

Commentary

The Boricua Summer

Keys from a Human Rights Perspective

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There is no rest in the fight for human rights. We may be condemned to the arduous and Sisyphian task of endlessly advocating for the rights and freedoms of despised races and marginalized peoples, tortured women and men, those who have been silenced, the disappeared.

—Luis Rivera Pagán, 2019

The Boricua summer¹ of 2019 (as the series of popular demonstrations against the administration of the then-governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló Nevares, has been termed) was a complex social event with significant potential. Some of its features are specific to the social context of one of the world's last colonies, a body politic that is still fighting for full decolonization and the expansion of its democracy in the face of an austerity agenda that has intensely affected the vulnerable sectors of the population (Colón Morera, 2016; Negrón-Muntaner, 2019; Rivera Ramos, 2019). In another sense, however, reflect a new anti-neoliberal activism that is common to very diverse contexts and significantly transnational (Bandy and Smith, 2004; Cotto Morales, in this issue; Díaz Lotero, 2019). The Boricua summer became part of an extensive process of citizen empowerment linked to the country's struggle to escape the colonial entrapment of its current territorial Commonwealth' arrangement (Colón Ríos, 2016; Fonseca, 2019; Negrón-Muntaner, 2019).² For this reason, it demands further analysis and presents the enormous challenges of capturing a process in full motion.³

It has been suggested that, because of its diversity and creativity (Colón Rodríguez and Rodríguez López, 2019), the movement that succeeded in removing Puerto Rico's governor (then leader of the Partido Nuevo Progresista [New Progressive Party—PNP]) serves as a model of citizen action.⁴ Others have highlighted its mainly nonviolent character (Pita, 2019). At the same time, it raises many questions with regard to its potential political development.⁵ Its connection with international human rights discourse and a more participatory

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democracy is, however, undeniable (Colón Ríos, 2016; Reyes Gil, 2019). In this regard, there are a number of contrasting approaches (Alvarado León, 2019a; Bernabe and Rodríguez Banchs, 2019; Chotiner, 2019; Córdova Iturregui, 2019). This essay is part of this ongoing reflection and seeks to contribute to the development of an effective praxis of social change and decolonization in a particularly challenging context (Ayala and Bernabe, 2011).

The correlation between what happened in the summer of 2019 and the international movement for human rights and its focus on the defense of human dignity is evident. In the view of Jürgen Habermas (2010), the central object of the dispute over human rights serves as a fundamental seismograph that is sensitive to the continuous effort for a full development of the human personality:⁶

The experience of the violation of human dignity has performed, and can still perform, an inventive function in many cases: be it in view of the unbearable social conditions and the marginalization of impoverished social classes; or in view of the unequal treatment of women and men in the workplace, and of discrimination against foreigners and against cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial minorities; or in view of the ordeal of young women from immigrant families who have to liberate themselves from the violence of a traditional code of honor; or finally, in view of the brutal expulsion of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. In the light of such specific challenges, different aspects of the meaning of human dignity emerge from the plethora of experiences of what it means to be humiliated and be deeply hurt.

During the summer of 2019, attacks on human dignity perpetrated by of the Puerto Rican government led to a formidable social response. What happened had seemed, to some, unlikely: a massive, supportive pluralist movement adorned with thousands of Puerto Rican flags and a wide range of voices and claims.⁷ The Puerto Rican researcher Félix Córdova Iturregui (2019) describes it well:

This summer's mobilization has been unique in our history. The jolt threw a governor out of his seat. To achieve this, the movement employed something stronger than an organized election following the colonial mold. People took direct action, occupying the streets, overflowing the streets day and night, creating new participation scenarios, with a huge but variegated voice that was nevertheless unanimous in its two main claims: "Leave, Ricky, and take the Financial Board with you."⁸

The shared feature of this event was the defense of human dignity, and it triggered a powerful social response. With complaints denouncing a variety of neoliberal measures, the movement was concerned with social justice as a key element in the enjoyment of human rights. This was a central topic underestimated by the international human rights movement at the turn of the century (Moyn, 2018).

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT WITH A LONG HISTORY

Previous social movements in Puerto Rico have been instrumental in achieving important social advances (Cotto Morales, 2015; 2019). The history of citizen protests during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is significant

and impossible to cover here. One example is the so-called land squatters, who promoted housing rights in the 1970s (Cotto Morales, 2019; see also 2006) and marked the personality of urban spaces in a dramatic way. Movements for the prevention of violence against women and women's equal participation in political processes, for environmental justice, and for LGTTBQ rights have also played significant roles, as has opposition to militarism (Méndez, 2012). A multiplicity of labor-based efforts against privatization has been part of a long struggle against social oppression (Córdova Iturregui, 2019; Klein, 2018). Demonstrations in favor of national self-determination and independence have grown massive across the past few decades and have included a variety of human rights demands (Nieves Falcón, 2009). In the 2019 demonstrations, the source of the mobilization was clear but the issue spectrum was broader. For the first time since the Elective Governor Act of 1947,⁹ a governor, elected by a mere 41 percent of the vote, was forced to leave office. Against the legal rationale arguing that the only choice was to wait for the next election to remove him, to the surprise of many the democratic voice prevailed.¹⁰

In fact, the events of the summer of 2019 led to an important public discussion regarding the progressive aspects and limitations of our constitutional order—one that does not, for example, include recall.¹¹ This strengthened the view among academics that the moment should be used to rethink the 1952 Constitution and consider what changes it required to expand its limited democratic scope.¹²

A SURPRISING SOCIAL UPRISING

The encouraging aspect of this conflict was its antiestablishment nature. In effect, the Boricua Summer demanded democratic ways of governing despite the colonial mindset, machismo, elitism, corruption, and aporophobia. As Ana Teresa Toro (2019) describes it, "It was the product of a peaceful revolution that kept the country in a state of permanent protest for almost two weeks." After the social trauma caused by Hurricane María,¹³ the pitiful governmental response to it, and the continued implementation of austerity policies reducing important collective rights, social solidarity offered routes to alternative action. Young people—the "I-won't-stand-for-it" generation—were the protagonists, but alongside them were thousands of pensioners also affected by the austerity policies. This was, therefore, an act of genuine popular sovereignty based on free speech and the right to association. It demanded ethical and transparent governance truly committed to social justice. Thus an intersectional political practice was developed that may envisage the future (Tormos, 2017).

According to Yara Maite Colón Rodríguez and Luz Marie Rodríguez López (2019), this surprising unleashing of social struggle exhibited a novel use of urban spaces:

Because Puerto Rico was and is framed by a complex scheme of polycrisis—colonialism/coloniality, poverty, public debt, and the impact of the Irma and María hurricanes, among other things—anger and outrage and collective expressions of love and euphoria triggered new types of activism that exhibited multiple modes of defiance of current bodily policies of authority. The

demonstrations took the form of both typical and atypical dramatic actions aimed at expressing opposition to oppressive political, economic, religious, and/or educational systems and institutions.

They have a refreshing and insightful view of events:

From the 13 to 24 [of July] (and more), citizens participated in various forms of dissent, mostly, but not only, in urban centers or public spaces. In addition to urban areas, people claimed suburban spaces (private developments and shopping malls), transport or infrastructure spaces (bridges, peripheral roads, highways, and airports), and natural spaces (the beaches and the Bay of San Juan). All of them were seen as sites for declaring opposition. Even in virtual spaces (social networks), the outrage was actively channeled into mobilization. The demonstrations began to be organized organically by the Puerto Rican diaspora in different cities in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and other geographies. It is therefore important to stress that the protests that have been grouped under the term *Verano Boricua* were characterized—when compared with previous exercises—an unprecedented decentralization, in which the typical tactic of space appropriation was atypically incorporated into ubiquitous self-convened actions by various representative samples of variegated groups of citizens. The anthropological notion of “tribes” seems useful to us in describing the phenomenon. In addition to this, the demonstrations were exceptionally organic.

THE IMMEDIATE TRIGGER AND ITS CONTEXT

This social explosion arose from an immediate trigger and a series of events that, coinciding over time, led to an unsustainable situation for Governor Rosselló and his closest allies. Like the case of Vieques, when an accidental death caused by the U.S. Navy’s military exercises caused shock and a series of protests, this was a watershed event.¹⁴ On July 8, 2019, a confidential online chat involving the governor and his closest and most trusted male collaborators was gradually unveiled, undermining the people’s trust forever. As the political scientist Raúl Cotto Serrano points out, this conversation was the last straw for the public and tarnished his whole administration (Chotiner, 2019; Hassan, 2019; Mazzei, 2019; Editorial Board, 2019; NotiCel, 2019; Sánchez, 2019; Vincens, 2019).

Weeks earlier, on June 24, the Puerto Rican press had reported that the Secretary of the Treasury and the chief government financial officer, Raúl Maldonado, had denounced the existence of “a mafia” in Rosselló’s administration that was engaged in various forms of corruption (*El Nuevo Día*, June 24, 2019). Days later, the filing of federal criminal charges against two high-ranking officers from the cabinet was reported. These two were in charge of the two agencies with the largest budgets and the greatest social impact: the former executive director of the Health Insurance Administration, Ángela Ávila, and the former secretary of education, Julia Keleher. A federal grand jury “accused them of conspiracy to commit fraud, theft, electronic fraud, conspiracy to incur money laundering, and money laundering” (Figueroa Cancel, 2019). The governor had invested a lot of political capital in defending Keleher, although she had very high disapproval ratings in opinion polls. The number of public schools in poor communities that Keleher had ordered closed and the overbear-

ing way in which she did this, the exorbitant compensation of US\$250,000 she received, and her arrogance had provoked multiple public requests for her removal. Citizen pressure eventually forced to resign as a financial officer of the Commonwealth after public rumors surfaced about an ongoing Federal investigation against her (Rosario, 2019).

Among the participants in the nearly 900-page chat were the governor, who had created it; his secretary, Ricardo Llerandi; Elías Sánchez, a friend of the governor and former director of his campaign; Alfonso Orona, who had served as legal adviser to the governor and chief executive officer of the Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority;¹⁵ Carlos Bermudez and Rafael Cerame, government communications advisers; and the publicist Edwin Miranda, a private contractor for an advertising company that had multiple contracts with government agencies. One of the most objectionable items in the chat was a joke related to the nearly 4,000 dead left by Hurricane María. The suffering of thousands of families became the object of mockery; “Sobrino, one of [the governor’s] senior advisers, intervened when discussing the forensic delays. ‘Don’t we have any corpses to feed our crows?’” (Rivera Sánchez, 2019).

This private exchange between government officials and contractors demonstrated how public officials and individuals representing private interests discussed highly confidential matters. Confident that the communication later leaked was secret, they did not refrain from vulgar, sexist phrases, swearwords, insults, violent and homophobic terms, and invective against the poor. For example, New York’s Democratic leader Melissa Mark-Viverito was called a prostitute. Outraged, the former city council member replied, “A person who uses that language against a woman should not govern Puerto Rico” (Sánchez, 2019). Measures for confusing the public and manipulating the media were discussed. The governor himself crudely boasted about making fools (a**holes) out of his supporters (NotiCel, 2019). The conversation also included homophobic jokes about the singer Ricky Martin and feminists. It was as if the Bill of Rights of the Constitution had been turned on its head. Martin summed up the situation well: “Governor, your insults and your taunts show us who you really are. Precisely because your comments were made in an intimate space, they prove what you’re made of. It is in the intimate space that we live with the truth and integrity that defines us, and yours is far from correct and admirable” (quoted in Vicente, 2019).

Some of the comments showed elitist tendencies. In one, the governor himself mocked a poor residence in sight of his Cayey retreat, disparagingly commenting, “My neighbors on the mountain—you can’t ask for statehood that way” (Sepúlveda, 2019). A series of appearances by Douglas A. Leff, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Puerto Rico, prior to the arrests of officials and contractors was no help to the government. At a conference on May 30, 2019, he warned: “We’re going to put the crooks in the back seat of an FBI car” (NotiUno, 2019). In this context, some observers feel that the governor made a big mistake when he told CNN that President Trump was a bully and added, “If the bully gets close, I’ll punch the bully in the mouth” (Acosta and Liptak, 2019). Never before had a sitting governor expressed himself in such a derogatory and violent way about a U.S. president. This could partially explain why the investigations, threats, and arrests of the governor’s inner circle

intensified. The FBI's allegations of rampant corruption undoubtedly helped bring Rosselló's government to an end.

THE CITIZEN REVOLUTION

Faced with this degree of corruption, the public began to protest in the various aforementioned ways. The government's legitimacy had bottomed out. At first there were hundreds of people chanting slogans and picketing around La Fortaleza in Old San Juan. This initial call prominently featured the Feminist Collective, an organization that had been the object of sexist and homophobic comments in the leaked chat. The activism of young people responding to the call of urban reggaeton performers was also instrumental (García, 2019). Gradually, the sizes of the demonstrations in the historic area of Old San Juan increased until, on July 22, in the vicinity of the Plaza Las Américas shopping center in Hato Rey, approximately half a million people congregated.¹⁶ What happened in the vicinity of La Fortaleza and then in the so-called Las Américas Express was impressive in its strength and the diversity of its demands. Celebrity participants included Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio (Bad Bunny), who has some 18 million followers on social media, Ricky Martin, René Pérez (aka "Residente"), Olga Tañón, Ednita Nazario, Kany García, and Tommy Torres, to name a few.

Social networks were a common medium for issuing calls, a common development in international human rights campaigns:¹⁷ "Tools such as social media, documentary videos, citizen journalism, and virtual education have accelerated political changes, reducing the information disadvantages of marginalized groups and facilitating joint activist action across borders" (Santos, 2014). Groups as diverse as the motorcyclists summoned by a community leader like Rey Charlie and college choirs joined the protests. Feminists and progressive priests, singers and artists, university students, divers, and yogis, on motorcycles and bicycles, and members of unions and cooperatives came together to defend the common interest. Traditional and new slogans were accompanied by storyreading, singing, and pan-banging in neighborhoods where citizens sought to express themselves from home. The so-called combative *perreo* was added to the variety of expressive forms among the young. Slogans such as "Leave, Ricky, and take the Financial Board with you!" made clear that the protest was directed against the austerity measures taken by the oversight board appointed by the U.S. government (García, 2019).

One of the key elements of this process was the relative absence of major political parties in the conflict. The governing party was unable to deal with the crisis because of serious internal disagreements over the course of action. The PNP had many of the oversight board's austerity policies and was estranged from the people, as revealed by the chat, and the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party—PPD) had been involved in corruption and political scandals and therefore lacked credibility when it came to asking for transparency and supporting the required citizen efforts. Smaller groups such as the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence Party—PIP) and the newly created Movement of Citizens' Victory had a secondary but

active presence in the demonstrations. Citizen political pressure focused on the official residence and the headquarters of the executive branch, La Fortaleza (also known as the Santa Catalina Palace). Never before had citizens surrounded this building symbolically and physically. The July 22 photos from *Las Américas Express* made clear how massive the movement had grown. For the first time in history, a mobilization that depended to a large extent on social networks was outside of partisan politics and combined highly diverse social sectors.

The march was crucial in determining future events. Félix Córdova Iturregui (2019) explains this:

The march on July 22 reaffirmed the popular opinion of the previous Wednesday. The lessons from these two crucial moments were decisive: the two legislative bodies had to take a stand, and this was no longer simply on the possibility of removing the governor but on the need to do so. Thus the actions taken by the legislature did not spring from the legislature. They were the unequivocal result of what was happening in the streets. There, on the wide public stage, the popular will gained more and more strength in the inexhaustible creativity of its call.

A governor who had won by a mere 41 percent of the vote, with the opposition divided among different candidates, and who had awkwardly and insensitively handled the crisis of Hurricane María found himself utterly isolated in the midst of a serious crisis of legitimacy. While the citizenry was solidly in favor of his resignation, important leaders of the governing party itself also joined in the request. When the NPP's most important municipal leader, Ramón Luis Rivera, asked the governor to resign, many observers recognized that the dam had burst and nothing was going to stop the popular discontent. On July 25, the governor announced his resignation, confirming the victory of one of the most successful social mobilizations in history. In the United States, a number of commentators remarked that the opposition to Rosselló had been far more creative than that expressed in U.S. society against President Trump's excesses.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

This 2019 democratic fight against corruption in Puerto Rico is a significant moment in the struggle for human rights in general. It should be seen as part of a process leading to the creation of a model of real democratic participation and effective representation for those currently excluded from the political process. What form these claims will take is still difficult to anticipate. It remains to be seen whether the citizen assemblies in the various communities will be able to articulate programs with fundamental demands. In any case, these civic nongovernmental organizations, with significant influence and broad resonance in public opinion and very diverse human rights agendas, will continue making their case.

The Boricua summer was an intense demonstration focused on claiming human dignity as an expression of human personality in its various manifestations. Its intersectional strategy was very promising, calling attention to a

multiplicity of sources of discrimination and oppression. It displayed a capacity for citizen action that may play a fundamental role in our collective determination to see the future as an opportunity. It was undoubtedly a democratic moment yet undiscovered potential.

NOTES

1. "Boricua" is the original Taíno name for the island, and Puerto Ricans refer to one another as "boricuas" as a show of national pride (Acosta Lespier, 2014).

2. This formal designation for the political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico is used by the U.S. courts for a territory that belongs to but is not part of the United States (Trias Monge, 1999).

3. The anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla (quoted in Chotiner, 2019) speaks of the attitudes of the young people involved in the July 2019 protests: "So I think the young people here are saying, 'Let's set aside the question of sovereignty, and let's focus on the schools; let's focus on health; let's focus on a plan for Puerto Rico.' And I don't think it's because they don't want sovereignty. It's because they don't see the U.S. being willing to change the relationship that they have here. And so they want to tackle what's going on right now and here."

4. Several progressive U.S. media have looked closely at the effectiveness of the Puerto Rican claims in contrast with the problems involving President Donald J. Trump in the United States (see, e.g., Katz, 2019).

5. Controversy has broken out regarding whether the next citizen actions facing the 2020 election should be the promotion of independent candidacy in opposition to the existing parties (Bernabe, 2019).

6. This is a guiding principle of the Constitution of Puerto Rico and is central to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948.

7. On this occasion, displays of cultural nationalism involving the display of single-starred flags were sometimes accompanied by multicolored LGTTBQ flags and banners referring to the fiscal crisis or demands from various groups such as the feminist movement. There were no instances of exclusionary nationalism.

8. The governor is known as "Ricky," and the "Board" is the federal agency appointed by the U.S. government to establish austerity policies in Puerto Rico and resolve the fiscal crisis caused by a huge public debt.

9. Prior to 1947 the president of the United States appointed the governor of the island. Since then the choice has been made by elections in the island.

10. Puerto Rico's Constitution has a broad Bill of Rights but does not contemplate forms of direct political participation for citizens (Montañez Miranda, 2014). On the contrary, because it is a constitution subject to the powers of the United States Congress, it is prevented from implementing changes to break colonial control (Alvarez, 2010).

11. This is one of the constitutional amendments being pursued by certain groups. A 2018 proposal to this effect (Resolución Concurrente de la Cámara C.2) was favorably recommended in the House of Representatives. <http://www.tucamarapr.org/dnncamara/Documents/Measures/6142ab24-5c71-4f1b-8890-9ebf5929da38.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2020)

12. Proposals are varied and come from sectors of Puerto Rican society including former governors (see Acevedo Vilá, 2018). For a recent interview on the subject with the author see *El Nuevo Día*, January 31, 2019. <https://lite.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/acevedoviladisculteen-sunuevolibrolaseparaciondepoderes-2474170/>. The Puerto Rico Bar Association has been promoting a constitutional assembly process to endorse decolonization for several decades (Torres Rivera, 2014). Awareness has increased, and there is growing interest in measures aimed at expanding direct democracy.

13. Hurricane Maria resulted in irreparable damage. It is estimated that nearly 4,000 people lost their lives as a result of the environmental phenomenon as well as poor institutional response. The local government was unable to provide reliable data on the matter. An initial study reported at least 3,000 dead (BBC Mundo, 2018). In a second study, the figure rose to over 4,000 (Sutter and Santiago, 2018).

14. Regarding the struggle for the demilitarization of Vieques, see Rodríguez (2000).
15. The government agency responsible for implementing austerity policies in correspondence with the mandates of the Financial Oversight Board.
16. "According to the geographer, planner, and interpreter of aerial images Jardany Díaz Salgado, over 500,000 people attended the event. His calculations are based on an analysis of images taken with drones and from surrounding buildings and helicopters, as well as those disseminated by the media" (Alvarado León, 2019b).
17. For a balanced discussion regarding the benefits and potential harmful uses of networks see Joseph (2012).

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