

# Commentary

## Social Movements, Crises, and Mobilizations

A Look at Summer 2019

by  
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*But if I have learned anything from my time in Puerto Rico,  
it is the Puerto Ricans do the impossible every single day.*

—Naomi Klein

Beginning in the 1990s and in the first five years of the twenty-first century, we saw a strengthening of social movements that had achieved political space for combating U.S. neoliberal strategies and halting the dangerous influence of big business and capitalist governments. These movements became the protagonists influencing state policies in several Latin American countries and other regions. A systematic study of the knowledge produced by this resistance and insurgency may suggest alternatives that could be transformed into solutions.

This protagonism was notable in the late 1980s because of its role in the fall of Latin American dictatorships and of “actually existing socialism” and in the Venezuelan Caracazo, among other iconic events. In Puerto Rico it was a decade of disillusionment with political parties and an expansion of grassroots community work with the principles of popular education as a political option. The visit of Paulo Freire, sponsored by a group of organizations that were part of the Coordinadora Nacional de Educación Popular (National Popular Education Coalition), determined for many that the way forward was organization outside traditional politics. This perspective gained strength during the final decade of the twentieth century.

The World Social Forum, whose initial seat was Porto Alegre, Brazil, was an organizational expression of the leading role of social movements on a global scale. The role of the world, regional, and local forums in the electoral processes

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of South American countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay was recognized as decisive in gaining access to the state apparatus in these countries. This was often acknowledged by elected officials of these countries. These governments, responding to the call of the social forums (2001–2020) and to a wide range of organizations active in civil society, pursued anti-neoliberal policies and constitutional reforms that promoted participatory and sometimes radical democracies.

But the state remains the state, and the contradictions and challenges of having to choose among decoloniality,<sup>1</sup> autonomy, the new era, and the need to implement extractive strategies in order to generate foreign exchange, redistribute income, and reduce poverty turned the initial optimism into caution.

Although this first stage of the influence of social movements on traditional politics eventually showed signs of exhaustion (Martínez Rodríguez, 2013; Zibechi, 2008), this does not invalidate the central fact: the protagonism created by the collective action of civil society. Before the organization of the first World Social Forum in 2001, one could observe this impact in previously fragmented areas of struggle, among them the mobilizations of indigenous peoples around the commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the European conquest in 1992, the 1994 uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army) against the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and the United States, and the 1999 protest in Seattle against the World Trade Organization known as the Battle of Seattle. Important during this period in Puerto Rico were the People's Strike against Telefónica Puerto Rico in 1998 and the Movimiento Social de Paz para Vieques (Movement for Peace in Vieques) from 1999 to 2003 and subsequent years, which was significant for putting an end to the U.S. Navy's military exercises in Vieques. After the World Social Forum's global initiative (Cotto Morales, 2016), this international protagonism shifted to the activists of the Arab Spring in 2010, the Spanish M-15, the European Indignados in 2011, and the U.S. Occupy movement in 2011–2012.

In Puerto Rico this was expressed in the university strikes of 2010 and 2011. As of the second decade of the new century, discontent with the neoliberal austerity policies promoted by the government and the Financial Oversight, and Management Board or Fiscal Control Board (FCB, known in Puerto Rico as the *la junta* [the board])<sup>2</sup> was evident in a variety of sectors. This board was part of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) passed by Congress in 2016. The discontent was voiced in the university strike of 2017 and the May 1 demonstrations that year and the next. It later increased in the campaigns for a debt audit by the organization Auditoria Ya (Audit Now) and that of Construyamos Otro Acuerdo (Let's Build Another Agreement) in opposition to negotiations between the government and organizations that did not represent the interests of affected civil society sectors in restructuring the debt through a reduction in pensions. The discontent also increased with the demonstrations of current and retired professors at the University of Puerto Rico represented by the Asociación Puertorriqueña de Profesores Universitarios (Puerto Rican Association of University Professors) and its retired professor's chapter in opposition to the unjustified cuts to the institution's budget and the

irrational goal of destroying the successful retirement trust fund (Fideicomiso de Retiro)—a struggle that is continuing. But the retirement committee of the UPR's governing board is pushing for the funds' elimination. Activists in research, communication, and performance such as Somos Dignos (We Are Worthy) also made clear the generalized discontent. This initiative was created in 2010 by students and professors of the law school at the Interamerican University, a private institution, in solidarity with the students of the public University of Puerto Rico. They opposed the violence of the police against students in front of the Capitol building while they protested budget cuts and increases in registration fees imposed on the UPR by the FCB and the UPR governing board. Today Somos Dignos includes professors and students from the UPR's Graduate School of Social Work and other organizations.

To this impressionistic recap of collective actions that nurture utopias in building social movements we need to add the mobilizations of the twenty-first century's past five years—the 2016 rise of a militant and combative activism among young people in response to the imposition of the PROMESA (Cotto Morales, 2017a). Among these collectives was the Campamento contra la Junta (Encampment against the Board), an occupation in front of the Federal Court that lasted seven months, night and day,<sup>3</sup> after which it was dismantled for safety and health reasons and its participants shifted to other venues for action. During the same period, the *Se Acabaron las Promesas* (No More Promises) campaign<sup>4</sup> became an organization that has led provocative and creative demonstrations against PROMESA and the FCB. In addition, it organizes work in training, cultural promotion, ecology, and outreach in excluded sectors. *Vamos* (Let's Go) was created in 2015 as a political initiative of a nonpartisan citizens' committee composed of people and organizations who agreed on five points.<sup>5</sup> In 2018 *JunteGente* (Bring People Together) opened another arena for “a meeting of organizations that are resisting neoliberal capitalism and fighting for a sustainable Puerto Rico in the spirit of solidarity.” In 2019 the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* (Feminist Collective under Construction) earned a leading role for its militant political work calling for an end to violence against women, an audit of the debt, retirement with dignity, and the elimination of the FCB, along with sectoral and general demands. Their slogan “No Vamos Solas, Llevamos los Reclamos Colectivos” (We're Not Alone, We Bear the Collective Demands) conveys this commitment. The defense of human rights by these collectives prioritizes opposition to the multiple forms of violence—domestic, police, legal, economic, gender, and social—generated by the current pattern of political power. The peace that is sought is not the peace of the grave but a proactive peace that requires militancy. Only in this way can the conscious development of a culture of peace be realistic.

The demographic profile of these mobilizations and initiatives of politico-social activism is youthful. This feature was enhanced during the summer of 2019 (Colón Morera in this issue; Pérez, Reina Pérez, and Toro, 2019; Silva, 2019). The subsequent processes of organizational continuity display a combination of millennials and baby boomers.

## PUERTO RICAN SUMMER 2019: THE OUTRAGE THAT MOVED THOUSANDS

What is the place of the Puerto Rican Summer 2019 in this landscape? The July 2019 mobilizations came after events and discontents that emerged during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Just like the Movement for Peace in Vieques, the outrage that moved thousands of citizens burst on the scene and surprised many. However, if we approach the analysis from the standpoint of the sociology of social movements or the history of our social struggles, we can see that in Vieques and in 2019 their content was already present in previous activism, protests, campaigns, and demonstrations promoted by a variety of groups. These groups, although sectoral in origin, embraced struggles for the human rights of other oppressed people. The most prominent were students, unions, environmentalists, women, and LGBTQIA+. LGBTQIA+ activists were much more visible in the 2019 mobilizations than in the Movement for Peace in Vieques.

In 2019 the outrage was already simmering in large sectors of the population but may not have been manifest because of the bewilderment that paralyzed a population battered and stunned by Hurricane María, a deadly tropical storm that devastated Puerto Rico, Dominica, and the Virgin Islands in September 2017. The publication of an infamous chat was the straw that broke the camel's back and sparked this pent-up outrage. For the sectors that had been battered, the path forward was clear: "¡Ricky, renuncia y llévate la Junta!" (Ricky, resign, and take the Board with you!).

One difference from previous collective actions was that all the victimized social actors, transformed into political subjects during the march, became protagonists (internal political actors)<sup>6</sup> of the protest. In earlier mobilizations, the protagonists—women, workers, the Movement for Peace in Vieques, LGBTQIA+, squatters, and others—received support in solidarity from other sectors (external political actors). In the Summer 2019 protests we were all internal political actors. This characteristic represents a magnificent foundation for the construction of social movements from multiple social bases aimed at what Sub-Comandante Marcos called "a world in which many worlds fit." The press, television, radio, social media, and some academics characterized the mobilizations as "organic." This concept has multiple meanings. Some of these meanings have fostered innovative and valuable impressionistic analyses that need to be complemented with systematic approaches from the distance of time.

The perspective of the sociology of social movements provides a major opportunity to specify the possible repertoires of action that promote citizen power and social transformation within or outside electoral means. It enables us to look at events from angles that complement those inundating the media. Studying these actions allows us to identify the changes that have occurred in the perception and explanation of the situation and in the meanings assigned to things, persons, relationships, and/or symbols. Unfortunately, until just recently this perspective was conspicuously absent from the academic and activist media.

There are historical moments in which collective actions generate latent processes of symbolic and practical social transformation—underlying processes

that work as if they were *underground* cultural processes. During certain historical periods these latent processes become visible and lead to mobilizations like those of the Movement for Peace in Vieques and those of Summer 2019 in Puerto Rico, Arab Spring in 2010, the Spanish M-15, the European Indignados in 2011, and the U.S. Occupy movement in 2011–2012. Some of these mobilizations became social movements while others have developed other political strategies.

The vision of social movements spurs the identification of mechanisms of participation, organized or not, that are produced within the mobilizations. Traditional analyses reduce mobilizations to transient events that do not open real possibilities for change. It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify these mechanisms of participation by merely addressing their influence in government, in other traditional state institutions, and in the corporate world. This is what happened when Ricky resigned. Once the immediate goal was achieved, the mobilization and politicization that removed Ricardo Rosselló from the governorship had little effect on the “solutions” developed by the governing party and the state, which six months later brought the country to another crisis of governance early in January 2020.

The major earthquake and its aftershocks in Puerto Rico in January 2020 created a new emergency for people in the central and southern regions of the island. It sowed panic in the Puerto Rican population and deepened the nation’s political crisis. The deficient response of the government of Puerto Rico, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the White House continues to worsen an unsustainable situation. The burden of the disaster response, just as after Hurricane Maria, has been shouldered by the municipalities, civil society organizations, communities, and private citizens. After these earthquakes, the same bad habits that brought the nation to the streets in July 2019 were being repeated.

The Summer 2019 demonstrations led broad sectors to propose new cultural policies for expanding democracy—conscious and informed policies involving thought, emotion, and knowledge. It is in these new collective actions, electoral or otherwise, with a focus on building social movements, that the content, direction, and rationale for pursuing power are being built.

The dominant elites, in the name of democracy, are enemies of democracy. They want it to promote voices that legitimize their interests. To avoid this, we need alliances and coalitions of all those who were transformed from social actors to political subjects so that we can “safeguard the only political arena in which we can fight for power: the democratic arena” (Santos, 2000).

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE JULY 2019?

A road map is emerging for changing the government and the country from various strategic perspectives. The people have kept alive their denunciations of corrupt people and policies and are repeating the demand for systematic accountability.

The organizations that preceded the mobilizations mentioned above have approached their innovative objectives with democratizing agendas and practices

aimed at creating different forms of government. In addition, new initiatives such as the 38 People's Assemblies and their Network of Assemblies have emerged to create and sustain the tools and mechanisms of participation that generate social power. In a parallel way, the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens' Victory Movement), an electoral option in 2019 transforming the government, has adopted a network-of-networks structure for electoral, programmatic, and postelectoral work. Another variant is Vamos, whose practice is based on education, organization, and mobilization and employs popular education, participatory self-management, and militant activism.

The political will exists, but it is too early to assess how these practices will alter the pattern of existing power. The work of the organizations named above has the inevitable structural contradictions of new practices. Both nonelectoral and electoral initiatives have the goal of bringing the demands of the mobilizations to fruition. A variety of organizations have this political will—among them JunteGente, the Movimiento Una Sola Voz (One Voice Movement) Acceso Legal (Legal Access), Casa Taft 169 (Taft House 169), the Organización de la Mujer Trabajadora (The Working Woman Organization), the Coordinadora de Paz para la Mujer (Peace for Women Coalition), the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, and Puerto Rico Te Quiero (Puerto Rico I Love You). I have focused on those in which I have participated more directly as an activist, academic, and organic (Gramsci) or public (Said) intellectual. I have presented some theories based on participant and analytical observation that point to possible trends for a utopian and pragmatic future. I draw on interpretive theoretical frameworks that I have developed throughout my life and on experiences in collective actions and previous movements that I have participated in and studied.

The consequences of these processes remain to be seen and analyzed. What impact, if any, will the incompetence and corruption of the government, the persistent hostility of the White House, and the proliferation of citizen and community responses have on new resistance and organizations, future mobilizations, voter registration rolls, and real influence on power?

## ONGOING ACTIONS

Outlined below, as a chronicle, are some of the activities of the above-mentioned collectives, which have increased because of the earthquakes. The People's Assemblies remain connected electronically and have generated several actions through in-person meetings. The creation of the Network of Assemblies points to a promising desire for coordination. The Placita Roosevelt Assembly in San Juan has 11 active committees.<sup>7</sup> Its constitutional amendment committee has chosen three types of amendments to the constitution to be submitted to the Legislature. The citizen participation committee of the Placita Roosevelt Assembly has developed a way of achieving political influence through an electoral strategy for the elections in 2020. The strategy includes a work plan to foster informed citizen participation and voting practices. The assembly's education committee has designed popular education activities to publicize the assembly's initiatives. Because the crisis of governance has reappeared since the earthquakes,

participants have been stressing the need to coordinate and integrate actions with other assemblies and organizations.

Another example of this political will is *Vamos*, whose work as a nonelectoral political entity is structured in terms of the work of community committees, sectoral committees, diaspora, fronts and alliances, an international team, and projects in education, communication, and the solidary economy, among others. They were brought together from a perspective of a Project for a Country under Construction with the desire to implement horizontal decision-making practices.

The network-of-networks structure<sup>8</sup> for the electoral initiative adopted by the national assembly of the *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana* is focused on replacing traditional party organization, which is consistent with its self-definition as a movement. This decision was preceded by important debates within the organization.

What should universities and other educational, union, and political institutions do?

First of all, they should promote and finance research that contributes to the study of the variables that typify the collective actions or social movements—variables such as political subjects, allies/adversaries, historical contexts, ideologies, demands/claims, organizational and communication practices, the role of violence, and the role of government and of private sectors of the economy, among others.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, they should expand the list of concepts for organizing the thinking about the problem, encouraging attention to notions such as collective action, performative action, coloniality of power, of knowledge, and of being, hegemony, decoloniality, epistemologies of the South, ecology of knowledge, interculturality, and epistemicide, among others. We need institutional commitments to financing research, programs, and courses on politics and social movements that include the critical methodology of popular education.

There are many social forces on this planet and in Puerto Rico committed to an agenda of social transformation, not always antisystemic in Wallerstein's sense but at least of change. They will survive if they maintain a praxis (a dialectic between action and reflection, in Freire's sense) guided by a critical outlook. In addition, it is essential to question existing paradigms, to be in touch with reality (*tocar suelo*),<sup>10</sup> to affirm utopias (Santos, 2000), to obtain commitments of solidarity financing to expand, systematize, and disseminate the body of knowledge on these issues that we in Puerto Rico have been building through practice.

## NOTES

1. The coloniality of power is, according to the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000), one of the founding elements of the current model of power. It refers to the basic and universal social classification of the planet's population around the idea of "race." This classification has existed for the past 500 years and is the basis of racism in the modern era. Along with the notions of America and Europe as unequal regions and capitalism as a universal form of the control of labor, it was "imposed on the population of the planet during the expansion of European colonialism." It is distinguished from colonialism in that the latter refers to the politico-economic domination of some peoples by others and preceded coloniality by thousands of years.

2. Consistent with Puerto Rico's colonial status, the law grants power to the FCB to impose fiscal plans on the government of Puerto Rico and all its institutions. Contradictorily, the area for

management by Puerto Ricans through the executive and the legislature has been reduced by a ruling of the Boston District Court of Appeals (December 18, 2019) upholding the decision of a lower court that “if the fiscal body makes a recommendation to the government and the latter does not comply, nothing prevents the FCB from implementing the suggested course of action” (González, 2019). The government of Puerto Rico has no decision-making power over the agreements.

3. The duration of this encampment exceeded that of the marathon picket line of the political subjects of the land invasions’ social movement of Puerto Rico from May to July 1975 but not that of the encampments against the U.S. Navy in Vieques from 2000 to 2003 (Cotto Morales, 2011; 2017b). Land invasions are known in Puerto Rico as *rescates* (rescues). My book and documentary *Desalambrar* (2011) and *Desalambrando* (2016) analyze and show the history of the Movimiento Social Urbano de Rescates (Land Invasions’ Urban Social Movement).

4. Note the play on words with PROMESA, which also means “promise.”

5. The points of agreement (*bases de concertación*)—social welfare, good health care, democracy from the people, identity and culture, dignified old age, and safe places to live—constitute the utopian horizon for building the transformative social movement to which *Vamos* aspires. For details of its vision, strategy, and values. see [www.vamospr.org](http://www.vamospr.org).

6. On the concepts of internal and external political actors and adversaries and allies, see Cotto Morales (2011).

7. The 11 committees are Logistics/Communications/Diaspora, Corruption, Constitutional Amendments, Debt Audit, Illegal Debt, Education, Citizen Participation, Public Policy, Decent Housing, Sustainability and Environment, and “Awareness” and Well-Being. Most of the assemblies agree on these topics, which correspond to the demands that were prioritized in the Summer 2019 demonstrations.

8. Some of the networks that have been organized by Victoria Ciudadana are Health, Education, Economy, Decolonization, Culture, Diaspora, Communication, Poverty and Communities, Government/Planning/Public Policy, Ecology, Gender, LGBTTTQIA+, and Territorial Network (which replaces the traditional structure whose cornerstone was the neighborhood committee).

9. Another way to achieve this incentive is the Puerto Rico Syllabus ([www.puertoricoosyllabus.com](http://www.puertoricoosyllabus.com)), an innovative tool created by young academics of the diaspora that provides “a list of resources for teaching and learning about the current economic crisis in Puerto Rico . . . and tools . . . to assess its roots and its repercussions.”

10. “The salvation of which the poet speaks is ‘hitting bottom’ with the ground of reality. Sub Comandante Marcos convinced me that, in the face of each theory, you have to see how to be in touch with reality. . . . What is the ground that my theory denied? What reality did it hide instead of revealing it?” (Robert, 2009).

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