

Puerto Rico: Mapping the Radical Imagination

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A Relational Genealogy of the Puerto Rican Left Since the 1990s

In memory of Frank Velgara Valentín

While the genealogies of pro-independence socialism in Puerto Rico—up to the 1970s or so—have been widely studied, in the present it is often treated as a closed tradition. Its heirs in the present—those who most openly continue to embrace its imaginaries—are simply ignored in the media and academic literature or, if considered at all, seen as hopelessly marginal remnants or tragically naive attempts to revive outdated political projects. When unexpected events, such as the 2019 Uprising that unseated the “unincorporated” territory’s colonial governor, [1] disturb this picture, they are quickly reincorporated into dominant liberal narratives about an astute people wisely skeptical of utopian dreaming, who are momentarily pushed too far by corrupt leaders, or by the burdens of incomplete (but, presumably, completable) citizenship. In edgier analyses, such rebellions are generally seen as *auto-convocado* (self-convened) episodes in which radical traditions are framed as backdrop and not much else. [2]

Meanwhile, those efforts whose imprint on such processes cannot easily be ignored are celebrated for their newness, creativity, and originality, with little to no regard for the trajectories that shaped the individual and collective biographies of their protagonists. For example, scholars reflecting on the 2019 Puerto Rican Uprising often recognize the role played by certain political and social organizations that held the smaller demonstrations at the start of the process, which quickly snowballed over the next few days. Attention is typically focused on relatively “new” groups such as the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (Colectiva), Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas (Jornada), or the Centros de Apoyo Mutua (CAMs). (English translations of Spanish-language names are given in tables 1 and 2, below.) Sometimes, the work of such groups in laying the groundwork for the Uprising during the almost two years following hurricanes Irma and María’s devastation of the territory in September 2017 is recognized as well. [3] It is rarely, if ever, acknowledged that these groups were founded and led by activists with long careers in other radical organizations—some of which are still active. Thus, the dynamics of interaction of the complex organizational field of Puerto Rico’s radical left since the onset of the ongoing and multifaceted crisis of colonial hegemony [4] remain largely unexplored.

Tabla 1 Major Anti-Capitalist Organizations in Puerto Rico, 1960s-1980s				
Organization	Political Spectrum	Leadership	Key Ideology	Key Activities
COPIA	Radical Left	Enrique Sureda	Anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism	Organized strikes, protests, and political education.
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Tabla 2 Major Anti-Capitalist Organizations in Puerto Rico, 1980s-Present				
Organization	Political Spectrum	Leadership	Key Ideology	Key Activities
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Writing on *El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueña*—a pro-independence and socialist organization of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the 1970s and 1980s strongly influenced by, and with connections to, radical Black and Third World movements, as well as by radical groups within Puerto Rico—Rose Muzio chose “radical imagination” to capture the way the group’s political identity and vision were shaped through its relatedness with existing traditions, as well as with its time and place. [5] It is in this sense that I seek to examine the Puerto Rican radical left of the past quarter century (taking 1996—the year federal tax exemptions for U.S. corporations in Puerto Rico under Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code began to be “phased out”—as the point of departure for the conjuncture): as a continually reselected and reinvented political *tradition* that, while undoubtedly still marginal within the territory’s larger political landscape, is absolutely crucial for understanding unexpected historical events like the 2019 Uprising and other ongoing transformations whose course—like the burrowing of Marx’s famous “mole”—is far from decided.



Based on my ongoing research—including conversations and interviews with founding and leading members of the *Colectiva*, *Jornada*, the CAMs, and other organizations—I seek in this essay to sketch a relational and genealogical map of the Puerto Rican radical left since the late 1990s. By radical left, I mean anti-capitalist and anti-colonial organizations whose praxis is rooted primarily in social movements (as opposed to electoral politics and armed struggle—though as I discuss below, there

are important historical linkages with both) *and* a significant part of whose discourse and/or tactics are confrontational. My discussion therefore focuses on “direct action” social movement organizations, as a distinct typology that also differs from mass membership social movement organizations and from those engaged primarily in more institutional activities (such as advocacy/lobbying, education, or service provision)—though there are often significant overlaps. [6]

Contextualizing the Radical Left

As is well known, Puerto Rico’s electoral field in the late twentieth century was structured according to the three historical “status options”: commonwealth, statehood, or independence. The pro-commonwealth status quo Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) dominated, alternating power every four to eight years, with the smaller, social-democratic Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP) in third place. [7] Directly to the left of the PIP within the pro-independence field, the Marxist-Leninist Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (PSP) ran candidates in the 1976 and 1980 elections, but, faced with meager results and the crisis of the international socialist bloc, throughout the 1980s some of its leaders promoted the idea of a puertorriqueñista alliance with the PPD in order to stem the growth of the pro-statehood movement. This notion proved seductive to many erstwhile independentistas, contributing to a dwindling of already reduced support for the PIP during the 1990s. [8] When the PSP officially disbanded in 1993, many of its prominent figures spearheaded new political initiatives, which later merged into the Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano (MINH), an organization known for its support of PPD candidates during the early 2000s and 2010s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the PSP, PIP, and smaller left organizations actively sought—with mixed success—to initiate, join, and lead social movements, especially labor unions and among high school and university students, but also in community organizing, including significant environmental justice and squatter, or “land rescue,” movements. [9] Puerto Rican “second wave” feminism emerged during these years, as did gay and lesbian rights efforts, not always receiving space in the agendas of the left. [10] Explicit critiques of racism within Puerto Rican society itself (as opposed to U.S. racism, which has always been prominent in independentista narratives) also began to be articulated more forcefully. [11] Although not appearing until the early 1990s and not explicitly pro-independence or part of the radical left, Colectivo Ilé should be mentioned here as the first—and for a long time, only—organization specifically addressing issues of race and racism within the territory. [12]

The role of the Puerto Rican diaspora has been important. Much has been written about radical political organizing among Puerto Rican diasporic communities, from the Nationalists and Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, [13] to the Young Lords, the U.S. chapters of the Puerto Rico-based PSP, and El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueña, among others in the late 1960s through 1980s. [14] One of the most important armed-struggle, pro-independence organizations in Puerto Rican history, the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), recruiting almost exclusively from the diaspora and operating within the continental United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, emerged from the milieu of Puerto Rican community organizations in the Chicago area. [15] In one form or another, all of these left a lasting imprint on Puerto Rican community and social movement organizing in the United States, and vice versa.

They also made a lasting imprint on later radical politics inside Puerto Rico, especially as a crucial transmission belt of new modes of thinking and practice for radical politics in general and especially in terms of sexuality, race, and diaspora itself. [16] To cite just two contemporary examples, the agitprop collective AgitArte/Papel Machete (which has an extended network of collaborators and consistently produces work around issues beyond Puerto Rican communities, including climate justice and prison abolition) and Colectivo Ilé—mentioned above—were born in the state of

Massachusetts in the 1990s, which has its own important history of Puerto Rican community organizing, often overlooked by a literature focused primarily on New York and Chicago.

In turn, radical politics in the territory has made its mark on the diaspora. When I first arrived in New York City in the late 1990s, groups like the Vieques Support Campaign and the Prolibertad Freedom Campaign maintained strong ties to the Frente Socialista (FS; see below), its member organizations, and other groups in Puerto Rico, while practicing active solidarity with U.S. struggles, such as the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. These relationships continue in the present. For example, one of the most recent radical left protest organizations to emerge in the Puerto Rican diaspora is Boricua Resistance, with chapters in Chicago (where it was founded) and New York. Boricua Resistance is also part of the Puerto Rico Is Not for Sale campaign, a U.S.-based solidarity network of individuals and organizations that also includes Jornada as well as several more established Puerto Rican groups from the diaspora.

In Puerto Rico, many activists throughout the 1980s and 1990s turned away from status-centered politics to prioritize their involvement in local movements. In their attitudes toward electoral politics—motivated by the need for legislation and funding to support their local projects—some also gravitated toward “softer” critiques and tactical support of the PPD. In the analysis of the radical left, especially the younger, emergent generation, these choices explain the behavior of some union leaders and other activists under PPD, as opposed to PNP, administrations. For instance, one contrast that came up repeatedly in my conversations was that between, on the one hand, the vociferous condemnation of the 2005 University of Puerto Rico (UPR) student strike and the 2008 teachers strike—both of which took place during a PPD administration—and on the other hand the broad consensual support for the first phase of the 2010 UPR student strike, which took place during a PNP administration.

The 1980s had also seen the near-total disarticulation of the Puerto Rican clandestine, armed-struggle organizations, with FBI arrests of dozens of members of the FALN and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Puertorriqueños—Ejército Popular Boricua, popularly known as the Macheteros, which operated primarily in the territory (with a few actions, such as the spectacular 1983 heist of a Wells Fargo armored car in Hartford, Connecticut, taking place on the U.S. mainland). In 1990, Machetero leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos escaped house arrest, only to reappear when tracked down by the FBI and allowed to bleed to death after a shootout in 2005. Both in the territory and the diaspora, a good deal of left activism during the 1990s, and until the release of the last remaining FALN prisoner, Oscar López Rivera, in 2017, revolved around the release of the political prisoners. [17]

Mapping an Ecosystem

Within the complex tactical and ideological space between the ex-PSP/MINH and the armed revolutionary groups, there have coexisted, from the 1990s to the present, a series of “revolutionary” or radical, but non-clandestine, organizations—often resulting from splits from the PIP or the PSP or from abandonment of the armed struggle during the previous decades. No longer seeking to control social movements, as was common in previous decades, these groups nonetheless have hoped to radicalize them by helping grassroots participants make connections between their local grievances and the systemic forces of colonial capitalism.

This is the immediate organizational field I am concerned with here—what Agit-Arte/Papel Machete founder Jorge Díaz half-jokingly calls his group’s “ecosystem”—in which interacting and interrelated organizations mutually influenced one another, sometimes nurturing each other’s ranks. [18] In this milieu, vigorous debates, dissidences, and splits were common, sometimes giving way to new groupings and orientations that nonetheless continued to exist in relation to, and dialogue with, pre-

existing ones.

In 1989, an initiative of the Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores (MST)—itself the product of a fusion between three groups from various Marxist tendencies and shaped by a number of debates in the early-to-mid 1980s on topics ranging from authoritarianism to identity politics—led to the formation of a Socialist Front (FS) with the expressed intent of forming a pole of attraction to keep revolutionary socialist politics alive in a time of ideological crisis for the global left. The FS, which first came to be as an ad hoc committee to mobilize left opposition to an ultimately unrealized status referendum, did not support electoral parties or candidates. Although in theory, their stance on the electoral question was not one of principle, many of its member organizations called for active nonparticipation in local elections, seen as functioning to legitimize colonial capitalism. [19]

The FS and its member organizations were to play a critical role in two mass movements taking place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In turn, these movements served as a crucible for the emergence of a new generation of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist activists and groups. The first was the 1998 Huelga del Pueblo (People's Strike) in support of telephone company workers already on strike against the sale of the public utility; the Huelga del Pueblo was made possible, to a large degree, by a broad coalition of labor, social, and civic organizations that the FS was instrumental in promoting. [20] The second was the movement to shut down the U.S. Navy's base and live-munition bombing range on the inhabited island of Vieques (a part of the Puerto Rican archipelago). Viequenses and their allies had faced off against the Navy since the base's construction in the 1940s, their resistance reaching a high point in the late 1960s to the 1970s, when protesters forced the Navy out of the nearby inhabited island of Culebra. When a civilian security guard was killed by a stray bomb dropped from a Navy plane in April 1999, the movement was reignited and ultimately succeeded when the base was permanently shut down in 2003.

Most accounts of that movement have highlighted the importance of a media-savvy strategy featuring hundreds of demonstrators—including numerous celebrities and politicians—visibly crossing the base perimeter to be immediately arrested with little to no resistance. [21] At least equally important, however, were the direct costs inflicted on the Navy by more confrontational tactics, including the cutting down of miles of perimeter fence by demonstrators and incursions into the bombing range during live-fire exercises by "human shield" brigades hoping to force the maneuvers to halt. [22] Shunned by many within the broader movement, these tactics were supported by the FS, and the MST was particularly active in organizing brigades, several of which made it back out without arrests despite the harshness of the terrain.

These tactical differences echoed earlier fissures within the labor movement during the ultimately unsuccessful 1998 People's Strike, which was called off by the conciliatory leadership of the phone workers union. [23] After the strike, debates continued between those espousing a radical critique of neoliberal globalization (and the capitalist colony's place within it) and those seeking varying degrees of alliance, leverage, or accommodation with local and U.S.-based politicians and employers. [24] These quarrels often echoed existing debates over collaboration with the PPD on questions of local autonomy and culture, as well as ongoing debates over tactical questions, which continued to deepen throughout the Vieques movement and thereafter. At stake, in essence: whether to increase opponents' political and economic costs through confrontational tactics or appeal to less radical publics through conciliatory tactics.

In the early 2000s, the FS consisted of the MST; the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT); Taller de Formación Política (TFP); Refundación Comunista; and two youth/student organizations, the Unión de Juventudes Socialistas and the Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria, linked to the MST and the PRT, respectively; along with a large group of unaffiliated socialists. Beyond the FS, there existed a number of other independent leftist groups, such as the Organización

Socialista Internacional (OSI), the storied but declining Federación de Universitarios Pro-Independencia, and the radical environmentalist Amigos del MAR (Movimiento Ambiental Revolucionario). Various short-lived initiatives that emerged at the time also had a lasting impact on the radical landscape, including the feminist organization Masfaldas, the popular education youth group La Nueva Escuela, the Frente Estudiantil, and the Comité Contra la Homofobia y el Discrimen (CCHD), which signaled the rebirth of a militant LGBTQIA+ movement.

The year 2006 is often identified as a turning point in Puerto Rico's recent history, given the introduction of a flat sales tax and the end of the Section 936 phaseout, destined toward the repayment of the territory's "extraconstitutional" debt—the first of many "emergency" austerity measures purportedly justified by the "debt crisis." [25] However, for many of my interviewees, the *previous* year, 2005, is more significant for the reemergence of the territory's radical left along with the rise of a series of grassroots movements, simmering in the wake of the Navy's withdrawal from Vieques. Combined with the stimulation of community organizing by "neocommunitarian" programs put in place by the previous PPD administration, and a series of lesser-known legal victories, this led to the proliferation and emboldening of community-based grassroots movements. [26]

In the spring of 2005, students at the flagship campus of the UPR, in Río Piedras, went on strike. The strike's confluence with various ongoing environmental justice, beach access, and anti-displacement movements brought student radicals from the UPR—many of them with personal and political roots in the Vieques movement—into closer contact with community-based grassroots organizations. It also allowed groups and individuals on the periphery of the FS and other longstanding organizations greater interaction within the radical left, which itself was further energized by the extrajudicial killing of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos in late September. [27]

The founding of AgitArte's street-theater troupe, Papel Machete (whose name, in part, honors the fallen Machetero leader) is illustrative of this moment. In 2005, AgitArte had been operating as a grant-funded nonprofit popular-education project in Caimito (a poor, historically Afro-Puerto Rican community facing displacement and environmental degradation) for three years when it ran out of funds. A community leader from Caimito brought the group to Santurce No Se Vende, an anti-gentrification campaign then underway in the heart of San Juan. Although that fight was ultimately unsuccessful, it was there that AgitArte members learned and honed the papier-maché puppet and mask-making techniques that became Papel Machete's signature style. They also met members of the Centro de Medios Independientes—the local platform of the global, online, alternative-media network Indymedia, founded in the wake of the 1999 alter-globalization protests in Seattle; Centro de Medios Independientes had been launched by local activists in the aftermath of Vieques.

From those interactions emerged the idea to "do something different" at the next International Workers Day demonstration. Composed of members of the original AgitArte nucleus as well as newcomers from Indymedia, Papel Machete performed its first street theater piece on May 1, 2006. That day's demonstration in the financial district—held in the midst of a government shutdown caused by a stalemate over the amount of the proposed sales tax, which was flatly rejected by the left and more militant unions—ended in confrontation with the police, marking a re-emerging tactical modality (which had in fact been present at May 1 demonstrations since at least 2004) that would be seen again, much more forcefully, in 2017 and 2018. [28]

Shortly after the end of the 2005 UPR strike, the MST and UJS left the FS, claiming irreconcilable differences over how the "broad front" was operating. In 2000, the youth of the different member organizations had formally proposed that the fusion of the various groups be accelerated. Despite the fact that this proposal did not prosper, the FS was de facto operating as a single organization in ways that—MST members argued—diminished democracy and gave some groups advantage over others. [29] Just as importantly, leaders believed the time and energy spent on these quarrels were

better spent on rank and file labor organizing. A slate led by members of the MST's teachers caucus had recently been elected to the union leadership of the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR), which at the time represented the entirety of the public school system's bargaining unit, and the possibility of a system-wide strike was fermenting. [30]

The strike happened in 2008, and in retribution, authorities revoked the FMPR's status as the sole bargaining representative under Puerto Rico's public-sector union law. The FMPR has suffered many transformations since then (to which I cannot do justice here). Today, it is only one of several teachers organizations. However, it has remained the most consistently vocal and militant rank and file union in the territory, spearheading ongoing campaigns against school closures and pension cuts, as well as a combative and successful push in 2022 for the largest pay raise in the history of the public school system. While the current leadership does not consist of MST members, some are former members and others were part of the MST-led platform that led the 2008 strike. MST members who are teachers are still part of the FMPR rank and file.

The MST's exit did in fact accelerate the demise of the FS as a broad front (it still exists today as a small, single organization). Not long thereafter, the TFP, along with the PRT and Juventud de Izquierda Revolucionaria, and some unaffiliated youth in the FS orbit, fused into the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), which also left the FS. The MAS later became the driving force behind the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador, which failed to surpass 1 percent of the vote in the 2012 and 2016 elections. In 2019, the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador disbanded to become part of the electoral coalition behind the new Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, capturing a significant share of the vote in 2020. [31] A tendency within the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, composed primarily of former TFP members, is today known as Democracia Socialista.

In 2010, students at the UPR went on strike once again. The UJS, the OSI, the MAS's youth wing, Juventud del 23 de Septiembre, along with the CCDH (which was more of a broad front than an organization) all played important roles in the strike, which followed mass mobilizations in 2009 against austerity measures premised on debt repayment and authorizing the layoff of up to 30,000 public employees. When calls for a general strike to stop the layoffs fell flat, the student movement took the initiative and struck, in the hopes of jump starting a national movement. Despite the broad support generated by the first phase of the strike, the jump-starting effort fell flat as well. The far more confrontational second phase of the strike generated the usual tactical objections, even amongst those who had enthusiastically supported the first phase. [32] In the spring of 2017 (just months before the hurricanes), UPR students once again attempted—and failed—to spark a general insurrection against the debt repayment regime imposed in 2016. Their months-long strike nonetheless generated huge participatory assemblies and served as a crucible for that year's massive and combative May 1 demonstration.

Shifting Gears

According to my interviewees, by 2014 the Puerto Rican radical left had entered a period of profound introspection. For many of the post-Vieques generation, it was now clear that the wider movements of the older generation would not recover their lost militancy. Students, who had been the backbone of the radical left during this period, no longer had enough time to dedicate to activist work after repeated tuition hikes and other institutional changes. At the same time, many were graduating into, and becoming parents in, an extremely hostile labor environment. Like hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans during this period, many were forced to migrate, as had hundreds of thousands in earlier decades. In quick succession, the organizations of the radical left were dramatically transformed: Some disappeared, others turned to electoral politics or mutual aid projects, still others stubbornly persisted in diminished form. It is then that the "new" organizations that have been protagonists in recent events made their appearance.

The OSI—after over two decades of existence—disbanded, with many of its members going on to form Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural, which founded the first *comedor social* (social mess hall) for hungry students at UPR Río Piedras—the pioneering initiative of what would become the CAMs. [33] The Caribbean transfeminist Colectiva, founded by women activists from several of the organizations discussed here who were fed up with what they saw as enduring sexist attitudes and insufficient attention to issues of gender, cisnormativity, and race, emerged around the same time. The Colectiva has been at the forefront of emphasizing the racial and gendered aspects of colonial capitalism in Puerto Rico and has served as a link to broader transnational struggles, leading a number of impactful campaigns and playing a key role in mobilization during the 2019 Uprising. [34]

In 2016, after Puerto Rico’s governor declared the territory’s \$74 billion public debt “unpayable,” the U.S. Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA; “promise” in Spanish), which among other things created an unelected, unaccountable seven-member Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (known locally as *la Junta*), to be named by the U.S. president and with the power to review and overturn all local financial legislation, to propose “adjustment plans,” and to initiate a local bankruptcy process. Opposition to PROMESA and the Junta took various forms, most visibly in the eventual emergence of Jornada. Erroneously identified by some as having an anarchist bent—probably given its aesthetic and tactical similarities with “black blocs” [35]—Jornada is in fact a militant, broadly anti-colonial collective that combines confrontational tactics with an agro-ecological ethos. (The group counts numerous farmers among its members and is directly linked to the Movimiento de Agroecología Popular de Puerto Rico.)

Incorporating highly performative elements into its repertoire, Jornada has also been closely tied to AgitArte/Papel Machete from the start, with the wooden shields used by Jornada in its first demonstrations built at AgitArte’s workshop/headquarters and various Papel Machete members also active within Jornada. Papel Machete has also created and performed a number of new street theater pieces around PROMESA. Following hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, Jornada, AgitArte, and CDPEC worked together closely to set up a network of mutual aid centers around the territory, which operated for about a year following the storms. [36] These, in turn, played an important mobilizing role during the 2019 Uprising and in many cases served as the basis for the much-touted horizontal spaces of participation known as *asambleas de pueblo* (people’s assemblies), which popped up in squares and other public spaces throughout the territory toward the end of the Uprising. [37]

Although these groups seem to represent new strategic approaches to radical organizing—grounded in nonprofit funding; explicitly feminist, anti-racist, and queer/trans liberationist praxes; ecosocialist projects; and/or anarchist principles such as mutual aid and *autogestion* (community self-management)—they are very strongly rooted in, and continue to be a part of, the radical ecosystem described above. They were founded by radical activists such as former OSI spokesperson Giovanni Roberto (CDPEC), former MAS and CCHD member Shariana Ferrer Nuñez (Colectiva), and Jocelyn Velázquez (Jornada)—who began her activist career in (and maintains a working relationship with) the FS. In conversation with me, all three openly discussed their personal and political trajectories at length, reaffirming their own (and their organizations’) enduring anti-capitalist and anti-colonial commitments.

Nor have the older organizations and forms of organizing entirely disappeared or become irrelevant. A well-established, “old-style,” mass-membership social-movement organization, the FMPPR, played a significant role in the 2019 Uprising, supporting all of the early demonstrations. The arrest, on corruption charges, of Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who was responsible for the school closures against which the FMPPR and other teachers groups had already been mobilizing, was one of the Uprising’s various detonators. One of the earliest demonstrations that grew to unexpected size

during the process was originally a march against pension cuts convened by the Retiree Chapter of the FMPR. As mentioned above, even in the midst of the Junta's colonial austerity regime, the teachers unions recently achieved a significant victory.

Of the *asambleas*, only the Asamblea de Pueblo de Bayamón (a city within the San Juan metropolitan area) remains active, at the forefront of mobilizations against LUMA Energy, the U.S.-Canadian private consortium to which Puerto Rico's power grid has been leased since 2020. The Asamblea de Pueblo de Bayamón is actively supported by the MST as well as by a "new" group that adheres to an "old" political identity and ideology, calling itself *Trabajadorxs y Estudiantes Comunistas por el Cambio Social*.

A Puerto Rican Radical Tradition

The long-term political impact of the work of all the organizations described above is evidenced, at least in part, by the 2019 Uprising and by major shifts in the 2020 elections. [38] As I have shown, the "new" groups typically acknowledged as having played key roles in the uprising are in fact part of a broader field with a long genealogy. Even though these groups often emerged as the result of conflicts and dissatisfaction with the ideas and practices of their immediate past, no tradition simply dies off when dissidents and those who have felt silenced break away. In many cases, those who break away feel that theirs is simply the best way for the radical tradition to move forward. However, those broken from often survive, and they don't do so unscathed. For better and worse, in political networks, all actors are transformed by their interactions with one another and with their spatio-temporal milieu.

In this essay, I have not even begun to scratch the surface of the complexities of such dynamics and interactions, nor have I documented the rich diversity of political imaginaries that are part of the tradition—all of that is necessarily part of a longer-term project. However, acknowledging the existence of this tradition in its changing complexity over several decades—as I have tried to approximate here, in a level of detail not previously attempted—is indispensable to understanding the dynamics of what I am calling the Puerto Rican Radical Tradition.

José A. Laguarda Ramírez

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New Politics

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Footnotes

[1] In late July 2019, Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced that he would resign without completing his term. That month, the 889-page transcript of a conversation or "chat" via messaging app between Governor Rosselló and his closest advisors had been made public, in various installments, over the course of several days. The full text of the chat was leaked just a

few days after the arrests of Education Secretary Julia Keleher and others on corruption charges. In the text, Rosselló and his inner circle made disparaging and often violently sexist and homophobic comments about political rivals, critics, and the general public, including callous and cynical remarks about the thousands who died as a result of infrastructure collapse and mismanagement in the wake of Hurricane María. Rosselló defiantly insisted he would not resign and only did so after two weeks of sustained mobilization, which included nightly confrontations between police and protesters at the gates of the governor's mansion, as well as a series of mass demonstrations, including the largest public gathering in the territory's history. For more detailed summaries, see, for example: Rafael Bernabe, "[The Puerto Rican Summer](#)," *New Politics* (No. 68, Winter 2020), and Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Duke University Press, 2021), 3-10 and 130-138.

[2] Zambrana, 132. A thorough examination of the term "self-convened" and its usages in academic and some activist circles in Puerto Rico is beyond the scope of this essay. I should note, however, that I find it largely unhelpful. While poetic, it simply restates, in micropolitical terms, what is self-evidently true of all collective action, especially if unexpected: That beyond a certain threshold of scale, it becomes "contagious."

[3] Zambrana, 132. See also: Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, "Against the Mythological Machine, Towards Decolonial Revolt," *Theory & Event* (vol. 24, no. 3, 2021), 808.

[4] On the crisis: Rafael Bernabe, "[Puerto Rico: The Organic Crisis and the Alternatives](#)," Aug. 23, 2019.

[5] Rose Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity: Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York* (SUNY Press, 2017). While Muzio's use of the term is explicitly influenced by C. Wright Mills' notion of the "sociological imagination," it also evokes numerous authors' writings on the Black radical imagination and tradition, including: Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2022 [2002]); and Ruth W. Gilmore, *Abolition Geographies: Essays Towards Liberation* (Verso, 2022).

[6] Such overlaps are powerfully illustrated by a quick survey of the initiatives supported through [the María Fund](#), set up in the wake of the hurricanes specifically to finance grassroots and community-based organizing efforts.

[7] Much of the history in this section is discussed in César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007). On the independence movement specifically: Rafael Bernabe, *Obstinate Star: A History of the Puerto Rico Independence Movement* (Haymarket, forthcoming).

[8] Ayala and Bernabe, 310-311.

[9] Jorge Colón Rivera, et al. *El proyecto de explotación minera en Puerto Rico (1962-1968): Nacimiento de la conciencia ambiental moderna* (Huracán, 2014); Deborah Berman-Santana, *Kicking Off the Bootstraps: Environment, Development, and Community Power in Puerto Rico* (University of Arizona Press, 1996); Manuel Valdés-Pizzini, "Historical Contentions and Future Trends in the Coastal Zones: The Environmental Movement in Puerto Rico," in Sherrie L. Baver and Barbra D. Lynch, eds., *Beyond Sun and Sand: Caribbean Environmentalisms* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 44-64; Liliana Cotto-Morales. *Desalambrar: Orígenes de los rescates de terreno en Puerto Rico y su pertenencia en los movimientos sociales contemporáneos* (Editorial

Tal Cual, 2006).

[10] Ayala and Bernabe, 235-237. Alice Colón-Warren and Idsa Alegría-Ortega, "Shattering the Illusion of Development: The Changing Status of Women and Challenges for the Feminist Movement in Puerto Rico," *Feminist Review* (vol. 59, 1998), 101-117; René Esparza, "'Qué Bonita Mi Tierra': Latinx AIDS Activism and Decolonial Queer Praxis in New York and Puerto Rico," *Radical History Review* (vol. 140, 2021), 107-141; Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "'Can You Imagine?': Puerto Rican Lesbian Activisms, 1972-1991," *CENTRO Journal* (vol. 30, no. 2, 2018), 348-377.

[11] Ayala and Bernabe, 256-258.

[12] Hilda Lloréns and Bárbara Abadía-Rexach, "In Defense of Black Life: A Brief Cultural History of Anti-Racist Efforts in Puerto Rico," in Bernd Reiter and John Antón Sánchez, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Afro-Latin American Studies* (Routledge, 2022), 448-456.

[13] Ayala and Bernabe, 113-115, 131-133, and 147-148.

[14] Muzio; Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020); José E. Velázquez, Carmen V. Rivera, and Andrés Torres, eds., *Revolution around the Corner: Voices from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party in the United States* (Temple University Press, 2021); Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Temple University Press, 1998).

[15] Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[16] On the role of Puerto Ricans in ACT-UP (including the formation of a Puerto Rico chapter in the early 1990s): Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021). See also Ayala and Bernabe, 235-237.

[17] Ronald Fernández, *Prisoners of Colonialism: The Struggle for Justice in Puerto Rico* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Michael González Cruz, *Nacionalismo revolucionario puertorriqueño, 1956-2005: La lucha armada, intelectuales y prisioneros políticos y de guerra* (Editorial Isla Negra, 2006); Michael González-Cruz, *Militant Puerto Ricans: Migrants, Armed Struggle, and Political Prisoners* (independently published, 2020).

[18] José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "[Crisis Projects: 25 Years of AgitArte in Puerto Rico and the Global Diaspora.](#)"

[19] On the MST: José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "[Struggling to Learn, Learning to Struggle: Strategy and Structure in the 2010-11 University of Puerto Rico Student Strike](#), 2016." On the FS: Carlos Quirós-Méndez, "[A 31 años de la fundación del Frente Socialista.](#)"

[20] Ayala and Bernabe, 296-297 and 311.

[21] Katherine McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

[22] Gazir Sued, *Vieques: Crónicas desde la desobediencia* (La Grieta, 2001).

- [23] Rafael Bernabe, "[Puerto Rico's La Huelga del Pueblo](#)," *Against the Current* (no. 76, Sept.-Oct. 1998).
- [24] Ayala and Bernabe, 297-299; Conferencia Sindical, *Entre la huelga del pueblo y la Cumbre Social: el movimiento obrero puertorriqueño en la encrucijada* (San Juan, 2007 [2001]).
- [25] José Atilés-Osoria, "Exceptionality and Colonial-State-Corporate Crimes in the Puerto Rican Fiscal and Economic Crisis," *Latin American Perspectives* (vol. 47, no. 3, 2020), 49-63.
- [26] Liliana Cotto-Morales, "Commentary: Social Movements, Crises, and Mobilizations," *Latin American Perspectives* (vol. 47, no. 3, 2020), 129-137. On neocommunitarianism and community organizing: Janialy Ortiz Camacho, "[Transitar entre la práctica gubernamental y la política: desarrollo y conflicto en la Comunidad Especial Juan Domingo, Puerto Rico](#)," 2017. On community legal victories in the early 2000s: Haydeé Colón, "[Historia de Chiclana](#)," and Cándida Cotto, "A Rare Happy Ending: Piñones Versus the Developers," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 40, no. 6, 2007), 30-34.
- [27] For visuals of Ojeda Ríos's funeral procession and others illustrating the mood in response to his killing (not necessarily limited to independentistas): Residente Calle 13, "[Querido F.B.I.](#)"
- [28] On May 1, 2006: Hugo Delgado Martí, "[Primero de mayo combativo](#)". On May 1, 2017 and 2018: Jorell Meléndez-Badillo. "Celebrating May Day in Puerto Rico," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 51, no. 3, 2019), 301-305.
- [29] Quirós-Méndez; Laguarda Ramírez, *Struggling to Learn*, 78-79.
- [30] On the 2008 teachers strike: José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "[Teachers' Strike Stops Classes in Puerto Rico](#)," *Labor Notes*, Mar. 27, 2008.
- [31] José A. Laguarda Ramírez, "In Puerto Rico, the 2019 Uprising Produces an Opening to the Left," *New Politics* (no. 70, Winter 2021), 74-80.
- [32] Laguarda Ramírez, "Struggling to Learn," 158-169.
- [33] Marisol LeBrón, "People Before Debt," *NACLA Report on the Americas* (vol. 48, no. 2, 2016), 115-117. Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez, "Centros de Apoyo Mutuo: Reconfigurando la asistencia en tiempos de desastre," *CENTRO Journal* (vol. 32, no. 3, 2020), 89-117.
- [34] Fernando Tormos-Aponte and Shariana Ferrer-Núñez, "Intersectional synthesis: A case study of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción," in Sharon A. Navarro and Lilliana P. Saldaña, eds., *Latinas and the Politics of Urban Spaces* (Routledge, 2021), 53-66.
- [35] See, for example: Zambrana, 132. Jornada's members typically dress in black and use black-and-white Puerto Rican flags. This version of the flag has come to broadly symbolize resistance since 2016, when an artists' collective responded to the signing of PROMESA by painting over the traditional red and blue, in an existing, well-known installation consisting of the flag painted on the wooden doors of an abandoned building. To public speculation, the collective replied in an open letter that the color change represented not mourning, but resistance. Julieta V. Muñoz Alvarado, "[Monoestrellada blanca y negra: "No es luto, es resistencia"](#)". It is worth recalling that black and white were also used by the Nationalist Party on its own flag (a white Maltese cross on

a solid black background) and the uniforms of its “cadets” in the 1930s.

[36] Laguarda Ramírez, “Crisis Projects.”

[37] On the asambleas: Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez, “[Puerto Rican People’s Assemblies shift from protest to proposal](#),” Aug. 20, 2019.

[38] Laguarda Ramírez, “In Puerto Rico.”