

Puerto Rico: The organic crisis and the alternatives

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The discredit attained by the dominant parties, by the legislature, by the “politicians” and even “politics” itself, defined inaccurately, but viscerally despised by many people, recalls the concept of “organic crisis” advanced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Authors such as Stathis Kouvelakis have used it to analyse the movement of the *gilets jaunes* in France. An organic crisis involves a breakdown of the ability of the ruling class to “maintain its leading role”. One of its “most visible symptoms” is the “collapse of support for traditional parties”.

This crisis is distinguished from a situation of radical change by the absence of a social force capable of replacing the order in crisis. It is an unstable, precarious situation, full of opportunities and dangers. The ruling class tries to regain its ability to lead. For this, despite discredit, it has large reserves. Thus, the organic crisis “unleashes a recomposition of political personnel”, including the struggle between leaders and parties and the emergence of new ones, constitutional reforms and so on.

Since the resignation of Rosselló (Puerto Rico’s governor until August 2, 2019) the slogan has been to return to “normality”. But that is not achieved by decree, as evidenced by the episode of Pierluisi and the internal struggle of the PNP around the governorate. [1] The ruling class wants stability but does not agree on how to achieve it. Everyone, from Rivera Schatz to the *Nuevo Día* newspaper, from the leadership of the PPD to the radio commentators, from the Chamber of Commerce to the employers’ offices, has different ideas on how to achieve it. Each tries to bring the charcoal to their sardine.

Given this process it is useful to review some ideas. Puerto Rico does not live under a “partyocracy”, as is sometimes said. It is not dominated by parties. It is dominated by those who dominate through the parties. To put it bluntly: it is dominated by plutocracy. The owners of money, wealth and capital. The employer class. The rich. Give it whatever name you want.

But this ruling class is not homogeneous, nor does it act as a unit. It does not meet somewhere and decide what its policy will be. It depends on structures that allow it to elaborate positions: its press, analysts, think tanks, organizations (Industrial Association, Chamber of Commerce and so on) and its parties (the PPD and the PNP).

The relationship between this class and its parties is not simple. Under an elected government they are subject to different pressures. Elected officials are supposed to serve the ruling class, on the one hand, and gain and maintain the support of the electors on the other. Otherwise, they would be of little use to the ruling class. But that electoral support is not achieved with beautiful smiles and phrases only. It often requires making real concessions to people or not giving way to the most voracious employers’ demands.

This was the case with Law 80, which the employer class wanted to eliminate, something that some of its politicians considered would have an unacceptable electoral effect. [2] The employer class has always had this problem with its elected representatives: the latter are more subject to electoral

pressure and therefore do not implement the entire anti-worker agenda of the former. Hence also the sympathy of the employer class for the Board: by not being elected, nor having to worry about re-election, the Board would dare to act without fear where the “politicians” falter (Law 80 is also an example of this). The employer class, of course, also loves to criticize the “politicians”, presenting themselves as part of the people, outraged by corruption and so on, even though that is the other side of corruption: a “[politician]” can only sell themselves if there is someone to buy them.

Thus we have a double hypocrisy inherent in our employer democracy: employers’ politicians despise the people, but they have to present themselves as friends and servants of the people (which sometimes implies real conflicts with the employers they represent) and the employers sometimes distance themselves from corrupt politicians who remain at their service. The publication of the “chat” altered the operation of this machine. It exposed the first hypocrisy: the contempt of politicians for the people was exposed. [3]

But the “chat” was the trigger, not the cause of the summer of 2019. An “organic crisis” is not forged in three days: it was prepared for a little over a decade. Since 2006 our economy has been sinking into an increasingly serious crisis. 250,000 jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands have had to emigrate. Young people find no future in their country. Faced with this depression, the government first became indebted, imposing new sacrifices (the Sales and Use Tax in 2006). When the debt became part of the crisis, it imposed austerity measures to try to pay it off: law 7, law 66, budget cuts, attacks on pensions, school closures, increases in the Sales and Use Tax. Meanwhile, corruption continued, uncovered by some scandals, such as Anaudi Hernández. [4]

The discrediting of traditional parties was already reflected in 2016 with the victory of Rosselló with 42% of the votes. Then the Board came to impose increasingly severe austerity measures. On top of this reality came the blow of Hurricane Maria: more than 4,000 dead, \$90 billion in losses. The response of the colonial and imperial governments was inept and corrupt (remember Trump throwing paper towels and the Whitefish contract). [5] Frustration with all this broke out in July 2019.

The crisis will be long precisely because our ruling class has no project. They love to blame the government, but they haven’t articulated a coherent plan to get us out of depression. As a candidate for the governorship, I proposed to their organizations to recover profits that are now fleeing to reinvest them here: they were the first to reject these measures, which would benefit them. They prefer to be harmed rather than touching the privileges of external capital. They are a dependent bourgeoisie, with no vision of the country or the future.

But they will continue to rule until we build our alternative. Their goal now is normalization. Several strategies will be used: the crisis will be attributed to Rosselló’s excesses. Once that is resolved, things must return to normal. They thought Pierluisi was the man to achieve this. For two days GFR Media sold him as the man of stability. But the crisis was too serious. With the manoeuvre being repudiated by the Supreme Court, they detached themselves from Pierluisi and attributed everything to his mistakes.

Now a more insidious manoeuvre will come: we will be asked, what was the use of the struggle, the mobilization, the protest if, after all, everything remains the same? That is, they will try to turn the limits of victory into an argument against struggle. We cannot allow it. While those above try to rebuild their domain, we have to build our alternative. The perspective cannot be to make a new constitution for the colonial regime, but to unleash decolonization accompanied by the fight against the Board and bipartisanship. That means remaining on the streets and also preparing for the polls: we took down Rosselló in 2019, let’s finish cleaning the house in 2020.

P.S.

- IVP, Thursday 22 August 2019:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6192>
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Footnotes

[1] Pedro Pierluisi was sworn in as Rosselló's successor but Puerto Rico's senate and Supreme Court rejected this as illegitimate and he was forced to resign.

[2] <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/puerto-rico-heading-towards-will-employment>.

[3] Governor Rosselló was forced to resign after the leaking of hundreds of derisive and offensive private chat messages between him and members of his inner circle.

[4] <https://nacla.org/article/puerto-rico-crisis-government-workers-battle-neoliberal-reform>
<https://harvardlawreview.org/2015/02/puerto-rico-public-corporation-debt-enforcement-and-recovery-act/>
<https://www.telemundopr.com/noticias/destacados/Anaudi-Hernandez-detalla-esquema-de-corrupcion-391649911.html>.

[5] <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/15/16648924/puerto-rico-whitefish-contract-congress-investigation>.