

Introduction

In the early decades of this century, a significant number of Puerto Ricans from the countryside and urban centers of the island began to migrate to the northern metropolises of the United States. Although small groups of political exiles had emigrated throughout the last third of the nineteenth century, it was not until after the North American occupation of the island in 1898 that critical social, political, and economic transformations in Puerto Rico triggered an increase in the numbers of people leaving for continental shores. Through the creation of infant enclaves on the mainland, Puerto Rican migrants set about establishing communities which reflected in many ways those they left behind. As early as 1910, over one thousand Puerto Ricans resided in the United States. American citizenship granted via the Jones Act of 1917 stimulated the freedom of movement between the island and the United States. By 1920, forty-five states reported the presence of Puerto Rican-born individuals, with all forty-eight doing so in succeeding censuses. In short, the decades before the onset of World War II witnessed a progressive increase in the numbers of Puerto Ricans living in the United States, a migration slowed only by the Depression, which would peak in the decades of the fifties and sixties.

In New York City and the surrounding metropolitan areas, the Puerto Rican presence became most noticeable just after the Second World War. About that time, the first systematic surveys

depicting the plight of the Puerto Ricans in the city began to appear in print. In 1947, for example, a pictorial essay in *Life* magazine chronicled the migration to the United States as the first airborne diaspora in history. Such news stories coincided with investigative reports of various social service agencies highlighting the health, housing, and employment problems of the city's newest migrants. Within a decade, monographs like the Columbia University Study, the Welfare Study, and the New York City Board of Education surveys focused attention on Puerto Ricans in an effort to inform the dominant non-Hispanic society about this group.¹

While literature on Puerto Ricans during the fifties centered on the economic, social, or racial assimilation or adjustment problems of the post-World War II migration, relatively few studies emphasized the community structure of the Puerto Rican New York settlements throughout the decades before the war. Social scientists like Daniel P. Moynihan and Nathan Glazer blatantly denied the existence of an early Puerto Rican community and failed to perceive the relationship between early support systems or coping institutions and the later migration.² Indeed, these particular authors based their ideas on the notion that the process of community building never existed on the island proper and therefore could not be translated to the New York settlements. Thus the experience and resettlement patterns of the larger migration at mid-century were frequently viewed and analyzed in a vacuum without reference to earlier community development or to the forces which motivated the original displacement. The experiences of the pioneer migrants in New York settlements who laid the groundwork for the "great migration" of the later decades had clearly been overlooked.

This study proposes to fill the gap. It explores the development of the Puerto Rican settlements, or *colonias*, in New York City during the first four decades of the century and demonstrates the existence of an identifiable migrant community during that period. Originating soon after the turn of the century, pioneer *colonias* charged with the responsibility of translating the Puerto Rican way of life to unfamiliar territory generated a visual and intrinsic presence which would greatly influence future settlement patterns between the island and the mainland. It was to those *colonias*, vividly Puerto Rican with their *bodegas* (grocery stores), Hispanic

boarding houses, or restaurants, formal and informal support networks and organizations, that migrants came.

Focusing on the community's organizational networks, structured and unstructured coping institutions, settlement patterns and migrants' occupations, the study revises heretofore accepted interpretations of the Puerto Rican experience away from the island and builds on pioneer works, such as those of Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, Lawrence R. Chenault, and C. Wright Mills. Moreover, I intend to expand on current scholarship, particularly the research of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, CEREP (Centro del estudio de la realidad Puertorriqueña), and the Puerto Rican Migration Research Consortium.³

Several issues integral to the migratory process will be dissected. How and why, for instance, did Puerto Ricans come to New York City during the first decades of the present century? What kinds of communities did they establish and what institutions or practices emerged to meet migrant needs? How did the settlements in different New York boroughs relate to one another, to issues concerning Puerto Ricans on the island, and to the dominant non-Hispanic or host society? Above all, who were the early migrants and how did they carve a definable community in the city?

Research for this book was divided into two phases. The first consisted of an investigation of United States government documents and publications, census materials, archival collections, newspapers, periodicals, and journals to determine the size and scope of the early *colonia*. Most of this research was executed while I served as a member of the History Task Force of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In conjunction with this group, an official but untabulated census, The New York State Manuscript Census of 1925, was coded and computed for 7,322 Spanish-surnamed individuals living in Manhattan's Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Assembly Districts. Yielding variables including the sex, age, race, and occupation, length of residence in New York City, country of origin, place in and composition of Hispanic households, the census formed the basis for an analysis of the mid-1920s Spanish-speaking community.

Moreover, while participating with the History Task Force, I was

introduced to an autobiographical manuscript detailing Puerto Rican life in the United States, especially in New York City, dating from the final decades of the nineteenth century up to and including the 1950s. This material, *Memorias de Bernardo Vega*, edited by the Puerto Rican writer César Andreu Iglesias, was subsequently published by Ediciones Huracan.⁴ The most comprehensive study on the subject to date, *Memorias* provided the leads to many Puerto Rican associations in operation throughout the early decades, newspapers and journals in existence, community issues, and leadership. Once the information became confirmed and corroborated, an investigation of the organizational charters on file in the New York City County Clerk's Office, Supreme Court Building became possible. Archival collections such as the Vito Marcantonio Papers and the Arturo Schomberg collection in the New York Public Library also yielded valuable insights on this theme.

While archival materials, census information, and publications provided important perspectives for an historical reconstruction of the pre-World War II settlements, oral interviews and popular culture also added major dimensions. The second research phase centered on tracking down appropriate oral history collections and interviewing migrants who had lived through the migration experience within the first four decades of the century. The Columbia University Oral History Project and the Brentwood Multilingual Assessment Program on Long Island housed limited collections on Puerto Rican settlers. The first concentrated on individuals recognized for their contributions in building the Hispanic community in general. These were mostly community leaders, writers, or both. The interview with folklorist Pura Belpré is representative in both of these areas. The second also focused on better-known persons such as Elizabeth Guanill, commissioner of Human Rights for Suffolk County, and others active in establishing the Hispanic Long Island community. The Long Island Historical Society, however, offered a fine, extensive, and varied collection of interviews with pioneering, working-class migrants in the Brooklyn *colonia*. This set focused on early settlement patterns, community and organizational structure, leadership, and the relationship between the Manhattan and Brooklyn settlements. Numbering close to seventy taped interviews, half of which have been transcribed, Puerto Rican life-

styles, attitudes, work experience, family structure, and migration processes have all been recorded.

Furthermore, from June 1977 until June 1978, a grant from the Ford Foundation, "Movements of People in the Caribbean," enabled research on return migrants currently living in Puerto Rico. During this period a series of interviews was conducted with retired, working-class individuals cognizant of the New York experience between the two world wars. Their references regarding the formation of the early settlements proved essential to the overall theme, since secondary sources have been so limited in this area. Close to twenty hours of transcribed tapes and an additional twenty-five conversations were gathered with migrants in Puerto Rico and in New York City, augmenting the interviews in other collections. Moreover, as women comprised a significant percentage of the interviews collected, a description of their specific role in the development of the pioneer *colonias* became possible for the first time.

Finally, the second research phase concluded with an investigation of popular culture, particularly the music and songs which so often expressed feelings, attitudes, and concerns of the migrant population rarely found in the literature. Themes of popular songs not only set forth strains of nostalgia for the migrants' absent homeland, but also expressed nascent feelings of incompatibility with the alien New York environment.

The book has been organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 describes the background of the migration to New York City, analyzing the factors which encouraged Puerto Ricans to leave the island as well as those which drew the migrants to the city and other parts of the United States. Indicating the migration occurred in response to complex and extensive continental considerations, many of these economically based, the chapter explains how and why Puerto Ricans became concentrated in the metropolitan area throughout the decades before the Second World War.

Chapter 3 explores the concept of community as described in the literature on Puerto Ricans in the mainland. It evolves to demonstrate the existence of an active, energetic, and structured Puerto Rican community which coalesced around various characteristics. These included Puerto Rican settlement patterns, increases in the

size of the *colonia* as well as in commercial and professional establishments, use of Spanish as the language of communication, and common interests and attitudes expressed in popular culture.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the role of Puerto Rican women in the structure of the early community. Comprising almost half of the migrant population throughout the period of this study, women persisted in maintaining traditional sex and family roles in spite of their steady integration into the mainland work force. Faced with a disintegrating and sometimes hostile environment, women devised practices and customs designed to maintain an intact family structure while shouldering their share of familial responsibilities. Often, women added supplementary or, in some cases, primary incomes to the households. Practices such as taking in boarders and child care expanded to strengthen communal bonds at a time when the *colonia* was most vulnerable. Thus the practices which emerge to meet migrant needs in this aspect of settlement are considered informal coping institutions.

Chapter 5 investigates the formal (incorporated) social, cultural, civic, and economic organizational structure and the leadership which these groups engendered. Neighborhood clubs, brotherhoods, federations, and professional and educational groups played pivotal roles in defining and reinforcing the *colonia hispana*. Here we trace the development of three organizational models over several decades, outlining the group's relationship to the community, to Puerto Rico, and to the dominant non-Hispanic host society. While the organizational objectives of many such groups appeared in their certificates of incorporation, these often failed to convey the full scope of a group's actual functions and operation. By describing the activities and concerns of several representative groups, the chapter attempts to fill this void.

Chapter 6 examines the functions of political organization and participation among Puerto Rican migrants. During the early decades political participation among this group was far more prolific than previously assumed. Political units numbered among the earliest associations within the *colonia* and these concerned themselves with the social or political issues affecting the community, relations between the early settlements and with the wider non-Hispanic society, and with Latin American issues in general. Above all, these were the groups which sought to serve the migrant *colonia*

as power brokers both within the Spanish-speaking settlements and with the non-Hispanic population.

Chapter 7 serves as summary. Without doubt the study of immigration, migration, and its aftermath forms an integral part of the histories of the Americas. As a Latin migration, the Puerto Rican experience and its efforts to build pioneer settlements should serve as a basis for comparisons with other Latin population movements or with Puerto Rican communities outside of New York City. Inasmuch as changes within federal immigration regulations continue to encourage and stimulate population movements from Latin countries to northern urban centers, an understanding of the Hispanic reality remains critical. New York City, in particular, continues to receive a substantial amount of legal and undocumented immigration. The problems faced by recent arrivals, whether social, in the job market, or in the community, closely parallel the Puerto Rican experience. It behooves us, therefore, to learn as much as possible about their migratory processes and resettlement patterns in order to understand other Latins in the United States.

Notes

1. Among the surveys published between 1947 and 1957 were the following: C. Wright Mills, Clarence Senior, and Rose Goldsen, *The Puerto Rican Journey: New York's Newest Migrant* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950), based on the findings of the Columbia University Applied Social Research team on the Puerto Rican community in New York City, 1948; New York City Board of Education, Bureau of Educational Program Research and Statistics, *Teaching Children of Puerto Rican Background in New York City Schools* (1953); J. Cayce Morrison, director, *The Puerto Rican Study, 1953-1957* (New York City Board of Education, 1957); The Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City* (1948); Welfare and Health Council of New York City, *Population of Puerto Rican Birth and Parentage* (1950); Welfare and Health Council of New York City, Brooklyn Council for Social Planning, "Report on Survey of Brooklyn Agencies Rendering Services to Puerto Ricans" (June 1953).

2. Adalberto López, "Some of the Literature on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in English," in Adalberto López and James Petras, eds., *Puerto Rico and the Puerto Ricans: Studies in History and Society* (New York: Schenkman Publishing, 1974), pp. 471-480; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963); History Task Force, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños,

Labor Migration Under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 144–45; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States: An Uncertain Future* (October 1976).

3. Lawrence R. Chenault, *The Puerto Rican Migrant in New York City* (New York: Columbia University, 1938; reissue, Russell and Russell, 1970); Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971); History Task Force, *Labor Migration*.

4. César Andreu Iglesias, ed., *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracan, 1977).