Meléndez Vélez, Edgardo
The Puerto Rican Journey revisited: politics and the study of Puerto Rican migration
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37717211
The Puerto Rican Journey revisited:
Politics and the study
EDGARDO MELÉNDEZ VÉLEZ

This article assesses the historical and political context of The Puerto Rican Journey, a seminal text in the study of Puerto Rican migration. It argues that political objectives were more important than scholarly ones in launching this project. It was commissioned by the Puerto Rican government in an attempt to counteract the anti-Puerto Rican campaign—known in New York and Puerto Rico as the "Puerto Rican problem"—that unfolded in New York City during 1947. The process whereby the study was defined is examined, as well as its content and consequences for future analysis of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States.

ABSTRACT

Opposite page:
Three photographs used by the Migration Division Office of the Government of Puerto Rico during the 1950s as part of its campaign to depict Puerto Rican migrants' positive contributions and orderly adaptation to life in the U.S.
Top: Governor Luis Muñoz Marín (fourth from left) greeting some of the Puerto Rican employees of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York (circa 1950s).
Left: Puerto Rican nursing aides at Lenox Hill Hospital, New York (1956).
Right: A Puerto Rican family at home watching television (circa 1950s).
At the end of the Second World War, thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States, particularly to New York City. The critical social and economic situation of the Island drove many to the mainland in search of jobs, better living conditions; the expanding American postwar economy provided new opportunities in services, manufacturing, and agriculture that attracted Islanders to the United States. This massive migration wave of Puerto Ricans to the United States was one of the definitive events in Puerto Rico's twentieth-century history. By the end of the 1940s, tens of thousands of Islanders were moving yearly to the mainland, mostly to New York City and nearby areas. But the reception given to Puerto Ricans was not what they expected; by 1947 Island migrants going to New York City began to experience a tremendous backlash upon entering America. This situation became a major issue of public debate in the city and in the Island. Fueled by scores of newspaper articles—from the most conservative tabloids to the most liberal newspapers—the polemic on the city's newest migrants became known as “the Puerto Rican problem.” This event influenced the incorporation of Puerto Ricans into New York City and the United States in general, since the issue surpassed the boundaries of public opinion.
first native-appointed governor, Jesús T. Piñero, declared that one of his priorities was to deal with “the situation of approximately 350,000 Puerto Ricans in New York.” Decision-makers in Puerto Rico and New York City were concerned about the “problems” created by the massive entrance of Puerto Ricans to the city. It would take almost a year for the Puerto Rican government to take some concrete steps in dealing with the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York. Meanwhile, the most rabid anti-Puerto Rican campaign in the United States began in New York by early 1947. It became known in New York and Puerto Rico as the “Puerto Rican problem.” This campaign was a determining event for the formulation of Puerto Rico’s migration policy, defined by the end of that year.

The “Puerto Rican problem” began in earnest on early February when the New York tabloid PM began a series on Puerto Ricans in the city. It argued that in the previous six months some 50,000 Puerto Ricans had entered the city. Calling it “the first airborne migration of history,” the report compared Puerto Ricans to Okies” that roamed the Southwest during the thirties (immortalized in Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath). The newspaper criticized the Puerto Rican government’s counterattack on the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York and Puerto Rico as the “Puerto Rican problem.”

The 1947 “Puerto Rican problem” campaign lasted until the end of the year. By late May another actor in the “Puerto Rican problem” campaign in New York began a series on Puerto Ricans in the city. It argued that in the previous six months some 50,000 Puerto Ricans had entered the city. Calling it “the first airborne migration of history,” the report compared Puerto Ricans to Okies” that roamed the Southwest during the thirties (immortalized in Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath). The newspaper criticized the Puerto Rican
The Puerto Rican Study

CREATING THE STUDY

The announcement in New York City by Puerto Rico’s Governor, Jesús T. Piñero, on August 7th that the government of Puerto Rico had commissioned Columbia University to conduct a “survey” of Puerto Rican migrants came in the midst of a difficult period: the “Puerto Rican problem” campaign in 1947. Piñero stated that the aim of the study was to devise “an intelligent solution” to the situation created by the massive influx of Puerto Ricans to the city. The governor, apparently unheeding the spontaneous, explained his idea to send a group of scientists to do a survey first in Puerto Rico and later in the Puerto Rican community in New York, following the study with a report on “what we can do about it.” He added that in “the course of, say, a year, we can have in black and white what we really need to tackle the problem intelligently.”

On August 9, the director of Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research, Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, and Governor Piñero announced in a press conference their agreement to carry out the survey. The study was estimated to cost between $15,000 and $20,000.
reunion as the basis for their relocation. The majority of migrants—68 percent—were young adults. The study found that 54 percent of migrants were males, while 46 percent were females. The survey revealed that 29 percent claimed they already had a job, and 20.4 percent cited family. The majority of those surveyed came from San Juan (which comprised only 10.4 percent of the Island). The survey noted that there was a net migration of 36,116 persons in 1946, while service occupations represented 21 percent. Also in contrast to the findings of the Puerto Rican Study, Ruiz's study concluded that the majority of migrants were unskilled or semi-skilled workers—28 percent for each category. Skilled workers were only 11 percent, a rate close to their proportion on the Island's labor force (40 percent). The majority of migrants chose to live in the city of New York, such as an increase in the government's budget for education and vocational facilities was an important reason why most migrated to New York (pp. 5–6).

The majority of the people of the Island desire such a study made so as to be ready to deal with the situation facing Islanders in the city.20

In his response to this criticism, the Governor called previous studies “a survey idea by a competent institution with trained personnel who dedicate full time to their chores.”21 In his reply to a New York Puerto Rican claiming that a study of the “problem” in New York should be paid by the city government, Piñero asserted that the “bad publicity that has appeared in all the continental press seems to have been an unbiased and carefully-made study in order that the facts and the truth be known.”22

The majority of the people of the Island desire such a study made so as to thwart vicious propaganda which is harmful both to the residents in the continent, and to the island.”22

So Ruiz conducted a survey among 3,024 white males (no reason was given for choosing this sample). She conducted a survey among 3,024 white males (no reason was given for choosing this sample).
THE PUERTO RICAN STUDY’S PURPOSE

Michael Lapp’s dissertation on Puerto Rico’s Migration Division has provided the best analysis so far of Puerto Rican migration policy; it includes an examination of the role played by The Puerto Rican Journey in this process. He argues that the Columbia University study has to be understood as a result of the “technocratic” perspective that prevailed in the Puerto Rican government under the PPD and largely determined its migration policy and the creation of the Migration Division. Lapp links the commission of the Puerto Rican Study to the creation of the Migration Division. Although the “technocratic” perspective that permeated Puerto Rican decision makers influenced most public policies at the time, including migration policy, the decision to authorize the Puerto Rican Study was mostly predicated on political factors: the Columbia University project was commissioned by the government of Puerto Rico to counteract the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York and thus to allow a more facile incorporation of island migrants into the United States. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies; the study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. Lapp links the commission of the Puerto Rican Study to the creation of the Migration Division. Although the “technocratic” perspective that permeated Puerto Rican decision makers influenced most public policies at the time, including migration policy, the decision to authorize the Puerto Rican Study was mostly predicated on political factors: the Columbia University project was commissioned by the government of Puerto Rico to counteract the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York and thus to allow a more facile incorporation of island migrants into the United States. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies. The study was authorized in August 1947 and was aimed at dealing directly with the issues raised in the ongoing “Puerto Rican problem” campaign; the Migration Division was established at the University of Puerto Rico on August 14, 1947, to address the immediate problems of the migrants and to provide solutions for future policies.
A third would be to determine the extent to which Puerto Ricans make use of private and public agencies. This information would help the latter to develop programs and techniques to assist the Puerto Rican community. The proposal asserts that in their “continued effort to ensure that the research will serve the needs of the New York agencies,” the research team has established a working arrangement with the Welfare Council of New York. The Council would provide questions to be included in the Columbia survey and, given the Council’s position as coordinating organization for the city’s agencies, “we feel that their close advice on the matter provides a guarantee, so to speak, that our research is being designed for maximum usefulness” (p. 11).

The proposal also argues that it is not enough to develop a census of migrants, but what is needed for “maximum usefulness” to the administrator is information regarding what kinds of possible migrants “are most likely to adjust themselves quickly, under certain conditions, and how many will experience greater difficulties in adjusting themselves. The need of the administrator who would intelligently plan a relocation of people is to be able to predict” what will happen to migrants.
The preliminary report to Piñero, signed by Mills and Senior as Directors, respectively, of the Puerto Rican Study, stated that 1,113 interviews were conducted in Harlem and the Lower East Bronx, selected on some 5,000 persons, making the sample “representative of the Puerto Ricans residing in these areas.” The report—always mindful of the Puerto Rican government’s interests—confirmed that there were three well defined, but overlapping, areas which our study can serve.

I. There are data which can be used to inform the New York public about the Puerto Rican colony in New York City.
II. There are facts which can be used in defining future policy for your government departments.
III. There is information of value to the welfare agencies in New York City, particularly the data on relief.

No recommendations were included in the report because the Bureau said “recommendations are of considerably more value when they are worked out jointly with the people they are intended to help.”
Daisy D. Reck, Special Assistant to the Governor, wrote to Sol L. Descartes, Director of the New York State Planning, Zoning and Urbanizing Board, that she and Sierra Berdecía “believe each and every section should be read thoroughly, otherwise the Puerto Rican government will have no recourse in case there are errors.” Both are “special anxious” that Descartes and Planning Board director Rafael Picó, both members of the Emigration Advisory Committee, read the report and provide comments. She added that if he finds “any major sections which you believe should be changed or reconstructed, then perhaps the group which is reading the report should get together to discuss it.”

Commissioner of Labor Sierra Berdecía presented very detailed comments on the report, as revealed in a memo to Governor Piñero dated November 9th. He felt that the report “is first rate and explodes [sic] many of the erroneous theories held in the United States about Puerto Rican migration to the Continent.” The basis of the “Puerto Rican problem” comes out immediately in his assessment of the migration.

The unfavorable publicity which this country was receiving abroad...
became very influential since then in determining how Puerto Ricans in the United States are perceived.

An important conclusion of The Puerto Rican Journey is presented toward the end of the book:

The Puerto Rican Journey to New York ends in the circumscribed worlds of Spanish Harlem and Morrisania. Neither these worlds, nor the economic transits to them necessarily spur the migrants to make those identifications that form the classic pattern of American migration; it is likely that they will continue to feel estranged, except for the few who gain solidarities with other thinned-out Latin American groups (p. 156).

And so the journey ends: in marginality, alienation, poverty, hopelessness.
some of their own characteristics also promote this outcome. If adaptation
an “inconspicuous functioning with psychic contentment,” Puerto Ricans
have a real chance for adaptation: they do not know English, most are Black,
mixed color, most are women, and they live in their own world of poverty and
marginality. As promised to the Puerto Rican government in their proposal,
presented an “adaptation index” which was supposed to predict which kind
migrant had a better chance of adaptation: a white male, educated, with a skilled job,
and some time of residence in the city (pp. 152–5). What complicates even
adaptation of Puerto Ricans to their new society is their lack of aspirations,
“general poverty of hopefulness” (p. 160), which is transmitted to the new
generations on the mainland.

In the last analysis, and this is how the book concludes, the main factor
explaining the Puerto Rican's hopelessness and impossibility to adapt and
adjust to the new society is cultural.
some unfounded contentions about Puerto Ricans that have lingered on for decades. The notion that Puerto Ricans had no community, no organizational or leadership capabilities became a widespread idea among scholars in the United States. But as several authors have documented, there was a vibrant, organized, and centralized Puerto Rican community before the war. The huge postwar migration could change the community, but it could not eliminate its impact and meaning in the history of Puerto Ricans in New York. As José Sánchez (1994) comments in his critique of The Puerto Rican Journey, the study surveyed migrants, not organizers. And furthermore: “Existing Puerto Rican organizations ‘disappeared’ against the background of the huge tidal wave of migration that occurred after the war.” That Puerto Ricans could organize and provide their own leadership is confirmed by their involvement in the city’s life and politics.

But it was not only the character of the new migration that affected the prewar community for Marcantonio was a major reason why the New York establishment and the Puerto Rican government tried to provide a new political
The Puerto Rican government’s Migration Advisory Committee was established in July to deal with the critical situation created by the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York. Its members were top government officials, including Governor Piñero, Senate president Muñoz Marín, Planning Board head Rafael Picó, Economic Development Administrator Teodoro Moscoso, Secretary of Education Mariano Villalonga, senator Vicente Gémez, and Clarence Senior, among others. Its first meeting was held on July 21st, and its last meeting was on September 11th. Committee meetings revolved around proposals for colonization plans to Brazil, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic, among others. The evidence suggests that Puerto Rican government officials were hesitant to promote a full migration program to the United States and looked for alternative areas for Puerto Rican emigration. It was on the September 11 meeting that a plan for a migration program to the United States was discussed, including the idea for the creation of an “Emigration Office” to manage the migration wave to the mainland. Commissioner of Labor Sierra Berdecía was commissioned to develop such a plan. He spent two months in the United States and found that Puerto Rican colonization plans to Brazil, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic, among other places, did not fit Puerto Rican conditions. The evidence suggests that Puerto Rican government officials were hesitant to promote a full migration program to the United States and looked for alternative areas for Puerto Rican emigration. It was on the September 11 meeting that a plan for a migration program to the United States was discussed, including the idea for the creation of an “Emigration Office” to manage the migration wave to the mainland. Commissioner of Labor Sierra Berdecía was commissioned to develop such a plan. He spent two months in the United States and found that Puerto Rican colonization plans to Brazil, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic, among other places, did not fit Puerto Rican conditions.
situation of Puerto Ricans in the city, prompted by “the greatest influx of Puerto Ricans to New York has ever known.” Its report, issued on February 1948, provided a liberal perspective on the “Puerto Rican problem.” It argued that the situation created by Puerto Rican migrants should not only be seen as a “local” one but also as a “national issue” by the island government. It also contends that many of the “problems” faced by Puerto Ricans in the city, like housing, were due to existing conditions in New York and were not created by the group’s influx. The Welfare Council’s report supported the continued migration of Puerto Ricans to the city since it satisfied an actual demand for labor there and also was helping to deal with Puerto Rico’s social and economic situation. It presented several recommendations in areas of education, employment, and housing to ease Puerto Rican integration into American society. The report advised that Puerto Rican migration be channeled away from New York City into other areas of the United States and proposed the creation of a resettlement program by the federal government to manage their entry into the mainland. Many of the recommendations by the Welfare Council report were later implemented by the Puerto Rican government.
Ricans who have come to New York City during the past four years. Do not get interviews with higher-educated, professional people—we have enough of them.

What we want now are interviews with skilled and unskilled workers, both colored and white; domestic and kitchen, restaurant and food workers, both colored and white.


But even this goal of interviewing recent migrants was not fulfilled, as the book acknowledges that about half of the migrants surveyed came to New York before the end of the war (p. 23).

44 See Vega (1984), Sánchez Korrol (1994), Rodríguez-Fraticelli and Tirado (1989), and Falcón (1984). As Lapp (1991: 101–2) has argued, by “emphasizing the sort of organizational life that seemed to them likely to promote assimilation, such as involvement in local politics and neighborhood clubs, the authors looked for some ‘community’ where it was weakest and ignored it where it was strongest.”

45 Glazer and Moynihan argue that Puerto Ricans are an “Island-centered community” what makes them different from other groups is their continued links to Puerto Rico through circular migration, facilitated by U.S. citizenship and cheap air transportation. It is their attachment to their homeland that makes Puerto Ricans an ethnic group that will not assimilate like previous immigrant groups. Closeness to Puerto Rico explains their lack of organizational capacity, using a “culture of public welfare,” a contention that will promote ever...