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BACKGROUND AND GENERAL INFORMATION ON PUERTO RICO  
AND THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT

by

JOSEPH MONSERRAT

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Commonwealth of Puerto Rico  
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INTRODUCTION

The original purpose of this paper was to provide social workers, teachers and others in the field of human relations, with some background and general information on Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican migrant. It was hoped this information would provide some of the basic understanding necessary to enable them to plan more intelligently and work more intimately with the Puerto Ricans with whom they come into contact. But as I planned and thought through the outline this paper was to follow, it became clear to me that it might well serve another and possibly more vital function.

It seemed to me that those of us who are professionally, as well as, personally interested in the well-being of all people, might learn some lessons from our experience with Puerto Rico. Lessons which might enable us to see more clearly our present role in the world and help us avoid some of the many pitfalls before us.

The role of the United States in world affairs today is a crucial one. We are looked to for help and guidance by millions of people. Upon our action might very well depend the peace of the world.



Puerto Rico was discovered in 1493 by Christopher Columbus on his second trip to the new world. Juan Ponce de León of the Fountain of Youth fame, founded what is today the island's capital and became Puerto Rico's first Governor. Very early in its history the majority of the Borinquen Indians who inhabited the island died from disease or were killed. Those who remained were absorbed into the population. Negroes were brought from Africa, but the language and culture remained Spanish. During Spain's 400-year reign, two major political concessions were made to the island. The first, in 1812, declared Puerto Rico to be a province of Spain; the second, in 1897, granted Puerto Rico a form of self-government somewhat similar to Dominion status.

In 1898 Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States as a condition of the Treaty of Paris which ended the Spanish-American War. Also ceded were Guam and the Phillipines.

This was a momentous step in American history.

The United States, for the first time, found itself sovereign over "non-contiguous lands already thickly populated, settled with people of alien culture, language and political traditions." Opinion over what to do with these lands (Puerto Rico, Guam and the Phillipines) was divided. Some wanted to keep them, others said it was imperialistic to do so, some were interested in their potential economic exploitation, while still others feared competition from "cheap labor." The United States had entered an uncharted sea.

The situation today is not unlike what it was in 1898, for today we, once more, find ourselves making our way along unknown paths, having emerged from the second world war as a world leader. Opinion over the role we are playing is once more divided. Many of the people who look to us for help today are in an economic position not too unlike the position of the Puerto Ricans in 1898.

In Puerto Rico then, as in many countries today, illiteracy was high, close to 80%. Over 90% of the children were out of schools. The birth rate was 40 per 1,000 while the death rate was between 30 and 35 per 1,000. The economy was agricultural and inadequately developed, the people, by and large, were politically immature.

For many Americans these problems were not too significant for, after all, all the island needed was some "American know-how and ingenuity." It would not be long before we made our Puerto Rican brothers over in our own image and then their troubles would end.

And so we began. In some fields we were highly successful. Our doctors and sanitary engineers made almost immediate inroads in their attack against smallpox, malaria, yellow fever and hookworm. We attacked the problem of illiteracy and the need for education. While we knew, having learned from previous experience, how to combat yellow fever, we did not know the best way to start to educate a people whose culture and history was one hundred years old when the Pilgrims first landed at Plymouth Rock, and an Indian looking out from behind a tree might well have said, "Ugh, foreigners!"



So we improvised. It was obvious that the Puerto Rican teachers needed further training. The question of where to train them was answered with the help of a map. The map showed Puerto Rico was in the West Indies, therefore, it seemed reasonable to assume that Puerto Ricans were Indians! The teachers were sent to Carlisle or Haskell Indian institutes!

But that was only the beginning; since we were going to make our brothers over in our own image, it was necessary that they speak English.

Almost overnight it was determined that Spanish, the language spoken for 400 years on the island, would be "relegated to the place of a subject;" English would be the language used in the schools! Persons who have complained that Puerto Ricans seem to resent speaking English might find a partial answer to their questions in this statement by Dr. Mariano Villaronga, Commissioner of Education:

"The result of these practices are the obvious ones of lack of progress in both English and in the subject taught; a tendency to memorize by rote without understanding; discouragement with the whole learning process; and a prejudice against English as the cause of the whole trouble."

I mention these facts not in any attempt to ridicule, but because they contain what might well be the most important lesson we need to learn today, namely, we cannot impose our value system or our frame of reference upon other people no matter how well-meaning we are. The attempt to do this in Puerto Rico for over 40 years has had repercussions which are being felt even today.

Social Workers have long known the importance of accepting an individual for what he is and at his level, they have learned that only in this way can a genuine and real relationship, so necessary for adequate understanding, be built. Social Workers know that projection techniques and role playing are not just techniques to be used at staff meetings or for therapeutic purposes; they need to be used in all human relations, whether at a social agency or at a U.N. conference table. In this respect, the Social Worker has much he can teach the diplomat and the politician - an important contribution to world peace. This is important to bear in mind when working with Puerto Ricans.

In 1917 Puerto Ricans were made citizens of the United States. By that time the military government that had ruled Puerto Rico had been replaced by a civil government as a result of the Foraker Act which was passed in April, 1900.



During the 40 years that followed, slow but steady progress was made along many fronts. This progress was greatly accelerated during the decade between 1940 and 1950, as the following chart indicates:

|                                      | <u>1940</u>   | <u>1950</u>   |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Government revenue                   | \$ 28,000,000 | \$114,000,000 |
| Gross national product               | 277,000,000   | 772,000,000   |
| Exports (primarily to U.S.)          | 92,000,000    | 234,000,000   |
| Imports (primarily to U.S.)          | 107,000,000   | 346,000,000   |
| Population                           | 1,870,000     | 2,210,000     |
| Population per square mile           | 534           | 630           |
| Birth rate                           | 40            | 40            |
| Death rate                           | 18            | 9.9           |
| Life expectancy at birth             | 45            | 58            |
| Unemployment                         | 18%           | 13%           |
| Percent of children in School        | 50%           | 63%           |
| Percent of literacy                  | 68%           | 78%           |
| Enrollment University of Puerto Rico | 5,000         | 11,000        |
| K.W.H. output                        | 182,000,000   | 521,000,000   |
| Sugar production                     | 1,000,000     | 1,300,000     |

During the period between 1900 and 1940, Puerto Ricans had been migrating to the continent in comparatively small numbers. In 1930 there were 34,756 Puerto Rican persons born in Puerto Rico who were living in New York City. By 1940, there were 63,281 Puerto Ricans in New York City, with a total of 69,967 in the entire country. In 1945, the beginning of regular air service between San Juan and New York City cut transportation time from four days to nine hours. Today, this same trip takes six hours and eventually will be made in 4-1/2 hours. Transportation by air costs as little as \$64.00. Puerto Ricans began to migrate in larger numbers.

But while reduction in time and cost of transportation might have helped to encourage migration, it was not the only reason for the increase in migration. There were two other major reasons.

At the end of World War II the United States entered into a period of production for civilian consumption. Production and employment was high. A study of the migration movement of Puerto Ricans to the mainland clearly indicates a simple fact, namely, when employment opportunities in the continent are high migration figures are high; when jobs are scarce fewer and fewer Puerto Ricans migrate until a point is reached where more migrants return to Puerto Rico than come to the mainland.

But possibly even more important is the ever-increasing population pressure in Puerto Rico. In 1940 there were 630 persons per square mile on the island, today there are 648. If we on the continent were to have the same density of population as exists in Puerto Rico, we would have to



have all of the peoples of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, in short, two billion, four hundred million persons, or the entire world population within our national borders. And even then the picture would not be comparable for this is a highly industrialized nation while Puerto Rico is just beginning to crawl toward industrialization; we are rich in minerals and natural resources, Puerto Rico has scarcely any; we have large tracts of farm land, Puerto Rico has only 1/2 acre of arable land per person.

But that is not all. The birth rate in the United States is 23.4. The death rate is at its lowest point in history at 9.6 per 1,000. In Puerto Rico the birth rate (except for a recent drop) is around 40 per 1,000 while the death rate is 9.9 per thousand. This means the rate of natural increase is about 30 per 1,000. To put this another way the population increases in Puerto Rico at a rate of 3% per year. At this rate it would double itself in less than 25 years. If the death rate keeps dropping, it might double itself in 20 years.

Here, then, is another lesson we might learn from Puerto Rico, namely, as underdeveloped areas throughout the world are helped toward greater development, one of the first occurrences is a drop in the death rate. The birth rate, however, remains about the same (as happened in Puerto Rico). It is necessary to make plans for this phenomena. If not planned, the resulting increase in population often makes an already dangerous condition more difficult.

There are other reasons why Puerto Ricans migrate. However, they all boil down to one main factor. Puerto Ricans come to the continent for the same reason that over 40,000,000 immigrants have come to this country before them; to seek better opportunities for themselves and their families. In other words, Puerto Ricans come to the continent to work!

Here it is necessary to make some important clarifications. The Puerto Rican migrant coming to the continent does not come simply to look for work, as such. He comes seeking better jobs! The Columbia University study on Puerto Rican migration discovered that "85% of the migrants in the labor force had quit jobs to make the trip; 15% had been unemployed at the time they left Puerto Rico. The majority (71%) had worked the entire 24 months of the two years before they left for New York." In other words, they had reached their level of aspiration on the island. They could go no higher and so they left.

Upon arrival in the states the Puerto Rican must make many adjustments. The weather is more extreme, being very hot in summer and very cold in winter. The pace is extremely rapid. The day is divided into split seconds. Almost everyone takes a note book out of his pocket and consults it before deciding whether or not he can meet you "tomorrow afternoon." The Negro and darker skinned Puerto Rican who has not known discrimination as practiced in the states before, suddenly finds that his ability to make



a living is very often based on the color of his skin and not upon his ability to do the job. The Puerto Rican comes from a patricial society where the father is the main bread winner and the ruler of the roost. Upon arrival in the states the family structure is very often changed. The father finds it difficult to earn enough or even to find a job. His wife, however, is often wanted for her skillful needle work and very often becomes the main breadwinner. If both work the wife may bring home at least as much as the husband. She no longer need be completely dependent upon her husband and becomes more independent. The childrens' position within the family undergoes a change. Very often the parents know little or no English. The children, however, have learned some English either in the schools of Puerto Rico or on the continent. When their parents have need to conduct business in English the children are very often brought along as interpreters. No longer are they "seen but not heard," now they are the very center of social interaction.

A study of Puerto Rican delinquent boys provides us with some further insight into the difficulties parents and children go through during the adjustment process. The study indicated that Puerto Rican youngsters were not involved in many major crimes. A disproportionate number of them, however, had been institutionalized for incorrigibility. This is not difficult to understand since these youngsters were suffering from what we might call "second generationitis." These are children who find themselves caught between cultures; their parents and homes on one side; the school and the street on the other. A young girl whose parents have been brought up in the tradition that a girl must not go out alone with boys and that she should be kept close to the home is bewildered and rebels when her schoolmates invite her to a settlement dance and her parents refuse her permission. She tells her mother she is going to visit a friend and sneaks off to the dance. When she returns home and is questioned as to her whereabouts she lies again. This innocent lying often leads to more serious deceptions and soon the youngster is on the road to delinquency. The parent, on the other hand, is hurt and bewildered by the child's action, complaining that youngsters are allowed "too much liberty here." The great tragedy here is the sincere and honest belief of both parents and children that they are right and the other wrong. More tragic is the fact that each is right, depending upon the frame of reference used.

A question often asked is: What is Puerto Rico doing to solve its own problems? I should like to discuss this point because it is most important to realize that Puerto Ricans do not come from a "mañana" land where all people do is sit around picking coconuts off trees. Puerto Ricans come from a poor island, but in the words of Governor Muñoz Marín:

"We are very far from being at the bottom of the list in the world economy. In income per inhabitant, out of 70 countries reported on by the United Nations, Puerto Rico occupies the 26th place, considerably



above the great majority of countries. In the Western Hemisphere as a whole it holds, together with Cuba, sixth place. Among Latin-American countries higher on the list than Puerto Rico are Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, countries of vast territory and vast agricultural and industrial resources. Cuba has an economic level similar to Puerto Rico's, although it has twelve times as much land and only twice the number of inhabitants."

Here again we should pause for a moment's reflexion. If Puerto Rico, as poor as it is, is the sixth highest country in per capita income in the Western Hemisphere and we have states within our union whose per capita income are little more than twice that of Puerto Rico, those of us who are in health and welfare work can see that we have a long way to go in raising levels in our country. This fact also helps to point up how terribly poor a great portion of our world is and why in this worldwide ideological struggle for survival it is so urgent to bring better and higher standards of living to the peoples of the world.

You are going to hear more about what Puerto Rico is doing to help itself so let me just highlight a few areas in passing.

Housing is a worldwide problem. In Puerto Rico in 1949 some 96,000 families lived in slums. To this can be added an annual increase of about 4,000 families. The Puerto Rican Housing Authority, in trying to wipe out the slums of Puerto Rico, estimates it will move 62% of the slum dwellers to permanent units and 18% to land and utility projects. About 12% are expected to move into private projects. The remaining 8%, it is estimated, are out-migrants from the slums.

By December 1950, the Puerto Rican Housing Authority had finished 4,178 low-cost dwellings. 412 more were under construction. While many slums were cleared, the Authority had not reached one of its major goals, to clear El Fanguito, the island's largest slum. To attain this goal, the Authority is constructing the San José development which will be its largest project, on a site covering 520 acres. When completed; this project will rehouse exclusively the people living in El Fanguito, some 6,200 families totaling 30,000 to 40,000 persons.

Another answer to the Puerto Rican housing problem is the land program of the Land Authority created to purchase land in excess of 500 acres held by corporations or partnerships and to secure a more equitable distribution of the island's agricultural wealth. As of December, 1950 the Authority had purchased 95,502 acres from corporations that in 1940 owned 194,500 acres in excess of the 500 acre law. Through cooperative ventures, people are encouraged to build homes.



The Puerto Rican Labor Force consists of over 780,000 workers of which 13% are chronically unemployed. One of the most important recent achievements of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor was to secure the extension of the Wagner-Peyser Act to Puerto Rico. In this way the Puerto Rican Employment Service became affiliated with the United States Employment Service and the Puerto Rican work force became an integral part of the continental work force. Puerto Rican workers who come to the continent through clearance procedures of the USES are transported from one part of the economy to another. They are not imported.

The Puerto Rican government has made tremendous strides in its efforts to industrialize the island. Over 160 new industries have been created on the island, providing a total of some 30,000 new jobs. Every year, however, 18,000 persons enter the labor force and thus it can be seen that it will be necessary to create some 200,000 new jobs in order to provide employment for the ever-growing labor force. This is the goal for the next 10 years.

It might be well to point out here another phenomena which the movement to industrialize non-industrial areas must face, namely, that new industries in order to compete must be efficient. To be efficient they must employ the latest and best techniques and equipment. This, in turn, means that comparatively few new jobs are created.

What does the future hold for Puerto Rico? I believe this question can best be answered by quoting from Governor Muñoz Marín's annual message to the legislature delivered on March 15, 1951:

"Which are the objectives that we should set for ourselves for 1960? I propose that we fix these objectives, that we conscientiously obligate ourselves to strive intrepidly to achieve them, in order to do away once and for all with extreme poverty in Puerto Rico. Let us set for ourselves the task of reducing unemployment from 13% of today's labor force to 5% of the much greater laboring force of 1960. 5% would mean practically no unemployment, for it would represent, in addition to the permanently unemployed, or the unemployable, workers in the period between jobs. To achieve this objective we shall have to proceed in such a way that our economy will create 200,000 additional jobs. The value of production of articles and services should increase from 772,000,000 in 1950 to 2,100,000,000 in 1960. During the next ten years we should invest, principally in the development of manufacturing industries, between \$30,000,000 and \$40,000,000 a year, derived in part from the government and in part from private enterprise. In addition, we must give highest priority among our objectives to the problem of increasing the productivity of agriculture. All



this must carry with it development of electrical power for productive purposes; it must be accompanied by the building of aqueducts and sewers for the protection of health, by health education and work in preventive medicine, for we must insure the physical and mental vigor of the people on whose shoulders the burden of this difficult task will rest.

Production must be increased between now and 1960 in order to raise the level of individual income and bring about a resultant improvement in the standard of living; in order to diminish the unfavorable trade balance; in order to lessen our dependence on Federal sources of income.

We must strive for this increase in production by diverting a large proportion of capital, both local and from the exterior, toward investments which will yield the highest quota in individual productivity, and in services related to the system of production; by continuing to increase output per worker (more workers working more days, within the limits of the law and of consideration of health, producing more in each working day because of better training, better attitudes toward their work, and more efficient tools, machines, equipment, and techniques).

Where will the money to make the necessary investments in Puerto Rico come from? I believe the words of the Governor can best answer the question:

'The economy of the United States generates more than \$25,000,000,000 of new capital, each year. Out of this new and enormous capital wealth Puerto Rico is legitimately seeking an investment of \$30,000,000 or \$40,000,000 of new capital a year - I repeat, of new capital, not transferred capital. The American citizens living in Puerto Rico compose 1-1/2% of the population of the United States. And our industrial plan calls for less than one-fifth of 1% of the new capital generated, not without the modest collaboration of Puerto Rico, by the American economic system every year. It would seem clear that, as good citizens, we need have no fear that the industrial system of the United States is in danger of destruction at the hands of Puerto Rico.

There is much more that can be said on this subject, but space permits just one last observation.



The Puerto Rican coming to the continent comes from a land that is struggling to bring to fruition a dream that most of the world is still talking about, namely; to develop an underdeveloped area. In the past ten years this dynamic struggle has brought forth sufficient tangible results to demonstrate beyond any question of doubt that the worldwide program for developing underdeveloped areas is not just the day dream of impractical do-gooders, but, rather, the most practical solution for the modern dilemma which, if not solved, will enable some future historian to chalk off one more civilization that flourished and then destroyed itself raising the total to twenty-two such recorded civilizations.

Puerto Rico can and is teaching the world much about how this can be accomplished and her experience can and has demonstrated some of the things that happen when this is done.