SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor- Congress of Industrial Organizations
AGPR	Archivo General de Puerto Rico (General Archive of Puerto Rico)
CPRS	Center for Puerto Rican Studies
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania
LGCC	La Guardia Community College
LMMF	Luis Muñoz Marín Foundation
NYCMA	New Yok City Municipal Archive
OGPRUS	Office of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States
PRDL	Puerto Rico Department of Labor
RG	record group
RUSCUA	Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives
SFSU	San Francisco State University
UBP	United Bronx Parents
USNARA	United States National Archive and Records Administration

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking the Struggle for Puerto Rican Rights—An American History

Rethinking the Struggle for Puerto Rican Rights examines the history of Puerto Ricans' political and social activism in the United States in the 20th century, tracing their efforts to live with dignity in a society structured around de facto divisions among its citizens. The book surveys the ways Puerto Ricans in the U.S. worked, through half a century and across many regions of the country, to create communities for themselves and their compatriots in times and places where dark-skinned or "foreign" Americans were often unwelcome, and where U.S. citizenship did not guarantee the protection of an individual's rights. Because it was hard in so many ways for marginalized people to build a stable life, and to take advantage of the opportunities the United States purported to offer, the central story of this book is one of struggle.

The book's title is borrowed from the writer and political activist Jesús Colón, who in the mid-1950s reflected on "the struggle for Puerto Rican rights" in an essay he wrote for a multi-ethnic audience of fellow leftists and Communist party members, seeking to convince them that the key to strengthening this growing population of New Yorkers was collaboration among "democratic forces." Colón lived and worked on the left of the political spectrum in his community, but he was no outlier. Indeed, he was very much a unifier, and his politics were more reformist than revolutionary. Rather than promoting political divisions or proselytizing his political ideology, Colón, like many of his leftist compatriots, devoted himself to building coalitions and approaching problems in an inclusive way.

The struggles for rights that Colón referred to—and those that emerged in the decades that followed—were episodic, not constant, and they varied over time, but were connected by certain consistent elements. We have structured this book around multiple stories of struggle, over many decades, emphasizing

the heterogeneous origins and goals of those struggles but also focusing on what connects them across eras, even as the context in which Puerto Ricans fought to identify and claim their rights changed over time.

Puerto Ricans have lived in the United States since the 19th century, first in small and scattered groups of political exiles, labor migrants, or expatriate intellectuals who sought both refuge and work in the land of their prosperous and free neighbors to the north. By the early 20th century, after the U.S. took possession of Puerto Rico and turned it into an "unincorporated territory" of the United States following war with Spain in 1898, thousands of Puerto Rican migrants were drawn to the opportunities of the metropole. After a few early waves of contract workers were recruited to Hawaii (and some settled in San Francisco), Puerto Rican migrants began to build communities in New York City and then, after the Second World War, in a number of other cities and rural agricultural areas in the Northeast and Midwest.

In all of these settlements—large or small, rural or urban, permanent or transient—Puerto Ricans met challenges common to many foreign and impoverished newcomers, especially those marginalized further by a failure to qualify as "white" in the U.S. racial system. They also struggled with obstacles particular to their peculiar political status. Puerto Rican migrants who arrived after 1917 were natural-born citizens, but they were still often treated as *alien*, both unassimilable and dangerous. In a society that still sanctioned racial divisions, and maintained them through both symbolic and actual violence, Puerto Ricans' mixed-race heritage, for both migrants and the "second generation" born in the U.S., meant that they were excluded from the full privileges of white American citizenship.

"Citizenship of the second class" was a specter that island-based political leader Luis Muñoz Rivera had warned against in the early 20th century, as Puerto Rico's status under U.S. rule was still being debated. He was right, of course. For the last century, Puerto Ricans have grappled with unequal citizenship. Puerto Ricans who reside on the island hold the same legally defined citizenship as Americans living in the United States, but due to provisions of the Jones-Shaforth Act of 1917, island residents cannot vote in U.S. presidential elections, nor do they have voting representation in the U.S. Congress.[1] The subjects of this book, Puerto Ricans living in the United States, have confronted a less formalized version of second-class citizenship than their island compatriots, but on the whole it has been no less insidious. Puerto Ricans in the U.S. were not officially barred from voting, but many of them struggled nevertheless to achieve not just political representation, but the protections laid out in the Bill of Rights.

The idea for this book began with questions about how the era of mass social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s shaped the experience of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Did a singular "Puerto Rican movement" emerge in the late 1960s, primarily inspired by and modeled after the African American rights movement of that era? Or would it be more accurate to describe this moment as merely the culmination of political engagement and the struggle for

rights by Puerto Ricans in the U.S. over the course of several decades? Puerto Ricans by the late 1960s began organizing on a large scale to push for social, economic, and legal justice in their communities. The mobilization of radicalized Puerto Rican youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s resembled, in terms of both strategy and ideology, those of Black Power proponents, anti-war protesters, and Chicano activists; in terms of the basic challenge to the status quo, they also resembled gay rights activists and second-wave feminists. Many of the former participants in these events—some of them now scholars, journalists, and artists who have written about their participation in the social and political organizing in the 1960s and 1970s—described this moment of dramatic change as the *despertar boricua*, or "Puerto Rican awakening"—a movement for sure, no matter its temporal or ideological connections to the activism that preceded it.[2]

The stories and analysis we offer in this book show how a Puerto Rican movement emerged out of the zeitgeist of the 1960s—but we argue that it was built on a foundation constructed over several decades. Furthermore, while many characterizations of Puerto Rican political activism posit a singular Puerto Rican movement, limited to a short period between the late 1960s and early 1970s, we take a different view. Throughout this book, we argue that community-wide battles to secure the basic rights and dignities of citizenship began long before the student movements and surge in youth-dominated radicalism in the late 1960s. We present here a decades-long history of Puerto Ricans' struggles for rights, waged by evolving coalitions of workers and intellectuals, aspiring politicians and artists, students and educators, professionals and unemployed youth, all grounded in varied conceptions of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in the United States. The stories that comprise the narrative include as well the forces Puerto Ricans fought against: people and institutions who seemed determined to oppose the expansion of Puerto Rican communities, and obstructed their civil rights. We also pay close attention to Puerto Ricans' many allies in their struggles, especially liberals, leftists, and African Americans.

Given our insistence on the *longue durée* of the Puerto Rican struggle for rights in the U.S., we must address a question that sometimes bedevils scholars of other moments of social and political change: when do a series of coordinated and uncoordinated actions, generating new social patterns and awareness, come to be defined as a "movement"? There are no specific criteria, no litmus tests that historians use to define a social movement or to determine when it begins. Historians of the U.S. refer to the "antislavery movement" and the "Populist movement" of the 19th century; yet African Americans' push for civil rights as citizens, which began with the formation of networks of organizations and protesters after emancipation in the 1860s, is not generally referred to as a "movement" before the Birmingham bus boycott of 1955.

Another key part of the definition of a social movement rests on visibility and mass participation, although these are always relative measures. Did the emergence of militant, multi-racial Puerto Rican organizations like the Young Lords

and El Comité provide sufficient evidence for branding this period as distinct from earlier decades, when organizations pushing for rights were less visible and less radical? We must also consider longevity, coherence, and range of impact. To what degree were non-participants affected by the ideas and actions of those who participated in the movement? To what degree did the ideas and arguments of the participants in the movement permeate the culture of Puerto Ricans or others more broadly? And how do we assess the specific participation of Puerto Ricans in larger movements that involved many other groups and ideologies?

There is no simple answer to the question of defining a singular Puerto Rican movement, or of when such a movement actually began. Disparate, politically heterogeneous groups of Puerto Ricans had struggled for rights in a coordinated, determined way for several decades before there was any mass participation or visibility beyond their immediate community. Then, with major shifts and political upheaval (antiwar protests, assassinations, riots) in American society in the late 1960s, thousands of mostly young activists were galvanized by the questions of racial justice and social equality that had become central to public debate. Even though the most visible mobilization of Puerto Rican activists may have centered around a radical politics that, like Black Power, was too far left to be broadly inclusive, Puerto Ricans as a group saw themselves represented and included in public debates in new, more positive—or at least more carefully considered—ways by the 1970s. Chicano and Asian American communities experienced similar shifts in the context of the mass mobilizations of the 1960s era.

Even as we acknowledge and carefully analyze these major changes in social and political dynamics, however, it is important to remember that Puerto Ricans had been sizing up, arguing about, and pushing to secure their rights as American citizens since even before they actually *became* American citizens in 1917. Rights—civil rights, political rights, labor rights, social rights—had been at the center of Puerto Ricans' lively debates since they became, first, U.S. nationals in 1900, then natural-born citizens in 1917. Our approach to this book about Puerto Ricans' struggles for rights across the 20th century reflects how Puerto Ricans themselves have talked about their experience as citizens in the United States, and it addresses the problem of breaking Puerto Ricans' activism out of the framework of a singular movement.

Another important part of the book's approach is its relatively broad geographic range. Because New York City was the primary Puerto Rican metropolis from the beginning of the first substantial migration from the island in the early 20th century, much of the published historical scholarship on Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (including our own) has focused on New York, with Chicago and Philadelphia a close second. Although significant numbers of Puerto Ricans soon began to settle in Newark, Camden, Hartford, Rochester, Cleveland, and other small cities as well as in rural areas of New Jersey, Connecticut, upstate New York, and Ohio, scholars are just beginning to write the histories of Puerto Ricans in these places.[3] We have relied on this growing body of work by other scholars in

order to include examples in our narrative representing a broad geographic range. Because our goal is to provide an overview of Puerto Ricans' rights struggles over nearly half a century and in many parts of the country, we have been selective, and often could not include as much detail as we would have liked about smaller Puerto Rican settlements, especially those in rural areas. Throughout the book, we did our best to account for the heterogeneity of Puerto Rican communities in the U.S., especially in terms of variable racial and class identification.

Even as we highlight this heterogeneity, we trace the markedly consistent goals of Puerto Ricans in U.S. communities in the second half of the 20th century, no matter their economic status or educational achievement or racial identification, and regardless of whether they lived in barracks on a farm in rural Connecticut or in a Chicago row house or a Bronx tenement. Puerto Ricans, like all other Americans, wanted financial security, opportunities to improve their economic and social status, and recognition of and respect for their cultural traditions. These basic goals could not be achieved without equal access to employment and schooling, freedom from discrimination, and basic integration into American society.

"Civil rights" often serves as shorthand to describe these protections, although Puerto Ricans, like other marginalized groups who experienced enduring oppression in the U.S., learned that there is a limit to how much the legal affirmation of such rights can actually protect people in situations where their physical or economic security is threatened by individuals and institutions. The movements of the 1960s exposed to public scrutiny the historic problems of police brutality and discrimination in the workplace and in schools; and in the 1970s and 1980s, Puerto Rican activists—including lawyers and elected officials as well as grassroots leaders and community residents—mounted powerful campaigns to secure legal rights to bilingual education and bilingual ballots, and continued to fight for legislation on issues like political redistricting and funding for social programs that supported marginalized communities. New generations of activists continue with the same work.

Because the historical struggles for rights and fights for resources that we recount in this book often focus on concrete, daily life issues like job discrimination, precarious (or entirely blocked) access to decent housing and good schools, and other hazards of poverty, some of the broader implications of Puerto Ricans' social activism and political engagement may be at times obscured. Puerto Ricans' quest to secure civil rights over the last century has been about their own group's stability, but it has also been bound up with major issues facing the United States as a nation and affecting other groups in similar ways. In the 1930s and 1940s, Puerto Ricans fought for relief from economic depression, for labor rights, and against fascism; and, in the post-war decades, they battled the constraints of cold war politics, participated in racial justice campaigns and ongoing civil rights battles for equity, and battled the fallout of deindustrialization and urban crisis. Puerto Ricans' history in the U.S. reflects a commonality of

challenges faced by any social group that has been marginalized and discriminated against in the United States. The subtitle of this introduction thus serves as a reminder that Puerto Ricans' struggle for rights is a shared story; it is, indeed, an American history.

Notes

1 Puerto Ricans on the island cannot vote in U.S. presidential elections because, according to the U.S. Constitution, only full-fledged states are given votes in the Electoral College. The Jones-Shaforth Act stipulated the election by popular vote of a single Resident Commissioner to represent Puerto Rico in the U.S. Congress. The Resident Commissioner can vote in committee but cannot vote on bills on the House floor.

2 See, for example, the contributors in Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.

3 Historical work on Puerto Ricans in the U.S. has developed substantially since the publication of the first book-length academic history on their experience, Virginia Sanchez Korrol's pioneering *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1917–1948*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983.