

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN IN THE LEADERSHIP OF A STRUGGLE FOR ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE: THE CASE OF VIEQUES

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critical comparative narrative of the development of the focused political pressure created by a unified population led by women who understood that the perceived results of the long term military activity on the island Vieques could be used to stop the catastrophic ecological damage that was being caused by the U.S. Navy. The narrative reviews the period of struggle in the 1970s and the period of 2000 to 2003 when all of the military activity was brought to an end. These periods are viewed as two distinctive conjunctures. The class and gender dynamics of these periods are comparatively considered along with the critical shift in the role of women as part of an emerging unique cultural identity of the region. During the second conjuncture the movement was driven by a tremendous concern for health, particularly threats to the people's nutrition and risks of cancer by the imposition of U.S. military technology. This new perspective was brought to this social motion by the involvement of independently organized women. This new dimension allowed the movement to be articulated in the more inclusive terms of environmental health, peace, and human rights which proved to be decisive in its success.

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Keywords: Vieques; Puerto Rican Politics; Ecological Social Movements; Caribbean Politics; ecological damage; effects of military bases

Vieques, inhabited by approximately 10,000 people of color, is the poorest of the municipalities of the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. Seventy-three per cent of the population lives below the poverty line and half of its adult population is unemployed (U.S. Census, 2000). This is a case study of how the people of Vieques rallied against the negative health effects of protracted environmental degradation caused by the American military. It has been documented

that during its occupation the Navy engaged in the regular use of toxic substances such as napalm, carcinogens, and depleted uranium at levels even prohibited by the Pentagon (Murillo, 2001). It has been estimated that during the fifteen year period from 1983 to 1998 17,763 live bombs of various sizes and description were dropped on Vieques by the military (Berman, 2002).

This overt ecological destruction was brought to an end as the result of a collective struggle ultimately led by women motivated by a strong concern for the total health of the people and their children. American military activity has been directly responsible for the creation of more than twenty-seven thousand specific toxic waste sites within the U.S. (Sorenson, 1998). The catastrophic destruction that has resulted in long-term international environmental degradation is immeasurable (Amin, 2003). Carmen Ortiz Roque, a spokesperson for the Puerto Rico Surgeons and Doctors Association, reported that from 1990-1995, Vieques' infant mortality rate dramatically increased to 50 per cent higher than in the rest of Puerto Rico (El Nuevo Dia, 2001). Official Puerto Rican government statistics revealed as early as 1985-89, the cancer rate among the inhabitants of Vieques was 26.7 per cent higher than in the rest of the territory (Marquez & Porto, 2000).

Although it is difficult to establish causality, it is widely believed that these health statistics are related to the long termed degradation of the eco-systems, in particularly the water and the food systems of the island upon which the health of a community depends. The perceptions of the impact of the military activities on the quality of human health in Vieques resulted in a protracted social conflict that lasted six decades. It consisted of a dynamic complex of interrelated crises and critical circumstances that developed within and between two analytical defined distinctive periods. The general social struggle under consideration continues to evolve even today. The singular most significant unifying factor which resonated across all sectors and classes that make up the larger community in the municipality of Vieques ultimately proved to be a common desire to resist a perceived and acknowledged threat to the health of all who lived there.

It is note-worthy that this social struggle produced no singular charismatic leader even though local definitive self-organized collective leadership emerged, changed and declined from one conjuncture to the next. The movement showed collective blind courage, and even hesitancy and reluctance, along with incidental martyrdom driven by organized spontaneous tactical creativity as it lurched forward. Most importantly, it was self-organized in the most profound and meaningful sense, by the people of Vieques. The political pressure created by this mass-based effort became the critical factor in the eventual cessation in 2003 by the U.S. Navy of the systematic ecological degradation throughout the island.

In this article, the author analyzes the effective mobilization that characterized the second of the two conjunctures that was essentially led by women. What are the dimensions of class, gender, economic and politico-cultural characteristics that gave this struggle such tenacity? What were the critical contours of the various conjunctures that defined the moments of the struggle? This analytical narrative draws upon actual events, ideas, and other selected relevant empirical information. The analysis begins by briefly describing the historical processes that allowed the specific dynamic configuration of class and gender components of the struggle to emerge. A brief historical sketch will describe how a unique and inspiring consciousness was shaped within the context of an overall protracted social struggle from one period to the next with the tenacious aim of protecting, defending, restoring, reintegrating and ultimately reenergizing a healthy environment that was being rapidly degraded by the military arm of an overtly destructive American international policy.

CLASS, GENDER AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Several large sugar plantations dominated the economy and social life of Vieques prior to the arrival of the Navy.

Like many of the smaller Caribbean islands the class configuration of Vieques was circumscribed by the lack of available land to small peasant farmers after slavery (Kadalie, 2000). Large sugar plantations owned almost all of the land. Hence, by the time of the arrival of the naval presence on the island in 1941, 95 per cent of the population was rural and landless. It was this landless sector of the population that essentially provided the labor and lived on land owned by two large sugar companies (McCaffrey, 2002). During this period in the history of the island dominated by sugar production, there were two principle distinctive social classes which themselves were divided into substrata that defined the local dynamic socio-cultural matrix. They were 1) a small group of independent farmers, the colonos, who owned very small plots of land; and 2) a large landless laboring class which was divided into a large agregado population and a numerically lesser jornalero group. The latter group, the jornalero came to the island as seasonal workers and lived in hostels during times when their labor was needed by the sugar companies. But it was the much larger group of agregados who remained as permanent residents of the island that were more significant to the development of a unique Vieques consciousness and identity.

The agregados lived on small plots of land owned either by the large estates or by colonos who were small independent sugar farmers. Agregados were allowed to use these small plots, without legal title, to sustain themselves when there was not need for their labor during the dead time of the year, which was generally from September to February. They not only used these small pieces of land for subsistence farming, but they also relied upon coastal areas and lagoons for fishing, collecting shellfish, and growing a variety of fruits and vegetables, particularly coconuts; as well as collecting wood for the making of charcoal for fuel (McCaffrey, 2002).

These three local strata provided the basis for the indigenous class configuration in 1941. Their food and nutritional needs were generally met, and it was in this way that they became dependent upon the local ecological systems for their livelihood. The role of women within these groups was well defined within nuclear and extended family formations with males providing some limited external support. Agregados women worked to sustain the family within the household, which included the maintenance of the small subsistence plots and the animals associated with these very small sections of land. They lived sheltered lives under the protection of one or more males as husbands, fathers, brothers, or uncles. The men worked outside the household. Although, the colonos possessed legal titles to some smallholdings, compared to the vast legal ownership of the sugar estates, the women's role was nevertheless rigidly confined to the management of larger households. Their primary activity was similarly confined to the house as well.

The jornaleros were often supporters of families on other islands or in other places. They tended to skew the male-female population ratio on the island during the period when sugar production was dominant and when their labor was needed on the large estates. They were essentially itinerant workers. Since these classes and class configuration was based upon the production of sugar, when the plantations were sold to the Navy, a drastic reconfiguration occurred.

The permanent residents of the island, the colonos, and agregados who had distinctively different relationships to the production process, along with the jornaleros, who had no long-term attachment to the island, welcomed the coming of the Navy. They all looked forward to the promise of significant economic development occasioned by what was considered to be almost limitless economic possibilities.

THE EFFECTS OF EXPROPRIATION

After declaring a state of national emergency, the Navy took over 6,680 acres in eastern Puerto Rico and 21,020 acres of Vieques. The plan was to expand the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, build a massive breakwater that would stretch from eastern Puerto Rico to western Vieques which would be part of a huge naval base about the

size of Pearl Harbor in the Pacific (Langeley, 1989). Although the expropriation of three fourths of the land on Vieques was a singular event, it set into motion other events that changed the island so much during the 1940s and 50s that it could barely be recognized as the same geo-political location.

Initially, a large numbers of Puerto Ricans and Viequeses were employed on the massive construction project. But no sooner than work had begun it stopped abruptly. The local economy was devastated. The sugar plantations were gone and the Navy's promises were unrealized. The Navy along with armed forces of several other countries made use of the extensive lands that it controlled for various war games.

The agregados sector of the laboring population was hit the hardest. They were cut off from their seasonal labor on the sugar plantation and their ecological support system during the dead time. They were pushed out of their homes and relocated within a narrow strip of land squeezed between two large swaths of military land to the east and to the west. The jornaleros simply had no reason to come to the island anymore and many agregado males left for employment in St Croix and on the U.S. mainland. Some however came and went on the island maintaining some semblance of support for their families. Others were even able to gain some employment from time to time on the small farms of the colonos families that continued to raise some cash crops on a limited basis. During the period of the 1950s up until the latter 1960s the Puerto Rican government did manage a relatively small sugar production enterprise that employed a significant number of workers (McCaffrey, 2002). In this situation, the male-female ratio became skewed in favor of females. The stark contradictory reality of the promise of meaningful service jobs and the actuality of occasional work as washerwomen, prostitutes, bartenders, and shoeshine boys were part of the obvious facts of life on the island by the mid 1950s as a direct consequence of the decade long military occupation of the island.

THE CONJUNCTURE MANIFESTED IN THE FISHERMAN'S WAR OF 1978-1983 AND THE CRUSADE FOR THE RESCUE OF VIEQUES (LA CRUZADA PRO RESCATE DE VIEQUES).

There was a dramatic increase in the conflict between the Navy and most of the local population in 1978. Consequently, a unique cultural identity and an increased attachment to the island emerged as a result of the popular resistance to the Navy's policies. Among the reasons for this increased cultural identity were the increasing challenges of maintaining a connectedness to the life giving local ecology in the face of severe restrictions on land use as well as limitations on fishing rights. It was becoming more difficult to obtain the food needed to promote health among the people and their children.

Historically, the Vieques inhabitants relied on fishing for survival. Fishermen, as an essential part of the social fabric of Vieques society of the 1970s, came into being as descendants of a section of the agregados during the period of the dominance of sugar production. Hence, the fisherman wars over fishing access was, in great measure, the age old conflict at the primary point of production which most of all is a manifestation of how humans approach how they intervene into ecological support systems to sustain their biological and social survival.

THE LIMITED ROLE OF WOMEN

The fisherman themselves consciously defined the struggle as one where the Navy was interfering with their right to support their families. It was, therefore, expressed in terms that evoked a male's responsibility to act as the breadwinner. Such a restrictive perspective does not account for the essential role of women's work in the production, reproduction, and nurturing of the laboring population as a vital part of the capitalist mode of production (James, 2007). This essentially male chauvinist articulation of the purpose of the struggle suggests a

limited and supportive role for women in this conjuncture. In a real sense, this proved to be a critical failure and perhaps one of the reasons why a perspective that had the possibility of a broader unity did not occur. Needless to say, that in this phase of the struggle, women were not in the leadership of any of the movement organizations. Consequently, their role essentially remained one of secondary functional support (Süsser, 1992).

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUED

The Navy was pressured into leaving the neighboring island of Culabra in 1972 which intensified and redoubled its noisy aircraft flyovers and bombings of Vieques. This increased activity made the residential areas of the island almost uninhabitable. In response, activists of various political persuasions formed Viequenses United (Viequenses Unidos) in an attempt to mobilize the people against this more intensified disruption of their daily lives. Viequenses United was a dismal failure and disintegrated amid partisan bickering and cold war accusations of un-Americanism and communism. From 1978 to 1999, a series of confrontations and mobilization activities did occur like the land invasion and squatter movement of April of 1989 that was abruptly ended by hurricane Hugo in September of that year. There were also many other clashes of the local population with the military (Murillo, 2001). While there is no attempt to diminish the significance of these events they did occur within essentially the period of time between the two major conjunctures under consideration here. It is for this reason that all of the details of these intervening events are not included in this narrative.

The Perceived Health Threat Posed by ROTHR: The Turning Point

In the early spring of 1994, the Navy announced the installation of a massive radar system, Relocatable-Over-The Horizon-Radar (ROTHR), at a cost of \$9 million (McCaffrey, 2002). The stated purpose of this radar installation was to aid in the new "war on drugs".

Approximately 150 people directly participated in picketing to protest the construction of the radar towers (McCaffrey, 2002), and hundreds more saw and began to comprehend the gravity of the issues involved. Within the context of growing protests that resulted from the mobilization for this picketing relevant questions began to be raised concerning the negative health effects of electromagnetic radiation emanating from the installation.

This action generated a most crucial public debate. The general health of the people of Vieques was brought into question. This proved to be the turning point of the movement. The ideas that influenced the new tactical and ideological direction of a new phase in this continuing mass movement were beginning to take shape as a result of the effective mobilization against the radar installation. There were two lines of argument within this debate. There were those who believed that the radar installation was really an attempt by the Navy to have an excuse to remain on the island in the face of local popular demands for it to leave entirely. They saw it as a cover for an underlying conspiracy to even extend its domination of the island in the long term. On the other hand, there emerged another line of reasoning that said that such a narrow confrontational strategy did not have broad appeal. This new perspective emphasized the dangerous health effects that the radiation was having on the population as a whole. New statistics regarding the increased incidence of the occurrence of cancer were cited as convincing evidence. This argument had the ability to rally the population, since generally everyone who lived on the island was subject to the long-term contamination that was perceived as emanating from the radar installation.

Interestingly, women championed the latter explanation and this perspective became the prevailing view within the larger population. Women thus, began to enter the struggle in a definitive manner both as leaders and inspirational figures that help lay the groundwork for the upheaval to come.

THE CONJUNCTURE MANIFESTED BY THE INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE WOMEN'S ALLIANCE

In a general sense, women tend to be more concerned with issues related to food, education, health, and the environment. It is this dimension of social protest activity that they bring to the table (Kaplan, 1982). This distinctive perspective is derived from the unique and dynamic social position that they have historically occupied within the evolving capitalist mode of production as reproducers, agents of the socialization and nurturers of the work force as well workers themselves. From this vantage point they have created an unrecognized invisible history with a humanitarian nurturing culture of peace at its core (Pacheco, 2006).

Among the founders of the new Women's organization (the Women's Alliance), were Amelia Mulero, an active social worker; Dora Vargas, an employee of the Puerto Rican agricultural extension service; and Norma Jimenez, an elementary school teacher. This women's organization was founded by independent professional women whose lives and daily work gave them an intimate and most profound understanding of the health effects, both physically and psychologically of the military exercises on the people of the island.

Beginning in June 1999 the Women's Alliance impacted the broad based struggle that emerged in many distinctive ways both tactically and ideologically. In fact, it was their basic inclusive tactical orientation that allowed their clear and non-sectarian ideological direction to become more developed as it guided them to even more clarity. In general they adopted the stratagem of engagement and support of all non-violence peaceful protest demonstrations that advanced the cause. This effectively provided enormous room for other organizations to engage under these general parameters. They were therefore placed in a position to rally the broadest support for the establishment of settlement camps on the site of the bombing range along with one that they maintained at the gate to Camp Garcia. More than 14 such sites were constructed by the collective efforts of a political assortment of activist groups that represented the full range of the issues involved as well as their very distinctive political perspectives. They all worked together to advance one single demand. "All environmentally destructive military activity must cease on the island of Vieques". According to Bishop Alvaro Corrado Del Rio, a Catholic bishop of Caguas, Puerto Rico, these camps were maintained for almost a year with the active support and solidarity of the Catholic Church as well as other organized groups and influential individuals from New York to San Juan (El Nuevo Dia, 2000). With this broad base firmly established, the moral high ground was achieved and maintained from then until now.

After the camps, which were directly on the range, were forcibly closed and the Navy evicted the mostly male occupants in May 2000, the "Peace and Justice" camp that was maintained at the gate moved across the street into a more permanent location. This "Peace and Justice" camp which was at first maintained by the Women's Alliance remained accessible to the grass roots people and became a generalized focal point of the struggle. Among the daily and weekly activities held at the camp were prayer vigils, candle light services, lectures, music, educational literature, and the generalized use of culture to heighten awareness and deepen their understanding of the on-going struggle. Perhaps the most dramatic, creative, and effective part of the camp was the shrine commemorating the cancer victims. It was located in a public area adjacent to the entrance to Camp Garcia. The shrine was made up of a highly visible collection of white crosses with the name of an acknowledged cancer victim on each. At this writing, it is still there and is expanding, as new crosses are often being added.

As a result of this continuing social conflict, an increasingly clearer vision of the essential nature of the struggle began to become more refined. The struggle became broadly casted as a non-violent struggle for peace and human rights. The right to live a life supported by a healthy environment, free from violence began to be presented to the world as an inalienable right of all people.

It was in this way that the active support from all religious, political, and environmental groups were achieved both internationally as well as within the U.S. Territory of Puerto Rico. Thus, the cold war accusation of being unpatriotic and un-American was avoided even as a movement from civil society again faced down the overwhelming power of the U.S. military. Attempts to co-opt and divide it were unsuccessful. The basic human demand for peace and health became the unifying mantra of this very specific continuing social struggle for human self-emancipation. After decades of conflict and years of sustained political protests, President George W. Bush, reluctantly bowing to political pressure, announced in April of 2001 that all military activity would cease on the Island of Vieques on May 1, 2003. Today, no bombs fall on the island. This remarkable outcome is mainly due to the unified struggle of the people guided by the broad vision of a peaceful, healthful, environment for all, consciously led by the women of Vieques. However, the arduous task of restoring an environmentally sensitive, and sustainable community yet remains (McCaffrey, 2006). Undeniably, the dramatic past and continuing struggle for basic human health on the part of the people of Vieques has lasting contemporary educational relevance and far reaching implications for the empowerment of women within the context of ongoing movements for social change.

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AuthorAffiliation

Modlbo M. Kadalie

Department of Government and History

Fayetteville State University

AuthorAffiliation

Modibo M. Kadalie is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Department of Government and History at Fayetteville State University. Dr. Kadalie is the author of Internationalism Pan Africanism and the Struggle of Social Classes as well as numerous articles and book chapters. Among his research interests are radical social movements as they are affected by shifts within the political economy of the International Capitalist System.

Address: Department of Government and History, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC 28301-4252. Ph.: (910) 672-2425, Fax: (910) 672-1090. Email: modibokadalie@yahoo.com

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