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Reseña de "Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898" de César J. Ayala y Rafael Bernabe
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37720123
Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898
By César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe
428 pages; $29.95 [cloth]
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This work offers a comprehensive overview of Puerto Rican history during the 20th century. Academics, students, and general readers will find in this book a helpful tool to probe the intricacies of Puerto Rican history, comprising diaspora communities in the United States. This supersedes traditional perspectives, centered on Puerto Ricans in the island. Secondly, unlike other works, focused on politics and economy, *Puerto Rico in the American Century (PRAC)* encompasses social and cultural history as well. Finally, although the authors engage in polemical issues, the book is generally balanced. This, for sure, is no small feat.

But what’s the story told by César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe? What are, according to them, the main threads of Puerto Rican history during the “American century”? What are the underpinnings of their narrative? In my view, Caribbean historiography turns around four “grand narratives”: (1) geopolitics, (2) economic backwardness or dependency, (3) the problem of identity, and (4) the resistances of the subalterns. Each one of these “metanarratives” constitutes a different form of conceiving Caribbean history, based on a specific interpretive paradigm. In any work, these paradigms are intertwined; still, one of them is paramount, acting as master trope. *PRAC* is no exception to this principle; in it, economic dependency acts as master narrative. This is evident in the conceptual and chronological setting of the author’s story. According to Ayala and Bernabe, Puerto Rican history in the 20th century could be broken down “into two distinct epochs: before and after World War II” (p. 2). They interpret these periods in the context of the longer “waves” of international capitalism. “Each epoch exhibits two distinguishable phases: an initial period
of economic expansion in which productive and state structures, dominant political parties, and labor organizations are put in place, and a succeeding phase of economic slowdown in which established structures and institutions are subjected to increased stress." Thus, while 1898–1930 and 1950–75 were "phases of expansion," 1930–50 and "between 1975 to the present" are conceived as "periods of slowdown or crisis."

On the other hand, Ayala and Bernabe argue that although U.S. imperialism did not become "a formal colonial empire" because its rise to power "implied a decoupling of economic and territorial expansion," Puerto Rico was "an exception to the rule, [becoming] neither part of the United States nor of its informal empire" (p. 30). During the first decades of the 20th century, sugar, tobacco, the needlework industry, and even coffee (allegedly the economic bastion of local *baccendados*) came to be dominated by American business or subjected to U.S. policies. Puerto Rico, therefore, resembled other Caribbean and Latin American countries whose economies were export oriented and foreign dominated. In addition, Puerto Rican politics was entangled with U.S. power structures, and political parties became gripped with the "status problem," that is, the relationship with the United States. This imbroglio was heightened after 1917 when Puerto Ricans were declared U.S. citizens. Creole elites and politicians, American bureaucrats, as well as workers' and women's organizations became actors of the struggles and conflicts that took place during the first decades of the "American century."

Most of this should be standard knowledge for academics. But the less informed reader will find in these pages a well organized text that covers a good deal of terrain. In the first chapters of the book I consider most innovative the discussions about "racism and imperialism," the early emigration to the United States, and cultural debates already begun by the early 20th century. Ayala and Bernabe made a commendable effort to include lesser-known or noncanonical figures, rescuing from oblivion intellectuals and views that challenged dominant ideas about the nation, social relations, economy, gender roles, literature, and cultural production. Cultural and political debates were particularly intensive during the 1930s. In the midst of the Great Depression, the Generación del 30 pondered "Puerto Rican identity" and outlined an agenda for the future. Most of the participants in these debates shared common ideas about the origins of Puerto Rican ills: "Americanization," dependence on sugar monoculture, and land concentration. They disagreed, though, on the ways of overcoming these maladies.

This was the case of Pedro Albizu Campos and Luis Muñoz Marín, the emblematic figures of *independetismo* and *autonomismo*. Seemingly, the authors of *PRAC* side with the *albizuista* view of Puerto Rican politics, as evidenced by their claim—following Albizu Campos—that politics in the 20th century "was characterized by the clash of two variants of accommodation to U.S. rule": annexionism and autonomism (p. 130). Still, Muñoz Marín's views were triumphant, thanks in part to the Partido Nacionalista's lack of massive support and the persecution it suffered. Other factors contributed as well to the rising to power of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD). The New Deal, for instance, served as a launching platform for Muñoz Marín's political career. However, Ayala and Bernabe give a cursory treatment to the New Deal and some of its spin-offs. This is also the case of other historical processes that took place in the 1930s-40s. For instance, the authors barely discuss the involvement of the *nacionalistas* in the sugar-workers' strike of 1934. This, to say the least, is astonishing since that event was a crucial juncture for workers and nationalists alike. What would have happened, José Luis González
mused decades ago, if the nacionalistas had established strong links with the labor movement—which, obviously, they did not?

The 1930s–40s were crucial years, and its leading figures became icons of current political ideologies and movements. For this reason, some key topics of that period deserved further development. Among other things, I found lacking an explanation of Albizu Campos’s switch from electoral politics to a confrontational stand against U.S. rule. On the other hand, the authors’ treatment of the 1940 election is rather conventional, bypassing some of its most profound (and socially progressive) implications. Might it be possible to claim that the PPD transformed the electoral campaign in a truly civic crusade, not unlike some of the civic struggles undergone by Puerto Ricans of the diaspora, rightly brought to light by Ayala and Bernabe?

Moreover, the authors missed the opportunity to scrutinize Muñoz Marín’s ideological background following their own proposal about the relevance of the diasporic experience. Was not Muñoz Marín one of the first Puerto Ricans to grow up in the United States—a sort of Nuyorican avant la lettre? Were not his outlooks a blend of creole and U.S. liberal and democratic (even radical) thought? This perspective might contribute to override the analytically poor notion of Muñoz Marín as “traitor” to independence. It would also shed new light on Puerto Rico’s economic and social transformations after 1940.

Regarding this topic, Ayala and Bernabe claim that in spite of his many “twists and turns, there is an evident continuity to Muñoz Marín’s trajectory”: “an unshakeable attachment” to the United States “as the only possible guarantor of Puerto Rico’s progress” (p. 151). According to them, this trait distinguishes Muñoz Marín and the PPD from other Latin American populist projects, which, allegedly, distanced themselves from (or broke with) metropolitan powers. However, their comparison with Argentinean peronismo, Brazilian varguismo, and Mexican cardenismo is misleading. A fair comparison should contrast Muñoz Marín and the PPD with like leaders and movements in the Caribbean. Puerto Rico’s evolution, the authors claim elsewhere, “cannot be divorced” from its Caribbean context (p. 323)—and I cannot agree more with them. Therefore, factors such as the countries’ size and resources, economic and social structures, and geopolitical realities matter after all! From a Caribbean perspective, the PPD’s type of populism does not appear so odd or at variance from a regional trend, as Gordon Lewis demonstrated several decades ago—an author ignored by Ayala and Bernabe in their discussion of this matter.

In any case, it was certainly under U.S. patronage that the PPD initiated the making of modern Puerto Rico from the 1940s on. Both industrialization and the establishment of the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA) were favored by the conditions of the postwar. The ELA, the authors argue, was the outcome of a variety of actors and their respective agendas. The United States sought to keep its hold upon Puerto Rico while persuading the international community that it no longer was under colonial rule. On the other hand, “Muñoz Marín hoped to extract a noncolonial status from Congress without it realizing it” (p. 162). The PPD was unable to accomplish this obviously naive agenda, and the ELA was distrusted since its foundation in 1952. Nationalists, for instance, perceived it as a ploy to conceal Puerto Rico’s colonial status. This led them to armed revolt. In the end, the new status did not alter the island’s colonial situation, although “dissatisfaction with the ELA has so far resulted in the growth of the statehood not of the independence movement” (p. 178). Ayala and Bernabe affirm that this leaning is an outcome of what they dub the “Tydings effect”: the popular perception that “independence is possible but miserable.”
This notion was reinforced by the increased well-being of the Puerto Ricans during the second half of the century. In spite of its contradictions—for instance, its huge dependence on U.S. capital or its incapacity to check unemployment—industrialization radically transformed Puerto Rican society. Thus, in the 1950s–60s agriculture receded while manufacturing became dominant. Puerto Rico’s economic makeover was part of the expansion of world capitalism that lasted till the 1960s. Still, “the insular productive landscape” retained “its underlying colonial and dependent nature” (p. 179).

Social reforms were likewise contradictory or ineffectual. In the first place, “PPD reforms had a clear top-down dynamic” and “changes brought about were not the result of a broad social movement of the rural population from below” (p. 183). This was the result of several factors—such as the PPD’s “respect for private property,” its “collaboration with Washington,” and “its inclusion of conservative [social] sectors”—that hampered the government’s social programs. A case in point is the hailed agrarian reform, which failed to modify “the overall structure of land tenure,” though “it freed thousands of agregado [squatter] families from the politico-economic clutches of the landowners” (p. 186). The distribution of residential plots (parcelas) also contributed to tackle the housing problem, rampant among the rural population. But the PPD missed the opportunity “of creating a more diversified agriculture and a healthier link between rural and urban development” (p. 186).

Urbanization spread as an upshot of the PPD’s economic policies. Operation Bootstrap attracted factories from abroad, industrial jobs increased, urbanization expanded, rural to urban migration swelled, and migration to the United States soared. Conceiving overpopulation as a burden to economic growth, the government favored migration as a way of relieving productive factors and, therefore, facilitating industrialization. Severed from the homeland, Puerto Ricans in the United States suffered inequality, low income, shameful living conditions, and all sorts of discrimination. Still, Puerto Ricans formed vibrant communities thanks to their social and political activism and their cultural life. Buttressed by a strong identity and seeking equality and justice, Puerto Ricans participated in formal politics and in less conventional forms of activism. Such was the case of the Young Lords in the 1970s and of the clandestine groups that sought Puerto Rico’s independence.

Eventually the cultural, political, and social endeavors of the diaspora impinged the island community. Puerto Ricans in the States were crucial in remaking Puerto Rican culture, especially from the 1960s on, when their influence became most palpable. In the 1950s–60s, there emerged a new cohort of writers and artists who became critical voices addressing the process of modernization and the island’s colonial situation; they also expressed the distress produced by emigration.

On the other hand, the PPD was promoting an official interpretation of Puerto Rico’s culture and history. Agencies such as the Departamento de Instrucción Pública, the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, and even, it might be added, the Departments of Hispanic Studies and History of the University of Puerto Rico—the latter two characterized by a traditional outlook—tried to generate a consensus about Puerto Rican culture. This conception acted as a blueprint for educational, artistic, literary, historical, and research programs in general.

Meanwhile, the island community was going through sweeping transformations. Even the most adamant aspects of Puerto Rican society underwent far-reaching mutations. Thus, after three decades in power, the PPD was defeated in 1968; from
then on, the PPD and the newly founded Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP) have been alternating in power. The demise of the PPD and the growth of the PNP were outcomes of social transformations. As the rural population diminished, the PPD lost its electoral stronghold, while the PNP gained support among the increasing urban population. The budding middle classes and the urban poor and working classes identified “progress” with the “American way of life,” which contributed to the rise of the PNP. The Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP), founded in the 1940s, also dwindled in the 1950s because of the rural-to-urban shift. Attuned with ideological trends elsewhere, in the 1960s–70s independentismo was influenced by radical anti-imperialism, third-world nationalism, and socialism. University students, workers’ organizations, and several social movements boosted the PIP, the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI), and, later on, the Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (PSP). Accordingly, social and political conflicts escalated in those years.

This seemed to augur a brighter future for the cause of independence and for social movements. However, the wave of neoliberalism that dominated the world since the 1980s swept away that chance. It also undermined the foundations of Puerto Rico’s economy. The productive infrastructure shrank as factories moved elsewhere; thus, the island economy is currently dominated by a few high-tech multinationals, banking, and commercial enterprises. On the other hand, Puerto Ricans haven’t been able to build a consensus on the “status question,” and the United States has been reluctant to assume a crystal-clear position on the island’s political dilemma. The current panorama, the authors conclude, is of “economic stagnation and political deadlock.” But the Puerto Rican’s combative will hasn’t abated—not at all, according to the photos included in PRAC, which thrive in strikes and protest rallies! During the 1990s, when the PNP hastened privatization and aggressively pressed for statehood, workers, students, and activists of a variety of social causes, as well as citizens from different political stances, took to the streets to protest. One of the most resounding and prolonged struggles had as its target the U.S. Navy and its practices in the island-municipality of Vieques.

Puerto Ricans in the United States also suffered the blow of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. In cities like New York, Chicago, and Hartford, they had to confront housing, health, educational, and economic policies that harmed their communities (or their sense of identity) or slashed welfare benefits. Meanwhile, the Puerto Rican population in the United States underwent modifications, like its geographical distribution. Currently the state of Florida shows the most significant increase of Puerto Ricans in the United States, fostered by migration from the island and other states. This is an example of the wider migration trends that affected Puerto Rico during the last decades. Another indicator is the increased migration to Puerto Rico from the Dominican Republic, a movement that added to the presence of Cubans, who arrived to the island beginning in the 1960s. This migration, the authors claim, shows the Caribbean nature of Puerto Rican society. Yet Dominicans in Puerto Rico are discriminated for economic, social, cultural, and even racial motives.

Puerto Rican culture has also been influenced by late-century trends. Ayala and Bernabe remark that while “the support for statehood” increased during the last decades of the 20th century, Puerto Ricans developed a stronger sense “as a distinct cultural entity” (p. 318). This sense of identity—conspicuous in music, art, literature, sports, and politics, but also in publicity and marketing—evolved into what has been dubbed “neonationalism.” One of the core themes in recent cultural debates, neonationalism has been challenged by postmodernists, who question
“master narratives” such as the nation. Neonationalism and postmodernism acted as opposing forces in the cultural debates of the 1990s, even though both “share an implicit premise: their parallel farewells to an anticapitalist, socialist vision.” To these “farewells” the authors of PRAC reply following a third (shining?) path, a trend “that largely shares the postmodern critique of nationalism, fully shares its enthusiasm for an increasingly transnational culture, and makes the struggle against nonclass forms of oppression (gay/lesbian, for example) its own, but that, unlike both the nationalist and postmodern creeds, insists on the need for a radical transformation of existing political, social, and economic structures as part of a global anticapitalist project” (p. 332).

Hence Puerto Rico’s hopes for social and political transformation rest largely on antisystemic trends and movements all over the world, which “bring to the fore old questions that some postmodern commentators had dismissed as belonging to the past” (p. 333). In the conclusion of their work, Ayala and Bernabe further develop this argument, claiming for Puerto Rico’s independence and reordering following a socialist agenda. In this line of reasoning, I think, underlies a quirk of fate. As I mentioned before, Ayala and Bernabe censured Muñoz Marín for relying on the United States—that is, an external force—for the remaking of Puerto Rico’s society. Yet the authors of PRAC advocate a course of action that is not very different. For them, Puerto Rico’s future is also dependent on external forces, including—alas!—Hugo Chávez’s “Bolivarian Revolution”. The beliefs, needs, desires, wishes, and agency of the Puerto Rican people play a small role in this foretelling.

Finally, their discussion neglects, once again, the Caribbean, that context from which, they claim, Puerto Rico ought not to be divorced. As is widely acknowledged, the Cuban Revolution had direct bearings on Puerto Rico’s economic renovation. What impact, consequently, would a change in Cuba’s political regime—a not so distant scenario—have on Puerto Rico’s economy and, thus, on its political situation? These questions, derived from what are key trends in Caribbean history—indeed in the region’s colonial experience—deserve close scrutiny in any discussion of Puerto Rico’s future.

No doubt: PRAC is a provocative work. As the icing on the cake, it includes a valuable bibliographical essay, full of judicious remarks on dozens of books and articles. Yet, even the authors’ use of sources brings about some surprises. For instance, Sidney Mintz, a precursor in the study of Puerto Rico’s working classes, is relegated in the text to an inconsequential endnote. Likewise, Gordon Lewis’s Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean (1963), in my opinion PRAC’s nearest predecessor, is omitted from the bibliographical essay. And in the text itself, Lewis is referred to only briefly to punch him—once again!—for calling Puerto Rican nationalists fascists and for his political “ambiguity” (perhaps meaning that Lewis’s views do not conform to the authors’). Another striking omission is José Rodríguez Vázquez’s El sueño que no cesa: La nación deseada en el debate intelectual y político puertorriqueño, 1920-1940 (2004). As far as I know, this is the best study of Puerto Rican nationalism; it poses, though, quandaries to some of Ayala and Bernabe’s key arguments. They should have given serious thought to it—which obviously they did not.

All in all, PRAC is a landmark work. Thus, why not dedicate a special number of CENTRO Journal to it? It would be an unequaled occasion to ponder key questions about Puerto Rico’s past and future. It might also foster something unusual and sorely needed, at least in Puerto Rico: frank, honest, and, hopefully, painstaking debate.