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ANTHROPOLOGY IN A POSTCOLONIAL COLONY: HELEN I. SAFA'S CONTRIBUTION TO PUERTO RICAN ETHNOGRAPHY

Jorge Duany

ABSTRACT

This article assesses Helen I. Safa's legacy to anthropological thought in Puerto Rico. The first part of the article locates Safa's research on the Island within a long tradition of fieldwork by U.S. scholars since the early twentieth century. More recent research, conducted mostly by Puerto Rican women anthropologists and other social scientists, has expanded upon Safa's insights on gender and work. The second part of the essay analyzes Safa's major empirical work, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*. Above all, this book helped overcome the theoretical impasse over the culture of poverty that characterized much of urban anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s. The article concludes with an appraisal of the relevance of Safa's work for the ethnography of contemporary Puerto Rico.

Keywords: Helen I. Safa, urban poor, ethnography, fieldwork, Puerto Rico

RESUMEN

Este artículo evalúa el legado de Helen I. Safa al pensamiento antropológico en Puerto Rico. La primera parte del artículo sitúa la investigación de Safa sobre la Isla dentro de una larga tradición de trabajo de campo por académicos estadounidenses desde principios del siglo XX. Investigaciones más recientes, realizadas mayormente por antropólogas y otras científicas sociales puertorriqueñas, han ampliado los aportes de Safa sobre género y trabajo. La segunda parte del ensayo analiza la principal obra empírica de Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*. Sobre todo, este libro ayudó a superar el callejón sin salida teórica sobre la cultura de la pobreza que caracterizó a gran parte de la antropología urbana durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970. El artículo concluye con una apreciación de la pertinencia de la obra de Safa para la etnografía del Puerto Rico contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Helen I. Safa, pobreza urbana, etnografía, trabajo de campo, Puerto Rico

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article évalue l'apport d'Helen I. Safa à la pensée anthropologique sur Porto Rico. La première partie de l'article situe la recherche de Safa sur l'Île, au sein d'une longue tradition de travail sur le terrain par les érudits nord-américains depuis le début du XXe siècle. Des recherches plus récentes, menées surtout par des femmes portoricaines, anthropologues et d'autres spécialistes en sciences sociales, ont développé les aperçus de Safa sur les femmes et le travail. La deuxième partie de l'essai analyse la principale étude empirique de Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico : A Study in Development and Inequality*. Par-dessus tout, ce livre a aidé à surmonter l'impasse théorique sur la culture de la pauvreté qui a caractérisé une grande partie de l'anthropologie urbaine pendant les années 1960 et 1970. L'article se termine par une appréciation de la pertinence de l'ouvrage de Safa pour l'ethnographie portoricaine contemporaine.

Mots-clés: Helen I. Safa, pauvres en milieu urbain, ethnographie, travail sur le terrain, Porto Rico

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As part of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, the United States invaded Puerto Rico and has since dominated the Island militarily, politically, and economically. During the first half of the twentieth century, U.S. colonial discourse often depicted Puerto Ricans as a backward, childlike, and effeminate people in need of tutelage and assimilation by Anglo-Saxon civilization (Thompson 2010). Today, U.S. popular culture pervades the Island, from the influence of the English language on the Spanish vernacular to the homegrown varieties of Pentecostal churches and the proliferation of fast-food restaurants. Puerto Rico currently retains many colonial ties with the United States—as evidenced, for instance, in its extreme dependence on massive transfer payments from the federal government. In some respects, however, the Island does not fit the conventional image of colonial societies such as the ones that British and French anthropologists studied before World War II. Contemporary Puerto Rico enjoys a greater degree of self-government than most classic colonies.

In 1952, Puerto Rico became a U.S. Commonwealth (or *Estado Libre Asociado*, in Spanish), with limited autonomy over local matters, such as taxation, education, health, housing, culture, and language. However, the federal government retained jurisdiction in most state affairs, including citizenship, immigration, customs, defense, currency, transportation, communications, foreign trade, and diplomacy. Puerto Ricans on the Island cannot vote for the U.S. president or vice-president, or elect

voting representatives to the U.S. Congress. The Island resembles a “postcolonial colony,”¹ combining traditional elements of colonial rule with political autonomy, a relatively high standard of living, and a strong national culture.

As in other countries, the beginnings of anthropology in Puerto Rico were closely linked with imperialism (Gough 1968). Between 1898 and 1945, U.S. expansionism encouraged fieldwork in the overseas territories of the Caribbean and the Pacific, especially the Philippines. In the postwar period, the discipline became increasingly “decolonized,” with the rise of a new generation of Puerto Rican intellectuals educated primarily in U.S. universities. Several U.S. scholars, such as Helen I. Safa, served as transition figures between the colonial and “postcolonial” eras in Puerto Rican anthropology. As Safa’s trajectory illustrates, the influence of Marxist and feminist thought grew in the discipline during the 1960s and 1970s. Although these ideas have been increasingly scrutinized, they played a major role in the intellectual genealogy of the social sciences on the Island.

This article assesses Safa’s legacy to anthropological thought in Puerto Rico. In the first part of the article, I locate Safa’s research on the Island within a long tradition of fieldwork by U.S. scholars since the early twentieth century. More recent research, conducted mostly by Puerto Rican women anthropologists and other social scientists, has expanded upon Safa’s insights on gender and work (see, e.g., Acevedo 1999; Baerga 1993; Colón et al. 2008; Pérez- Herranz 1996; Toro-Morn 2001). The second part of the essay analyzes Safa’s major empirical work, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*. Above all, this book helped overcome the theoretical impasse over the culture of poverty that characterized much of urban anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s. Because other contributors to this volume deal with Safa’s feminist research agenda, I do not dwell on that topic here (see especially the article by Alice Colón-Warren). I conclude with an appraisal of the relevance of Safa’s work for the ethnography of contemporary Puerto Rico.²

From U.S. Colonial Anthropology to Puerto Rican Anthropology

Several cohorts of U.S. anthropologists preceded Safa’s arrival in Puerto Rico in the 1950s. During the first half of the twentieth century, U.S. scholars displaced an incipient local tradition of academic research on the Island’s archaeology and folklore. Prominent U.S. anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Jesse Walter Fewkes, William H. McGee, and Otis T. Mason saw the U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico as an ideal opportunity

to push the frontiers of social science beyond the mainland. Together with the Island's colonial government, the Smithsonian Institution as well as the New York Academy of Sciences funded fieldwork, sponsored collecting expeditions, and organized displays of Puerto Rican artifacts in world's fairs and museums. Many of these activities were divulged in leading academic and popular journals in the United States. Along with journalists, photographers, government employees, and other scholars, anthropologists helped represent Puerto Ricans to a large U.S. audience.³

Fewkes was the first U.S. archaeologist to spend several months in Puerto Rico between 1902 and 1904 (Fewkes 1907). John Alden Mason collected vast amounts of local folklore—including traditional riddles, poems, stories, and songs—and excavated a large archaeological site between 1914 and 1915 (see, e.g., Mason 1916, 1941). None other than Boas, the “founding father” of U.S. anthropology, published an anthropometric study of Puerto Rican physical types in 1916. In the 1930s, the dean of Caribbean archaeologists, Irving Rouse, initiated his major research program on the Taíno Indians of the Greater Antilles in Puerto Rico (see Rouse 1992). In 1947, Morris Siegel (2005) and his students completed the first well-rounded ethnography of a Puerto Rican town, Lajas. Between 1948 and 1949, Harry Shapiro directed a massive study of the biological characteristics of the Puerto Rican population (Thieme 1959). Many of these field projects tested anthropological theories in vogue during the first half of the twentieth century (see Duany 1987 for an overview).

During and after World War II, race relations in Puerto Rico became a favorite research topic for U.S. anthropologists like Siegel (1953) and sociologists like Charles Rogler (1943–44) and Maxine Gordon (1949, 1950). For many scholars, the Island became the prototype of a “racial democracy” where whites, blacks, and mulattos coexisted peacefully. According to Siegel (2005:3), “the island is one of the few places in the world where interracial harmony has been achieved in high degree compared with countries like the United States and the Union of South Africa.” Similarly, Safa would later “minimize the racial differences” and acknowledge “the much lauded racial tolerance of the Puerto Rican poor” (1974:70). Puerto Rican social scientists began to question the benign image of race on the Island only in the mid-1960s (see Duany 2002, chap. 10).

In 1947, Julian Steward chose Puerto Rico to document the concepts and methods of cultural ecology (Steward et al. 1956). Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Steward's collective project launched the professional careers of Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, Robert Manners, Raymond Scheele, and Elena Padilla, then doctoral students at Columbia University. None of these anthropologists maintained a longstanding

Puerto Rican focus in their work, aside from Mintz (1960, 1966, 1988) and Padilla (1958), who later wrote about the Puerto Rican diaspora. Some local research assistants, notably Eduardo Seda Bonilla and Charles Rosario, later became well-known scholars in their own right. One of the first professional anthropologists in Puerto Rico, Eugenio Fernández Méndez (1970b), extended the cultural ecology model to the Island's history. Contemporary historians continue to draw on the richly textured accounts of rural proletarian and peasant communities by Mintz, Wolf, and their colleagues (Scarano 1988). Unfortunately, Steward et al.'s volume was never published in Spanish, its perspective on national culture was nearsighted, and its political implications were not well received by the then-ruling Popular Democratic Party.⁴

The 1950s and early 1960s produced a plethora of studies celebrating the Island's modernization. The Commonwealth government flaunted Operation Bootstrap, its program of "industrialization by invitation," as an economic model for the so-called Third World (see Pantojas-García 1990; Ramírez 1985; Rosario Urrutia 1993). According to the longtime director of the Social Science Research Center at the University of Puerto Rico, Millard Hansen (1953:113), the Island became "one of the most fruitful places in the world to study development, swift social change, and the culture fusion of a border society." However, few anthropologists embraced the triumphalist discourse of modernization, led by economists, political scientists, and sociologists. In the 1960s, Oscar Lewis coined the expression "culture of poverty," based largely on San Juan's most notorious shantytown, La Perla, which he called La Esmeralda (Lewis 1966). To counter Lewis's depressing depiction of lower-class life, Safa (1974) chose a now defunct squatter settlement, probably El Fanguito or El Mangle in Santurce, as her ethnographic site.

Every subfield of U.S. anthropology—except perhaps linguistic anthropology, an odd exception given the Island's official bilingualism and unofficial Spanish predominance—turned to Puerto Rico as a field station. Like imported plants or animals, anthropological concepts developed elsewhere—such as race, culture, subculture, nation, peasantry, and folk society—were often transplanted and adapted to the Island.⁵ Between 1945 and 1965, Puerto Rico became one of the most intensively studied societies in the world. According to Michael Lapp (1995), the publication of Lewis's *La Vida* (1966) marked the decline of Puerto Rico's role as a laboratory for U.S. social science.

Until then, many U.S. social scientists regarded Puerto Rico as a place to collect data, refine their ideas, expand their research agendas, return to their universities, and then move on to other, perhaps more exotic sites. Some anthropologists first earned their reputations primarily by working on the Island (such as J. Alden Mason, Rouse, Mintz, Wolf,

and Safa), while others advanced their professional careers through their Puerto Rican research (such as Fewkes, Boas, Siegel, Steward, and Lewis). The U.S. colonial power structure made the Island accessible, feasible, and safe for fieldwork. Research grants, institutional sponsorship, local administrative support, and publishing outlets facilitated studying the “overseas possessions.” Unfortunately, this fieldwork generated little pertinent knowledge about Puerto Rican culture, with the major exceptions of Steward’s and Safa’s projects.

During the 1950s, a new generation of Island-born, U.S.-trained scholars took over the academic establishment in Puerto Rico. The “postcolonial” emergence of a local educational elite transformed teaching and research in the social sciences.⁶ Some social scientists played decisive roles in the development of public policies toward Puerto Rican culture. In 1954, Ricardo Alegría was the first Puerto Rican to earn a doctoral degree in anthropology in the United States. In 1945, he had been appointed director of the Museum of History, Anthropology, and Art at the University of Puerto Rico. In 1955, he became the founding director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, under the auspices of the *Estado Libre Asociado*. Fernández Méndez also contributed significantly to cultural nationalism, especially as the first president of the board of directors of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (1955–64) and as director of the University of Puerto Rico Press (1956–64).

In the 1960s, Puerto Rican intellectuals, exemplified by Seda Bonilla (1980) and sociologist Luis Nieves Falcón (1971), denounced the mechanical transfer of social science concepts, perspectives, and methods to the Island. Many were drawn to various strands of Marxism, including dependency and world system theories, during the 1970s and early 1980s. Such ideas influenced the members of the Center for the Study of Puerto Rican Reality (known as CEREP for its Spanish acronym), founded in 1970. Aside from its extensive historical output, CEREP’s work was well represented in the writings of sociologist Ángel Quintero Rivera (1977) and anthropologist Rafael Ramírez (1976, 1977, 1978, 1985). Early on, Safa (1974:115) expressed her sympathies with this “group of young Puerto Rican scholars” and the political economy perspective they advocated.

During the 1960s, the Cuban Revolution, the Civil Rights movement, and student protests against the Vietnam War radicalized a significant segment of the Puerto Rican intelligentsia. By the 1970s, many of the Island’s social scientists assumed a nationalistic, anti-imperialistic, and pro-independence stance. Many aligned themselves with the Puerto Rican Independence Party or the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. Some embraced the Marxist dictum that the point of social theory was not only to interpret the world, but to change it.

Nowadays, Puerto Ricans dominate the Island's anthropological profession. Research topics, canonical figures, techniques, and approaches have shifted accordingly. In the 1980s and early 1990s, local scholars tended to move away from the positivism prevalent in U.S. social sciences toward poststructural French authors (notably Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Bourdieu). Much recent writing about Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the United States displays a postmodern bent (see, e.g., Negrón-Muntaner 2007; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997; Quiñones Arocho 2004). Heated intellectual debates have focused on cultural politics on the Island, specifically on questions of colonialism, nationalism, and transnationalism (see Dávila 1997; Duany 1998, 2005b; Morris 1995; Pabón 2002).

This synopsis of Puerto Rican anthropology⁷ since the early twentieth century suggests that all the major academic fads developed in the United States and Western Europe have had local repercussions, as befits a postcolonial colony. Historical particularism, diffusionism, functionalism, cultural ecology, structuralism, and historical materialism have found enthusiastic followers (as well as critics) among past generations of anthropologists on the Island. Feminism, deconstructionism, constructivism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, and queer studies increasingly attract Puerto Rican scholars, especially younger ones and those living in the United States.⁸

The list of canonical figures in Puerto Rican ethnography reveals the predominance of men and of androcentric perspectives. The social sciences traditionally privileged such male-oriented topics as political parties, economic development, paid work, and organized labor. Since the 1980s, more researchers have paid attention to gender relations in Puerto Rico. For many feminist scholars, Safa's work has served as a pathbreaking example, as other articles in this collection document. Ethnographic fieldwork on issues like work and migration has been engendered, while scholars have raised new questions about the construction of masculinities and sexual orientations.⁹ Let me now turn to the book that most influenced my thinking about urban anthropology on the Island.

Conducting Fieldwork in San Juan

Safa's involvement with Puerto Rico dates back to 1954, when she first traveled to the Island with a summer scholarship from New York University. "I fell in love with the island during my visit," she remembered four decades later (1995b:75), "looked for a job, was hired by the Commonwealth government and stayed two years." She later returned to the United States with a graduate fellowship from the University of

Puerto Rico. At Columbia University, she studied anthropology with Conrad Arensberg, Margaret Mead, Charles Wagley, and Marvin Harris. She completed her master's thesis on "Dorado: A 'Traditional' Puerto Rican Sugar Community in Transition" (Icken 1958).

Safa came back to the Island in 1959–60 to conduct fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation. The Urban Renewal and Housing Administration (or CRUV, its Spanish acronym) employed her to evaluate the relocation of shantytown residents in public housing projects. Eventually, Safa became one of the harshest critics of the Commonwealth's slum clearance policy. She practiced applied anthropology well before that term became popular in the discipline.

Safa summarized the results of her doctoral dissertation in *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* (1974), a Spanish translation entitled *Familias del arrabal* (1980b), and several journal articles and book chapters (e.g., Safa 1964, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1980a). *The Urban Poor* was part of a widely read series of case studies in cultural anthropology published by a major academic press. It became a classic account of Puerto Rican culture, along with Mintz's *Worker in the Cane* (1960, 1988) and Lewis's *La Vida* (1966). The Spanish translation, a local bestseller, was reprinted in 1989.

The subject matter of *The Urban Poor* is now mainly of historical interest. In 1962, the Commonwealth's urban renewal program demolished most of the shantytown (*arrabal* in Spanish) that Safa studied (which she called Los Peloteros). Like other squatter settlements, Los Peloteros was razed to give way to the construction of a modern expressway, a public park, and low-income housing. Most of the shantytown's residents were resettled in a public housing project Safa (1967:32) had called El Capitán in an earlier publication.

The debate surrounding the "culture of poverty" dominated urban anthropology during the 1960s (Valentine 1968). Because Lewis had used a lower-class Puerto Rican family in San Juan and New York as a textbook case of the culture of poverty, the controversy engaged many social scientists in Puerto Rico (in 1967, the *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* devoted a special issue to this discussion).¹⁰ Much of the local controversy centered on the representation of Puerto Ricans as sex-driven, violence-prone, immoral, drug-addicted, and socially deviant characters. (For a more recent ethnography of Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem, see Bourgois 2010.) Today, the nearly unanimous academic consensus is that the culture of poverty thesis raises unresolved conceptual, methodological, and policy issues. Still, Safa's study of the urban poor has survived that historical juncture because it addresses enduring questions, such as the coping mechanisms of migrants to the city, the impact of development strategies on social inequality, and the need to provide adequate shelter for all.

An Accomplished Ethnography

The major achievement of *The Urban Poor* was to debunk the myth of the culture of poverty on empirical and conceptual grounds. Whereas Lewis depicted the urban poor as disorganized, apathetic, and alienated, Safa portrayed them as resourceful, self-reliant, and cooperative. Mounting academic evidence gathered in several Latin American cities during the 1960s and 1970s tended to support Safa's favorable image of shantytown residents (see, e.g., Lomnitz 1975; Perlman 1976). In Puerto Rico itself, Ramírez's (1976) study of squatter settlements in Cataño reinforced Safa's position. Like an earlier confrontation between Robert Redfield's and Lewis's perspectives on the Mexican peasantry, the Lewis-Safa polemic undermined the claim to scientific authority of ethnographic research.

The Urban Poor signaled a paradigm shift in anthropological thinking about lower-class urban settlements, although it did not propose an alternative model to the culture of poverty. Earlier, Charles Valentine (1968) had provided a detailed critique of Lewis's views and counter-proposals for ethnographic fieldwork. Later essays by other authors in Latin American countries elaborated the concepts of urban marginality (Lomnitz 1975, 1994; Ramírez 1977), proletarianization (Pérez Sáinz 1989), and informality (Pérez Sáinz 1991; Portes 1995; see also Safa 1986). In turn, during the 1980s and 1990s, social scientists scrutinized such concepts and the emergent notion of the urban underclass in the United States.

In her 1974 monograph, Safa's initial goal was to assess the impact of the Island's industrialization program on the urban poor, particularly the rural migrants who had moved into San Juan's squatter settlements since the 1930s. Here again, the book formed part of a larger reevaluation of the Commonwealth's much-touted strategy of "export-led manufacturing" (Pantojas-García 1990; see also Safa 1995a, 1995b, 2003). In the epilogue to the Spanish translation, Safa (1980b:152) stated squarely that Operation Bootstrap had failed. Safa agreed with pro-independence scholars like Gordon K. Lewis (1968), Quintero Rivera (1977), and Seda Bonilla (1980), that Puerto Rico's dependent development under U.S. colonial domination had been superficial and artificial. She contributed to this line of criticism a close up view of the negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization for the everyday life of common people. Thus, she showed that the spectacular expansion of the San Juan metropolitan area after World War II did not equally benefit all sectors of the population. Moreover, her findings suggested that an inappropriate model of economic growth produced uneven settlement patterns and reinforced class segregation.

The Urban Poor was also concerned with identifying the socioeconomic factors that “promote or hinder the development of class consciousness and class solidarity among the urban poor” (1974:2). This concern reappeared in Safa’s comparative work on Latin America and the Caribbean (see, e.g., Safa 1980a, 1986, 1993, 1995a). In Los Peloteros, Safa found an apparent contradiction between the residents’ economic deprivation and their acceptance of the status quo. The shantytown’s strong family and community linkages ironically prevented the establishment of broader class alliances against colonial capitalism. The residents’ networks of solidarity and reciprocity rarely transcended the neighborhood. Similarly, their faith in occupational advancement and personal prosperity impaired their awareness of class exploitation. As Ramírez (1977) showed in his study of another Puerto Rican shantytown, the urban poor tended to be ideologically conservative and to support right-wing political parties, such as the pro-annexationist New Progressive Party in 1968. The dominant discourse of progress and “development” permeated the mentality of the popular sectors.

Safa’s final objective in her monograph was to denounce the deteriorated living conditions of relocated shantytown dwellers, especially those who had been forced to move to public housing projects (*caseríos*). Despite improving material conditions, public housing eroded the residents’ quality of life and their traditional social control mechanisms. Whereas the *arrabal* had functioned as a viable, tightly knit community, the *caserío* created more social problems than it solved, such as drug addiction, vandalism, and juvenile delinquency. In Safa’s view, “Project residents come much closer than shantytown residents to being a true, full urban proletariat” (1974:86), with all its socioeconomic consequences, among them widespread anomie.

Safa’s work represented a strong indictment of public housing policy in Puerto Rico during the 1960s and early 1970s. Although well-meaning, the government’s slum clearance program had many unintended effects, such as the dissolution of extended kinship ties, neighborhood solidarity, and traditional gender roles. Safa joined a growing number of detractors of urban renewal, who argued that public housing should not displace squatter settlements and other lower-class communities (see Bryce-Laporte 1970; Gilbert 1994). As a result of these criticisms—and of the resounding failure of public housing—the Commonwealth government stopped building large-scale housing structures and experimented with other models such as on-site rehabilitation and privatization of low-cost housing (see Duany 1997 for a review of housing policies on the Island).

The Political Economy of the Urban Poor

The Urban Poor sought to explain the living conditions of working-class people from the standpoint of political economy. (In 1982, Safa edited a volume entitled *Towards a Political Economy of Urbanization in Third World Countries*.)¹¹ The questions the author posed about class consciousness and solidarity, and her interpretation of their wider significance, were akin to the intellectual and political project of historical materialism. However, Safa never spelled out her conceptual model in *The Urban Poor*. Nor did she espouse a feminist perspective in this work, despite her interest in gender ideology, conjugal relations, female-headed households, and kinship structure. Elsewhere, Safa adopted the framework of feminist socialism, attempting to reconcile the often competing claims of Marxist and feminist approaches to contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean (see Safa 1980a, 1987, 1993, 1995a). Time and again, she returned to her fieldwork in Los Peloteros to support her arguments.

Throughout her analysis, Safa took for granted that the material infrastructure of Puerto Rican society largely determined the ideological manifestations of the urban poor. Even the order of her presentation, moving from a historical and economic background to current social and cultural affairs, suggests this causal chain. In her own terms, the creation of new opportunities for “earning a living” diminished the possibilities of “creating class consciousness” among the lower-class residents of San Juan. Rapid economic growth in the postwar period had thwarted class solidarity. The urban poor lacked a proletarian consciousness because of the widespread ideology of upward mobility through individual hard work, thrift, initiative, and education, rather than through collective organization and negotiation. Her informants tended to perceive poverty as a personal inadequacy and a “natural” and inevitable fact, rather than as a structural feature of colonial capitalism. Although Safa never cited Marx’s concept of false consciousness in this book, her argument pointed clearly in that direction.¹²

Problems in Research Design

Safa’s fieldwork resorted to the standard techniques of participant observation and survey research, supplemented by in-depth interviews. Her survey sample consisted of 100 families from Los Peloteros and 100 families from El Capitán, the public housing project, for a total of 474 individuals. Unfortunately, the author did not specify how she obtained a representative sample of the two populations, other than claiming she selected them “at random” (1974:3).¹³ Nor is it clear

why she concentrated on Los Peloteros as her field site. Was it size, accessibility, or location? Did it better reflect her mentor Arensberg's (1961:250) definition of a community as "a structured social field of interindividual relationships unfolding through time"? In other words, was Los Peloteros an exemplar of a compact population with enduring social ties? Or did the Commonwealth housing agency for which Safa worked target that site for study before bulldozing it? After ten years of her original research, Safa returned to the field, tracked down fifteen former shantytown residents, and tape-recorded lengthy conversations about moving to other places. Safa offers little information on how she gained access to the sampled households, established rapport with key informants such as her "sponsor" Doña Ana, observed everyday routines, or asked standardized questions.

Because of the dearth of such technical details (as well as the shantytown's disappearance), Safa's study is difficult to replicate and its results can only be judged for their face value. The author did not explicitly recognize that her own personal attributes as a white, U.S. woman of considerable stature (both physical and professional) may have shaped her interpersonal relations in the field. This lack of reflexivity is troubling in light of Safa's awareness of Puerto Rico's colonial dilemma and her advocacy of independence for the Island. As postcolonial theorists have argued, the unequal encounters between ethnographers and their subjects often reproduce the power relations between metropolises and colonies (Said 1989).

The methodological drawbacks of *The Urban Poor* are also significant in the context of the culture of poverty debate. In her annotated bibliography, Safa casually acknowledges that "The differences between Lewis' study and my own are due partly to the differences in the shantytowns we studied" (1974:114). In his writings, Lewis tended to use the term "slum" rather than "shantytown." In Safa's terminology, slums are inner-city tenements that deteriorate over time, whereas shantytowns are inadequate structures from the start, usually located in public lands on the urban fringe (1974:2). While Safa's site was clearly a shantytown, Lewis's approximated the slum type because of its central location in Old San Juan.

If La Esmeralda and Los Peloteros had different geographic locations and socioeconomic characteristics, what did such differences imply? Most likely, Safa chose Los Peloteros because she felt it was more "typical" of squatter settlements than La Esmeralda. Alternatively, she may have focused (consciously or not) on Los Peloteros because it embodied her optimistic view of the urban poor. As noted before, Lewis depicted slum dwellers as downtrodden and hopeless people, whereas Safa emphasized the stability, cohesion, integration, and solidarity of

shantytown life. For anyone who knows Safa well, the idea that trust, reciprocity, cooperation, and generosity bind people together may seem like a projection of her own personality and politics. Without questioning the validity of her findings or her interpretation, I want to underline their methodological limitations and possible sources of contamination.

A Question of Ideology

While Safa's outlook on shantytown communities was upbeat, her assessment of Puerto Rico's political economy—particularly its inability to produce sufficient affordable housing—was less sanguine. Her analysis juxtaposed two ideal types: a romanticized view of the *arrabal* versus a demonized view of the *caserío*. The shantytown recalled Redfield's (1947:297) notion of a "folk society as small, isolated, nonliterate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity." In contrast, the public housing project illustrated Louis Wirth's (1938:20–21) theory of urbanism as "the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity." Ironically, Safa (1972:485) had earlier decried the "antiurban ethos" of Wirth, Redfield, Lewis, and many other U.S. social scientists.

Another of Safa's recurring themes was the stark contrast between the disadvantaged situation of the urban poor and the populist, developmentalist ideology of the Commonwealth government. On the one hand, the urban poor faced bleak prospects, such as high unemployment rates, job insecurity, and few opportunities for occupational advancement. For Safa, Operation Bootstrap perpetuated the Island's structural problems, including economic dependence, poverty, and inequality. Even though education, health, and housing had improved since World War II, the living and working conditions of the urban poor remained substandard. The government's development strategy stimulated economic growth from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s, but it also broadened the gap between rich and poor. Between 1953 and 1977, the distribution of family income became more polarized in Puerto Rico (Irizarry Mora 2001:195). Subsequently, Operation Bootstrap lost its capacity to fuel economic growth and to absorb an expanding labor force.

On the other hand, Safa was convinced that the internal social structure of lower-class communities provided a feasible alternative to the external forces of economic exploitation. The survival strategies of the urban poor were embedded in a dense network of kinship, friendship, and neighborly ties. Female-headed households were an effective response to the weakening of male authority and marital relations in the

city. Ritual kinship remained strong and supportive, as were the webs of informal leaders and neighborhood groups. Safa's rendering of the shantytown community (reminiscent of the "primitive communism" of orthodox Marxism) preserved many "folk-like" elements of traditional Puerto Rican culture, contradicting Wirth's description of urbanization as the breakdown of primary ties. Again, Safa's two-pronged argument raised an unresolved paradox in strictly materialist terms: the coexistence of an egalitarian, almost utopian way of life, with the capitalist mode of production.

In conclusion, Safa contended that "independence must be linked to a socialist program which aims at ending the present system of inequality in Puerto Rico through a redistribution of wealth and power in the society" (1974:110). Revolutionary Cuba was her main model for radical social change (see Safa 1995b:25–27). Although this deduction flowed easily from her argument, it was not well developed or substantiated. (Lewis himself doubted that the Cuban Revolution had eradicated the culture of poverty from Havana's worst slums.) It remains unclear whether the resolution of the Island's colonial status or the socialization of the means of production would abolish social classes, sustain economic growth, and distribute wealth equally. Twenty-one years after the publication of *The Urban Poor*, Safa (1995a:xv) asserted: "I cling to a belief that greater social justice must prevail and that this cannot be achieved without the empowerment of the working class, including women." But the worldwide crisis of Marxism, marked by the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the abandonment of "real socialism" in Eastern Europe, and—closer to home—the precarious condition of Cuba's economy, had sobered Safa's rhetoric. At the same time, emerging forms of popular resistance to oppression, including indigenous, Afro-descendant, women's, and ecological movements, resonated with Safa's call for community solidarity and collective struggle.

Overall Assessment

Regardless of such methodological and ideological qualms, *The Urban Poor* is a pioneering urban ethnography. Safa's monograph helped move anthropology into a field of study with numerous practical implications—in this case, public housing policy. Her research offered ample qualitative and quantitative evidence to subvert Lewis's pessimistic portrayal of the urban poor. Safa's political economy perspective stressed the subjective and cultural dimensions of class conflicts, as well as the close interaction between the material infrastructure and the ideological superstructure. Furthermore, Safa's politically engaged and personally engaging writing style respected her informants' voices, as the text



Figure 1. Helen Safa doing fieldwork in Puerto Rico during the early 1970s.
Photo: James Weber.

aspired to become “a vehicle of transmission for their ideas” (1974:x). After completing her research in Puerto Rico, the author extended these insights to her work on gender, development, and social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Despite its outdated object of study—shantytowns have practically disappeared in San Juan—*The Urban Poor* remains an anthropological classic. First, it set a standard for ethnographic fieldwork in urban settings. Second, it captured an important moment in Puerto Rico’s hasty transition from a predominantly rural, agricultural country to an urban, industrial one. Third, it showed that anthropologists could effectively link local communities with larger economic forces. Finally, it anticipated current trends in Puerto Rico, such as the wide-reaching consequences of the Commonwealth’s housing programs for urban crime; the weakening of trade unions as a result of stunted class consciousness; the increasing visibility of grassroots groups pressing for social change, such as the women’s and ecological movements; the expansion of fundamentalist Protestant denominations among the urban poor; and widening social inequality as reflected in a lopsided income distribution.

Safa’s text still opens a window into many features of contemporary Puerto Rico, although they may need to be approached with new

theoretical, methodological, and political lenses. Feminist scholars have built on Safa's formulation of gender relations and especially of women's industrial labor (see Acevedo 1999; Colón et al. 2008; Ortiz 1996). Ethnographic fieldwork on Puerto Rican urban communities has sought more rigorous standards of empirical verification, by laying out its sampling frames, instruments, and procedures (see, e.g., Duany, Hernández Angueira, and Rey 1995; Griffith and Valdés Pizzini 2002; Pérez 2004; Ramírez 1977; Ramos-Zayas 2003). And recent incursions into poststructuralist, postcolonial, postmodern, subaltern, cultural, and queer studies have shattered the illusion that an independent socialist state will by itself eliminate all forms of oppression.

Conclusion

Safa carried out her fieldwork in Puerto Rico in an ideologically charged academic milieu. As a progressive, Spanish-speaking, sympathetic *gringa*, she earned the trust of local scholars, enlisted their collaboration, and identified with their political causes. Even though she originally worked for the Commonwealth government, she maintained a critical distance from its development strategies and housing policies. While she openly supported the independence movement, she was respected as an academic expert from the colonial power, the United States. Her book on Puerto Rico won her international fame and, when it was translated into Spanish, local acclaim as well. In the growing field of urban anthropology, her work was widely recognized, cited, and emulated. Together with Mintz and Lewis, Safa became the most prominent figure in the ethnography of contemporary Puerto Rico.

If I had to summarize the most enduring contributions of Safa's research on Puerto Rico, I would highlight four points. First, it paved the way for a new genre of ethnographic writing on the Island, unclogged by excessive jargon, technical complications, and quantitative data. Safa's style was direct, crisp, vivid, and accessible to a wide reading public, unlike many social scientific texts written then and now. Second, *The Urban Poor* sought to intervene in public debates in favor of the subaltern sectors of society. Safa's text was politically committed, unabashedly partisan, and morally passionate, but tempered by scholarly language. Third, her work served to redirect field research in Puerto Rico toward neglected social problems. Among other topics, her book fostered the study of urbanization and industrialization in the wider context of dependent development, as well as class consciousness and solidarity and the effects of public policies on everyday life. It also anticipated debates on the urban informal economy in Latin America and the underclass in the United States. Finally, Safa helped frame Puerto Rico in a comparative

perspective. In constantly referring to related work in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean, she helped decolonize Puerto Rican studies by breaking away from the traditional insular mold. If Puerto Rican ethnography seems increasingly “postcolonial,” it is due in no small part to the profoundly liberating legacy of Helen I. Safa.

Notes

- ¹ Juan Flores and María Milagros López (1994) coined the expression but did not elaborate its conceptual and political implications for the Island. Flores (2000:10, 36) later clarified “the seeming anomaly of the postcolonial colony,” insisting that “Puerto Rico is a colony in a different way, jibing only partially and uncomfortably with the inherited notion or stereotype of the classical colony.” By “postcolonial colony,” I mean “a people with a strong national identity but little desire for a nation-state” as well as the replacement of traditional forms of external domination by indirect rule (Duany 2002:4, 122). Jaime Pagán Jiménez and Reniel Rodríguez Ramos (2008) have also used the expression “postcolonial colony” in their analysis of archaeology in Puerto Rico.
- ² As one of the reviewers of this manuscript suggested, Safa’s work might be revisited in light of recent anthropological debates about the state, power, and planning (see Li 2005; Scott 1998). However, this analysis lies beyond the scope of this article.
- ³ This paragraph is based on my previous characterization of U.S. anthropologists in Puerto Rico between 1898 and 1915 (Duany 2002, chap. 3).
- ⁴ For a detailed appraisal of *The People of Puerto Rico*, see Lauria-Perricelli 1989. Anthropological research in postwar Puerto Rico—some of which was critical of state-sponsored development projects—raised suspicions among many university administrators and policymakers. Siegel’s pioneering monograph was never published in English and was only recently translated into Spanish (Siegel 2005). The Spanish translation of Mintz’s renowned life history of a Puerto Rican cane cutter took twenty-eight years to appear (Mintz, 1960, 1988).
- ⁵ For example, Mintz (1953) argued cogently that Robert Redfield’s (1947) folk-urban continuum did not apply well to the rural proletariat of modern sugar plantations, such as Cañamelar, the community he studied in Santa Isabel.

- ⁶ Elsewhere I have documented the progressive “nationalization” of the Island’s social scientists during the 1950s (Duany 2005a). This decade witnessed the rapid expansion of teaching and research in the social sciences at the University of Puerto Rico, which offered numerous scholarships for graduate study in the United States. Safa received one of these scholarships.
- ⁷ For more details on the history of anthropology in Puerto Rico, see Alegría 1996; Buitrago Ortiz 1982; Duany 1987, 2002, 2009; Duncan 1979, 1982; Fernández Méndez 1970a; Lauria-Perricelli 1989; Pagán Jiménez and Rodríguez Ramos 2008; Ramírez 1976, 1978, 1985; and Valdés Pizzini 2001.
- ⁸ The quantity and quality of ethnographic fieldwork on Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the U.S. mainland have grown considerably since the 1990s. Among the most significant contributions, I would single out Bourgois 2010; Dávila 1997, 2004; Godreau 2008; Griffith and Valdés Pizzini 2002; López 2008; Pérez 2004; Quiñones Arocho 2004; Ramos-Zayas 2003; and Zentella 1997.
- ⁹ An example of Safa’s influence on current research on gender and work in Puerto Rico is Colón et al. 2008. For a recent study of Puerto Rican women in Chicago, see Toro-Morn 2001. Rafael Ramírez (1993) pioneered masculinity studies in Puerto Rico (see also García Toro, Ramírez, and Solano Castillo 2007). Inexplicably, the latter studies do not cite Safa’s work in their bibliography.
- ¹⁰ Large-scale migration from Puerto Rico to the United States, particularly to New York City, took off after World War II. However, Safa overlooked this population movement in her fieldwork, focusing instead on internal migration from rural to urban areas. At one point, she admitted that “One outlet for the Puerto Rican poor who could not find a decent job on the island has long been migration to the mainland, especially New York” (1974:58). She then argued that geographic mobility weakened extended kinship bonds in the shantytown community. Safa (1995b:75) later regretted that she had “never conducted systematic research on Puerto Rican migrants on the mainland.”
- ¹¹ For overviews of the political economy perspective in post-World War II U.S. anthropology, see Roseberry 1988, 2002. I follow Roseberry’s broad definition of political economy as “the study of capitalism, its formation as a structured and hierarchical system, and its economic, social, and political effects on particular regions and localities and the people who live in them” (2002:61).

- ¹² In Marxist theory, “false consciousness” refers to the proletariat’s lack of awareness of the causes of its own exploitation in a capitalist society. In a later essay, Safa (1980a) combined Marxist and feminist interpretations of women’s labor.
- ¹³ In another publication, Safa (1967, Appendix II) was more explicit about her research methods, noting that she spent three months of intensive participant observation in each neighborhood, drew the sample based on a previous political census, and constructed an interview schedule which was later administered by a team of Puerto Rican assistants. Such details raise even more doubts about the extent of personal contacts developed by the researcher with her subjects.

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