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García-Colón, Ismael

Playing and eating democracy: The Case of Puerto Rico's land distribution program, 1940s-1960s

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In the mid-twentieth century,

governments in the United States, Latin America, and other parts of the world carried out radical projects of urban and economic development with the purpose of “modernizing” their populations and industrializing their economies. These projects involved the settlement and resettlement of thousands of people in new cities, neighborhoods, and villages. Their aim was to rationalize urban space in order to foster production (De Janvry 1981; Scott 1998). In the case of Puerto Rico, the insular government, with the consent of the United States government, began to implement policies of land reform and industrialization aimed at transforming an agricultural and rural-based society into an urban and industrial one. One of the government strategies was to establish land distribution communities for the landless population. Land distribution and community development were part of interrelated and changing political economic processes occurring at the local, island, regional, U.S., and international levels. These conditions forced government officials and populist leaders of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party—[PPD]) to revise their strategies within the land distribution by creating new government programs, and more actively promoting those in existence in order to modernize the Island.

The study of land distribution communities is not new. As part of the Puerto Rico project, leading anthropologists such as Elena Padilla and Sidney Mintz conducted fieldwork in these communities during the late 1940s (Padilla 1951, 1956; Mintz 1951, 1956, 1974; Steward et al. 1956). Their ethnographies of Puerto Rico’s land distribution communities were part of a groundbreaking study that attempted to integrate community history into larger regional, national, and global processes (Roseberry 1989: 146–53). Other studies have described the social, legal, and historical aspects of the program (Packard 1948; Edel 1962, 1963; Villar Rocés 1968; Curtis 1965, 1966; Seda Bonilla 1969, 1973; Watlington Linares 1975;



Drawing parcela lots in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.

community education programs, and many other government initiatives that fostered community development and political participation. During the 1950s, government officials inserted land distribution within their policies to industrialize the Island and their particular views about the role that landless families would play in their schemes of industrialization.

By means of land reform, one of the objectives of the PPD was to challenge and destroy the power of the established ruling groups of the 1930s, namely the U.S. sugar corporations and their managers, and political leadership of the Republican and Socialist parties. During the 1930s, the Great Depression, World War II, the militancy of

the Nationalist Party, and the many labor strikes maintained a climate of social unrest, and economic and political instability. The PPD presented itself as the alternative to reform all aspects of society. Using the most popular local and global discourses of reform, the PPD elaborated a discourse of social justice and democracy focused on land reform and distribution. In the 1940 elections, the PPD, as a populist and pro-New Deal political party, emerged as the leading political force, winning most of the municipal governments and controlling the Senate. After forming an alliance with the Unificación Puertorriqueña Tripartita party, it gained the control of the Chamber of Representatives.³ The following year, as a legitimizing gesture, President Roosevelt appointed Rexford G. Tugwell (1941–1946) as governor of the island. Tugwell, a radical New Dealer, strongly believed in the intervention of the economy through planning and was in line with PPD's policies of land reform and industrialization. These gestures continued with President Truman and Congress, allowing the election of a governor by popular suffrage in 1948 and the enactment of a constitution in 1952.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, the PPD together with the U.S. federal government constituted a new ruling coalition that aimed at transforming the

On a typical morning in the eastern highlands of Puerto Rico, women and men belonging to landless families from the countryside and the small town of Cidra woke up around 4:00 am or 5:00 am in the morning. Their daily routine began with simple cup of black coffee, and if they had enough money for food, they would add soda crackers or cornmeal. In some cases, they had to walk an hour to their jobs and work from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. Friday, August 31, 1945, however, was a unique day for them; for they were going to be participants of a land distribution by lottery that the Puerto Rican government had scheduled. The possibility of winning a plot of land as a prize represented a dramatic change in their lives. Most of landless workers had to toil to cultivate the land and perform heavy agricultural tasks, such as cutting sugar cane, picking coffee, or sewing tobacco for long hours. Without any protection, they were at the mercy of their employers, who also provided their housing. Land distribution was an opportunity for landless workers to end those abuses and improve their lives.

The lotteries were a culmination of a rising discursive formation about social justice and the evils of monocrop cultivation. PPD leaders knew that landlessness was a big problem and any efforts to resolve this problem would find support among the rural population. To illustrate this point, the discourses of landless workers about their needs and efforts to overcome hardship reveal the importance of owning land and land distribution. Former landless workers expressed that their aspirations in those days were to *buscar ambiente* (to look for a place with better economic and social opportunities) and *tener con que comer y donde vivir* (to have the wherewithal to eat and live). Landless families suffered from inadequate housing, short life expectancy, endemic diseases, and malnutrition. Lack of food and medical care exacerbated their harsh living conditions. In the crowd, the enthusiasm of landless families ran high as they expected to be vindicated by obtaining land, their symbol of freedom.



joined in the ceremony, which had overtones of a political rally or even a festival because of the music, and alcoholic beverages behind the scenes. The ceremony closed with the lottery. The officials in charge had a bag with bundles of paper from which the candidates would pick one, and if that bundle had a number, they won the plot with that specific number.

Government discourses express the fairness and transparency of the process of selecting candidates and distributing the land. In order to participate in the program, landless workers had to apply in the municipal hall. Government officials were the ones to determine who qualified for the program. The principal requirement was to be the landless head of a household and a wage earner living in a house built on another person's rural land (Autoridad de Tierras [1948?]: 101). In practice, the government also accepted landless workers who did not work in agriculture and lived in urban areas. They also gave priority to the landless workers already residing in the lands to be distributed, and people from whom the government had expropriated land for other projects.

Land distribution overall did not immediately resolve the problem of landlessness in Puerto Rico. While some recipients of land stayed in their new communities, others left the communities to become landless workers or to migrate to the cities and the United States. Fundadora and Monserrate are two interesting examples of women and former landless workers who were recipients of land. Their lives reflect the different journeys of former landless families after obtaining a parcel. In the 1930s, Fundadora was living with her first husband in the municipality of Naranjito in the central highlands of Puerto Rico. Her husband got sick and she maintained the household by washing clothes for the town's elite. Because of her husband's illness and the low income, they were *pasando hambre* (experiencing hunger) and decided to move to the municipality of Cidra, where her parents lived and worked in a tobacco farm. Eventually, her husband died from lack of medical care. Later, she was able to find a job as a domestic employee in the house of Luis Lugo, Cidra's postmaster.

During the lottery drawing, government officials gave priority to widows like Fundadora, and she had the privilege of being the first person to draw a number, and she won a plot in the Parcelas Gándaras. Ironically, Fundadora and her family left the community in the late 1940s because of interpersonal problems with neighbors. With the money from the improvements made to the parcela and the house they built, they bought a house in a working class sector of town. However, they sold it eventually and moved frequently, sometimes renting houses, or becoming landless again. Pastor, her second husband, migrated to Miami in the 1970s and 1980s, and this allowed them to buy a piece of land in Cidra and to end their frequent moves.

Unlike Fundadora, Monserrate remained in the same parcela her husband Rosendo received from the land distribution program in the 1940s. She was a former *agregada* from the Gándara family, the family that the government expropriated land from to

The integrity of the land distribution process was also questionable. According to a PPD member, the organizers of the lotteries intentionally gave some PPD members a piece of paper with a parcela number which they pretended to draw from the lottery bag. He also claims that PPD officials offered him a parcela through this method.

Another important aspect is that the government did not distribute all of the parcelas through the lottery. In the case of Parcelas Gándaras, many people who received parcelas did not participate in the lottery. Government agencies were expropriating land where people lived and the government set aside some parcelas for them. In Parcelas Gándaras, some of the residents had been displaced by a government project to build the artificial lake in Cidra. For example, Eduardo and many other residents received land as an exchange from government expropriations in the Miramonte sector of the municipality. In the end, land distribution was not solely an act of giving land to “liberate” landless workers and obtain electoral support, but a process that benefited particular interests. Political favors, manipulation of the list of candidates, and the resettlement of expropriated small landowners raises questions about the extent that land distribution was really about liberating landless workers from their dependence on landowners. What happened was that workers became dependent on the political patronage of PPD leaders. The lottery and its ceremony was a way by which government officials and PPD leaders could present the distribution process as a symbol of democratic practice and popular participation, rather than for what it really was.

The ceremonies of land distribution reflected the ideas of agrarian reform and social justice throughout the Americas, from the Mexican agrarian reform to Roosevelt’s New Deal. The rhetoric of liberation echoed the populist and radical leftist discourse of social justice in Latin America. However, distributing land was a political process vitiated by frequent exceptions to the rules. Despite such irregularities, the act of distributing land changed the lives of thousands of former landless families. Those who had access to the lottery and won a parcel gained the opportunity to find new ways to improve their living conditions. They also found new ways to play the democratic game. For the many landless families that were mere spectators, the “PPD fulfilled its promises.” Thus, landless families and residents of land distribution communities became strong political supporters of the PPD, giving legitimacy to its government at home and abroad.

Cold war diets

Part of the government’s strategies for creating new citizens was to promote and create community organizations, print posters, publish literature, and release films. PPD leaders and government officials utilized these educational materials to encourage leadership and self-help in order to facilitate community development.

Encouraging residents' involvement, the agency worked to educate them about their role as workers and citizens in a democratic and capitalist society. The government expected the population to willingly build the infrastructure needed by the country and participate in the government programs of self-help and development. The goals of the APS were to promote leadership, mutual aid, and social responsibility as keys to fostering a labor force socially responsible as well as physically healthy. This agency established committees that sought to find solutions for community problems, such as lack of potable water, electricity, bridges, and roads or inadequate housing and access to health care. The committees appointed leaders that served as liaisons between the government and the community. The APS sought to foster social cohesion and collaboration through the establishment of self-help committees, milk stations, cooperatives, and small-scale industries. Social cohesion and collaboration increased in importance when agricultural production began to decline and industrialization was expanding. The results of APS's efforts were to expand civil society, gain consent from subalterns, and foster economic development (Departamento de Agricultura y Comercio de Puerto Rico 1953: 11–36, 1958: 242; Edel 1963: 30).

Other agencies and programs used those committees as tools to promote different aspects of community development. Another government agency, the División de Educación de la Comunidad (Division of Community Education [DIVEDCO]),



under the Department of Education, provided films, posters, and literature in order to encourage hygiene, community leadership, and political participation. Other programs such as Mutual Aid and the 4H Clubs attempted to transform the lives of residents by improving their health and socioeconomic conditions. Some of these programs were already in place and the government integrated them to the land distribution program.

Providing land did not change the precarious housing conditions of former landless families. Residents had to build

(Wale and Isales 1967: 7; Rivera de Otero 1976: 49–51). Among the books produced were *La mujer y sus derechos*, *El arrabal*, *La ciudad*, *El líder*, *Lucha obrera*, and *Los derechos del hombre*. These educational materials addressed topics of leadership, development, health and hygiene, and cooperation and self-help to resolve social problems. The goal was to provide residents with new knowledge and make them reflect upon their own experiences. Francisco, DIVEDCO's agent in charge of Parcelas Gándaras, remembers that awareness about contagious diseases through these educational materials were one of the most important success of the program. Government officials conceptualized community development as a process in which the population would participate in the resolution of their problems (Rivera de Otero 1976: 26, 49–51).

As an example, the topic of leadership in the books and films sought to transmit “democratic values.” The government wanted Puerto Ricans to understand the concept of liberal democracy and participation in the electoral process. The purpose was to introduce new forms of behavior and facilitate the transition from a rural order to an urban, industrial one. The films presented discourses about how people could improve their living conditions by taking action in their hands and build infrastructure, such as sanitary facilities, sewers, roads, community centers, and schools (Wale and Isales 1967; Rivera de Otero 1976: 49–51; Lauria Perricelli 1990–91: 93–6).⁷

DIVEDCO, together with the APS, created action groups to foster leadership and participation in community projects. In Parcelas Gándaras, DIVEDCO's officials working in the community arranged community meetings and discussion groups at the house of Blas, the community leader, or in the house of Elmer Ellsworth, an important PPD leader and landowner. The program made parcela residents aware that they could resolve their problems through collective efforts. The program taught residents how to use government services and approach government officials with concerns. Residents of Parcelas Gándaras began to discover new ways to deal with the government. They held meetings, created committees, and went to the government authorities with requests. For example, Monserrate, a long-time resident, remembers how the lack of access to potable water impelled neighbors to form a committee, write letters, and protest to municipal and government authorities. Community education taught residents to deal with the government to obtain aid that they could complement with cooperation in building community projects. Yet community education was a way in which residents might become more dependent on government help and learn how to channel grievances through institutional channels without aiming at the transformation of their society.

The state also engineered consent through their participation in development and their direct access to government and party politics. Some residents remember with enthusiasm how community meetings and neighborhood committees gave them a voice

chickens, cattle, and pigs. Some of them went to work with farmers earning cash for their families. Adults from the community such as Blas volunteered helping and teaching members. The success of these clubs depended on the support of government officials, residents in the community, and the enthusiasm of members (Orcasitas 1936: 308–10; Universidad de Puerto Rico 1943: 3).

Socialization of children in 4H clubs by means of exposure to parliamentary process and cooperation was an attempt by the government to ensure its authority and control. A pamphlet about organizing clubs states, “The youth of a democratic government should learn to work in teams and, therefore, to behave in a constructive and prudent manner. In the United States, the youth should get accustomed to working in teams that function within democratic principles from an early age. In this way, they learn how to work with others contributing their best ideas when the team makes

a decision, disregarding selfish interests for the good of all, and finally, learning to accept the will of the majority.”⁹ The government’s discourses about democracy aimed at the creation of social cohesion in the new communities, as an element of social engineering that could introduce and transform everyday life and reproduce new power relations among workers, party bosses, and government officials.

Among the materials distributed among 4H Clubs was a brochure, entitled *Dieta y democracia* (Diet and Democracy), that offered a nutritional guide specifically for citizens in a democratic society.¹⁰ Inside the brochure, the subtitles read: “democracy needs healthy citizens” and “maintain your health with a good diet.” It listed the different food groups that maintain bodily functions, reproduce tissue, and provide energy. The front of the cover showed the U.S. and 4H Club flags. The Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Puerto Rico published it in 1947.

The brochure *Dieta y democracia* illustrates the way that U.S. federal government



Land Authority officials explaining the procedure before the drawing for parcels in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.

32). Nevertheless, residents engaged community education programs by giving priority to their immediate survival needs. For example, the Mutual Aid program did not teach about cooperation and self-help to those residents who could pay for the labor instead of working themselves on their houses. Community education instilled political patronage and intolerance instead of participation and critical thinking. 4H clubs taught agriculture to children, but migration took people away from the countryside, and industrial manufacture and service sectors were becoming the principal employment sources. Residents also utilized their networks in the community to resolve their problems. At last, the government efforts to create community cohesion failed with community education. Sharing food, and knowing and visiting their neighbors, and taking care of elders are not important anymore for social reproduction. In post-Operation Bootstrap Puerto Rico, networks of solidarity slowly became obsolete in land distribution communities.



Spectators at the drawing of lots for parcels in Luquillo (June 1947). Photographer Charles Rotkin.

Fragmented democracy

The land distribution program, more than a vehicle for obtaining electoral votes, was an attempt at transforming the everyday life of landless workers with the purpose of developing the Island. Those development strategies confronted moments of tension, however, and points of rupture between government officials and PPD leaders, landless workers, and residents of land distribution communities. The PPD policies were not part of a cohesive and homogenous project. They were the result of different competing interests, international and

local conditions, and workers' claims and involvement.

The ceremonies of distribution enacted as acts of democracy against corporate interests are examples of the strategies used to build support among landless families. The landless, as well as technocrats, considered land distribution to be progress and a form of liberation from precarious living conditions. Nevertheless, the manipulation of the lotteries and the recommendation of candidates by politicians are examples of corruption and the lack of democracy in practice. Self-help programs and community cooperation were part of the PPD's efforts to articulate a centralized policy through the APS. Government agencies became a vehicle for expanding civil society by fostering industrialization, economic growth, and urbanization.

The policies of land distribution were unsuccessful in transforming landless workers

NOTES

¹ Although Gramsci (1971) uses subalterns as a synonym of working class, my definition of subalterns includes workers as well as impoverished small landholders who practiced subsistence and small-scale cash crop agriculture. I consider that rich landowners, professionals, government employees, creditors, and merchants represented the local elite in Puerto Rico's small towns.

² The Land Law of 1941 also included: Title IV, which established Proportional Profit Farms where managers and workers share all the profits; and Title VI, which distributed individual farms to landless workers (Autoridad de Tierras [1948?]: 17–79).

³ On July 14, 1940, the Laborista Puro (Pure Labor), Liberal and Unión Republicana Progresista (Progressive Republican Union) parties established a coalition known as the Unificación Tripartita Puertorriqueña. The Laborista Puro and Unión Republicana Progresista represented splinter groups respectively from the Socialist and Republican parties. The Liberal Party grouped the remainder of liberal sectors that accepted a pro-statehood political program after the death of its leader Antonio R. Barceló (Bayrón Toro 2003: 193).

⁴ John F. Kennedy Library, Teodoro Moscoso Papers, Correspondence, Box 4, File 10/61.

⁵ Archivo Luis Muñoz Marín (ALMM), Sección IV, Serie 2, Subserie 14, Addendum 14 B, Cartapacio 1, Press Release, Land Distribution of Parcelas Gándaras.

⁶ On July 17, 1957, Juan Ortiz Rivera, President of the PPD committee in Rabanal, wrote a letter to the government on behalf of Josefa Figueroa Rivera. Ms. Figueroa was living under critical conditions. She lived with her nine children in one room. See Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, Caja 360, Exp. tercero.

⁷ These movies are located at the Archivo de Imágenes en Movimiento, AGPR.

⁸ 4H stands for head, heart, health, and hands. ALMM, Sección IV, Serie 10, Subserie 19, Cartapacio 184.

⁹ La juventud de un gobierno democrático debe aprender a trabajar en grupos y, como tales, a actuar en forma constructiva y mesurada. En los Estados Unidos la juventud debe acostumbrarse desde muy temprana edad a actuar en grupos que funcionen dentro de los principios democráticos. Así aprenden a trabajar con los demás, aportando sus mejores ideas al hacer el grupo alguna decisión, desechando intereses egoístas por el bien de todos y, finalmente, aprenden a acatar la voluntad de la mayoría (Universidad de Puerto Rico 1943: 33).

¹⁰ This document was located at the Library Files of the Agriculture Experimental Station, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

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