Puerto Ricans in the United States

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Summary and Keywords

Puerto Rican migrants have resided in the United States since before the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, when the United States took possession of the island of Puerto Rico as part of the Treaty of Paris. After the war, groups of Puerto Ricans began migrating to the United States as contract laborers, first to sugarcane plantations in Hawaii, and then to other destinations on the mainland. After the Jones Act of 1917 extended U.S. citizenship to islanders, Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States in larger numbers, establishing their largest base in New York City. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, a vibrant and heterogeneous colonia developed there, and Puerto Ricans participated actively both in local politics and in the increasingly contentious politics of their homeland, whose status was indeterminate until it became a commonwealth in 1952. The Puerto Rican community in New York changed dramatically after World War II, accommodating up to fifty thousand new migrants per year during the peak of the “great migration” from the island. Newcomers faced intense discrimination and marginalization in this era, defined by both a Cold War ethos and liberal social scientists’ interest in the “Puerto Rican problem.”

Puerto Rican migrant communities in the 1950s and 1960s—now rapidly expanding into the Midwest, especially Chicago, and into New Jersey, Connecticut, and Philadelphia—struggled with inadequate housing and discrimination in the job market. In local schools, Puerto Rican children often faced a lack of accommodation of their need for English language instruction. Most catastrophic for Puerto Rican communities, on the East Coast particularly, was the deindustrialization of the labor market over the course of the 1960s. By the late 1960s, in response to these conditions and spurred by the civil rights, Black Power, and other social movements, young Puerto Ricans began organizing and protesting in large numbers. Their activism combined a radical approach to community organizing with Puerto Rican nationalism and international anti-imperialism. The youth were not the only activists in this era. Parents in New York had initiated, together with their African American neighbors, a “community control” movement that spanned the late 1960s and early 1970s; and many other adult activists pushed the politics of the urban social service sector—the primary institutions in many impoverished Puerto Rican communities—further to the left.
By the mid-1970s, urban fiscal crises and the rising conservative backlash in national politics dealt another blow to many Puerto Rican communities in the United States. The Puerto Rican population as a whole was now widely considered part of a national “underclass,” and much of the political energy of Puerto Rican leaders focused on addressing the paucity of both basic material stability and social equality in their communities. Since the 1980s, however, Puerto Ricans have achieved some economic gains, and a growing college-educated middle class has managed to gain more control over the cultural representations of their communities. More recently, the political salience of Puerto Ricans as a group has begun to shift. For the better part of the 20th century, Puerto Ricans in the United States were considered numerically insignificant or politically impotent (or both); but in the last two presidential elections (2008 and 2012), their growing populations in the South, especially in Florida, have drawn attention to their demographic significance and their political sensibilities.

Keywords: Puerto Ricans, migration, citizenship rights, labor, political representation, civil rights

Introduction

Puerto Ricans have resided in the United States since before the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, when the United States took possession of the island of Puerto Rico as part of the Treaty of Paris. After the war, groups of Puerto Ricans began migrating to the U.S. as contract laborers, first to sugarcane plantations in Hawaii, and then to other destinations on the mainland. After Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens in 1917, with the passage of the Jones Act, a migrant population grew rapidly in New York City, where a strong post–World War I economy attracted thousands of Puerto Rican workers each year. Until World War II, New York remained the center of the lively and heterogeneous Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. With “great migration” of Puerto Ricans from the island beginning in the late 1940s, New York’s Puerto Rican population remained the largest, but many migrants dispersed, settling in Chicago and other Midwestern cities, in Philadelphia, Hartford, and various New Jersey cities, as well as in rural communities in the Midwest and mid-Atlantic that attracted migrant farmworkers.

Since the 1980s, with the old manufacturing centers in steep decline and the nation’s economic growth shifting to the Sun Belt, some of the fastest-growing Puerto Rican communities have emerged in Texas, California, Georgia, and, most notably, Florida—where Puerto Rican voters’ impact on the presidential election of 2012 was widely noted. Throughout the 20th century, Puerto Ricans in the United States were often marginalized, first as a racially suspect and unskilled migrant population and later as a group presumed to comprise a politically apathetic “underclass.” A review of Puerto Ricans’ history in the United States—their deep roots, social heterogeneity, and political activism—helps rectify such distortions. It also enables us to see historical patterns in the demographic, socioeconomic, and political changes that have emerged among Puerto Rican communities in the United States in the 21st century.
Early Migrants in New York City: 1890–1930

The first community of Puerto Rican migrants developed in New York City in the late 19th century, part of a larger settlement of exiled Antillean nationalists who supported the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule in its last colonies in the Americas, Cuba and Puerto Rico. Many of these Cuban and Puerto Rican transplants were tabaqueros, skilled immigrant artisans who dominated the growing business of cigar making in New York. Whatever their occupations, these early migrants tended to be well educated and very active in homeland politics, especially as Cuba’s second independence war with Spain began in 1895, and they drew the United States into the conflict by 1898. One member of this early colonia, Arturo Schomburg, would become a renowned bibliophile, collector, and intellectual—although after his marriage to an African American woman in the 1890s, he left the Spanish-speaking community for “black Harlem,” and spent the rest of his adult life culturally separate from his compatriots.

Having allegedly entered the war with Spain to support the independence goals of the Antillean independentistas, the United States won possession of Puerto Rico as part of the spoils of war following its quick victory over Spain in 1898. In 1900, the U.S. legislature passed the Foraker Act, creating a U.S.-controlled civilian government in the island. Still, Puerto Ricans entering the United States after that point were considered “aliens.” The exact status of Puerto Ricans in relation to the United States—alien or national, subject or citizen—would preoccupy members of Congress and legal scholars for over a decade. Those who favored the extension of citizenship argued that the U.S. Constitution, and the protections of citizenship, must “follow the flag” into the territories it now controlled; those opposed to the extension of citizenship to inhabitants of the new territories made a racist case for their “incapacity for self-government.”

In 1917, when the Jones Act finally was passed and Puerto Ricans finally did become citizens of the United States, there were several thousand Puerto Ricans living in New York. After 1917, with citizenship in hand and drawn by a wartime economic boom, a steady stream of Puerto Rican migrants found work in skilled trades and the service sector. Jesús Colón, an early migrant who would become a lifelong political activist in his community, described the heterogeneous Spanish speaking world into which Puerto Rican migrants settled, including “Puerto Ricans who are poor, middle class, white like some inhabitant of a Nordic forest, trigueños like good descendants of Chief Aguaybana [sic], black like a shining citizen of old Ethiopia.”¹ Along with the other mostly working-class members of the multiethnic communities they settled in, Puerto Ricans spent their days working at factory jobs or in kitchens or doing piece work in their small apartments. “We work our fingers to the bone, but why complain? We all have to work to improve our situation,” wrote one woman to La Prensa about her work as a seamstress in a small Manhattan garment factory.²

The young and middle aged Puerto Rican workers who migrated to New York in the 1920s had come of age in Puerto Rico in a period of intense labor struggles. Dock workers, agricultural laborers, and urban artisans like carpenters, shoemakers, and tabaqueros
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engaged in strikes countered by violent repression from both employers and the island government. Conflicts between workers and bosses played out in a context of widespread tension over the transformation of the island’s economy. U.S.-based corporations bought up huge tracts of mixed-use agricultural land to convert into profitable sugar plantations, causing disruption in the agricultural sector. Socialists and workers began organizing the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, a craft-based labor union, which by the early 1920s had forged close ties with the American Federation of Labor.

Among Puerto Rican workers in New York, it was the colonia’s cigar makers who engaged most intensively in cross-national labor organizing in this period, motivated in part by the challenges they faced from the mechanization of their industry in the mid-twenties. By 1925, following the lead of their compañeros in Puerto Rico and Tampa, Puerto Rican and other immigrant cigar makers in New York had begun to organize to improve working conditions.

The conflict generated by the rapid evolution of island politics increasingly divided the New York colonia. After the 1900 Foraker Act established a U.S.-dominated government on the island (with a legislature elected by Puerto Rican voters, and a governor appointed by the U.S. president), political parties in Puerto Rico formed around various positions on the “status question”—the unsettled relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. The Union Party supported independence; the Republican Party (with no ties to the U.S. Republican Party) advocated the full integration of the island into the United States via statehood; the Socialist Party vacillated on the issue of independence, but ultimately allied with the pro-statehood Republicans; and the Nationalist party advocated full independence. Because migrants retained close ties to their homeland, and because its political fate remained in flux, changes and developments in island party politics reverberated deeply in New York’s Puerto Rican communities.

On the other hand, as the 1920s progressed, most politicized New York Puerto Ricans became equally preoccupied by the question of their community’s survival in New York City. Some migrants were drawn to the local Republican party, but most followed the pattern of earlier European immigrants, seeking an alliance with the city’s Democratic machine as the most effective means to represent the interests of Puerto Rican migrants. Neighborhood Democratic clubs, often tied to hometown organizations, proliferated in the colonia, competing for members and vying for attention from the representatives of New York’s Democratic machine.

While many Puerto Ricans “pioneers” who were interviewed about their lives in the 1920s recalled their New York communities in the early twenties as peaceful places where neighbors of different nationalities got along well, others noted that conflicts between ethnic groups sometimes arose, both in their workplaces and in the streets surrounding their homes. In the East Harlem barrio, inter-ethnic tensions exploded in the summer of 1926 in a series of street fights, or choques. Most observers said that the trouble originated between Jewish shopkeepers (many of whom no longer lived in Harlem) and Puerto Rican migrants, whose population there was growing quickly. By the time the neighborhood
settled down after two weeks of “disturbances,” as the Spanish-language newspaper called them, fifteen people were estimated to be seriously injured, and business owners on both sides suffered untotaled losses in sales, merchandise, and property damage.

Leaders of the Puerto Rican community saw the choques as a wake up call, and formed new community self-defense organizations. One observer of the choques told a New York Times reporter that the real problem was “that people do not realize that we Porto Ricans are American citizens in the fullest sense of the word . . . We believe that we have readily adapted ourselves to American standards and ideals and there is no reason why we should be looked upon with suspicion.”³ Even before the financial crash of 1929, Puerto Ricans in New York knew that the next decade would present new challenges.

Surviving the Great Depression

When the Great Depression hit, Puerto Ricans were the fastest-growing group of foreign workers in New York, and they felt the deprivations of the Depression earlier and more keenly than most. “When we say in an employment office that we are from Puerto Rico, they frankly reject us,” declared one migrant in a letter to the editor of La Prensa, in spite of the fact that “we are as American as they are.”⁴ Puerto Ricans a decade earlier had expected to be identified much like earlier immigrants, as outsiders only temporarily. The social strains of the early thirties seemed to intensify inter-ethnic hostilities, particularly in the job market.⁵

The Depression also exacerbated racial prejudice, an increasing concern for Puerto Ricans in New York. Several articles emphasizing migrants’ low status and racial inferiority appeared in widely circulating magazines in the early 1930s. Nationalists in particular rejected this ascription, since they tended to identify with the white elite on the island. Working-class Socialists took a broader view, although they saw the danger to Puerto Ricans of being positioned low down in the U.S. racial hierarchy. There were also the native racisms of various groups in the Spanish-speaking colonia. It was not uncommon for announcements for some social events, like a charity dance sponsored by the Mexican Club Azteca in support of victims of a hurricane in Puerto Rico in 1932, to specify “for whites only.”⁶

After the passage in 1933 of the National Industrial Recovery Act and its wages and working hours protections, unions grew in size and power during the 1930s and helped improve the lives of a growing number of working-class Americans. Nevertheless, Puerto Ricans were consistently excluded from mainstream labor organizations, including the racially progressive AFL-CIO. Even the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which successfully organized Chicana women in the Los Angeles garment industry starting in 1933, made uneven efforts to organize the many Puerto Rican migrant women garment workers in New York, and rebuffed several efforts by Puerto Rican migrant workers to create a Spanish-speaking local in the 1930s.⁷
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In this context, the New Deal seemed to promise some payoffs of political participation at the local level. In addition to the scores of hometown clubs, employees’ unions, and various community defense groups that Puerto Ricans organized in this era to serve the unmet needs of Puerto Ricans in New York, colonia leaders and voters also began to intensify their focus on gaining the recognition of the major political parties. If residents of the Puerto Rican districts could convince political bosses of their importance as an ethnic voting bloc, they would be in a position to demand their rights to the benefits of patronage and city services. One migrant, writing to La Prensa in 1936, reminded his compatriots in Harlem that after the “racial disturbances” in East Harlem a decade earlier, “it was our ability to vote that saved us from being driven out of this district, that induced political leaders to defend us for the interest of gaining our votes.”

Even if local party leaders were beginning to notice their growing Puerto Rican constituencies, New York’s political terrain was undergoing dramatic ruptures and realignments in the thirties that cast a shadow over Puerto Ricans’ hopeful vision of political advancement. An extensive reform movement in the early thirties hurt the city’s Democratic machine, and the impact of national-level New Deal policies reduced the power of some local politicians. Inclusion in the city’s new liberal order proved problematic for Puerto Ricans for reasons beyond their relatively small numbers (in 1940, the U.S. Bureau of the Census counted just over 61,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York City, while African Americans numbered over 450,000) or the faltering support of the political machines. In the mid-thirties, intensifying agitation for independence in Puerto Rico, and several incidents of high-profile political violence, brought the question of the island’s still-indeterminate status back to the center of colonia political culture. Migrants’ calls for the end of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico further spurred the radicalization of the colonia, and some accused even New Deal liberals of adopting imperialist policies regarding Puerto Rico. This nationalist agenda for Puerto Rico was beyond the tolerance of mainstream liberals in the United States. The Puerto Rican status issue had become a political hot potato that very few U.S. lawmakers were willing to touch.

Many Puerto Ricans leaned further left by decade’s end, and invested even more faith in their stalwart advocate, Vito Marcantonio, first elected to represent East Harlem in Congress in 1934. Earlier in the Depression, many of these activists had begun to embrace “the politics of here,” initiating their first focused efforts at making demands of the state on the basis of their citizenship. Now, they framed their expectations of their U.S. citizenship around a new set of political claims, combining demands for local rights and island sovereignty. It was their own version of a New Deal language of rights, but it complicated their effort to create a niche for Puerto Ricans in mainstream city politics. One Puerto Rican, Oscar García Rivera, was elected on the Republican ticket in 1937 to represent the East Harlem district in the New York State Assembly, but he was defeated in 1940 by Hulan Jack, a popular black leader born in Saint Lucia. Puerto Rican migrants made few concrete political gains during this decade-long push for recognition by the major parties in the United States, leaving them more marginalized—if somewhat more visible—than they had been in 1930.
The Great Migration and Cold War Politics

During World War II, members of Congress quietly addressed what a few commentators were beginning to call “the Puerto Rican problem”: the question of the island’s status, now revived as a political dilemma for the United States amid the growing tide of decolonization movements during a war fought in the name of freedom and democracy. Due to a persistent lack of interest in the island’s affairs—beyond support for U.S. business interests in the island—Congress was unable to achieve any kind of resolution to its colonial problem at this moment of great visibility. (The 1948 triumph of island leader Luis Muñoz Marín’s Popular Democratic Party, with its developmentalist agenda that won strong support from U.S. policymakers, would pave the way for joint support for the island’s new Commonwealth status.)

Meanwhile, a postwar economic boom in the United States provided a favorable context for a process of government-sponsored migration that nearly doubled New York City’s Puerto Rican population in two years. By the late 1940s, the “Puerto Rican problem” was popularly understood to be one created by the island’s people rather than its unresolved political situation. New York’s daily papers published countless stories and photographs of Puerto Rican migrants who crowded four and five to a room in shabby apartments, often without coats or blankets to protect them from New York winters. Within a few years, the Puerto Rican Department of Labor created a comprehensive service agency for migrants, the Migration Division, designed to help migrants with housing, employment, education, health, and all other issues related to “adjustment.” A second office of the Migration Division opened in Chicago in 1949 to draw Puerto Ricans (both from the island and from New York) to Midwestern industrial centers. Together, the two offices created scores of programs for adults throughout the early 1950s, including English classes and vocational training but also “housekeeping” and “budgets and finances.”

During this “great migration” from Puerto Rico, progressive civic leaders and social service professionals argued that New Yorkers should welcome the newcomers, whose difficulties and differences would soon fade, just as they had for the earlier generation of eastern and southern European immigrants. A number of Puerto Rican community leaders, too, asserted that Puerto Ricans’ poor image in New York would improve if the public would recognize that they were “just like other immigrants.” One problem with this argument, though, was that Puerto Ricans’ mixed-race heritage made them very unlike European immigrants. As psychologist Kenneth Clark (who would soon be the key expert witness in the Brown vs. Board of Education case) told a reporter for the New York Amsterdam News, “‘we are a nation of immigrants, and all immigrants have been stereotyped and discriminated against . . . every minority has had the privilege of moving upward—if it is white . . . The reality of the United States is that assimilation is blocked by skin color.’”

The second flaw in the argument that Puerto Ricans were just like other immigrants in the United States was that their status as colonial citizens of the United States set them apart. And while Puerto Ricans’ U.S. citizenship was widely misunderstood or unknown by
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the public and even many officials in the United States, some of those who did know about migrants’ status feared its impact: because they were citizens, they could not be deported, even if they committed a crime; and they could vote, giving their growing communities the potential to exert political power. Exacerbating this concern about political empowerment, McCarthy-era assumptions about radical foreigners made life very hard for left-leaning migrants in the 1950s.

As pervasive as the vilification of Puerto Ricans was in New York, the situation in Chicago during the early postwar years was quite different. There, newspapers touted Puerto Ricans as model migrants, representing the best of the hardworking new workers in Chicago’s industries. The context was very different, of course. Puerto Ricans joined a population of Mexican migrants that had begun arriving in the city in the 1920s; and postwar city boosters portrayed the newcomers as more industrious and less impoverished than their Mexican neighbors. Also, whereas New York was receiving around fifty thousand Puerto Ricans per year during the peak years of the postwar migration, Chicago’s Puerto Rican population was still only thirty-two thousand total by 1960. The demographic situation was similar in Philadelphia, whose Puerto Rican population grew from two thousand in 1950 to about twelve thousand in 1960. Although there was one notable instance of inter-ethnic tension there in 1953, when hostile white neighbors instigated an episode of street fighting in the Spring Garden neighborhood, city officials, noting how the migration had affected New York, asserted in 1959 that a “Puerto Rican problem . . . has not yet arisen”—although things could “easily change for the worse.”

An additional challenge for those seeking to protect Puerto Rican migrants’ group image stemmed from two high-profile attacks on the U.S. government by Nationalist migrants in the early 1950s. In 1950, Nationalists in Puerto Rico had initiated an armed rebellion on the island in response to the passage of Public Law 600, the first step in transition for the island from an “unincorporated territory” of the United States to an “Associated Free State” or “Commonwealth.” Supporters of independence derided the new arrangement as “perfumed colonialism.” In November 1950, two Nationalist migrants attempted to assassinate President Truman—who was unharmed—in Washington, D.C. Few Americans had any idea of the nature of the United States’ relationship with Puerto Rico, or of the contentious politics surrounding that relationship, but the assassination attempt tarnished the image of Puerto Ricans in the United States, making them seem politically volatile and “un-American.”

Then, on the 1954 anniversary of the signing of the Jones Act and the extension of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans, four armed Puerto Rican Nationalists entered the gallery of the United States House of Representatives and opened fire, wounding five congressmen. The Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico, and its branch in the United States, continued to protest vehemently the island’s new Commonwealth status, instituted in 1952. Nationalists begged to differ—violently—with the popular Governor, Muñoz Marín, who pronounced that, with the status change, “the United States of America ends every trace and vestige of the colonial system in Puerto Rico.”
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In this highly charged moment, Puerto Rican leaders in New York sought to make a renewed push for political empowerment. By 1956 there was still only one elected Puerto Rican representative in the city, Felipe Torres, of the Bronx 4th Assembly District—the first Puerto Rican in the state government since the end of García Rivera’s two-year term in the state assembly in 1940. No Puerto Rican was appointed to any municipal post until Mayor Robert Wagner named Manuel Gómez a municipal magistrate in 1957. Many colonia leaders expressed deep pessimism about the prospect of improvements for Puerto Ricans in housing, employment, schooling, and health without political representation.

Puerto Rican leaders argued that low voter registration among Puerto Ricans had less to do with “apathy”—an increasingly common accusation—and more to do with the hindrance created by the English-only literacy test, which remained in place until outlawed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They also accused the Republican state legislature of gerrymandering the districts in which most Puerto Ricans lived in East Harlem and the Bronx so that only one out of approximately eight such districts actually obtained a Puerto Rican majority, hindering both their traditional support of Democratic candidates and their ability to lobby for backing for Puerto Rican candidates from the Democratic party.\(^\text{15}\)

The much smaller Puerto Rican communities in Chicago and Philadelphia, and those more recently established in in other Midwestern and mid-Atlantic cities, were still some years away from attempting political influence.

Deindustrialization and the Second Generation

A study published in 1957 by a group at New York University (NYU) concluded that, ten years after the first “influx” of migrants to New York, Puerto Ricans as a group were continuing to struggle with poor health and limited access to health care, dilapidated housing and discrimination in the housing market, inadequate English instruction in the schools, and a heavy reliance on welfare services. The researchers warned that “the problems of serving these new New Yorkers and of integrating them into the community are likely to increase in the near future.”\(^\text{16}\)

Puerto Rican community leaders and activists did not need an NYU study to tell them this.

Based on the reporting of its clients, the Migration Division identified exploitation by landlords as the most urgent problem for newly arriving Puerto Ricans. This was a widely reported problem not just in New York but in other cities with smaller—but now rapidly growing—Puerto Rican populations. The Migration Division office in Chicago systematically aided Puerto Rican families in their search for housing. Settling in some of that city’s more heterogeneous neighborhoods in the 1950s, Puerto Ricans “learned that being ambiguous about their ethnoracial origins worked to their advantage,” writes historian Lilia Fernández. “When landlords mistook Puerto Ricans for Italians or Greeks, they did not correct them.”\(^\text{17}\)

In Philadelphia, where migrants lacked the benefit of any organized social services, Puerto Ricans also recalled pervasive discrimination by landlords. In the neighborhoods where migrants first settled in the 1950s, “For Rent” signs increasingly noted “whites only.”
Aside from housing, the other top concern for Puerto Ricans in their new urban environments was access to decent schooling for their children. In New York, where the Puerto Rican community had the deepest roots, a small number of progressive educators had worked to help Puerto Rican children’s adjustment in city schools since the 1930s, and parents had worked with the school district officials to make their needs known. The education department of the Migration Division produced a variety of short films and pamphlets for distribution in schools, intended to familiarize teachers and other students with both the struggles of migrant children, and the richness of their culture.

Puerto Rican young adults and adolescent members of the “second generation” emerged as important community activists in this era, especially on issues related to education. The first formally organized, youth-led Puerto Rican organization in New York, the Hispanic Young Adult Association (HYAA), formed in the early 1950s out of a collective of young activists including Manuel “Manny” Díaz and Antonia Pantoja. Over the next several years, members of this group collaborated with other community leaders to create the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs (PRACA) and the Puerto Rican Forum, which would be instrumental in fostering further community activism among young Puerto Ricans.

This rising generation of young leaders in the 1950s were interested not just in increasing educational opportunities for Puerto Ricans; they also wanted to challenge the image of young Puerto Ricans as susceptible to juvenile delinquency and gang participation. West Side Story, which appeared on Broadway in 1957, played on these hardening stereotypes of Puerto Rican youth. Two years later, in 1959, a high-profile murder by a young Puerto Rican gang member dubbed the “Capeman” brought the preoccupation with delinquency and gang violence to a head. Two weeks after the Capeman incident, the murder in Chicago of an Italian man randomly targeted by two young Puerto Rican men sparked the same kind of hysteria about Puerto Ricans and crime.

It was in this climate of fear and prejudice that Antonia Pantoja and other members of the Puerto Rican Forum—most notably Frank Bonilla, who would become one of the early leaders of the push to create programs in Puerto Rican studies at the university level—formed a youth leadership organization that focused on educational opportunity. They named the organization ASPIRA, “to aspire,” which Pantoja described as a movement, not a service agency, to be structured around “clubs” that would allow youth to set their own agendas and designate their own leadership. ASPIRA, which still exists as a national organization after more than fifty years, represented precisely the goals articulated by a group of college-bound Puerto Rican youth in 1960 at their second annual Puerto Rican Youth Conference: “We must set a positive image . . . to show the Puerto Rican as ambitious, with a desire and increasing ability to climb upwards, as have all past new-comers to the city.”18
The Long 1960s

Although some Puerto Rican youth nurtured a combination of hopefulness and aspiration by the early 1960s, most Puerto Rican children still lived in households in which poverty and insecurity outweighed opportunity. If their parents worked in the garment industry they made, on average, 30 percent (men) to 50 percent (women) less than their white male counterparts. And their prospects worsened over the course of the 1960s: Puerto Ricans’ small socioeconomic gains over the 1950s faded with a growing trend in “deindustrialization,” the moving of manufacturing plants to locations cheaper than their original urban base, which hit the garment industry, with its high concentration of Puerto Rican workers, earlier than most. Virtually every U.S. urban area in which Puerto Ricans had settled—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Hartford—was affected. Nationwide, Puerto Ricans’ family earnings dropped from 71 percent of the national average in 1959 to 59 percent by 1974.19 In 1967, 33 percent of Puerto Ricans were receiving welfare benefits, up from 29.5 percent in 1959. By the late 1960s, Puerto Ricans—including a substantial number of young activists under the age of twenty-five—would confront these problems in their communities head on.

Many young adult activists got involved in promoting civil rights for Puerto Ricans during the early 1960s, working with organizations like the National Association of Puerto Rican Civil Rights (NAPRCR), which focused on equity issues specific to Puerto Ricans.20 One of the first major events NAPRCR was involved in was a massive school boycott in New York City in 1964, organized by African American and Puerto Rican leaders to protest the Board of Education’s failure to take adequate steps toward integrating New York City schools.21 The boycott was considered a major success, and the participation of nearly half the city’s public school children called attention to the failures of city officials to meet the needs of black and Puerto Rican students.

Another important moment in education-related activism was the “community control” movement of the late 1960s. In 1966, half the students in New York’s schools were African American (30 percent) or Puerto Rican (20 percent), but they only comprised a tiny proportion (3.6 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively) of those graduating from academic high schools.22 These statistics showed, said those who protested Board of Education policies, the impact of inequality: black and Puerto Rican students were not being adequately supported in their schools. Protesters demanded a new governance structure for the local school boards, with substantial representation from parents and community members. The Board of Education ultimately consented to the creation of several “experimental” school districts. Although each of these experimental or “community controlled” districts only lasted a few years, they left an enduring legacy: residents of poor communities forced the city to give them more than a token say in the way institutions operated in their neighborhoods.

The battle for self-determination—ensuring that the institutions serving the people in poor neighborhoods were managed and led by those people—was also being waged with force by many of the increasingly radical social work and community development organi-
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Zations that Puerto Rican activists founded in every city with a notable Puerto Rican population. Especially after major riots exploded in the Puerto Rican communities of both Chicago and New York (in 1966 and 1967, respectively), activists made real the idea of “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” They also saw the momentum and energy they gained when they also aimed for the maximum feasible participation of the young. A radical social work organization based in New York’s Lower East Side, called the Real Great Society, gained prominence in the late sixties when it started a program called the “University of the Streets,” which offered free classes to thousands of people in poor communities, on subjects ranging from karate to photography to Puerto Rican and African American history.23

A similar motivation to dramatically expand opportunities in his impoverished community led José “Cha Cha” Jiménez, head of the Chicago street gang the Young Lords, to turn the gang into a radical community service organization in the late sixties.24 The founders of the New York Young Lords Organization (YLO) were inspired by Cha Cha Jiménez, although their organizations were not formally affiliated. Most founding member of the New York YLO were college students, active in one or more of the many political organizations that thrived on City University campuses in the 1960s. Activist Iris Morales, who became one of the first women leaders in the YLO, recalled what motivated her cohort at City University of New York (CUNY)—almost all of them the first in their families to attend college—in the late sixties: “we were marginalized, and we tended to stick together united by common experiences of poverty and racial oppression.”25

Structurally, both the Chicago and the New York Young Lords—and the branches that formed in Philadelphia, in Newark, in Camden, New Jersey, and in Hartford, Connecticut—modeled themselves after the Black Panther Party, relying on a central committee comprised of various “ministers,” and an organizational platform that emphasized the group’s commitment to self-determination, racial justice, and a socialist society. Many people who joined the Young Lords had attended Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or Black Panther meetings as high school students, in some cases because they were unaware of activist Puerto Rican groups, and in other cases because they already identified as Afro-Puerto Rican. A powerful influence for many of these activists was the intersection of Black Power and Puerto Rican nationalist ideology. For example, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael had joined Puerto Rico’s Movimiento Pro-Independencia leader Juan Mari Bras in a massive anti-war demonstration Puerto Rico in 1967, reportedly ten thousand strong, at which Carmichael told the crowd, “Our people is a colony within the United States, in the same form that Puerto Ricans are a colony outside the continental United States.”26

Around the time the Young Lords were organizing in Chicago and New York, black and Puerto Rican student leaders had shut down New York’s City College campus in April, demanding a more inclusive admissions policy that would provide more open access for Puerto Rican and African American students to a university education. They wanted a more equitable representation of students of color admitted to the CUNY colleges. The student activists also lobbied for the creation of Black and Puerto Rican studies programs
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on their campuses. The idea was not simply to provide minority students with the opportunity to “study themselves,” as one critic complained during the takeover in 1969. Their larger goal was to create a new visibility for the silenced histories of Puerto Ricans and African Americans. The Puerto Rican studies programs developed at CUNY starting in 1969 were part of a larger national trend—programs in Black, Third World, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies emerged at universities around the country in the early 1970s, transforming campus protests into a durable legacy of academic impact.

Challenges of the 1970s-1990s

By the mid-1970s, urban fiscal crises—fueled by inflation, deindustrialization, and the declining incomes and unemployment these forces produced for blue collar workers—had dealt a heavy blow to most Puerto Rican communities in the United States. By 1975, a federal report found that Puerto Rican households in the United States had a lower per capita income than any other group, and they suffered unemployment rates roughly 300 percent higher than white workers. Puerto Rican neighborhoods in a handful of cities in the United States experienced some version of the New York Puerto Ricans’ trauma of that era: “The Bronx was burning,” recalled one community activist about the 1970s, “and nobody cared to try to stop it.”

After several decades of struggling to secure decent housing and stabilize their impoverished communities, Puerto Ricans faced the accumulated pressures of what social scientists were beginning to call “the underclass,” a label that only added to the stigma of their communities. No longer were Puerto Rican migrants and their U.S.-born children hoping to make good on the promises of life in a “nation of immigrants”; the paucity of both basic material stability and social equality in their communities was now a hardened reality. In response, during the 1970s, for the first time, more Puerto Ricans were returning to the island than arriving in the United States.

On the other hand, the 1970s was also the decade when many Puerto Rican communities managed to elect their own political officials (New York Puerto Ricans had won some important political gains beginning in the early 1960s, with the election of several State Assembly representatives. Much of the political energy of Puerto Rican leaders in this era focused on addressing the community’s problems; but they were also creating a permanent place in local, state, and (on a smaller scale) national politics. Herman Badillo, for example, after two successful terms in the U.S. Congress, became deputy mayor of New York in 1978. One reason for these electoral successes—beginning in the 1960s in New York and in the 1970s and 1980s in other cities with notable Puerto Rican populations—was the simple math of larger constituencies and more powerful voting blocs in predominantly Puerto Rican districts. But another key reason was the resilience of existing community organizations, and the growth of new ones, that nurtured a growing Puerto Rican leadership.
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The most powerful and durable Puerto Ricans organizations of this era were those that litigated and lobbied for Puerto Ricans’ civil rights. ASPIRA had continued, since its founding in 1961, to be a substantial supporter of Puerto Rican youth, especially those who aspired to graduate from high school or go to college. After the federal Office of Civil Rights issued a memo in 1970 that gave powerful support to the idea of bilingual programs (asserting that failure to provide such programming by school districts may constitute a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act), ASPIRA collaborated with the newly formed Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF) to initiate a class action lawsuit against the New York City Board of Education. The major result of this suit was a consent decree, in 1974, stipulating that New York City schools would implement transitional bilingual instruction to children who needed it. Similar cases were mounted—and won—by the PRLDEF in Philadelphia, Long Island, and Connecticut.

Another other area of civil rights litigation pursued by the PRLDEF was voting rights, ensuring that non-English speakers (linguistic minorities) had fair access to the ballot. During the early 1970s, the organization won cases to establish bilingual election systems in New York City, Philadelphia, New York state, and New Jersey. In 1975, largely as a result of this body of case law, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was amended to ensure federal protection of voting rights for linguistic minorities. The other key dimensions of Puerto Ricans’ battle for civil rights in this era dealt with equity in employment and in government benefits. Through cases targeting discrimination in civil service exams and other employment requirements, and highlighting the need for bilingual access to information about government benefits ranging from Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC) to unemployment insurance, the PRLDEF waged a rapid and successful campaign to secure a range of civil rights for Puerto Ricans—at a moment when a stagnant economy and mounting prejudice challenged the group’s social standing.

Even as many young Puerto Rican leaders focused their efforts on expanding educational opportunity and civil rights in the United States, others continued the Nationalist struggle. The detention of the Puerto Rican Nationalists responsible for the 1950 attack on Truman (one of the two assailants was killed) and for the 1954 attack on Congress remained a powerful symbol for Nationalists. Some radical factions of the Puerto Rican independence struggle embraced increasingly violent tactics, and persisted through the 1970s and 1980s. Most prominent among these was a group called the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), which claimed responsibility for over one hundred bombings in several U.S. cities between 1974 and 1983 that resulted in five deaths and $3 million in damage. A less contentious but high-profile action, by a group formed to lobby for the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners in the United States, was the mounting of the Puerto Rican flag on the crown of the Statue of Liberty in 1977. The symbolic power of the Puerto Rican flag adorning this icon of American inclusion won the support of many Puerto Ricans, even those who did not endorse the Nationalist cause. As more members of armed nationalist groups went to prison or went into hiding throughout the 1980s, campaigns to sever the political relationship between the island and the United States by force dwindled.
The “underclass debate”—concerning the perception of a set of seemingly self-reinforcing disadvantages that kept Puerto Ricans locked in extreme poverty—emerged with new force in the 1980s, when the impact of two decades of economic hardship had seriously destabilized the poor urban neighborhoods where the majority of U.S. Puerto Ricans lived. In 1991, President Reagan’s former director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Linda Chávez, published a book titled *Out of the Barrio*, which labeled Puerto Ricans as a “tragic and curious exception” to the growing successes of Latinos as a group nationwide. Citing statistics about welfare dependency and low marriage rates (and making a fuzzy case for a causal relationship between them), Chávez posited that it was Puerto Ricans’ access to the full range of social benefits, rather than the structural disadvantages they encountered in the areas in which they settled, that caused their suffering. “Puerto Ricans have been smothered by entitlements,” she asserted, “which should serve notice as a warning to other Hispanics.”

Since the publication of Chávez’s controversial cautionary tale, the population of other Hispanics—immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere—has continued to grow rapidly, including in the Eastern and Midwestern cities where most Puerto Ricans in the United States live. While it is impossible to generalize accurately about the relationships of these newer immigrant groups to the older Puerto Rican communities, some observations are instructive. First, while poverty rates of Puerto Ricans nationwide may remain higher overall than those of other Hispanics, comparisons of demographic data within most cities where Puerto Ricans live point to improvements. Second, many of the “pioneer” organizations started by Puerto Ricans in the 1960s or 1970s have made a transition to adopting Latino-inclusive agendas and names, symbolizing not just the possibilities for a shared agenda of Latinos of different national origins, but also the strength of Puerto Ricans’ history of effective community organizing. By the late 20th century, Puerto Ricans as a group began to shed at least some of the stigma of the “failed immigrant” identity that followed them since the 1940s.

**Prospects in the New Millennium**

The new millennium has shown that warnings about the alleged intractability of Puerto Ricans’ socioeconomic failings were off the mark. As the long decades of economic suffering between the 1960s and 1980s turned into a more hopeful horizon by the mid-1990s, the Puerto Rican middle class—always part of the diaspora—has become increasingly visible, forcing the reconsideration of presumptions of Puerto Ricans’ intractable socioeconomic failures.

At least as important, the political salience of Puerto Ricans as a group has begun to shift since 2000. Although the number of those who support outright independence has remained small, nationalist activism animated many Puerto Ricans, on the island and in the United States during the successful movement to force the U.S. Navy to abandon its base and bombing targets at Vieques, off Puerto Rico’s eastern coast. The Navy gave up its holdings on the island between 2001 and 2003. On the other hand, the question of state-
hood for Puerto Rico has continued to attract many supporters—particularly among those on the island: in a two-part plebiscite in 2012, a plurality voted in favor of U.S. statehood as a solution to the island’s problematic relationship to the United States. Although statehood remains an unlikely final outcome, the plebiscite in 2012 showed the continuing importance of the question of the island’s political status in relation to the United States.

Even more important in the new millennium is the growing significance of Puerto Rican voters in the United States For the better part of the last century, Puerto Ricans in the United States have been considered numerically insignificant or politically impotent, or both. In the last two presidential elections, however, their growing populations in the South, especially in Florida, have drawn attention to their demographic impact and to their political sensibilities. After nearly a century of residing in this country as citizens, Puerto Ricans in the United States may at last be recognized as an important constituency.

Discussion of the Literature

The history of Puerto Ricans in the United States received very little attention from scholars before the 1980s, and most of what was published about Puerto Ricans focused on their “adjustment problems” and other pathologies. A few historically minded social scientists diverged from this pattern: Lawrence Chenault, who taught economics at the University of Puerto Rico, published *The Puerto Rican Migrant in New York City* in 1938; the renowned sociologist C. Wright Mills was the primary author of a study that resulted in a book, *The Puerto Rican Journey*, in 1950; and Mills’s student Elena Padilla published *Up From Puerto Rico* in 1958. Between the 1940s and the end of the 1970s, even researchers who took an interest in Puerto Ricans as subjects of social science in their own right had to address the predominant approaches that objectified Puerto Ricans’ problems and dramatized their alleged deficits.

With the development of academic programs in Puerto Rican studies by the mid-1970s, this trend began to change. Scholars from a variety of disciplines now collaborated on the goal of framing serious intellectual questions about Puerto Ricans’ lives and history that would be acknowledged in the academy. A growing group of scholars, including members of History Task Force at the Center for Puerto Rican studies, confronted the impoverishment of old ideas; this collective published *Labor Migration Under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* in 1979. Such work challenged the assumptions of liberal luminaries like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose 1963 book *Beyond the Melting Pot* (updated in 1970 to address the social and political upheaval of the late 1960s) represented Puerto Ricans as insignificant historical actors incapable of developing their own political analysis. Since 1987, the *CENTRO Journal*, connected to the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, has published a wide variety of scholarship on Puerto Ricans, from a full range of humanities and social science disciplines.
One of the most central set of questions embraced by scholars of the 1970s—addressing the impact of the colonial relationship of the island to the United States—was rooted in the political culture of Puerto Ricans in the United States dating back to the 1920s, and remains relevant to both activists and scholars today. Legal theorist and federal judge José Cabrantes published a definitive review of Puerto Rican’s legal status, *Citizenship and the American Empire: Notes on the Legislative History of the United States Citizenship of Puerto Ricans*, in 1979. Subsequently, scholars have examined historical details of that status, and its origins and impact, in works like Cristina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*, and Charles Venator Santiago, *Puerto Rico and the Origins of U.S. Global Empire*. Literary, cultural, and anthropological perspectives add dimension to the political issues in books like *Puerto Rican Jam*, edited by Frances Negrón Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel and *National Performances* by Ana Ramos-Zayas.32

Scholarship on the social history of Puerto Ricans in the United States accumulated slowly after the 1970s, picking up increasing momentum by the late 1990s. Virginia Sanchez-Korrol was the first U.S. historian to publish a book-length study of Puerto Ricans there; *From Colonia to Community*, published in 1983, has served as the starting point for several generations of scholars already. Historians following in her footsteps have approached that social history from various angles. Ruth Glasser, focusing on the music traditions of early Puerto Rican migrants in her book *My Music is My Flag*, also provided a foundation for the cultural history of the New York community before World War II. Carmen Whalen’s study of Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican migrants focused on labor history and the industrial economy that attracted migrants to the city in the postwar period. Lorrin Thomas’s work on New York Puerto Rican communities before and after the World War II emphasized evolving political identities in the changing historical contexts.33

Given the continuously fraught political relationship of the island to the United States, as well as the political dynamism of many Puerto Rican communities throughout the 20th century (which has been often overlooked by observers), it is not surprising that political scientists and political historians have produced varied and dynamic scholarship on Puerto Ricans in the United States José Cruz’s study of Puerto Rican politics in Hartford, Connecticut, *Identity and Power: Puerto Rican Politics and the Challenge of Ethnicity*, asked important new questions about the relationship between ethnic identity and political empowerment, at the same time pushing forward the diversification of scholarship beyond New York City. In their powerful edited volume, *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, Andrés Torres and José Velázquez offered an impressive range of perspectives on and analysis of the politics that motivated the period known as the Puerto Rican movement, spanning the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Reflecting the spirit of the era, radical leftist politics comprise much of the focus of the book, but not the whole story. Johanna Fernández’s and Darrel Wanzer-Serrano’s work on the Young Lords and their connections to other politically engaged groups of their era carry forward the questions about the enduring legacies of Puerto Rican radicalism.34
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The scope of contemporary studies that broaden both geographic and disciplinary perspectives in the study of Puerto Ricans has been expanded by Adios Borinquen Querida: The Puerto Rican Diaspora, Its History and Contributions, by Edna Acosta-Belen et al.; Carmen Teresa Whalen and Victor Vazquez-Hernandez’s The Puerto Rican Diaspora, Historical Perspectives; Edna Acosta Belen and Carlos E. Santiago’s Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait; and Mérida Rúa’s A Grounded Identidad: Making New Lives in Chicago’s Puerto Rican Neighborhoods.35

Last but certainly not least among recent scholarly trends is the examination of Puerto Rican history in close relationship to other social groups. This is not a new approach—sociologist Felix Padilla wrote Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago in 1985—but it is gaining momentum as scholars continue to make the case that, in a number of major U.S. cities, the history of postwar urban politics simply cannot be written without analyzing Puerto Ricans’ relationship to other groups and how they remade social, economic, and political life together. Historian Lilia Fernández’s book Brown in the Windy City presents the separate and converging development of Mexican and Puerto Rican communities in Chicago, and analyzes their shared as well as their distinctive preoccupations over time. The most recent additions to this area of historical scholarship include Sonia Lee’s Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement and Frederick Douglass Opie’s Upsetting the Apple Cart: Black-Latino Coalitions in New York City from Protest to Public Office, both of which examine how Puerto Rican activists and leaders interacted with African Americans—and learned from their strategies—as they sought to make their own claims to equal rights in the United States.36

Scholarship on Puerto Ricans in the United States has reached a new level of growth and dynamism in the past decade, in each of the areas of research described above. The genre of personal memoir, pioneered by early 20th century leaders Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón, has provided an indispensable complement to scholarly writing, with important recent examples including Antonia Pantoja’s Memoir of a Visionary and Gilberto Gerena Valentin’s Gilberto Gerena Valentin: My Life as a Community Activist, Labor Organizer, and Progressive Politician in New York City. The momentum created by this diverse body of work will have an increasingly visible impact, bringing the study of Puerto Ricans closer to the center of urban, labor, social, and political history in the United States.37

Primary Sources

Much of the primary source research conducted on Puerto Ricans in the United States in the past four decades has begun with materials from the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Library and Archive, housed at Hunter College in New York City. The Centro archive consists of 240 collections, most of them personal or organizational papers, although the archive also contains collections of photographs, political posters, and other visual materials. Most of the collections document Puerto Ricans in New York City and the mid-Atlantic region, but there are also collections that deal with the migration to Hawaii and California. The largest of the Centro archive’s collections (fourteen hundred
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of the archive’s five thousand feet of archival materials) is the Offices of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States, including the papers of the Migration Division, which served migrants in the U.S. from 1948 to 1989. Also important at the Centro Archive, and at nearly all the archives discussed below, are the holdings of microfilmed local and community newspapers that contain abundant information on Puerto Ricans’ lives in each of the places they settled.

Other important sources on Puerto Ricans in New York City are located at the New York Public Library (NYPL) Manuscripts and Archives Division, especially the papers of long-time East Harlem congressman Vito Marcantonio; the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University, which holds the records of several major New York settlement houses and community centers that served Puerto Rican populations; the Fordham University Archives and Special Collections, especially the Joseph Fitzpatrick papers there; and at the Municipal Archive of the New York City Department of Records, with valuable materials in the Works Progress Administration Writers’ Project collection, mayor’s papers, and the published and unpublished records of various city agencies. A variety of holdings and collections related to Puerto Ricans can be found at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, part of the NYPL; the Oral History Archives at Columbia University; the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University; the Laguardia and Wagner archives at Laguardia Community College; the Brooklyn Collection at the Brooklyn Public Library; the Brooklyn Historical Society; and La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña. The Puerto Rican Records of the National Archives of New York City primarily contain materials related to the island, although some materials deal with Puerto Ricans in the United States.

Elsewhere in the mid-Atlantic, the Puerto Rican Community Archives, part of the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center, is housed at the Newark Public Library and contains several dozen collections of personal papers and organizational records. At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), the extensive papers of East Harlem (New York City) educator and community organizer Leonard Covello contain a substantial amount of material on Puerto Ricans in New York. HSP also houses significant archival materials on Puerto Ricans in other collections, organized as the Hispanic/Latino Collections. The Temple University Urban Archives houses a number of collections that deal with Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, as well as microfilmed runs of many local and community newspapers. At the University of Connecticut’s main campus at Storrs, El Instituto: Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean, and Latin American Studies houses archives that include the Puerto Rican Collections.

The U.S. city with the second-largest Puerto Rican population, Chicago, also offers significant archival holdings on the history of Puerto Ricans in the United States, especially in the Midwest. The Illinois Regional Archives Depository at Northern Illinois University houses municipal government records, many of which are relevant to Puerto Ricans in Chicago. The Archives and Manuscripts collections of the Chicago History Museum, and the Special Collections of the University of Illinois at Chicago, include personal papers and many organizational records with materials related to Puerto Ricans. Finally, DePaul
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University houses the papers of several Puerto Rican community organizations in Chicago, including the Young Lords Organization.

Further Reading


Notes:


(2.) Interview with Juan Ramos, conducted by Mayda Cortiella, October 21, 1974, Pioneros Project, LIHS; Mercedes Hernández, “De Nuestros Lectores,” La Prensa, December 2, 1924, 4. On migrant women’s work in the needle trades in this era, see Altagracia Ortiz, “En la aguja y el pedal eché la hiel: Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry in New York City, 1920–1980,” 55–81; and Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, “Survival of Puerto Ri-
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(5.) Puerto Ricans were not counted separately in census figures on unemployment for this decade; the categories were Negro, Native white, Foreign-born white, and Other races. Census takers made their own judgements about the categories in which Puerto Ricans should be placed, which means that they were scattered throughout the aforementioned categories. See Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Appendix II, for a thorough review of statistics on unemployment in the 1930s, tabulated by race.


(7.) Altagracia Ortiz, “Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry,” in *Puerto Rican Women and Work*, ed. Ortiz, 58–59. See also various interview transcripts in the Costureras collection, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

(8.) The “Organizations” sections of the WPA “Spanish Book” lists or describes scores of organizations—fraternal, political, labor, social, and cultural—that were founded by Puerto Ricans (and other Hispanics) during the 1930s. See WPA Federal Writers Project, “Organizations,” 1938, Spanish Book, WPA Files, reel 269.


(11.) Historical sociologist Margaret Somers has written extensively on the idea of citizenship not as a status but as “a set of institutionally embedded social practices,” framed by expressions of expectations of the state. See, for example, Somers, “Citizenship and the Public Sphere: Law, Community, and Political Culture in the Transition to Democracy,” *American Sociological Review* 58 (October 1993), 587–620.

(12.) Leonard Covello, notes on Hilliard’s 1949 report on “The Puerto Rican Problem . . . ” [nd], Covello papers, box 110, folder 1.

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(18.) Second Puerto Rican Youth Conference, “We the New Yorkers Contribute,” 1960, Covello papers, series X, box 102, folder 10.


(21.) Counting the number of total participants—those who marched and those who stayed home—Bayard Rustin called it the largest civil rights protest in the nation’s history. (The 1963 March on Washington, which Rustin had also played a key role in organizing, had drawn 200,000, who, unlike school boycotters, all convened in one place.) “Boycott Cripples City Schools; Absences 360,000 Above Normal; Negroes and Puerto Ricans Unite,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1964, 1. The *Times* clarified that the figures for both students and teachers who did not attend classes should be adjusted to account for the typical daily absentee rate: 10 percent for students, 3 percent for teachers.


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(29.) There is much debate about how to read the results of the plebiscite, given its confusing two-part structure, the alleged abstention by many voters who support the current Commonwealth status, and given the defeat, on the same day, of the incumbent pro-statehood governor in favor of a governor who supports some form of Commonwealth status. One thing is clear, though: a majority of Puerto Ricans voted against the colonial status quo. See Charles Venator-Santiago, “Constitutional Questions Incident to President Obama’s Puerto Rico Status Plebiscite,” New England Law Review On Remand 48 (2013), 61.


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