CONCLUSION

Rethinking the Struggle for Puerto Rican Rights

Throughout this book, we have shown that struggles over claiming and defining rights comprised a central theme of Puerto Ricans' experience in the U.S. in the 20th century. In assessing the meaning and implications of this history, it is important to distinguish between the continuities of struggle as a process of response—to racism and discrimination, to economic disadvantage and social exclusion—and the evolving intentions and goals that motivated that response. In other words, struggle may have been a constant for many Puerto Ricans who sought to make a life in the U.S. in the 20th century, but the motivations that guided them and the strategies they developed to meet the challenges at hand were constantly changing, partly in response to changing context. Economic opportunities shifted, alliances formed and broke apart, political winds blew in multiple directions, and racism and ethnic prejudice blocked opportunity in different ways in different settings.

In Puerto Ricans' evolving efforts to secure rights and resources and to live with dignity in the U.S., there were important continuities. As far back as the 1920s and 1930s, there had been campaigns by Puerto Ricans to secure decent housing, access to social services, fair wages, and educational access. The vast majority of these early demands for rights developed first in New York City, where Puerto Rican communities had laid down roots in the early 20th century; Puerto Ricans only began to settle in sizable groups in other cities and towns around the mid-1950s. By the mid-1960s, there were visible and increasingly vocal Puerto Rican communities in over a dozen U.S. cities. Members of the younger generations who had been born and educated in the U.S. began adding their voices to the older generation's demands for rights.

Also constant were the ways Puerto Rican migrants used their U.S. citizenship as a strategic resource, developing creative strategies to demand their rights as American citizens. While most migrants did not cling to naïve expectations

that they would encounter social equality upon arrival in the U.S., many were hopeful that their status as U.S. citizens would mitigate some of their disadvantages as newcomers. This hopefulness ebbed over time, following nativist and racist responses to the mass migration of Puerto Ricans in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and then receded sharply during the 1970s and 1980s, as factory jobs and opportunities for employment left the cities where Puerto Ricans had settled. In response to both types of challenges, Puerto Ricans pursued political representation as a means of making their voices heard in public life and participated in the creation of policies that would support the survival of their communities.

During the 1960s, Puerto Ricans adapted their decades-long struggles to secure rights in the United States to the zeitgeist of the decade. Puerto Rican leaders gained momentum first by participating in anti-poverty programs of the mid-1960s, independent of organizations like the Migration Division or the Democratic clubs that had traditionally served as Puerto Ricans' organizational base. Then, joined by younger activists—many of them still teenagers—who were radicalized by the work of their peers in Black Power and Chicano organizations, Puerto Ricans across the political spectrum achieved a mass mobilization of their compatriots that peaked during the mid-1970s. New York and Chicago were the primary hubs of the movement, but Puerto Ricans in many smaller cities all over the Northeast joined in what became known as the *despertar boricua*, the Puerto Rican awakening.

By the early 1970s, the movement had united Puerto Ricans in new ways across class and generational lines. Even as Puerto Rican leftist and liberal activists debated their ideological differences, they often maintained a shared commitment to common goals, especially after the more militant organizations of the early 1970s dissolved. Older leaders who had been involved in the Puerto Rican community's earliest efforts in politics and the labor movement expressed gratitude for the energy and drive of the younger leaders, even though they did not always agree with their political style. These second-generation leaders had come of age in the 1950s and 1960s, and many of them had attended college, poised to embark on careers in politics, labor unions, grassroots organizing, legal advocacy, social services, and teaching. Even as many of these young leaders found paths into the middle class, they maintained connections to poorer members of their communities, including more recent migrants who tended to have less education and less economic security.

Although the movement receded after the mid-1970s, the principal drivers of the Puerto Rican mobilization—economic suffering and discriminatory treatment—continued to galvanize grassroots and labor activists along with intellectuals and professionals working in legal and social service fields. Through their work, many Puerto Rican activist networks became national in scope during the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, it was during the era following the decline of the most visible mass movement that activists began to accomplish the most

substantial gains in civil rights protections and educational access. Among the most important legacies of this later stage of the Puerto Rican movement—the movement's "coda," perhaps—were a sharpened focus on securing legal protections for civil rights, particularly in the areas of voting rights and access to equal education for non-English speakers.

Another important achievement by the 1980s was that Puerto Ricans had secured at least a small foothold in local politics in half a dozen U.S. cities. This change, along with the impact of concrete gains in legal civil rights at the national level, produced a notable adjustment in the tenor and scope of organizing work by Puerto Rican leaders. The center of gravity of Puerto Ricans' activism began to shift away from a nationalist form of ethnic politics and toward a deeper engagement with policy issues and cultural politics that were more broadly Latino rather than specifically Puerto Rican, including language rights, higher education access, school quality, affordable housing, and fair policing. Although connections with other Latino groups were at times tense or begrudging, this building of alliances continued throughout the 1980s, with increasing solidarity on labor issues, immigrants' rights, and in protests against the Central American wars backed by the Reagan administration.

Scholarship was another key area of collaboration among Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the 1980s. Although often marginalized in the academy, still, Puerto Rican scholars had begun to fortify their projects by collaborating across national origin boundaries with other Latino academics. Together, they created broader agendas for the study of Latinos in the U.S. at a time when the "culture wars" had generated a more open conversation about how power was distributed within institutions like the university. The idea of cultural citizenship that Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo proposed in the early 1990s reflected the expansive vision of Latino Studies as a field: the goal to situate and analyze Latinas and Latinos as social and political actors in frameworks beyond the usual binary categories—citizen or noncitizen; black or white; migrant or settled; middle class and "assimilated" or poor and marginal. These dialogues provided a strong basis for the emergence of Latino Studies as a field by the early 1990s.[1]

Along with its central concern with Puerto Ricans' fights to protect their civil rights, this book also provides a general survey of Puerto Ricans' history in the U.S. since the 1940s. In crafting this survey, we have relied on the work of many other scholars whose research illuminates various aspects of the Puerto Rican experience in places beyond our own expertise, as we seek to draw out consistent themes and patterns across time and region. The historical literature on Puerto Ricans has grown tremendously just in the past decade and has begun to move beyond a narrow focus on specific places and time periods into work that is more comparative and relational, examining Puerto Ricans' experience as part of larger networks and issues of regional and national significance.

Still, historians' focused analysis of particular places and groups continues to be essential as the field expands. For example, the Puerto Rican experience in New Jersey, for decades the second largest state of settlement, remains largely unexamined; upstate New York settlements, including Albany, Rochester, and Schenectady have also not been studied.[2] A plethora of advocacy and social service organizations, many of them with significant archival collections at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, still await study; so do the histories of youth employment and training programs in Puerto Rican communities in the decades after the 1960s, of Puerto Rican entrepreneurship and small businesses throughout the 20th century, and the work of Puerto Rican lawyers and their campaigns for voting rights. While the field has seen a few new publications on Puerto Rican radicalism in the 1960s and after, there is still a need for thorough histories of the complex movements in support of Puerto Rican independence in the same period. Puerto Ricans' extensive participation in the labor movement after the 1970s has not been explored, nor have their responses to the urban crises of the 1970s and 1908s.[3] *Rethinking the Struggle for Puerto Rican Rights* is a starting point, and we anticipate substantial growth in historical scholarship on Puerto Ricans in the coming decade.[4]

The Current Landscape and the Evolution of Puerto Rican Struggles for Rights

These new directions in the scholarship will keep evolving along with the changing goals and challenges of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., as the label "Puerto Rican" encompasses an even more diverse population in terms of regional, class, and generational identification. Two trends in particular promise to shape the ways Puerto Ricans in the U.S. continue to engage in the political and social issues that matter to them. The first involves changes in how Puerto Ricans identify themselves: with the highest out-of-group marriage rates of all Latinos, the category "Puerto Rican" includes tens of thousands of children of mixed families—Puerto Ricans who have children with partners who identify as white, African American, or other Latino. The children of these families are growing up with a variety of possible racial and cultural identities, and varied relationships to the island and to U.S. Puerto Rican communities. This is not a completely new phenomenon. Since at least the 1940s second generation Puerto Ricans, especially women, married outside their group in large numbers. But the rate of intermarriage has risen sharply since the 1990s and will likely mean that political expressions of rights will be framed in pan-Latino or pan "minority" languages but also that many white-skinned people of Puerto Rican descent will identify as Puerto Rican only circumstantially.[5]

The other trend has to do with ongoing migration from the island to the U.S. Because of a resurgent economy in Puerto Rico during the 1990s, migration during that decade declined significantly. But that decline reversed sharply

after the Puerto Rican economy took a sharp dive in 2006—largely the result of changes in U.S. tax law that produced a precipitous drop in investment in the island's major industries, losses that were then compounded by mounting debt from an unequal Medicaid reimbursement program and the recession that followed the United States' sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2007. In addition to producing a tremendous resurgence in the number of migrants to the U.S., the Great Recession in the U.S. also intensified a growing internal migration of Puerto Ricans already in the U.S., particularly southward to Florida, Georgia, Texas, and the Carolinas. Some of this migration is related to the Puerto Rican presence in the military, but most of it has been driven by the promise of jobs, decent schools, and cheaper housing.[6]

Puerto Rican communities in Florida have expanded most dramatically in recent years. In the decade after Puerto Rico's economic crisis began in 2006, the state's Puerto Rican population (which had grown steadily since the 1980s) almost doubled, from about 640,000 to over one million, with the majority of migrants settling in the central Florida counties surrounding Orlando. Overall, Puerto Ricans who have migrated to Florida—both from the island and from other U.S. states—have higher family incomes, lower rates of residential segregation, higher rates of educational attainment, and higher rates of business ownership than Puerto Ricans in any other state. In other words, more of them have achieved middle class status than their counterparts elsewhere in the U.S.

Yet inclusion and incorporation have presented challenges even for Puerto Rican migrants who are less economically vulnerable, as anthropologists Patricia Silver and Simone Delerme have amply documented in their work on Puerto Rican and Latino communities in the Orlando area. In one local controversy, a Puerto Rican county commissioner proposed the renaming of a former public golf course as a memorial to Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry, an all-volunteer regiment of the U.S. army whose soldiers fought and died in both World Wars and in the Korean War. In the rancorous debate that led up to the creation of the 65th Infantry Veteran's Park, opponents raised the same issues that Puerto Ricans have confronted elsewhere in the U.S. throughout the 20th century: unsure of Puerto Ricans' status as "Americans," many refused to include them in additional categories of belonging, like "veteran" or even "neighbor."[7]

Along with the impact of intermarriage and migration trends that are diversifying and expanding existing Puerto Rican communities, cultural and political shifts have created opportunity for connection with other groups in other ways. In the last two decades, Puerto Rican leaders, activists, artists, and intellectuals have increasingly asserted their group's presence as part of larger national debates over race, gender, sexuality, and class, often in collaboration with African American and other Latino groups. The Black Lives Matter movement has attracted substantial participation by Puerto Ricans, whose motivations come from a range of

political and identity positions. Activist and writer Rosa Clemente, for example, has written extensively about her identification as Afro-Latinx, a Puerto Rican woman who is also part of the African diaspora. Although they are American citizens no matter where they are born, Puerto Ricans have also been very active in organizations that support immigrant rights and the broad range of justice issues related to U.S. Latinos, many of whom are undocumented. Latino Rebels, a group of media activists founded in 2011 by Puerto Rican-born Julio Ricardo Varela, defines its audience and subject—"U.S.-Latino communities"—as capaciously as possible, generating solidarity across boundaries that typically separate Latinos by nation, race, and class.[8]

In 2018, as we conclude this book, an unprecedented crisis grips Puerto Rico, threatening the lives and livelihoods of Puerto Ricans on the island and substantially affecting Puerto Ricans in the U.S. whose families and histories have roots in their homeland. After two massive hurricanes hit the island in September 2017, the historic destruction and infrastructure collapse—combined with the island's decade-old economic crisis—triggered an enormous new wave of migration estimated at 250,000 in just the first six months after the storms. The majority of these migrants left the island in desperation, not because they planned or desired to relocate to the U.S., and their path of return is uncertain: Puerto Rico's government and public sector is bankrupt and austerity measures from the Financial Oversight and Management Board, imposed in a colonialist fashion by the Obama administration and Congress, have done nothing to reverse the evisceration of the island's economy.[9]

These overwhelming problems have produced at least one silver lining: a seismic movement of solidarity with the island on the part of U.S.-based Puerto Ricans. Members of the diaspora have wired millions of dollars to family and to aid groups on the island, they have created new support and advocacy networks, and they have founded their own reconstruction organizations, harnessing social media and applying enormous pressure on elected officials and federal government agencies to provide both immediate and long-term aid to the island. Outstripping previous responses to a handful of other major natural disasters and political crises on the island in the last century, the stateside Puerto Rican community has tapped into its power to mobilize essential resources in support of the island, despite continued disagreements over the best future for Puerto Rico's political status. In many ways, in fact, this response by U.S. Puerto Ricans represents yet another engagement in their long history of struggle for rights, recognition, equal standing—this time not for their ailing urban communities or neglected migrant labor settlements, but for the survival of their homeland. The goal of this book has been to make concrete and visible the ways Puerto Ricans have fought for inclusion and strategized to participate fully and equally in the plural society of the United States—and continue to do so even after 100 years as U.S. beleaguered citizens.