the Nationalists and to quell the striking sugar workers. The repression of the Nationalists culminated in the

massacre by the insular constabulary of peacefully assembled members and sympathizers in Ponce on March 21, 1937. This event constituted the apogee of Winship's tenure of dictatorial colonial rule (Hackett 1951). Congressman Vito Marcantonio denounced Winship, claiming that his five-year tenure as governor "destroyed the last vestige of civil rights in Puerto Rico" (Marcantonio 1956, 387). The credibility of the U.S. had been damaged, and opposition to colonial rule intensified during Winship's disastrous reign as governor. President Roosevelt summarily dismissed the reviled Winship in 1939, and appointed General Leahy (Rodríguez Beruff 2007). The appointment of Leahy marked Roosevelt's decision to refocus U.S. hemispheric relations from the Good Neighbor Policy to building a Latin American Alliance to combat the encroaching menace of Nazi Germany (Johnson 1997, 33).

By 1938, the political party system in Puerto Rico was on the verge of a significant realignment. In that year the Liberal Party splintered into two factions, one of which would eventually form the Popular Democratic Party (Partido Popular Democrático [PPD]) under the leadership of Muñoz Marín. The PPD broke with traditionally status-oriented parties by suspending the quest for independence in favor of agrarian reform and economic modernization. Muñoz Marín drew his electoral support from the popular forces (Villaronga 2004). Unlike the political factions and parties that dominated the insular political process for decades, the PPD promised a better and more dignified life under a colonial regime that it could reform. In the 1940 elections, Coalición won the resident commissioner position, but to the surprise of many, the PPD gained control of senate. The traditional parties were unraveling, and with the ascendancy of the PPD, Puerto Rico was embarking on a new phase in its political evolution.

As the United States monitored the war in Europe, the political and economic situation in Puerto Rico remained desperate, and anticolonial sentiment was widespread. On January 22, 1940, shortly after his appointment, Leahy reported to President Roosevelt that Puerto Rico should receive emergency "federal aid for the unemployed which number 300,000 out of a total population of 1,800,000." He told Roosevelt that the "unemployed natives, all of whom are citizens of the United States, would be a serious detriment to defense plans if the heavily populated island were to become involved in military action" (*The New York Times* 1940, 5). The Interdepartmental Committee

on Puerto Rico agreed with Leahy and proposed that “in the interest of economic betterment and political stability, it is necessary that a Puerto Rican policy be formulated.” The committee emphasized the “exceptional degree of distress in Puerto Rico,” and called for a review of the “policy of assimilation, remission of import duties on foods.” It recommended that Puerto Rico be granted a “partial and limited autonomy in matters of commercial agreements with neighboring countries,” and called for a reexamination of the Jones Act coastwise laws (Zimmermann 1940, 24).

Rexford Tugwell, Leahy’s replacement as governor, realized that for the U.S. to achieve its strategic objectives in the Caribbean, it had to reform its colonial policy. In his voluminous memoirs, Tugwell wrote that his “duty as the representative of my country in Puerto Rico was to shape civil affairs, if I could, so that military bases, which might soon (before they were ready) have to stand the shock of attack, were not isolated in a generally hostile environment.” Tugwell stressed the necessity to redress the privation and penury. He thought: “To set down numerous airfields, naval bases, army camps and other such centers in the midst of populations which are poor, ignorant and disease ridden and resentful is to build them on sand.” Tugwell worried about “the battle against civilian disintegration in Puerto Rico,” and he asked, “If we had bases in the Caribbean, and especially air bases, had we not a real and immediate interest in the tranquility, even the loyalty of its people?” (1977, 70).

Roosevelt, concerned that the unruly colony would undermine his Good Neighbor Policy, moved quickly to reform a long-standing colonial policy of neglect.

From 1928 through 1940, the shocks that struck Puerto Rico exposed the deep fault lines of U.S. colonial policy. As the legitimacy of the colonial regime waned, so did the viability of American hemispheric aspirations. Roosevelt, concerned that the unruly colony would undermine his Good Neighbor Policy, moved quickly to reform a long-standing colonial policy of neglect. The extension of the New Deal to Puerto Rico was a novel approach to redress the economic and humanitarian crises that had over-

taken the archipelago. However, the ambitious project failed to undermine the economic structure that, according to colonial officials, was the source of Puerto Rico's instability. With the outbreak of war in Europe, these same officials urgently wanted to impose political stability in the strategically valuable colony. The hundreds of millions of dollars expended by the federal government to convert Puerto Rico into an island fortress achieved the political stability long sought by Roosevelt.

The Second Conjuncture: 2006-2020

There are notable economic and political similarities between the second conjuncture (2018-2020) and the first. Puerto Rico faced a difficult economic situation during the 1930s. Its current economic situation is dire as well. Since 2006, Puerto Rico has been saddled with negative economic growth for fourteen of the last fifteen years. Widespread poverty is a persistent problem and currently plagues over half the population. The archipelago was also buffeted by catastrophic hurricanes. More recently it has been rattled by earthquakes, and is confronting the coronavirus pandemic. The summer of 2019 protests forced a corrupt and incompetent governor to resign. The protests eroded the legitimacy of the government, and challenged the viability of colonial rule. The protests were also a powerful popular declaration that the political class was unable to manage the political economy. Puerto Rico is currently undergoing a political party realignment that resembles what occurred during the late 1930s.

During both conjunctures the federal government effected changes in its treatment of Puerto Rico that broke with previous policy. However, the reasons for the changed colonial policy differed for each of the conjunctures. Puerto Rico was a strategic asset vital to national security during World War II, and subsequently it assumed geopolitical and ideological significance during the Cold War. But as the millennium was coming to an end, so was Puerto Rico's strategic and economic value to the American state and capital. After 1994, the federal government altered its policy toward Puerto Rico as a consequence of its diminished status within the empire. Henceforth, colonial policy would be determined by U.S. domestic political considerations.

Puerto Rico's current economic predicament owes much to the post-Cold War policies enacted by presidents William Clinton and George W.

Bush. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent demise of Cuba's political prominence in the Caribbean region, the Clinton and Bush administrations assessed Puerto Rico's role in light of the nation's economic condition, domestic political situation, and altered post-Cold War geopolitical environment. The policies of both presidents marked the transition of Puerto Rico from an international issue to a domestic issue. In 1994, the Clinton administration approved international trade agreements designed to increase the presence of U.S. multinational corporations in hemispheric trade. A couple of years later, Clinton phased out Section 936, a fiscal measure that allowed multinational corporations with manufacturing operations in Puerto Rico to accumulate profits unmatched anywhere else. The Bush administration proposed a huge military spending increase of \$48 billion in 2003, but ordered the closing of the vast Roosevelt Roads Naval Station the following year.

Section 936 and other tax incentives that preceded it were fiscal instruments used by the federal government to prop up Puerto Rico's economy during the Cold War. In its ideological war with the Soviet Union, the United States portrayed Puerto Rico as a vibrant democratic polity with a modern free market economy. The United States called Puerto Rico "The Shining Star in the Caribbean" in its campaign to discredit the Cuban regime. But by 1970s, Puerto Rico's once envied economic growth rate based on labor-intensive manufacturing had stalled. Congress enacted Section 936 in 1976 in an effort to salvage the decaying economy. Under this new code, American firms were exempted from paying corporate income taxes on profits earned in Puerto Rico. Capital-intensive, high-technology firms migrated to Puerto Rico to capitalize on the huge profit potential. By the time Clinton ascended to the presidency, Puerto Rico had become a remarkably lucrative export platform for U.S. pharmaceutical firms. These firms generated the bulk of their profits from legally dubious transfer pricing techniques made possible by Section 936's tax credit. The tax provision resulted in billions of dollars of lost revenue for the Treasury Department (United States General Accounting Office 1992 May). In 1992, the Congressional Budget Office (1993) calculated that the federal government would lose \$15 billion in revenues between 1993 and 1997. This was of concern to Clinton, who had campaigned on erasing the sprawling federal deficit, and wanted to end this "corporate welfare" program. He

also needed the revenues to offset revenue losses he promised small businesses, as well as to finance a minimum wage increase (Luxner 1996). After Clinton recommended in 1993 changes to Section 936, over 100,000 Puerto Ricans marched in San Juan to protest the termination of Section 936 (Rohter 1993). Despite organized opposition from the corporate sector and the Puerto Rican government, Clinton signed the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996. The bill contained a provision for a ten-year phase out of Section 936. Opponents of the measure warned that manufacturing investments would decline, firms would abandon Puerto Rico, out-migration would increase, and the government's revenue base would collapse.

The Section 936 doomsayers accurately predicted the impending fiscal crisis of the colonial state. After the expiration of the tax credit in 2006, the Puerto Rican economy went into a tailspin. Between 2006 to 2013, Puerto Rico lost 230,000 jobs in a workforce that numbered only 1.2 million. Puerto Rico's development bank repeal of Section 936 "led to a significant contraction in employment in Puerto Rico's manufacturing sector" (United States Senate 2015, 37). From 2005 to 2016, Puerto Rico's gross domestic product, a key indicator of economic performance, decreased by over 9 percent (United States Government Accountability Office 2018, 1). By 2018, manufacturing employment had dropped to 7 percent of the labor force. According to the Census Bureau, Puerto Rico's population plunged from 3.8 million in 2006 to slightly less than 3.2 million today.

In 1994, Clinton approved the North American Free Trade Association and Central American Free Trade Agreement to promote U.S. hemispheric free trade. Multinational corporations advocated for integration of regional economies into a hemispheric free trading bloc (Moody 1995). These trade measures erased Puerto Rico's competitive advantage over other countries in the Americas, a position it had enjoyed for over nine decades. In 1901, the Supreme Court had decided in *DeLima v. Bidwell* to grant Puerto Rico preferential access to the U.S. market, since Puerto Rico was not a foreign country for tariff purposes. All trade between the U.S. and Puerto Rico would be free of tariffs. The CAFTA free trade agreements with Latin America and the Caribbean removed one of Puerto Rico's distinctive advantages as a colony.

When President Bush ordered the Navy to end operations on Vieques by April 30, 2003, he implicitly acknowledged that Puerto Rico had lost

its prominent role in national security. For decades, the Navy Department resisted all attempts to relinquish control of this prized military asset. Admiral Jay L. Johnson testified before a congressional committee in 1999 that “Vieques is an irreplaceable asset. It’s the crown jewel of live-fire, combined arms training. It’s the world standard. We do not want to leave Vieques” (United States. Congress. House 2001). Vieques, as well as Culebra, another island in Puerto Rico the Navy was forced to relinquish in 1975, were part of the Atlantic Integrated Weapons Training Range. In other words, the Navy Department’s position was that Vieques and Culebra were military assets vital for national defense. Johnson’s comments on Vieques were consistent with the Navy Department’s long-standing position that Puerto Rico was a valued weapon in its arsenal. In congressional hearings in 1945, Capt. G. B. Parks, testified on behalf of the Chief of Naval Operations that Puerto Rico should be held indefinitely since “in future wars” the military will need “to expand its naval facilities.” According to the Navy, Puerto Rico was a military asset to be garrisoned in perpetuity, its land and resources being subject to expropriation without consultation or approval of the Puerto Rican people: “The United States must be the sole judge of its own future military requirements in this area” (United States. Senate. Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs 1945).

By the late 1990s, Vieques was no longer a local political issue; it had evolved into an international human rights and environmental issue with potential domestic political consequences for President Bush.

For decades Puerto Ricans protested the Navy’s presence in Vieques. Navy Secretary Gordon England testified that “protests and unrest... is an issue that goes back, literally now, a generation. It is deep-rooted. My judgment is it is not about to change.” He acknowledged that the “people” caused “disruptions during our training exercises” (United States. Congress. House 2001).

In the early 1990s, the Comité Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques (CPRDV) [Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques] organized a campaign to oust the Navy from Vieques. The “Navy out of Vieques” move-

ment quickly gained support throughout the United States as the diaspora became involved. Prominent celebrities and politicians travelled to Vieques to protest; and many were arrested. Members of Congress, most prominently Luis Gutiérrez, from Illinois, were vocal proponents and activists. The Governor of Puerto Rico Sila Calderón joined the chorus in demanding the Navy's ouster from Vieques. By the late 1990s, Vieques was no longer a local political issue; it had evolved into an international human rights and environmental issue with potential domestic political consequences for President Bush.

The Navy had sorely misjudged the protestors' determination and their willingness to endure abuse, arrest, and incarceration. The Navy deployed an array of tactics in a heavy-handed campaign to squash the protests: non-lethal tactical weapons, psychological operations, physical abuse against the protestors. It secured the cooperation of right-wing local judges who sentenced protestors who were convicted of misdemeanors to excessive jail terms. Thousands were arrested, and many reported being victims of abuse. The Puerto Rican Lawyers Guild filed suit with the Navy and Federal District Court for excessive use of force to suppress and punish acts of civil disobedience and lawful demonstrations of free expression. In Washington, Congressman Robert Owens (D-NY) warned that "both the Navy and a Federal judge are blindly pursuing a policy [...] of extremism. We should listen to the will of the people, not have a blind eye similar to the tanks that roll over the will of the people at Tiananmen Square" (147 Cong. Rec. H2682 2001).

The vision of an omnipotent American military unit violently riding roughshod over the impoverished people of an economically desolate island was damaging to the Bush Administration. The domestic political situation for Bush was further complicated when the struggle for the liberation of Vieques generated support in the Puerto Rican diaspora, and internationally, Puerto Rican activists, community members, organizers, politicians, intellectuals, and entertainers who were U.S. residents were prominent in the Latina/o community. The campaign for Vieques had morphed from a Puerto Rican anticolonial struggle into part of the national Latina/o movement against racial and social injustice (Barreto 2002). *Time* reported that halting live fire training in Vieques was a "political decision, not a military decision" (Reeves and Thompson 2001). The White House perceived the protest "to be a growing political problem among Hispanics, who are a very important and

increasingly powerful political bloc.” Karl Rove, Senior Advisor to Bush, was convinced that opposition to the Navy’s bombing of Vieques would continue to grow and ultimately damage the President’s support among the Latina/o electorate (Hernández 2001). Bush hinted that his decision was political when he said to a reporter: “My attitude is that the Navy ought to find somewhere else to conduct its exercises—for a lot of reasons: One, there’s been some harm done to people in the past; secondly, these are our friends and neighbors, and they don’t want us there” (United States. President 2001). By referring to Puerto Ricans as “friends and neighbors,” Bush unintentionally reinforced the idea Puerto Ricans are not truly American.

Bush ordered the Navy to end military operations in Vieques after being advised that training on the island was not essential for military preparedness. Admiral John J. Shanahan commented that “the current training on Vieques is neither unique, nor in most instances necessary for modern amphibious warfare” (quoted in Puerto Rico Governor 1999). Retired Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll penned an op-ed questioning why the Navy adhered to training that is archaic and inappropriate for modern warfare. Military preparedness does not require “continued access to Vieques as a bombardment area” (Carroll Jr. 2001). Ultimately, the Navy’s rationale became untenable when Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz commented that, “Vieques, within a matter of 5–10 years, would be completely obsolete. You cannot train with modern weapons on a World War II training basis” (Shanahan and Lindsay-Poland 2002). The anachronistic weapons training the Navy conducted in Vieques was unsuited for the United States self-proclaimed war on global terrorism and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bush administration calculated that by supporting Puerto Rican demands for demilitarizing Vieques, it could expand its electoral support in the rapidly growing Latina/o population

After being evicted from Vieques, the Navy abandoned the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base, which served as a support facility for Vieques training. The Navy left in its wake an economically devastated and environmentally despoiled region. It rapidly decamped from Puerto Rico without offering restitution for over six decades of abusing Vieques and its people. More than six thousand jobs were lost, and the estimated \$300 million expended by the Navy virtually evaporated overnight. The federal government chose not to mitigate the local crisis caused by the Navy’s retreat (Cabán 2018).

Clinton and Bush were motivated to alter colonial policy for similar reasons. Clinton rescinded Section 936 over the staunch opposition of the Puerto Rican government and corporate lobbying groups. He was willing to bankrupt Puerto Rico in order to balance the federal budget and to expand his base of political support. Bush readily antagonized one branch of the military in pursuit of domestic political advantage, hoping to prevent losing Latina/o electoral support. His administration failed to mitigate the economic damage caused by the Navy's abrupt departure from Puerto Rico. In the opening years of the new millennium, Puerto Rico suffered the consequences of having lost its privileged status in the American empire.

When the Section 936 tax credits expired in 2006, Puerto Rico plunged into a severe and prolonged economic recession. Since then, the economy has endured negative economic growth annually, except for 2012 when the economy grew by a mere 0.5 percent. Between 1996 and 2014, approximately 270,000 manufacturing jobs were lost (United States. Senate 2015). As tax revenues plummeted and the budget deficit became unmanageable, successive governors turned to the U.S. municipal market as a source of short-term financing to sustain public services. Debt accumulated quickly and more than doubled—from \$35 billion to over \$74 billion between 2005 and 2017, about \$20,000 for every resident of Puerto Rico (Weiss 2019). The government issued municipal bonds in amounts and at a pace that it soon had created a debt overhang crisis.

The credit rating agencies alarmed investors when in 2014 they downgraded to junk status the once highly sought-after triple tax-exempt bonds (Sasseen 2019; Associated Press 2015). Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers called Puerto Rican bonds the “junkiest of the junk” (Zamansky 2013). The government also had a pension liability of \$48.8 billion after it had systematically underfunded the public employee's retirement fund. By 2014, Puerto Rico was effectively locked out of the credit markets.

Bankers and U.S. government officials were aware that Puerto Rico could not extricate itself from the debt overhang, but did not act to prevent the profligate borrowing (Hedge Clipper Reports 2020). Despite the warnings of an impending fiscal crisis, the federal government acted only after Governor García Padilla warned on June 28, 2015 that “the debt is not payable [...] there is no other option. The economy has to grow. If not, we will be

in a death spiral” (Corkery 2015). In an attempt to shield U.S. investors from financial losses if Puerto Rico defaulted on the loans, President Barak Obama signed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). Signed into law on June 30, 2016, the act authorized the president to appoint a seven-person Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) with “supremacy over any territorial law or regulation that is inconsistent with the Act.” A congressional report stated, “The board would have broad sovereign powers to effectively overrule decisions by Puerto Rico’s legislature, governor, and other public authorities” (United States. House 2016). The FOMB has the authority to restructure the economy in order to “achieve fiscal responsibility and access to capital markets” (PROMESA 2016). With the enactment of PROMESA, the federal government gave notice that Puerto Rico’s political class was incapable of managing the political economy and that it had failed to protect the interests of U.S. capital.

PROMESA is a watershed moment in Puerto Rican history. The law is a unilateral appropriation by the 114th Congress (2016) of Puerto Rico’s fiscal autonomy that was granted by the 82nd Congress (1952). The FOMB is a forceful intrusion into Puerto Rican domestic affairs, and it usurped the nominal fiscal autonomy Congress granted the insular government when it approved the establishment of the Commonwealth. Representative Raúl Grijalva, chairperson of the Natural Resources Committee, protested, “The oversight board is too powerful and is yet another infringement on the sovereignty of the people of Puerto Rico and they are right to find it offensive” (Cowan 2016). PROMESA negated President Truman’s celebratory announcement in 1952 that, having with Congressional approval of Puerto Rico’s constitution, “full authority and responsibility for local self-government will be vested in the people of Puerto Rico. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico will be a government which is truly by the consent of the governed” (Truman 1952). He claimed that this was evidence of America’s “adherence to the principle of self-determination in Puerto Rico” (Truman 1952). Soon afterward the United States informed the United Nations that it was no longer necessary to transmit information about Puerto Rico. The law was drafted with the purpose of giving the illusion that Congress had fundamentally altered Puerto Rico’s status as a non-self-governing possession of the United States. In effect, with the establishment of the Commonwealth, Puerto Rico ceased to be an international matter for the United States. Puerto Rico became a purely domestic concern beyond the scrutiny of the international community.

The United States did not challenge repeated claims by Puerto Rico's political leadership that the Commonwealth had fiscal autonomy. Only when the unrestrained exercise of fiscal autonomy created the debt overhang did the U.S. reassert its full authority over Puerto Rico. House Speaker Paul Ryan countered critics of PROMESA by reminding them, "This is constitutional. Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory and the Constitution explicitly gives Congress the power to 'make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the U.S.' Need we say more?" (Ryan 2016).

But in this neoliberal moment, austerity is the official corrective that states must execute to reduce sovereign debt, irrespective of the pain it inflicts on its citizens.

PROMESA's allusion to "fiscal responsibility" is drawn from the International Monetary Fund's overall plan and is a euphemism for reducing sovereign debt, compelling governments to restructure the economy, and holding them responsible for the economy's fiscal performance. Revenues saved by the wrenching austerity measures will be used to pay down the debt. The mandate of FOMB is to extract wealth from Puerto Rico without consideration for the social and political consequences its policies may have (Marxuach 2018). The 2019 summer uprising was a public catharsis that revealed the depth of the people's opposition to the economic punishment the *Junta* had imposed. A year earlier, on May 1, 2018, thousands marched in the Milla de Oro financial district to protest the FOMB's austerity measures (Newkirk II 2018). In both instances militarized police and the "fuerza de choque" (SWAT) deployed non-lethal weapons against the peacefully assembled protestors (Mazzei 2018; Brusi 2019). The FOMB was a frequent target for acts of resistance and civil disobedience. Hundreds of protestors marched against the FOMB when it convened its first meeting on November 16, 2016, at the exclusive and sheltered El Conquistador Hotel in Fajardo. A leader of the protest expressed the thoughts of those gathered that rainy afternoon: "The fact they chose an isolated place to carry out this meeting and placed a security force of more than 500 police officers reflects they

recognize that their agenda is rejected by the country and that the country doesn't support this antidemocratic imposition" (Suárez Torres 2016).

Protestors regularly demonstrated at many of FOMB's meetings. The Democratic Party leadership also condemned the *Junta* for its policy. Senator Bernie Sanders was particularly forceful in his censure of the *Junta*: "Two years after Hurricane María, they are still working hand in hand with ultra-rich investors to try to squeeze blood from a stone. We are saying, stop dictating Puerto Rico's economic decisions and let the people decide their own future" (Aronoff 2019). It is difficult to imagine that the United States would have enacted a colonial policy during the Cold War that would surely have generated demonstrations and protests. But in this neoliberal moment, austerity is the official corrective that states must execute to reduce sovereign debt, irrespective of the pain it inflicts on its citizens.

The Supreme Court may eventually have to decide if PROMESA violates Section 19 of the Constitution of Puerto Rico; "The power of the Legislative Assembly to enact laws for the protection of the life, health and general welfare of the people shall likewise not be construed restrictively." Under the Constitution, the people acting through the electoral process have the power to hold government accountable for its actions. By absolving the FOMB from accountability to the government of Puerto Rico and the people that it represents, PROMESA violates this cardinal democratic principal against arbitrary and capricious rule.

The United States' colonial policy in the second conjuncture differed markedly from the first. The different colonial policies during the two conjunctures points to Puerto Rico's recasting from a foreign policy asset to a domestic political and economic liability. During the first conjuncture, the Roosevelt administration understood the foreign policy value of Puerto Rico to its New Neighbor Policy. As the war in Europe escalated, the archipelago became critically important to U.S. national security. In short, the U.S. intervened when instability threatened its imperial aspirations or its national security. During the second conjuncture, the change in colonial policy corresponded to the end of Cold War antagonisms and the resulting demise of Puerto Rico's role in the American empire. With the denouement of the Cold War, the geopolitical constraints that guided U.S. policy in Puerto Rico were removed. During the post-Cold War period,

three successive Presidents fundamentally transformed American colonial policy. Clinton eliminated two key props of Puerto Rico's economy because he was determined to reduce the federal deficit and he was committed to promoting hemispheric economic integration. Bush was unwilling to accept the domestic political costs of losing the Latino vote and disagreed with the Navy's argument that an antiquated training facility was vital for military preparedness. For the Obama Administration, the protection of institutional investors from potentially huge losses took precedence over the social and economic well-being of Puerto Rico.

A comparison of the federal government's emergency response to hurricanes San Felipe and San Ciprián during the first conjuncture and its subsequent response to hurricanes Irma and Maria bolsters the notion of Puerto Rico's continued deterioration of its value to the United States. The Trump administration's response to Hurricane Maria stands in marked contrast to the War Department's reaction to the devastation caused by hurricanes San Felipe and San Ciprián. As described above, various reports show the urgency with which the War Department, which had jurisdiction over Puerto Rico, acted to provide emergency relief to the victims of the hurricanes and to rebuild the devastated coffee plantations. In comparison, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was widely criticized for its desultory and ineffectual response to the humanitarian crisis (Suárez 2018). A *The New York Times* editorial called FEMA's "response to the killer hurricanes... chaotic and tragically inadequate" (*The New York Times* Editorial Board 2018).

Hurricane Maria was a rare catastrophic event that decimated the archipelago's entire infrastructure: its transportation, energy, water, and communications. Puerto Rico was especially vulnerable to the hurricane since the physical infrastructure was in disrepair. A Puerto Rican government official testified before a congressional committee that hurricanes Irma and Maria caused such massive destruction and devastation that they "were game changers for Puerto Rico"—laying bare the vulnerability caused by decades of underinvestment and deficient maintenance of critical infrastructure" (Marrero 2019).

The Trump and the Rosselló administrations' emergency response was deficient and flawed, and doubtless caused hundreds of deaths. An official for the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that "the territorial

government was overwhelmed. FEMA was overwhelmed.” The official noted that “significant gaps and weaknesses” were identified before Hurricane Maria by FEMA and “the territorial government”(GAO-Watchdog Report 2018). A GAO review of the agency’s operations discovered that a “lack of trained personnel with program expertise led to complications in its response efforts” (United States. Government Accountability Office 2018). In a post-Hurricane Maria assessment, FEMA concluded that it failed to prepare for the hurricane season, its food and supply stockpiles were insufficient, and its disaster planning focused on a tsunami, not a hurricane, hitting Puerto Rico, and lacked “situational awareness” (United States. Department of Homeland Security 2018). FEMA responded with greater urgency and deployed more resources and personnel to Texas after it was hit by Hurricane Harvey that it did to Puerto Rico. A detailed study of the record of U.S. hurricane emergency responses to areas stricken by hurricanes and earthquakes “does make it clear that the speed and scale of the initial Maria relief effort pales next to other recent campaigns” (Meyer 2017). On virtually every emergency relief item, Puerto Rico was short-changed compared to Texas. LatinoJustice-PRDEL, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, and other organizations have sued FEMA since it refuses to release records pertaining to the agency’s response to Hurricane Maria. PRLDEF council Natasha Ora Banna calls FEMA’s failure to cooperate as “part of a larger continuum of negligence by the federal government” (Latino Justice: PRLDEF 2018).

Trump’s “policy” (actually it is more of a posture) toward Puerto Rico was driven by impulses that appeared to be personal and ill-considered. Trump recoiled at the mounting opprobrium directed against his administration’s flawed emergency response, and launched a succession of rage-filled tweets and public denunciations that resurrected racist tropes of Puerto Ricans as prone to dependency and lacking personal responsibility. Trump tweeted that Puerto Ricans “want everything to be done for them.” FEMA’s negligence and Trump’s open contempt for Puerto Rico is an evolving narrative that portrays Puerto Ricans as other than Americans—people who reside in a foreign country (Negrón-Muntaner 2017). Former Governor Alejandro García Padilla denounced Trump for spreading “an anachronistic, racist vision” of Puerto Rico (*Primera Hora* 2017). Trump’s surrogates also promulgated the idea that Puerto Rico might not be a part of the United States. A high-level Trump

spokesperson accused Puerto Ricans of mismanaging the aid the U.S. had “given that country” (Gidley). In tweets, Trump complained that Puerto Rico was “taking dollars away from our farmers and many others.” The interim Chief of State Mick Mulvaney compared Puerto Rico to the Ukraine and suggested that both are corrupt places. In response, Congresswomen Velázquez tweeted that that “illustrates the fundamental problem that this White House views Puerto Rico as a foreign country.” She stressed that the “President and his administration have a deep antipathy for our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico” (Velázquez 2019). References by Trump’s surrogates to Puerto Rico as “that country” have injected a racial dynamic absent from public pronouncements of federal officials during any other administration in recent history.

The current state of the political parties bears a strong similarity to the situation in the 1930s. Now, as then, popular support for the dominant political parties has waned. During both conjunctures, the workers and the poor protested against the government that bore responsibility for their economic and social plight. Mass labor strikes in the 1930s and, more recently, popular protests challenged the legitimacy of the political order. While the summer of 2019 uprising was an open repudiation of Rosselló and the *Junta*, it was also a condemnation of the dominant political parties for their incompetence, venality, and their leaders’ detachment from the people’s quotidian struggles (Cabán 2020). A popular chant during the protests, “Ricky, renuncia y llévate la Junta” (Ricky, resign and take the *Junta* with you) captures the widening anticolonial sentiment in Puerto Rico. The uprising was also a renunciation of the discredited *Estado Libre Asociado* that diminishes the population and makes a life of dignity elusive. This anticolonial sentiment was expressed in the popular protest chant “*Sí, sí, ELA se murió, y el pueblo lo enterró*” (Yes, yes, ELA has died, and the people buried it). Activists among the 5.2 million Puerto Ricans in the diaspora challenged the established order as well. The diaspora provided financial and political support for the popular resistance and organized protests against Rosselló and the *Junta* in cities with large Puerto Rican populations.

For over half a century, the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (Partido Nuevo Progresista [PNP]) and pro-commonwealth PPD have dominated insular politics. Yet neither party has been able to convince the federal government to make changes in Puerto Rico’s territorial status. Nonetheless, both

parties continue to vigorously promote the idea that a change in territorial status is possible if not inevitable (Puerto Rico Report 2019). The body politic has come to accept the futility of this quest for statehood or enhanced commonwealth, and sees that the PPD and PNP are engaged in a permanent campaign to wrest control of the colonial state's sizeable resources for political gain (Torres Gotay 2020). The overarching concern for a population that has lived through a continuous series of shocks—economic depression, austerity, hurricanes, earthquakes, and massive outmigration—is for the government to ameliorate the level of collective suffering and offer a just path out of the morass. The persistent failure of the government to do so has resulted a gradual erosion of electoral support for the political parties. The PNP and the PPD are virtually indistinguishable in how they have responded to the protracted crisis that has engulfed the archipelago (Cabán 2020). Both parties borrowed prodigiously, both implemented austerity programs before PROMESA, and both have an ignominious record of corruption. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the political leadership of the PPD and PNP has failed to dispel the popular belief that it is aloof and unconcerned with the plight of the people (*Primera Hora* 2019). An indifference and inability to comprehend the bleakness of life for workers and the poor fueled the political instability in the 1930s, and it also was the catalyst for the summer uprising in 2009.

New political forces have organized and will challenge the PNP and PPD in the 2020 general elections. The Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens' Victory Movement [MVC]) is a new political party that was formed by progressive political leaders, activists, community organizers, and intellectuals. The MVC is focused on “restoring public institutions; social, economic, environmental and fiscal reconstruction and decolonization.” Alexandra Lúgaro, the MVC's gubernatorial candidate, emphasized that “we need to regain our economic development so that we're in the position to negotiate the question of status with the United States” (Deibert 2019). This was precisely Muñoz's message to his followers: postpone the resolution of Puerto Rico's status to a more propitious economic moment. The emergence of the MVC is reminiscent of the conditions that sparked the formation of the PPD: an absent state, a failed political class, a population on the edge of precarity, a skeptical electorate, and a dystopic future. The MVC promises the electorate an opportunity to elect a younger progressive

leadership that is not tainted by the corruption and venality that has plagued the PNP and PPD (Cabán 2019).

Conclusion

The 2019 summer uprising may well be the reckoning that shatters the ideologically sterile and meaningless electoral contests between proponents of statehood and commonwealth. The collapse of politics as usual seems imminent and may create unforeseen opportunities for Congress and a new political leadership in Puerto Rico to rework the 120-year-old colonial formula. Congress's power over the territorial possessions is absolute and not subject to limitations or judicial review. Yet it is a sobering reality that since the passage of the Foraker Act in 1900, Congress has not seriously considered using its plenary powers to alter Puerto Rico's territorial status. Congress alone has the authority to do so. As an unincorporated territory, Puerto Rico resides in a state of absolute uncertainty about its political future (Burnett and Marshall 2006, 12). Puerto Rico's political leadership either does not believe that is the case or chooses to deny it, which is necessary in order to sustain their political organizations (statehood, enhanced commonwealth, or independence).

United States colonial policy is determined not by the aspirations of the colonized, but by the priorities of the colonizer. That is why the protest march of 500,000 Puerto Ricans in the summer of 2019 is so significant. Protestors were targeting multiple dysfunctions of the colonial regime: the depredations of the political class, the absent state that failed a population in need, a foreign-imposed *Junta* with the task of ruthlessly extracting value from a population living in a state of precarity, rapacious capitalist expansion, and military exploitation that has despoiled much of the environment and created toxic disease-causing zones. This colonial condition is so markedly dysfunctional that Congress may not be able to ignore it. But while Congress also operates in the realm of uncertainty, the colonial policies of the past seem woefully ill-suited for the current conditions. The 5.4 million Puerto Ricans in the diaspora add another dimension of political uncertainty regarding their potential role in any Congressional schemes to erase or rework the antiquated colonial formula. The uncertainty of the moment creates the potential for the United States to explore alternative approaches to the eternally vexing colonial problem.

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