

Economic and Social Crisis in Puerto Rico: “The Ugly American” and the Puerto Rican National Question

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*The latest crisis in Puerto Rico involves **Gov. Ricardo Rossello** and appears to be the accumulation of other crises that now appear to question the legitimacy of the colonial political structure in Puerto Rico. Nearly 900 pages of personal messages on the Telegram app between him and others in his political inner circle were published by [Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism](#).*

*These messages comprise of homophobic, misogynistic, and the disregard of the those who lost their lives during Hurricane Maria. They also reveal discussions of alleged election manipulation and attempts to affect his administration's public image. This all came at the heel of arrest that the FBI of six governmental officials who were charged with 32-counts of corruption. Along with the six, is **Julia Keleher**, the former education secretary, and **Ángela Ávila-Marrero**, the former executive director of the Puerto Rico Health Insurance Administration.*

The [federal indictment](#) states that former officials illegally directed federal funding to politically connected contractors. Some Puerto Ricans questioned the U.S.'s motive in arrests because of the possibility it is used to justify the Trump administration restriction of aid to the island in the aftermath of the hurricane. Just about any understanding of the history of Puerto Rico and the U.S. should be viewed with suspicion, especially matters dealing with the U.S. and its Puerto Rican elite alliance.

It is clear that the Trump administration has shown the “ugly American” and the bigoted side of the U.S. empire, but we should not lose sight that the history of U.S. imperialism has been a U.S. bipartisan affair between the Republican and Democratic parties. As **Gore Vidal** reminds us,

“There is only one party in the United States, the Property Party ... and it has two right wings: Republican and Democrat. Republicans are a bit stupider, more rigid, more doctrinaire in their laissez-faire capitalism than the Democrats, who are cuter, prettier, a bit more corrupt – until recently ... and more willing than the Republicans to make small adjustments when the poor, the black, the anti-imperialists get out of hand. But, essentially, there is no difference between the two parties” (1977).

After all, it was the Obama administration, a democrat, that imposed the financial oversight board, the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) of 2016, which was tasked with imposing austerity measures on the spending on public services (resulting in the closing schools, downsizing government operations and public employees) in order to service the \$72 billion-dollar debt. Or more historically, it was FDR,

the patron saint of the Democratic Party, whose administration repressed a movement for Puerto Rican independence in the 1930s while extending New Deal reforms that were designed to pacify Puerto Rican discontent and perfect political and economic control, which also meant the cultivation of a pro-U.S. local political elite.

The economic crisis that preceded the imposition of the oversight board that was not elected by the Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and yet wields control over the economic affairs of the economy was met with frustration by many Puerto Ricans that did not fully understand what colonial control means. As if colonial control vis-à-vis the control by an intermediate political system of the two dominant political parties of the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, PNP) and the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, PPD) was somehow different. This political system in Puerto Rico largely provides the illusion of self-governance, but in reality, operates within the colonial structure of control because the real authority resides with the U.S. government. The point being is that Puerto Ricans did not have control of its economic affairs prior to the imposition, but that the imposition of the oversight board unveiled this reality to many.

In fact, months before Hurricane Maria, the economic conditions on the island were already in deterioration, with alarming rates of unemployment and poverty that the [United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization](#) approved a draft resolution that called on the U.S. to expedite a process enabling the people of Puerto Rico to exercise fully their right to self-determination and independence. The Committee also expressed concerns with the imposition of PROMESA and its impact on Puerto Rico's already weakened sovereignty within the U.S. prevailing regime of political and economic control. Colonial status was supposed to have been resolved in 1952 when the U.S. approved a Puerto Rican Constitution in which it retained control over Puerto Rico.

The creation of the "commonwealth" in 1952 was designed to shield against international criticism of Puerto Rico's continued colonial status and an attempt to manufacture consent to "legitimize" the political arrangement as the expression self-determination. The U.N. committee signed off on this deception under the pressure of the United States. Yet, over the years, the PPD (the key party to sponsor the so-called status change), along with the PNP, the pro-statehood party agree with the pro-independence movement that Puerto Rico is in fact a colony. However, each of these forces has different objectives. The PPD continues to believe that the commonwealth arrangement can be made to work with modifications - i.e., enhancements that essentially continue Puerto Rico's dependency on the United States.

The problem with the PPD is that it is seen as the co-architect, with the U.S., of the status quo on the island. Yet, the PNP is also complicit in this status quo, because since 1968 it has rotated in out of the governorship and is part of the colonial structure order. This being said, the PNP advocate that the only solution is statehood.

For the pro-independence movement, the colonial relationship with the U.S. cannot be resolved as an internal matter of the U.S. and requires international intervention and the establishment of a process for decolonization. In other words, this requires a process of decolonization first. Conceivable this would mean the transfer of authority of all political, economic, and cultural affairs to the Puerto Rican people, the withdrawal of the U.S. military and all other coercive and counterinsurgency agencies such as the FBI, DEA, and CIA. In addition, all U.S. interference in Puerto Rico's affairs must cease.

In addition, there needs to be a set period of time in which Puerto Ricans receive economic and technological assistance from the U.S. as it organizes its own economic development and trade in order to ensure a viable level of self-sufficiency. Until some version of the above pre-conditions is met, all plebiscites that claim to address the national question on the island are invalid because voting is reduced to voting with one's stomach, out of the fear that decolonization means living under far worst economic conditions. Also, the path to true decolonization requires addressing the impact of internalized colonialism on the psychology of subjected people and the restoration of an independent national identity.

The Puerto Rican National Question

For Puerto Ricans, the national question can be seen either as Puerto Ricans as a national minority within a larger and more powerful nation (this is the current status and would change under statehood, having particular rights like other states) or as a nation itself, with its own sovereignty (Blaut 1987). Contrary to the pro-statehood party anti-colonial stance, Pedro Albizu Campos once said that statehood would mean the "final triumph of colonialism" (Maldonado-Denis 1972:136). In other words, it would mean full cultural assimilation of Puerto Rican culture into a dominant U.S. culture (such as language and national identity). The reason why the word full is used is because political and economic integration occurred when the U.S. invaded and colonized Puerto Rico in 1898.

The issue of full cultural assimilation is complex and needs to be dissected in order to understand the context of the Puerto Rican national question. Although as Trias Monge states that "Culturally the Americanization policy failed," because "the people clung desperately to their language and sense of self" (98), however, when it comes to political identity this is a far more complex issue. In fact, the imposition of U.S. citizenship (Jones Act of 1917) is one of the most important factors that can be seen as hindering the efforts at self-determination because it integrates Puerto Ricans into the dominant cultural values and beliefs of the United States. Essentially, Puerto Ricans were forced to pledge their allegiance to another nation that treats them as colonial subjects that must be governed; this is in contrast viewing them as equals with the capacity for self-governance.

The U.S. military in Puerto Rico is embedded in almost all aspects of Puerto Rican life and cannot be understood only in terms of being part of the state repressive apparatus. The military plays a dual role in socially integrating large sectors of the Puerto Rican population into the "American way of life." Rodriguez-Beruff argues that many of the U.S. military organizations were designed to instill a pro-U.S. ideology and to develop loyal and patriotic U.S. citizens (as opposed to a Puerto Rican nationalism) (1983:23). The military or more specifically military service serves as a vehicle for social integration that unifies separate entities into a nation (Deitz, Elkin, and Roumani 1991:2). The U.S. has carried out some nation-building strategies, such as imposing U.S. citizenship and conscription into the military, which are consistent with colonial forms of rule as opposed to the formation of a democratic federation.

In order to understand the illusion of the U.S. as the savior we need to understand the degree of U.S. cultural integration in Puerto Rico. First off, the concept of culture needs more explanation in this specific context. Culture as the realm in which values, norms, customs, rituals, and beliefs that reside within a people. When speaking of national culture, this usually refers to distinct cultures in which language is key is transmitting culture from generation to generation and is the glue that binds people's identity, but a colonized people are exposed to a particular culture that is the antithesis of decolonization and

independence.

The imposition of one nation over another is usually a bloody affair that requires not only military might, but counterinsurgency strategies of persuasion to win people over (e.g., through deception and co-optation) to integrate (i.e., by cultural assimilate) them into the new system of domination, and to isolate and neutralize those who rebel against this imposition. Historically, as well as presently, Puerto Ricans on the island and in the U.S. have a long history of rebelling and resisting this imposition and fighting for national liberation, which these efforts have been repressed and criminalized.

Although Puerto Ricans have retained their language, customs, and traditions, what we really need to develop is a deeper analysis that can enable us to understand how over one-hundred and twenty years of exposure to U.S. cultural values and beliefs impede resolving the national question.

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