

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE NEW OLD DEAL: COLONIAL SOCIAL WELFARE AND PUERTO RICAN POVERTY DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1928-1941

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In 1941, at the end of the Great Depression, continental observers noted that Puerto Rico's urban shantytowns were expanding despite the US government's efforts to alleviate poverty through New Deal programs such as low-income housing and slum eradication initiatives. Their consensus was that working-class Puerto Ricans had it far worse than many poor Americans—including African Americans in the Jim Crow South. And yet, over the course of the 1930s, policymakers in Washington, D.C. came to conclude that a large portion of the Puerto Rican population were deserving, “white” American citizens. One would expect that, as they became increasingly categorized as “white” in the national census, federal aid to Puerto Rico would have followed the same patterns of racialized welfare that historians have associated with the New Deal. Why then were so many islanders moving to city squatters’ settlements while the white, continental working class benefitted from New Deal housing and employment initiatives? This conundrum prompted the following exploration of how Puerto Ricans' access to New Deal labor legislation, jobs creation and housing programs influenced the reinforcement of the island’s class structure, entrenched poverty, and the dramatic growth of its urban

shantytowns. This dissertation considers how an analysis of island squatters' settlements and housing programs for the island's homeless can contribute to our understanding of how the Great Depression unfolded in a U.S. colonial territory as well as the race and class-based exclusions of New Deal aid programs. It also reveals that some U.S. officials did attempt to increase federal aid to the island during the 1930s. However, in addition to a relative lack of funding from D.C., local resistance to the New Deal fomented by insular politicians sympathetic to the colonial sugar industry prevented any meaningful aid from reaching the pockets of the island's working classes for the bulk of the decade. And finally, this dissertation explores how exclusion from federal programs led to popular unrest that threatened to destabilize colonial rule and eventually caused a political sea change in Puerto Rico beginning in the late 1930s.

This work will add to a growing body of transnational literature addressing New Deal scholarship which overlooks Puerto Rico as a topic of analysis. Including the colony in discussions about the discriminatory policies that reinforced the spatial isolation and poverty of mainland minorities will provide a new perspective on the ways power was maintained in America during an era of socioeconomic crisis. The following research also responds to works that privilege Puerto Rico's rural class struggles and agricultural capitalism while obscuring their effects on the island's urban areas. Rural unemployment fueled migrations that swelled Puerto Rico's shantytowns, which became key sites for policy implementation battles between local and federal authorities. Such factors call for an analytical focus that includes the island's cities more fully. This approach will provide a holistic look at the interplay between the island's rural and urban regions and the mainland during the 1930s while broadening our understanding of class and racial dynamics during the American depression.

THE NEW OLD DEAL: COLONIAL SOCIAL WELFARE AND PUERTO RICAN
POVERTY DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1928-1941

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2024

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation was made possible by the care and support of numerous friends, family members, and academic mentors. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Colleen Woods, my dissertation advisor, for her unwavering encouragement, nurturing, constructive criticism, and advice as I underwent this arduous writing and research journey. Without Dr. Woods' brilliant insights, regular pep talks, generosity of time and spirit, sense of humor, and positive reinforcement, this dissertation likely would not have been written. Our weekly meetings proved invaluable to this process and were often made even more enjoyable when her dog, Georgie, graced us with her effervescent presence and exuberant demonstrations of affection.

I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Julie Greene, Dr. Robyn Muncy, and Dr. Nancy Mirabal of UMD, as well as Dr. Eileen Findlay of American University, for their support and tutelage. Through their own brilliant research, classes they have taught, and feedback given to me throughout the writing of this dissertation, each has guided and challenged me in the best of ways. They have helped me expand and deepen my love for and knowledge of a variety of topics including, but not limited to U.S. labor history, the New Deal, global and transnational history, and all things Puerto Rico. Each of these stellar scholars has gone above and beyond to make themselves available to me throughout this process. They generously answered all my questions—both large and small—and offered to read through and critique various chapter drafts. Their kind guidance and helpful critiques became motivating factors that improved my writing and analytical skills, toughened my skin, and ushered me over the finish line.

Much appreciation goes to Dr. David Sartorius for introducing me to a wide variety of literature centering on Caribbean history, which enabled me to consider Puerto Rico's unique

position of sitting at the crossroads between Latin American and the continental United States. Many thanks are also due to Pablo Delano who inspired me with personal insights into his parents' work in Puerto Rico.

Thanks also to Dr. Robert Chiles and Dr. Howard Smead for helping me translate what I have learned into teachable material which I have imparted to the undergraduate students I have taught over the course of these past seven years. I'd like to think that in this way, with the influence of these two teaching mentors, I have made Puerto Rico a more visible and intriguing subject of study for hundreds of students who otherwise may not have known about the island's significance in U.S. history. Additionally, I offer a special round of gratitude to Jodi Hall, Graduate Coordinator for the UMD Department of History, for her incredible ability to gracefully and adroitly juggle twenty tasks at once, including answering an endless slew of emails from graduate students like me who were trying to navigate the dissertation process.

These graduate mentors picked up where my undergraduate advisors left off. I want to extend many thanks to Dr. Libby Bischof, Dr. Adam Tuchinsky, Dr. Leroy Rowe, Dr. Ashley Towle, Dr. Eileen Eagan, and Dr. Polly Kaufman of the University of Southern Maine for encouraging my love of history and my desire to pursue a PhD as a non-traditional student.

It is not an exaggeration to say that this project would have been a non-starter without the assistance of every librarian and archivist I have had the good fortune to work with. I would like to thank all of those who have patiently and graciously assisted me as I did my research, particularly the librarians and archivists at UMD's McKeldin and Hornbake Libraries as well as the archivists at the National Archives and Records Administrations of College Park and New York City.

A good portion of this dissertation was written under the lockdown circumstances brought on by the Covid 19 pandemic. For roughly two and a half years I found myself sequestered in my home with little in-person human contact. But I was not alone during this period because I had the virtual company of many friends and the unconditional love of my beloved cats, Archie and Chet. The moral-support Zoom meetings, phone calls, and FaceTime sessions with friends such as Michelle Esrick, Carl Bernstein, Patsy McSweeney, Lesli Baker, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Jennifer Bassey, George Bamford, Andrea Syglowski, Rob Walsh, Emma Ramos, Sean Carvajal, Jaimes Mayhew, Gigi Farley, Will Sutton, Francis James DeSantis, Jr., Peter Dunn, Frank X. Vitolo, and Andy Kent kept me connected, grounded, and thoroughly entertained during a time that was trying for all of us. Archie and Chet's humorous antics, such as letting me know that it was time for me to take a writing break by sitting on my keyboard or knocking books off the table, as well as their undying affection got me through what might have been a tremendously isolating experience. These lovely beings, along with weekly sessions playing music with my neighbors, Z Smith, Andrew Smith, and Momo Smith provided much-needed levity when the going got tough.

And then there are my best friends who included me in their Covid "pods," welcomed me into their homes, fed me, and treated me as family while I wrote this dissertation. I offer much love and appreciation to Ray Anthony Cádiz, Elin Slavick, Angela Dufresne, and Mala Iqbal whose belief in me and my work has been a driving force behind my pursuit and completion of this PhD.

I want to give the most loving thanks to my partner, Zoe Kogan, who came into my life as I was working on this project. Her warmth, intelligence, patience, infectious laugh, delicious

meals, listening skills, and willingness to read my work and give honest feedback have been indispensable. With her in my life, I feel blessed.

My lifelong love of learning was undoubtedly made possible by my father, Paul Brahms, who fostered my passion for devouring books at an early age—a habit that proved very useful during my graduate coursework when I was assigned a seemingly impossible amount of literature to read on a weekly basis.

And finally, these acknowledgements would not be complete without mentioning my mother, Ann Allen Brahms, who passed away during the first semester of my PhD program in 2016. Throughout my life, my mother nurtured my love of history by regaling me with colorful stories of my own family's history dating back to the Civil War. When I was admitted to this PhD program, my mother proudly bragged to all her friends that I was going to school to “become a doctor,” leading many to believe that I was on my way to opening a medical practice. Mom, I wish you were here to read this dissertation and watch me graduate.

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Introduction

“El Fanguito, as you may know, is located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. It is the worst of several huge slums festering in the body of the Puerto Rican capital, and it is perhaps the most terrible destitution area in the whole western world. El Fanguito, meaning in English, “The Mudhole,” is the very symbol of human misery, exploitation and despair. It is also, no less, the symbol of American colonial domination over Puerto Rico...El Fanguito, together with the other local slums of San Juan, embrace an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 people. This is equal to about one-half of the total population of the capital city itself. These terrifying slums are primarily of American making. The worst of them, the social cancer, El Fanguito, has, with malignant vitality, been rapidly spreading its deadly poison far and wide during the past 15 years. These vast slums are the inevitable result of the ruthless exploitation of Puerto Rico by the American sugar trust, aided by reactionary Washington politicians.”¹ -William Z. Foster, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USA, 1948.

In March of 1948, William Z. Foster, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), traveled to Puerto Rico and toured the largest of the island’s squatters’ communities, El Fanguito, on the outskirts of the capital city of San Juan.² Shocked by the dismal conditions and destitution he witnessed being endured by the working-class people he encountered, Foster furiously penned a letter to President Truman, whom he personally blamed for El Fanguito’s existence. Foster castigated Truman for favoring the profit-driven, exploitative capitalism of the sugar industry over the needs of the starving Puerto Rican masses, who were, he noted, American citizens. “I am addressing this letter to you,” Foster wrote to Truman,

¹ William Z. Foster, *The Crime of El Fanguito: An Open Letter to President Truman* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1948), 3.

² To avoid the perjorative connotations that accompany the word “slum,” throughout this dissertation I will be using the terms “squatters’ community,” “squatters’ settlements,” or “shantytown” in place of the word “slum” except for cases when the latter word appears within the context of primary sources. It must be noted, however, that many residents of Puerto Rico’s poorer neighborhoods were not necessarily living in these communities as “squatters.” Many did, in fact, pay rent to exploitative landlords and others owned the the buildings in which they were living.

“because as President of the United States, you exercise almost dictatorial control over Puerto Rico, which is a colony of the United States.”³

Truman’s power, Foster noted, was evident in the fact that the President had control over funding that could “go far toward shaping the economic life of that island,” but he had thus far withheld much-needed financial assistance to Puerto Rico.⁴ In Foster’s view, Truman supported an economy based on a “one-crop sugar system” that exploited Puerto Rico’s booming population. Furthermore, due to the colonial political arrangement between Puerto Rico and the United States, Truman and Congress had complete veto power over any legislation produced by the Insular Legislature even if it should be passed by “unanimous action.”⁵ According to Foster, this unbalanced power arrangement had disastrous consequences for poor islanders. In the post-World War II era, he reported, unemployment was still at Great Depression-era levels, ranging from 40 to 75 percent. Such figures stood in sharp contrast to what was being experienced stateside. By comparison, in 1948 continental unemployment figures hovered somewhere between 3 and 4 percent.⁶ But in Puerto Rico, unemployment problems were forcing thousands of islanders into “the monstrous slums of El Fanguito.”⁷

Foster’s vituperative anti-capitalist critique of the colonial arrangement between Puerto Rico and the United States might be the type of rhetoric expected from a man whose political

³ Ibid.

⁴ While the U.S. President did have the power to dictate island economic policy at the time of Foster’s writing, the U.S. Congress also had a substantial amount of authority in terms of financial appropriations to the colony. As such, Truman was not entirely to blame for the lack of financial assistance offered to Puerto Rico during this era. For more on the political and economic structure of the U.S. colonial relationship with Puerto Rico see: Anna Price for the Library of Congress, “The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and its Government Structure,” November 10, 2022, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2022/11/the-commonwealth-of-puerto-rico-and-its-government-structure/>; Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018); Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006).

⁵ Foster, 3.

⁶ The Balance, “Historical US Unemployment Rates by Year,” <https://www.thebalancemoney.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506>

⁷ Ibid., 7.

leanings earned him the nickname “America’s Lenin.”⁸ Though in 1948 Truman could easily dismiss Foster’s assessment due to his role in the CPUSA, it was, in fact, historically accurate. From the time of the U.S. takeover of the island after the Spanish American War in 1898 through the depression, monopolistic U.S. sugar corporations controlled Puerto Rico’s economy and politics with little oversight by the federal government. By the 1940s, the sugar industry was Puerto Rico’s largest employer, owned the majority of island land, and was represented by a conservative political majority in the Insular Legislature. Big Sugar’s power was cemented by the fact that Puerto Rico’s large population provided an expendable labor force. A constant surplus of workers enabled management to hire and fire at will, thus diminishing the bargaining power of the island’s traditionally weak labor movement.⁹

Puerto Rico’s people had been granted U.S. citizenship by the 1917 Jones Act but were subject to a series of legal tenets that prevented them from receiving the full benefits of that citizenship. While islanders had been allowed to elect members of the Insular Legislature since 1900, until 1946, the top political positions in Puerto Rico such as the governorship, the attorney general, and the Insular Chief of Police were appointed by the president of the United States. And, as Foster noted, any legislation passed by the Insular Legislature was, and still is, subject to

⁸William Z. Foster was a prominent labor organizer, a three-time presidential candidate, and the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USA from 1945 to 1957 “Notable Tauntonians: William Z. Foster, ‘America’s Lenin’ ran for president three times,” *The Taunton Daily Gazette*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.tauntongazette.com/story/news/history/2022/11/11/notable-tauntonians-american-lenin-william-z-foster-communist-president/69622906007/>

⁹Historian Miles Galvin notes that the Puerto Rican labor movement was “unsuccessful” during the early decades of U.S. occupation for a number of reasons that included a surplus labor force including a large pool of unemployed workers who were eager to break strikes for survival, a lack of union funds due to high unemployment and subsistence wages that rendered workers unable to pay dues, a lack of jobs outside of seasonal agricultural work, a lack of funds that hindered worker mobility, the fact that credit, land, and housing were primarily controlled by employers, lack of enforcement for labor legislation, an insular government that was in the hands of agribusiness, a 1910 law that gave police protection to corporations when workers went on strike, and industrial relations marked by coercive and often violent control of workers. Miles Galvin, “The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico,” *Latin American Perspectives*, *Puerto Rico: Class Struggle and National Liberation*, 3, no. 3 (Summer, 1976): 17-35.

the veto power of the United States Congress and the president. From 1900 to the present day, Puerto Ricans have not been allowed to vote in presidential elections, even though the executive branch, as Foster noted, holds considerable power over the state of the island's political and economic affairs. While the island is represented by a Resident Commissioner to Washington, D.C., they have no vote in congressional proceedings.¹⁰ The political limitations placed on the island, both in Foster's time and now, seem to support his assertion that the president and Congress had "almost dictatorial control over Puerto Rico."¹¹

Foster's views were surprisingly similar to those of certain prominent and less-radical U.S. observers who had, while working for the federal government, visited the island during the Great Depression. As I argue in this dissertation, while there, these U.S. colonial agents gained an awareness of Puerto Rican poverty and its effects on the general population—effects that had the potential to topple the colonial regime as the masses became restive and discontented due to the pervasive homelessness, joblessness, illness, and starvation they were experiencing. In response to the demands of working-class Puerto Ricans and moved by their embarrassment over conditions in the colony, which they increasingly viewed as unjust, continental observers utilized their transnational political connections and began to call for changes to the colonial order that might placate and improve the lives of islanders. Many of these colonial officials were instrumental in bringing Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to Puerto Rico with the hopes of transforming the Puerto Rican socioeconomy. As I demonstrate here, however, their efforts were often stymied by various groups who were working at cross purposes—be it differing desires for societal reform or, conversely, a desire to maintain class and racial hierarchies. As a result, at the

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "Puerto Rico: A U.S. Territory in Crisis," <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis>.

¹¹ Foster, 3.

end of the 1930s, hopes for major structural changes to Puerto Rico's society were largely left unrealized. Consequently, poor Puerto Ricans experienced a longer and more devastating depression than their stateside counterparts, particularly African Americans living in U.S. cities and in the Jim Crow South.

Like Foster, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt grew incensed upon seeing El Fanguito and encountering its residents for the first time in 1934. The experience prompted her to call out the "powerful financial interests" of the United States for exploitative practices she believed had led to the formation and growth of the island's shantytowns.¹² When she returned to Washington, D.C., she implored her husband, President Franklin Roosevelt to intervene on behalf of the Puerto Rican people. Her sentiments were echoed that same year by then-Undersecretary of Agriculture, Rexford G. Tugwell who offered a harsh critique of exploitative American corporations and members of Congress. The latter group, Tugwell noted, made "Puerto Rico beg" for the type of government intervention that would benefit the island's poorer classes.¹³ These reform-minded colonial officials had hopes that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal might improve the lives of poor Puerto Ricans. As will be highlighted in this dissertation, however, working class and union activists along with many colonial officials increasingly viewed New Deal programs as anemic attempts to remedy deeply-seated structural problems on the island, which prompted them to make further demands on the state.

Nevertheless, despite critiques that viewed the Roosevelt administration's efforts as lackluster at best, the hands-on involvement of the federal government in Puerto Rico, via the

¹² Ruby Black, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce), 297; Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 156.

¹³ Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico* (New York, Praeger, 1946), 45.

New Deal, expanded considerably, as it did stateside.¹⁴ Since the U.S. took possession of Puerto Rico in 1898, the traditional economic policy of presidential administrations had been predominantly laissez-faire in terms of their regulation of business practices.¹⁵ This hands off approach to island economic affairs enabled the monopolistic and exploitative capitalism of a single powerful industry, namely Big Sugar. By 1929, four major U.S. sugar corporations—the South Porto Rico Sugar Company, the United Porto Rico Sugar Company, the Central Aguirre, and the Fajardo Company—had nearly total control over the island’s politics and economy.¹⁶ A significant example of Big Sugar’s unchecked power came with the so-called “500-acre” clause of the 1900 Foraker Act. The clause made it illegal for any individual or corporation to own more than 500 acres of land in Puerto Rico, but the law did not include any measures for its enforcement. And so, as the federal government looked the other way, U.S. sugar corporations and large-scale island producers gradually took ownership of the majority of arable land in

¹⁴ This dissertation will highlight critiques of the Puerto Rican New Deal by many of the actors who participated in its enactment and/or experienced it firsthand during the 1930s. In addition to labor activists, Nationalists, conservative and liberal insular politicians, along with average working-class islanders, this work will include critiques offered by New Dealers and other continental observers such as: Eleanor Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell, Bailey and Justine Diffie, James Bourne, and Jack Delano. For more recent scholarly critiques of the Puerto Rican New Deal see historian Fernando Picó, who notes that funding for New Deal programs was barely enough to “scratch the surface of” Puerto Rico’s “problems” during the depression. Dr. Manuel R. Rodríguez also states that the New Deal “did not provide the blessings of American exceptionalism” to “territorial possessions such as Puerto Rico.” Puerto Rico scholar Blanca Silvestrini argues that the New Deal failed to bring concrete “changes on the life of workers.” Thomas Mathews observes that there has been a “tendency among the islanders to view the PRRA as a dead loss.” Picó, 260; Manuel R. Rodríguez, *A New Deal for the Tropics: Puerto Rico During the Depression Era*, an (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4; Blanca Silvestrini, “Women as Workers: The Experience of the Puerto Rican Woman in the 1930s,” in *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History, and Society*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belen (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), 64; Mathews, 323.

¹⁵ This is not to discount the significance of the political influence the U.S. had over the island since its takeover in 1898. For instance, the Foraker Act and the Insular Cases, which were brought before the Supreme Court the early 1900s, ensured that the federal government would have direct political control over the island and codified the right of the federal government to solidify its extraconstitutional, colonial rule over the newly conquered territories by preventing full self-government. These *de jure* measures are indisputable examples of U.S. federal political intervention in Puerto Rico. For a good overview of the Insular Cases see: Christina D. Ponsa-Kraus, “The *Insular Cases* Run Amok: Against Constitutional Exceptionalism in the Territories,” *The Yale Law Journal*, <https://www.yalelawjournal.org/article/the-insular-cases-run-amok>.

¹⁶ James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 110; Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 241.

Puerto Rico. By the time of the Great Depression, both groups owned nearly 76 percent of the fertile acreage on the island, leaving little land for the average person to cultivate food or to build a home.¹⁷

Facing pressure from liberal insular lawmakers, colonial officials, and grassroots activists, the Roosevelt Administration, became the first administration in forty years to help implement measures that would see to the enforcement of the 500-acre Law. The administration's break with tradition in this regard combined with the persistence of island poverty at the tail end of the New Deal years led me to the central questions examined in this dissertation: Why, after so many years of government neglect did the Roosevelt Administration become the first presidential administration to take more of an interventionist approach in Puerto Rico? And, once this approach was taken, why was there so much evidence that the New Deal had failed to meet many of its objectives on the island? For instance, why were Puerto Rico's city shantytowns growing at exponential rates despite New Deal programs designed to eradicate poverty and homelessness?

Unlike the stateside depression that was largely contained to the decade of the 1930s, the Great Depression in Puerto Rico lasted for over twenty years. This contention is supported by the reports of continental observers who began remarking upon the mass exodus of poor islanders into city shantytowns beginning in 1928 (the year this study begins), which was one year before the infamous Stock Market Crash of 1929. Similar observations were made during the middle and late 1930s and through the war years, despite the implementation of New Deal programs in Puerto Rico. And, as Foster's account attests, the phenomenon continued into the post-World War II era. Class disparity, hunger, disease, unemployment, landlessness, and homelessness had

¹⁷ Pedro A. Caban, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932*. (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1999), 2, 91, 76, 113; Pico, 240-243.

been rampant at the beginning of the 1930s and persisted throughout the decade and into World War II—a period that saw the end of the stateside Great Depression due to the economic boom brought about by war mobilization.¹⁸

As I will demonstrate here, the failure of the New Deal to ameliorate Puerto Rican poverty during the Great Depression and beyond was due to a convergence of events and interactions between a variety of actors who were frequently working in opposition to each other. These included, but were not limited to: working-class labor organizers, newly-emerging insular political parties, entrenched pro-Sugar political elites, U.S. legislators, the president, and reform-minded New Dealers. This latter group, which will be discussed in the greatest detail here, sought to create what might be termed as a more “benevolent” form of colonialism through the implementation of New Deal social welfare programs on the island. However, their efforts were thwarted at nearly every turn by those opposed to reforming the colonial system. In particular, lack of Congressional funding, the political machinations of pro-Sugar elites, and a growing anti-American Nationalist movement, which sought to put an end to U.S. rule on the island, hampered federal officials’ efforts to effect change via New Deal programs. As a result, New Deal reformers’ attempts to improve the living conditions of poverty-stricken Puerto Ricans became mired in conflicts that frequently stopped initiatives in their tracks before they could even get started. And so, throughout the 1930s and the World War II era, the Puerto Rican depression persisted and islanders remained in poverty.

¹⁸ For more on the origins of the U.S. welfare state and the role of World War II in creating the economic boom that pulled the U.S. out of the depression see: Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II, Americans, and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Library of Congress, “Great Depression and World War II: Overview,” <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929>

For instance, in 1941, Tugwell, who had become Governor of Puerto Rico, remained dismayed by Puerto Rico's expanding squatters' settlements despite the fact that model housing projects and resettlement initiatives had already been in place for nearly eight years under the Puerto Rican New Deal. And so, he directed Farm Security Administration photographer, Jack Delano, to capture on film the "deplorable conditions" being endured by the Puerto Rican working class.¹⁹ The overall purpose of Delano's trip was to gather visual evidence of the colony's problems. The photos then would be disseminated to the continental public and politicians with the hopes of gaining moral and financial support for federal social welfare programs. As Delano's voluminous photo file on Puerto Rico demonstrates, the majority of the island's population was still living in poverty. On the verge of World War II, joblessness was rampant as were hunger and homelessness—evidence of which could be seen in the long unemployment lines and in the gaunt faces photographed by Delano. And, as Delano's images of El Fanguito and other shantytowns attest, despite New Deal housing and "slum eradication" initiatives, the island's poor urban neighborhoods continued to rapidly expand over the course of the previous decade, with residents living in nearly intolerable conditions.

Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, the general opinion held by continental observers who visited Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements was that working-class Puerto Ricans had it far worse than many poor Americans—including African Americans in U.S. cities and in the Jim Crow South. Moreover, during that same period, numerous policymakers in Washington came to conclude that a large portion of the Puerto Rican population were deserving, "white" American citizens—a phenomenon that, in part, worked in response to the increased "whitening"

¹⁹ Jack Delano, *Photographic Memories* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 70.

of the island population by early twentieth-century Puerto Rican census renumerators.²⁰ One would expect that, as islanders became increasingly categorized as “white” in the national census, federal aid to Puerto Rico would have followed the same patterns of racialized welfare that historians have associated with the New Deal. Why then were so many islanders moving to city squatter settlements while the white, continental working class benefitted from New Deal housing and employment initiatives?²¹ This dissertation considers how an analysis of island shantytowns, as well as “slum eradication” and housing programs can contribute to our understanding of how the Great Depression unfolded in a U.S. colonial territory as well as the parameters of race and class-based exclusions of New Deal aid programs. As I demonstrate here, such exclusions, particularly those aimed at poor people of color by powerful U.S. business interests, New Deal policymakers, and Southern Democrats, had both similar and differing effects on marginalized groups on the mainland and in Puerto Rico. In some cases, the deliberate, discriminatory design of New Deal programs produced similar results or exclusions in both places and in other instances, due to the colonial status of Puerto Rico, policies went even further in their failure to extend social welfare and protection to citizens of the island.

It has been well established that New Deal housing initiatives were discriminatory against both white and non-white working-class Americans on the mainland.²² In particular,

²⁰ For more on this see: Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muniz, "How Puerto Rico Became White: Boundary Dynamics and Intercensus Racial Reclassification," *American Sociological Review* 72 (December 2007), 915, 935.

²¹ It is important to note that the working class mentioned here was mostly comprised of white men who were considered eligible for New Deal welfare programs due to their assumed status as primary breadwinners of U.S. households by the U.S. government. Women, along with people of color, were largely excluded from New Deal initiatives. For more on women’s exclusion see: Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²² See: Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liverlight Publishing Company, 2017); Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Karen Miller, *Managing Inequality: Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit*. New York: New York University Press, 2015;

African Americans were subject to a number of policies that rendered them underserved and led to further segregation in terms of their living conditions. For instance, housing policies instituted under the Public Works Administration included a “neighborhood composition rule.” The brainchild of Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, the rule stipulated that, as economic policy expert Richard Rothstein notes, “federal housing projects should reflect the previous racial composition of their neighborhoods.” Therefore, housing projects in poor African American neighborhoods would be made available to prior residents of that neighborhood, which usually consisted of an area that had been zoned for African Americans only. What had been poor, racially segregated neighborhoods would remain poor, racially segregated neighborhoods, both in the Jim Crow South and in northern cities.²³

On the island, Puerto Ricans were also subject to discrimination under New Deal housing policies which were federally (under)funded and locally administered. However, there were subtle differences between the type of discrimination African Americans faced on the mainland and what was taking place in Puerto Rico. The underfunding of Puerto Rican housing projects was indicative of the pervasive view held by many white Washington policymakers in the 1930s that Puerto Ricans were, like African Americans, racially or ethnically inferior and too reliant on government welfare. The racial views of this political camp, who were not exclusively southern Democrats, ran counter to those on the mainland who increasingly viewed Puerto Ricans as white citizens. According to the former group, Puerto Ricans, particularly working class Puerto Ricans, were an inferior racial group and therefore were undeserving of government

David M.P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 2013); Abrams, Charles. *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1955);

²³ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 23; Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated*, 163;.

aid. In terms of the local administration of housing policy, however, discrimination seemed to have more in the way of class-based rather than race-based characteristics—an indicator of a sharply delineated and entrenched class hierarchy that had emerged under U.S. colonialism in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Caribbean politician and historian Eric Williams said of Puerto Rico in 1945, “racial differences are subordinate to class.” However, although legal segregation did not exist in Puerto Rico, Williams also noted that racial differences were frequently adjacent to matters of class. For instance, as Williams noted, “social discrimination is most obvious in private employment in the upper brackets. Conventionally, none but white people or the fairest-skinned among the colored are employed by banks, sugar corporations, airlines and shipping companies, and the large department stores.”²⁴ Historian Eileen Findlay also observed that “struggles over racial definitions and hierarchies permeated social relations in Puerto Rico” from the time of Spanish colonialism, and there was a commonly held belief in the early twentieth century that “whiter is better.”²⁵ As will be discussed in this dissertation, ultimately low-income housing on the island proved to be unaffordable for many working-class islanders and in many cases, it was the middle classes who benefitted from such programs rather than the people they were ostensibly designed for.

This is not to suggest that New Deal housing programs on the continent were particularly well-funded or successful either. By the end of the decade, as it was in Puerto Rico, budgetary

²⁴ Housing and other policy discrimination likely did have racial parameters due to the long running associations between skin color and social mobility that emerged under the Spanish colonial slave-based economy. Still, de jure segregation did not exist on the island as it did on the continent and people of all races were more inclined to mingle with each other in Puerto Rican society. Williams noted in 1945 that “legal discrimination” was “unknown” in Puerto Rico, observing that there were no “segregated housing areas. Whites, blacks, and mulattoes sit side by side in the theaters, churches and public vehicles, and lie side by side in the cemeteries. The law recognizes no differences based on race, color, creed, national origin or previous condition. Lynchings are unheard of.” Eric Williams, “Race Relations in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands,” *Foreign Affairs*, 23, no. 2 (January 1945): 312, 313, 315.

²⁵ Eileen Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 39.

concerns brought on by a lack of federal appropriations resulted in an inadequate amount of low-income units to meet the housing needs of the mainland homeless, cost prohibitive rents, and shoddy workmanship on those units that were constructed. Nevertheless, as will be discussed at length in Chapter 4, relative to the mainland, there were disparities between housing programs on the mainland and in Puerto Rico, that resulted in even worse results for the latter. Evidence of New Deal low-income housing failures and disparities becomes particularly evident when examining the ratio between homelessness statistics and the amount of low income units constructed in both places by the late 1930s. By the federal government's own estimates, in 1935, the number of homeless in the continental U.S. had reached upward of 2 million people, or roughly 1.5 percent of the over all population of 127 million people. By 1938, 151 housing projects consisting of 20,000 units had been constructed in continental United States which was enough to house approximately 82,000 people (average family size of 4.11 people) or about 4 percent of the American homeless.²⁶ By contrast, in 1935 about 33 percent of Puerto Rico's population of 1.7 million people was homeless. By 1938, the federal government had constructed about 3,004 units, which was enough to house about 16,522 people or less than one percent of Puerto Rico's over all homeless population.²⁷

Puerto Ricans were impacted by many of the same race, class, and gender-based exclusions endemic to many stateside New Deal programs. In particular, Congress excluded the island from landmark legislation such as the Social Security and the Wagner Acts of 1935.

Although Puerto Rico was covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), the

²⁶ U.S. Housing Authority, *Annual Report of the United States Housing Authority for the Fiscal Year, 1938* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 2, 42.

²⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938*; The Living New Deal, "Hurricane-Proof Housing," <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/hurricane-proof-housing-san-juan-pr/>

legislation did not offer benefits or protections for agricultural, service, and domestic workers—the majority of whom were, on the mainland and in the colony, people of color and female. In some cases, however, Puerto Rico was subject to legislation that rendered it even less entitled to social welfare in the eyes of white U.S. lawmakers than minorities on the mainland. For instance, the FLSA’s minimum wage provision did include Puerto Rico’s small industrial sector, particularly its home needlework industries. But in the two years following the Act’s introduction, the island minimum wage actually dropped from 20 cents per hour down to 12.5 cents per hour due to the lobbying of powerful and unregulated insular business owners and politicians. Such dramatic wage decreases were not evident on the mainland after the passage of the FLSA.²⁸

Both the similarities and differences in exclusionary policies between the island and the mainland prompted me to examine how Puerto Ricans' relative access to New Deal labor legislation, jobs creation, “slum eradication” and housing programs worked in relationship to the reinforcement of the island’s colonial class structure and entrenched poverty. As I demonstrate throughout this work, many U.S. officials did attempt to increase federal aid to the island during the 1930s. And they did so for a number of reasons that included responding to growing working-class demands, a rising Nationalist movement, increased pressure from Liberal Party politicians such as Luis Muñoz Marín, and, for some, a growing sense of shame over the poverty

²⁸ Anne S. Macpherson, "The Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage: The Struggle over the Fair Labor Standards Act in Puerto Rico, 1938-1941," *The Journal of American History* (December 2017), 656; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938*, 28, 62, 64; Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.

they witnessed on the island that was combined with an impulse to manage America's image for broader world consumption during the tumultuous 1930s.

However, as I argue, in addition to a relative lack of funding from D.C. lawmakers, resistance to the New Deal fomented by insular and continental politicians sympathetic to the colonial sugar industry prevented any meaningful aid from reaching the pockets of the island's working classes for the bulk of the decade. Such resistance mirrored that offered by Roosevelt opponents, particularly U.S. southerners, who opposed New Deal measures that might upset the class and racial order on the mainland. Similarly, island elites and their allies in the U.S., particularly pro-Sugar and anti-New Deal politicians, channeled resources and resisted projects that would unsettle the colonial class structure. And so, the intractable poverty that existed before the depression continued, thus hampering the ability of poor islanders to afford the necessities of life such as food and adequate shelter. The hostile resistance of pro-Sugar elites to New Deal initiatives was also apparent in their successful efforts to thwart attempts made by liberal insular politicians and the federal government to enforce the 500-acre Law over the course of the 1930s. The lack of access to land hindered the Roosevelt Administration and pro-New Deal islanders' efforts to resettle and house the hundreds of thousands of members of the Puerto Rican working class who were rendered homeless by two devastating hurricanes and the depression.

Finally, my dissertation highlights how exclusion from depression-era federal programs fueled ongoing working class unrest that threatened to destabilize colonial rule. Although I focus more on policies and less on labor actions in this work, the significance of such unrest in transforming Puerto Rican society should not be undervalued. Foster's 1948 analysis of Puerto Rican squatters' settlements echoed the sentiments of members of the Puerto Rican working class who faced skyrocketing unemployment, homelessness, hunger and disease throughout the Great

Depression. These conditions created massive social unrest as the working classes led a continuous stream of protests, labor strikes, and, for some, a turn toward radical nationalism over the course of the 1930s.²⁹ Agitation, demands for change, and the airing of grievances grew in intensity as the decade progressed, placing pressure on colonial administrators and liberal island elites to make changes that would alleviate the intolerable conditions being endured by the Puerto Rican people. Not only was working-class activism indicative of the impacts of what Foster deemed to be the “ruthless exploitation of Puerto Rico,” but it also had a tremendous influence on eventual policy change. While working-class Puerto Ricans may have been exploited by the colonial system, they provided very exuberant and effective resistance to the exploitative colonial order—giving weight to historian Kristin Hoganson’s assertion that, in its colonial endeavors, the United States has “never been able to unilaterally impose its will on the world” as “colonized peoples” have also “shaped the contours of U.S. imperial power.”³⁰

Bottom-up agitation, which manifested as a continuous stream of popular uprisings and labor strikes over the course of the decade, eventually caused a political and economic sea change in Puerto Rico by the late 1930s with the creation of the populist political party known as the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD).³¹ Under the guidance of the PPD and its leader Luis

²⁹ For more on popular movements in Puerto Rico during the 1930s see: Kirwin Shaffer, *Transnational History of the Modern Caribbean: Popular Resistance Across Borders* (Springer Nature, 2022); Emma Amador, “Organizing Puerto Rican Domestic: Resistance and Household Labor Reform in the Puerto Rican Diaspora after 1930,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 88 (2015); Felix Matos-Rodriguez and Linda Delgado eds. *Puerto Rican Women's History: New Perspectives* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006); Carlos Sanabria, *Puerto Rican Labor History, 1898-1934: Revolutionary Ideals and Reformist Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); Margaret Power, *Solidarity Across the Americas: the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and Anti-imperialism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Gabriel Villaronga, *Toward a Discourse of Consent: Mass Mobilization and Colonial Politics in Puerto Rico, 1932-1948* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

³⁰ Kristin Hoganson, *American Empire at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 28.

³¹ For more on Puerto Rican labor activism and the emergence of leftist political parties during this era see: Eileen Findlay, *We Are Left Without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Organized Agriculture and the Labor Movement Before the UFW: Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Jorell Melendez-

Muñoz Marín, rather than the federal government, Puerto Rico began to move away from a monocultural economy based on sugar growth and production. And, for the first time since the U.S. takeover in 1898, the PPD successfully oversaw the enforcement of the 500-acre Law which enabled relatively successful New Deal-style housing and resettlement policies that eventually, over the course of two decades, curtailed the growth of island squatters' settlements. Running counter to the delterious effects localism had on both the continental and the colonial New Deal throughout the depression, it was the local nature of the PPD's initiatives that enabled greater gains within the realms of land distribution and housing than the federal programs that had preceded them.

While scores of volumes have been produced about the Great Depression and Roosevelt's New Deal programs, most fail to investigate or fully include Puerto Rico in this chapter of the national story, despite the fact that it was and remains a part of the United States.³² For instance, in historian Anthony J. Badger's highly respected 364-page study, *The New Deal*, discussion of Puerto Rico is limited to a mere sentence. Similarly, Ira Katznelson's best-selling work, *Fear*

Badillo, *The Lettered Barriada: Workers, Archival Power, and the Politics of Knowledge in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

³² This dissertation was inspired in part by a growing body of transnational literature addressing continental New Deal scholarship that tends to overlook Puerto Rico as a topic of analysis. Conversely, I also hope to add to the few works written about the Puerto Rican New Deal, which, although useful, tend to place a heavy analytical emphasis on the island itself as though it were an isolated geopolitical entity. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, federal New Deal officials viewed Puerto Rico as being a part of the United States. Using their rhetoric of inclusion as a cue, I operate under the knowledge that during the depression Puerto Rico and the U.S. were, therefore, working in relation to each other. However, as Puerto Rico was a colony and not a state there were inherent policy differences that led me to think comparatively. For instance, there are many instances in this study where I compare the amount of federal aid given to Puerto Rico as opposed to what was given to the states. In many cases, the island received far less than what was appropriated to even the poorest states in the union—a situation that was partially created by the fact that Puerto Rico lacked lobbying power due to its lack of political representation in the U.S. Congress. Such comparisons reveal a tiered system of inequality where Puerto Rico, as a colony, consistently ranked on the lowest rung of the U.S. socioeconomic hierarchy. As I highlight in this work, the consequences of the U.S. government's neglect of the island did not go unnoticed by the Puerto Rican working class and certain New Deal operatives both on and off the island who sought Puerto Rico's full inclusion in national relief, recovery, and reform efforts.

Itself, neglects to mention Puerto Rico at all.³³ In the past twenty years, however, historians such as Marietta Morrissey, Emma Amador, and Anne S. Macpherson have produced transnational studies that have done much to include Puerto Rico in the narrative of the Great Depression.³⁴

³³ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 2013). For more on the continental New Deal, see: Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Robyn Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Karen Miller, *Managing Inequality: Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Kevin Fox Gotham, "Racialization and the State: The Housing Act of 1934 and the Creation of the Federal Housing Administration," *Sociological Perspectives*, 43, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 291-317; Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Fred C. Smith, *Trouble in Goshen: Plain Folk, Roosevelt, Jesus, and Marx in the Great Depression South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014); Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); David Worster, *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security*; Gareth Davies and Martha Derthick, "Race and Social Welfare Policy: The Social Security Act of 1935," *Political Science Quarterly*, 112, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 217-235; Richard Rodems and H. Luke Shaefer, "Left Out: Policy Diffusion and the Exclusion of Black Workers from Unemployment Insurance," *Social Science History*, 40, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 385-404.

³⁴ Marietta Morrissey's 2006 study of Puerto Ricans' battle for inclusion in federal social insurance programs. She argues that the island's initial exclusion from the 1935 Social Security Act was prompted by Congressional opposition to statehood for the island. Morrissey's contends that Puerto Rico's ultimate inclusion in social security programs came from lawmakers' fears over the potential consequences and impacts on the island's relationship to the U.S. emanating from the 1950s world decolonization movement. More recently, in 2016, historian Emma Amador examined debates surrounding proposed amendments to the Social Security Act of 1939, which in its planning stages had completely excluded Puerto Rico. Amador claims that the mobility, activism, and agency of newly professionalized female Puerto Rican social workers employed under the New Deal allowed for them to travel to and from U.S. where they successfully lobbied for SSA amendments that ultimately benefitted Puerto Rican families, particularly mothers with children. Although Puerto Rican SSA benefits paled in comparison to what was extended stateside, these provisions and the political activism of these social workers laid the groundwork for the post-war emergence of the expanded island welfare state. Anne S. Macpherson's 2017 study highlights the battles waged from 1938 to 1941 between Washington lawmakers, Puerto Rican laborers, and island employers over minimum wage rages included in the Fair Labor Standards Act. The outcome of these battles resulted in what Macpherson calls a "colonial minimum wage," which, in Puerto Rico, was substantially lower than what was promised to stateside workers. Nevertheless, according to Macpherson, the colonial-metropolitan disparities codified in the FLSA prompted the rise of a powerful CIO-affiliated union in Puerto Rico, which strengthened what had traditionally been a weak labor movement on the island. Marietta Morrissey, "The Making of a Colonial Welfare State: U.S. Social Insurance and Public Assistance in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, 33, no. 1, (January 2006): 23-41; Emma Amador, "Women Ask Relief for Puerto Ricans': Territorial Citizenship, the Social Security Act, and Puerto Rican Communities, 1933-1939," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 13, no. 3-4 (2016): 105-129; Anne S. Macpherson, "The Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage: The Struggle Over the Fair Labor Standards Act in Puerto Rico, 1938-1941," *The Journal of American History* (December 2017): 656-680.

Their analyses of the debates waged between U.S. and Puerto Rican policymakers, businessmen, and the Puerto Rican working and middle classes over the parameters of inclusion and exclusion have highlighted what scholars Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper have described as the “tensions of empire”—where power is never completely in the hands of either the conquered or the conquerors, the people or the state, the colony or the metropole.³⁵ This dissertation seeks to include the colony in discussions about discriminatory New Deal policies, particularly housing and “slum eradication” initiatives, that reinforced the dispossession and poverty of mainland minorities.³⁶ In doing so, I provide a new perspective on the ways power dynamics were maintained, challenged, and/or transformed in the U.S. during an era of socioeconomic crisis.

Scholars of the U.S. Great Depression generally periodize the crisis as beginning with the infamous Stock Market Crash of 1929 and ending with the domestic economic boom brought on by World War II. I argue that the crisis hit Puerto Rico harder and for a longer duration than it did the mainland U.S. In Puerto Rico the depression began in 1928 with the arrival of the San Felipe hurricane, which was one year earlier than the oft-cited benchmark date of the Stock Market Crash. As far as endpoints are concerned, I will illustrate that Puerto Rico’s economy remained stagnant or worsened during the war years as a result of colonial economic policies. Unlike in the continental U.S., it wasn’t until the 1960s when the island saw any meaningful rise in the

³⁵ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³⁶ See: Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

standard of living for most of its people.³⁷ Such gains came with the arrival of relatively more effective, yet highly flawed, housing and “slum eradication” programs and industrialization efforts that diversified the Puerto Rico’s economy. The roots of these efforts can be traced to certain New Deal modes of thought and policy initiatives implemented in the 1930s and 1940s. Although, in general, New Deal housing policies underserved the poor in both Puerto Rico and the continental U.S., they did provide a template for post-World War II initiatives on the island that saw more success in housing working-class Puerto Ricans.

In a broad sense, I ask the reader to consider how the inclusion of Puerto Rico in discussions about the U.S. Great Depression might add to our overall understanding of the economic crisis. Both on the continent and in Puerto Rico, the New Deal was not extended to everyone. This was evidenced by discriminatory policies such as the Social Security Act and housing initiatives that largely failed to provide for the needs of women, non-white citizens, *and* those who lived in U.S. colonies. In depression-era Puerto Rico, sociopolitical tensions, debates, and policies intended to rectify socioeconomic insecurity existed, but so too did policies and practices that highlighted the limitations of U.S. citizenship. In short, this historical moment was not solely taking place within the geographical borders of the mainland United States. It also transpired in Puerto Rico, and it was marked by conditions that were both similar and uniquely dissimilar (due to the colonial dynamic) to what was transpiring on the continent.³⁸ I also

³⁷ Emilio Pantojas-Garcia, *Development Strategies as Ideology: Puerto Rico’s Export-Led Industrialization Experience* (Boulder: Lynce Rienner, 1990), 86; Lehman College, “Operation Bootstrap,” <https://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/Bootstrap.htm>;

³⁸ For works examining the Great Depression in the Western Hemisphere and on a global scale, see: Kirin Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); John E. Moser, *The Global Great Depression and the Coming of World War II* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2015); Paulo Drinot and Alan Knight, eds. *The Great Depression in Latin America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014); Douglas A. Irwin, *Peddling Protectionism: Smoot-Hawley and the Great Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

consider how Puerto Rico's prolonged depression might be indicative of the particular type of unequal treatment offered by the federal government to American colonial citizens. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, in spite of the increased demands of the island working class, the parameters of the federal government's involvement in the daily lives of Puerto Ricans in the 1930s was relatively limited due to congressional neglect and anti-New Deal opposition among pro-sugar political operatives both on and off the island. But, nevertheless, working in response to the demands of the Puerto Rican people, the Roosevelt Administration and its Puerto Rican allies in the Liberal Party and the PPD, took an unprecedented, involved policy approach in Puerto Rico as it had on the mainland. The aforementioned alliances led to the, albeit restricted or anemic, implementation of New Deal programs and policies in Puerto Rico. Such policies laid the groundwork for substantial changes made to the island's socioeconomy beginning in the early post-World War II era under an industrial economic policy known as Operation Bootstrap.

The transnational lens employed by scholars such as Morrissey, Amador, and Macpherson provides a new standard of scholarship covering Puerto Rico during the depression in that they address the role of grassroots movements while staying attentive to the nuances of policymaking. They also fill a gap in New Deal scholarship covering Puerto Rico—of which, to date, there is also very little. While there have been a few broad studies written about the Puerto Rican New Deal, the scope of these analyses is mainly limited to what was taking place on the island itself during the depression era. To some extent, this approach has served to conceptually divorce or insulate Puerto Rico from the dynamic colonial relationship between it and the continental U.S. Nevertheless, the island-centered works by Geoff G. Burrows, Manuel

Rodriguez, Thomas Mathews and others, have been significant in the sense that they have provided me with a comprehensive overview of Puerto Rican New Deal programs.³⁹

Unlike Morrissey, Amador, and Macpherson, who place heavy emphasis on the activism and agency of depression-era Puerto Rican actors, my study primarily focuses on the role of continental operatives in effecting socioeconomic and political change in Puerto Rico. While not entirely absent from these pages, the voices of average, working-class Puerto Ricans are admittedly and regrettably underrepresented in this dissertation. My decision to give primacy to these continental New Dealers was in no small way due to the limitations imposed upon my research by the Covid-19 pandemic. Health risks and nearly three years of quarantine prevented me from traveling to Puerto Rico where I might have gained access to archival material which would have allowed me to include the stories of islanders more fully.

Nonetheless, my focus on urban housing and “slum eradication” programs also responds to and builds upon works that privilege Puerto Rico's rural class struggles and agricultural capitalism while obscuring their effects on the island’s urban areas and their tiny industrial sector. Works such as Cesar J. Ayala’s *American Sugar Kingdom*, James Dietz’s *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, and Miles Galvin’s “The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico,” emphasize the impacts of the introduction of U.S.-based agricultural capitalism and the subsequent class struggles that ensued primarily in the Puerto Rican

³⁹ Other scholars, including Rafael Bernabe, César Ayala, and James Dietz, have included broad overviews of the island Great Depression in select chapters contained in works covering twentieth-century Puerto Rico. See: César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); James Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Geoff G. Burrows, "The New Deal in Puerto Rico: Public Works, Public Health, and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1935-55," (PhD diss. from City University of New York, History Department, 2014); Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960); Manuel Rodriguez, *A New Deal for the Tropics* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2011).

countryside in the decades following 1898.⁴⁰ As Puerto Rico was an agricultural colony, it seems logical that primacy be placed on conflicts and issues that transpired in rural areas during this period, as these three scholars do. However, these works largely omit the effects agricultural capitalism had on Puerto Rico's cities, which often served as arrival points or entrepôts for in- and out-island migration. Rural unemployment fueled migrations that swelled Puerto Rico's urban shantytowns, which became key sites for policy implementation battles between local and federal authorities. Such factors call for an analytical focus that includes the island's cities more fully. My analysis of New Deal-era urban housing and "slum eradication" programs will provide a holistic look at the interplay between the island's rural and urban regions and the mainland during the 1930s, thus broadening our understanding of class and racial dynamics in Puerto Rico during the depression.

And finally, my chapter on the San Felipe Hurricane of 1928 expands upon works surrounding the impacts of natural disasters and disaster relief produced by historians Stuart B. Schwartz and Marian Moser Jones and journalist Naomi Klein. Schwartz's 2015 study, *Sea of Storms*, takes an expansive look at how Caribbean hurricanes, including San Felipe, have altered the course of the region's politics and economies from the time of Columbus to Hurricane Katrina. Schwartz's broad, yet brief, overview of the 1928 storm and his perspective on hurricanes' role as drivers of historical change provided an invaluable model upon which I based my more nuanced, micro historical analysis of San Felipe's effects in Puerto Rico.⁴¹ Naomi Klein's work on what she describes as "crisis capitalism" (which she defines as the "deliberate

⁴⁰ César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1924*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999; James Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Miles Galvin, "The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 3 *Puerto Rico: Class Struggle and National Liberation* (Summer, 1976):17-35.

⁴¹ Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

exploitation of states of emergency to push through a radical pro-corporate agenda”) has also provided a useful analytical template for examining the political and economic outcomes of San Felipe.⁴² I also draw from Jones’ study, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal*. The work explores the contradictory practices of the venerated relief organization that has been historically viewed as a politically neutral, humanitarian body. According to Jones, however, such portrayals belie the fact that the ARC has a long history of implementing discriminatory policies that have reinforced racial and class hierarchies in locales hit by natural disasters.⁴³ My analysis of ARC relief efforts taking place in Puerto Rico after San Felipe expands the geopolitical scope of Jones’ research, which focuses solely on the continental United States, particularly the Jim Crow South. Using Jones, Klein, and Schwartz’s work as a starting point, I show how American Sugar corporations, their political allies in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and the Red Cross utilized San Felipe and the arrival of the Great Depression as an opportunity to reconstitute the power of Big Sugar by exploiting the vulnerable state of the island and its people.⁴⁴ As I will demonstrate, Big Sugar’s seemingly unstoppable political and economic influence served as a roadblock preventing any meaningful overhaul of the status quo put forth by New Deal operatives who wished to effect sociopolitical change in Puerto Rico during the 1930s.

Chapter Outlines

In my first chapter, “Hope Deferred: The San Felipe Hurricane of 1928,” I explore how a devastating category 5 hurricane exposed the existing socioeconomic fissures already present in

⁴² Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 46.

⁴³ Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ For more on the role of the Red Cross in solidifying U.S. state power at home and abroad, see Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Puerto Rico. San Felipe relief distribution also set the pattern for New Deal relief efforts during the depression—efforts that were hampered by the reinstatement of pro-sugar elites after the storm. San Felipe’s destruction of agricultural industries, particularly coffee, impacted employment prospects for the already-struggling working class. As a result, thousands were forced to migrate from rural areas into Puerto Rico’s cities where they settled in squatters’ settlements and searched for work in the island’s tiny industrial sector. I illustrate how discriminatory disaster relief policies honed in previous decades under Jim Crow in the U.S. South reinstated members of the Puerto Rican planter class who did little to assist the poor islanders left jobless and homeless by San Felipe. Fueled by racist and classist assumptions about islanders and a desire to maintain an expendable and exploitable workforce, the American Red Cross, Congress, insular elites, and the federal government used the hurricane as an opportunity to reconstitute the uneven power dynamics fostered by colonialism—dynamics that favored Big Sugar and its political allies. The modest relief funds allotted to the island were mostly given to island elites who were trusted by U.S. officials to use the funds wisely because they were white and wealthy.⁴⁵ I demonstrate how allocation procedures and debates over who—be it the planter class or the working class— was deserving of relief after San Felipe foreshadowed how federal programs would be received and administered under the Puerto Rican New Deal. Additionally, despite calls from observers to diversify Puerto Rico’s economy through industrialization, the island continued its reliance on its vulnerable agricultural industries—particularly the sugar

⁴⁵ The privileging of whiteness in Puerto Rican society at the time of San Felipe will be discussed at length in Chapter One. As sociologists Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muñiz note, over the course of the twentieth century, a trend existed in Puerto Rico where many islanders increasingly self-identified as white so as to avoid the social, political, and economic ramifications of non-whiteness during the Jim Crow era. “Whitening” rhetoric was sometimes employed by U.S. and insular government officials who sought to ingratiate themselves to Washington lawmakers who controlled federal appropriations to the island. Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muniz, "How Puerto Rico Became White: Boundary Dynamics and Intercensus Racial Reclassification," *American Sociological Review* 72 (December 2007), 915, 935.

industry. Relief efforts also revealed unequal treatment in terms of how funds were allocated between the states and the colony during states of emergency. As it would be under the New Deal, financial priority was given to continental disaster victims (in the case of San Felipe, victims who lived in Florida) over those who lived in Puerto Rico— signaling a trend of federal financial neglect of the colony during times of crisis.

Chapter Two, “The Early Depression: 1928-1935,” covers the tumultuous years that encompassed San Felipe’s impacts, the onset of the Great Depression, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s initial efforts to bring relief to Puerto Rico. Between 1928 and 1933, the year Roosevelt took office, Puerto Rico’s working class was still experiencing economic hardship and migrating en masse to the island’s urban squatters’ settlements. Facing dire living conditions, landlessness, homelessness, and starvation, island workers grew increasingly restive and turned to collective action and to radical nationalism. Fearing a potential upheaval that would threaten the U.S. colonial hold over the island, Franklin Roosevelt created the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA) to placate and assist islanders through direct aid and jobs creation programs. Continental operatives working for the federal government in Puerto Rico— some of whom were working at cross purposes— began to conceptualize the island as a part of the national project, rather than view it as separate from the United States due to its geographical location and colonial status. As such, they believed that Puerto Rico was not receiving its fair share of federal funding, especially when compared to what was being extended to the states under the New Deal. They contended that it was Puerto Rico’s relative exclusion from federal welfare that was keeping working-class islanders in a state of poverty. As it was after San Felipe, many continental and insular observers offered the solutions of industrialization, “slum clearance,” and housing initiatives. But the federal government did little to construct new homes

for the poor, enforce the 500-acre Law, and move the island away from its dependence on agricultural industries, particularly sugar. Big Sugar's influence could be seen in the fierce opposition of insular politicians to New Deal welfare initiatives promoted by the PRERA and its director, James Bourne. Faced with underfunding and the distraction of political battles, Bourne and the PRERA were unable to achieve the goals of providing the type of relief and reform that would better the lives of Puerto Rican workers.

As I will demonstrate in my third chapter, "A Sense of Shame," many New Deal operatives, including Eleanor Roosevelt and Undersecretary of Agriculture Rexford Tugwell, had arrived on the island with preconceived notions about the Puerto Rican people that were based on disparaging racialized or classist assumptions about Puerto Ricans as an ethnic or racial group. Such assumptions fed into their beliefs that poor islanders were somehow responsible for their own misery. As I argue here, however, when continental New Dealers spent time in Puerto Rico, their biased rhetoric began to encompass the language of inclusion. Many began to question the justness of unchecked monocultural capitalism and its role in perpetuating a cycle of poverty among those whom observers increasingly viewed as deserving American citizens. Some grew openly critical of colonialism and sought to use the New Deal to first provide immediate relief and then to overhaul the political and economic system to create a more equitable society. As I contend, some New Dealers were prompted to reform Puerto Rican society after they came face-to-face with the visceral realities of poverty they witnessed in the island's expanding shantytowns. Others, however, feared a working-class revolution that had the potential to topple U.S. control over the lucrative sugar colony. Regardless of differences in motivation, the consensus among New Dealers in Puerto Rico was that the colonial capitalist system was somehow broken and that something needed to change. In part, it was their direct contact with

poverty, particularly as it affected the people living in the island's shantytowns, that transformed the assumptions and attitudes of continental actors and motivated them to draw stateside attention to what they referred to as the Puerto Rican "problem" and to implement changes that they hoped would overhaul the island's economy.

My fourth chapter, "'Minimal at Best': Slum Eradication, Model Housing, and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," covers the years from 1935 to 1945, a period which saw the arrival of Roosevelt's so-called "Second New Deal." Motivated by the reports he had received from New Dealers working in Puerto Rico, on May of 1935 President Roosevelt established the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA). The mission of the PRRA included "slum eradication" and housing programs and a restructuring of the Puerto Rican economy to diminish the power of large agricultural corporations. In doing so, Roosevelt and his advisers hoped to narrow the island's class gap and pacify a restless and poverty-stricken population—a move that would hopefully ensure the continuation of U.S. sovereignty over the island. Roosevelt and his advisers were also motivated by a desire to prevent the the migration of thousands of poor and "undesirable" Puerto Ricans to U.S. cities where, officials feared, their presence would create overcrowding and place a burden on the welfare system.⁴⁶ This chapter provides an assessment of the PRRA's achievements, particularly its housing initiatives. I argue that while the PRRA's "slum eradication" and housing programs may have signaled a shift in U.S. colonial policy, they were, like in the continental U.S., exclusionary or limited at best and, therefore largely unsuccessful in providing for the physical security of millions of Puerto

⁴⁶ Historian Eileen Findlay notes that the press in cities like New York, for instance, portrayed Puerto Rican migrants as "an invasion of subhuman creatures or sinister natural forces" who were prone to promiscuity, tropical diseases, poverty, and leftist politics. See: Eileen Findlay, *We Are Left Without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 94-95.

Ricans.⁴⁷ This was because, like the PRERA, the efficacy of the PRRA's operations was hampered by bureaucratic red tape and structural problems that included budget issues, political opposition, corruption, and the government's failure to enforce the 500-acre law. Also instrumental in this regard was Puerto Rico's exclusion from second New Deal legislation, such as the Wagner and Social Security Acts, that might have provided for the upward mobility of the island's working classes and enabled them to afford low-income housing.⁴⁸ The majority of underhoused, poor workers continued to migrate to city squatters' settlements, which steadily grew over the course of the depression. The ever-expanding shantytowns were an indicator of the limits of the New Deal and the difficulty of overhauling the sugar-reliant island economy throughout the 1930s.

In my final chapter, "Puerto Rican Land Reform Under the Farm Security Administration and the *Parcelas* Program," I discuss how the arrival of the Farm Security Administration and the political ascendance of the pro-New Deal PPD in the early 1940s created an unprecedented amount of low-income rural housing to accommodate the island's homeless poor. This was in no small part due to the Supreme Court's 1940 decision to finally enforce the

⁴⁷ Historian Geoff G. Burrows has argued that the PRRA made "lasting contributions to the physical security of millions of Puerto Ricans" through social welfare and experimental housing programs during the depression. Burrows, "The New Deal in Puerto Rico: Public Works, Public Health, and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1935-55," iv, 5.

⁴⁸ Such exclusions mirrored those in the continental United States where labor and social security legislation deliberately omitted protections for agricultural and domestic workers—groups which consisted largely of minority and female workers. Such omissions would continue to impact Puerto Rican migrant agricultural workers who arrived on the continent in the post-World War II era. See: Findlay, *We Are Left Without a Father Here*; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Mary Poole, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

500-acre Law and the subsequent enactment of the Puerto Rican Land Law of 1941—both events being the product of the intervention and activism of islanders. These changes to land policy freed up available acreage for insular and federal land-purchase, resettlement, and housing projects. For instance, the FSA’s low-interest Tenant Purchase loan program, which had existed prior to the enforcement of the land limitation law, saw an exponential increase in loans granted to poor island farmers in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision. Even more successful were the resettlement and housing initiatives known as *parcelas* programs, which were funded and administered under the PPD-led insular government in the wake of the Land Law. I argue that despite long-running issues with localism that plagued both the continental and the colonial New Deal, it was the local nature of the PPD’s programs, rather than a dependence on federal funding and oversight, that provided far more success in the realms of land distribution and housing than the initiatives that preceded them. Nevertheless, while the initiatives offered by FSA and PPD did much to resettle and house Puerto Ricans, it was still not enough to stop the existence and continued expansion of island shantytowns in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Relief in this regard would not arrive until the postwar era when the federal government, working in reaction to the Cold War and the decolonization movement, began styling Puerto Rico as a model democratic/capitalist colony. Beginning in the 1950s, well-funded, yet problematic, industrialization efforts, as well as “slum eradication” and housing programs would ultimately curtail the growth of Puerto Rico’s shantytowns.⁴⁹

I conclude this dissertation by examining how certain continental attitudes toward Puerto Ricans and discriminatory federal policies have persisted from the time of Hurricane San Felipe to the post-Hurricane Maria era. Still lingering are mainland assumptions that islanders are

⁴⁹ Eileen Findlay notes that Muñoz and the PPD sought to “silence” and “repress” any opposition to its programs designed to reform, rather than rid Puerto Rico of, its colonial ties to the U.S. See Findlay, *We Are Left*, 10-11.

unable to care for themselves, are overly dependent on federal welfare, and are somehow responsible for their own poverty. I demonstrate how these beliefs infuse contemporary social welfare policies that have perpetuated Puerto Rico's financial dependence on the United States. This dependent relationship, often steeped in neglect on behalf of the federal government, has led to the continuation of widespread poverty in Puerto Rico. Consequently, to this day, as it was during the depression, Puerto Rico consistently ranks at the top of the list of the poorest states and territories in the United States. While post-World War II industrialization efforts transformed the ways in which members of the island's working class earned a living, discriminatory colonial policies instituted by the federal government (or the lack thereof) since the Operation Bootstrap era, have adversely impacted the living conditions of average Puerto Ricans in ways not unlike what was seen during the 1930s.

Chapter One

Hope Deferred: The San Felipe Hurricane of 1928

If Porto Rico approaches the first anniversary of the San Felipe hurricane of Sept. 13, 1928, in a somewhat pessimistic state of mind, probably the chief cause has been the failure of the rehabilitation funds voted by Congress to do what was expected of them. It is largely the case of hope deferred to a point where many have lost all hope. Many who had both the courage and determination to start all over again during the months immediately following the storm, provided they could be financed, find themselves at the end of almost a year practically where they were following the storm, only with their belts a few holes tighter. - The New York Times, September 1, 1929¹

In the first decades after the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898, American observers frequently described the island as a tropical paradise where every region seemed to offer some natural wonder aimed to satisfy American consumers' hunger for exotic commodities.² They noted the craggy, bleached limestone country on the northeast side of the island which became famous for its prized grapefruits, oranges, and pineapples. And then there were the lush slopes of the central hills where tobacco was harvested and then hand rolled into cigars, which made their way to the humidors of stateside aficionados. In the cooler mountainous region, an area known as the *cordillera central*, were the coffee haciendas. On these small plantations constant, cooling breezes swayed forests of parasol and banana trees, which provided shade for row after row of coffee bushes that produced beans considered a delicacy in Europe due to their deep, rich flavor.³

¹ "Relief Fund Delay Dismays Porto Rico: Hurricane Sufferers Find Red Tape Hampers Obtaining Financial Aid. Only 500 Loans Approved," *The New York Times*, September 1, 1929, E8.

² For more on the relationship between Caribbean colonialism and metropolitan consumption habits see Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3-4. For an excellent primary source that epitomizes turn-of-the-century American views of Puerto Rico and other Spanish territorial acquisitions as fertile paradises that held the promise of providing the metropole with an abundance of exotic goods and agricultural products, see: José De Olivares and Major-General Joseph Wheeler, *Our Islands and Their People As Seen with Camera and Pencil* (New York: N.D. Thomson Publishing Co., 1899).

³ James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 100; Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 7.

They told of the seemingly endless acres of sugar cane that blanketed the island coast. The towering grassy stalks held the lucrative white gold that was the mainstay of Puerto Rico's economy.⁴ As one observer for the Brookings Institution wrote, “the best of this land has been cultivated for centuries, without much effort to maintain its fertility.” At first glance, Puerto Rico seemed like an enchanting land of mouth-watering abundance where, it would seem, no one could possibly go hungry.⁵

But such descriptions belied the fact that by the 1920s, under U.S. occupation, the majority of Puerto Ricans were poor and hungry. Over two-thirds of the island population labored as unskilled workers earning subsistence wages in the above mentioned agricultural industries.⁶ In the decade preceding the Great Depression, Puerto Rico's population consisted of 1.5 million people, 800,000 of whom were landless, malnourished, and underemployed urban and rural workers.⁷ 96 percent of the island's economy was dependent on the four export crops of sugar, tobacco, coffee and fruit and the bulk of Puerto Rico's wealth was in the hands of the top 15 percent of the population. The majority of this prosperous class earned its wealth from the cultivation of sugar and its adjacent industries. Due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work and the island's steadily growing population, which created a labor surplus, the remaining 85 percent faced chronic employment shortages and extended families in the countryside netted average daily wages of less than 60 cents per day. Steadily reduced wages and poor working

⁴ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster, September, 1928: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Florida" (Washington, D.C., 1929), 7; Pedro A. Caban, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1999) 72-73; U.S. Congress, Senate and House, "Relief of Porto Rico," *Joint Hearings Before the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions, United States Senate and the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives*, 70th Congress, 2nd sess. (December 10 and 11, 1928), 5.

⁵ The Brookings Institution, *Porto Rico and its Problems* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1930), 6.

⁶ The American National Red Cross, *West Indies Hurricane*, 9.

⁷ Knowlton Mixer, *Porto Rico: History and Conditions Social, Economic and Political* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 171; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1929* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 78.

conditions over course of 1920s led to violent labor unrest and the rise of the anti-American Nationalist Party, which had been steadily growing in popularity among a wide segment of the population and gaining media attention on the island.⁸ Additionally, the majority of small farmers faced destitution and were forced to sell their land to U.S. sugar corporations, thus diminishing the middle class and creating a widening gap between the very poor and the very rich.⁹ Crushing poverty, hunger, and unsanitary living conditions resulted in illness and death in the countryside.¹⁰ Tuberculosis, malaria, hookworm, and gastrointestinal ailments contributed to climbing mortality rates, and even leprosy and the bubonic plague made occasional appearances throughout the decade.¹¹ Puerto Rico's cities offered little in the way of opportunity during this era. Employment was scarce in the miniscule urban manufacturing sector, which consisted of a few thousand jobs in tobacco processing, rum and cigar making, and in the homework-based needlework industries.¹² Nevertheless, many continental observers were insensitive to the dire circumstances plaguing the island's poorer population, instead focusing on the more beneficial aspects the colony had to offer to white mainlanders. For instance, according to an American Red Cross (ARC) official in 1928, Puerto Rico's moderate tropical climate, with average temperatures hovering around 75 degrees, proved "altogether favorable to the Caucasian race," especially for those "people of the well-to-do class whose growth has not been stunted by

⁸ Fernando Picó, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2014), 256; James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 162.

⁹ Historian Margaret M. Power notes that "for hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans, the situation" during this era was "bleak, even desperate" as "people's earnings did not cover what they needed to survive at even the most basic level." Margaret M. Power, *Solidarity Across the Americas: The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and Anti-Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 100; Mixer, 112, 119, 183, 185.

¹⁰ Margaret M. Power notes that adequate nourishment for working class Puerto Ricans was almost unattainable at this time. Most could not afford the food necessary to provide for their daily, minimal caloric intake which was approximately 1,800 calories per day for a needleworker and between 3,200 to 4,100 calories per day for a farm laborer. Power, *Solidarity*, 100.

¹¹ Mixer, 187.

¹² César Ayala, "The Decline of the Plantation Economy and the Puerto Rican Migration of the 1950s," *Latino Studies Journal*, 7, no. 1 (Winter 1996), 6; The American Red Cross, 32, 37.

insufficient food." If one happened to be a white person of means, the official noted, they might fare just as well on the island as their relatively prosperous counterparts living in northern climates.¹³

Such were the socioeconomic issues plaguing Puerto Rico when a massive category 5 hurricane hit the island on September 13, 1928. The cyclone, known as San Felipe (or the Okeechobee Hurricane), was described as a "hurricane of extraordinary intensity, unusual duration, and unexampled violence" and the worst disaster to hit Puerto Rico since the San Ciriaco storm of 1899. Although nearly three decades had passed since the latter storm struck, economic damage had been so great that the island still had not recovered by the time San Felipe "laid the island waste."¹⁴ San Felipe nearly destroyed the island's agricultural industries and therefore its entire economy. Property damage was estimated at \$85 million (\$1.4 billion in today's dollars) and 500,000 mostly impoverished people were left homeless.¹⁵ But, many continental and insular officials saw the crisis as a moment of opportunity. For instance, Puerto Rico's Governor Horace Towner, Washington think-tanks, and even church groups, to name a few, called for an overhaul of a colonial economy which they believed had become too dependent on agriculture to the detriment of the laboring masses. Members of this camp believed that industrialization efforts would be key in restructuring an island society that had reached a breaking point by the late 1920s.

Their reform-mindedness was in no small way inspired by the increasing unrest among the island's working class. Social unrest included a steadily growing Nationalist movement that

¹³ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 10.

¹⁴ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,"6; U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 1.

¹⁵ Mathews, 2; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 3.

aimed to dismantle the sugar monoculture by organizing “the workers so they can recover their share of profits appropriated by foreign interests” and to throw off all ties between Puerto Rico and the imperialist mainland.¹⁶ Others, such as U.S. lawmakers and the ARC, used the moment to reinforce island class disparities and a colonial relationship steeped in neglect. They did so by adopting disaster relief measures that were vastly underfunded— a pattern that foreshadowed how the New Deal would play out in Puerto Rico in the early 1930s. What little money *was* extended to Puerto Rico by U.S. lawmakers after San Felipe was doled out under racialized and class-based criteria that excluded most of the impoverished population and favored the island’s prosperous classes. Additionally, disaster appropriations revealed disparities between the amount of relief doled out between Puerto Rico, which was the hardest hit by San Felipe, and the state of Florida, which was also impacted by the storm but to a lesser degree. In both locales, the ARC and Congress employed discriminatory relief protocols that favored elite, white community members. Such protocols privileged Puerto Rico’s planter class and helped to reconstitute the colonial status quo, which placed power and money in the hands of the fortunate few. The federal government’s failure to directly assist the island poor led to a mass migration of unemployed and unhoused agricultural workers from the countryside to Puerto Rico’s urban squatters’ settlements, where they would remain for the bulk of the depression years.¹⁷

¹⁶ Power, *Solidarity*, 102.

¹⁷ For more on the linkages between natural disasters and the economic crisis of the depression see historian David Worster’s work on the U.S. Dust Bowl. Worster connects the crises of the depression (economic crisis) and the Dust Bowl (ecological crisis), saying that they emerged from the same capitalist ethos that drove the American way of life and economy. He argues that both “offered a reason, and an opportunity, for substantial reform of that [capitalist] culture. David Worster, *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5.

The Storm

On the morning of September 12, 1928, there was an ominous change in the characteristically tranquil breezes of Puerto Rico's *cordillera central*. As the day unfolded, windspeeds began to climb and move the vegetation with increasing violence. On the coast, field workers noticed the climbing height and force of the surf which drew dangerously close to the edge of the sugarcane fields where they labored.¹⁸ By midday, news of an impending hurricane originating near the Caribbean island of Martinique reached Puerto Rico and officials began issuing hourly warnings to island municipalities over the telephone and telegraph wires. The insular police went from door to door of workers' shacks warning residents to vacate their frail dwellings, urging them to find "anywhere to be safe."¹⁹ By the time the storm hit Puerto Rico in the early morning hours of Thursday, September 13, thousands had rushed for the shelter of soundly built structures that included plantation houses, schools, churches, and mountain caves. As one official noted, the thousands more who could not access such shelters simply "threw themselves prone upon the ground" where they hoped to remain safe from the "falling trees or buildings" brought on by the hurricane.²⁰

Subsequently named San Felipe, the storm traveled at the rate of 14 mph, slowly rendering a gash of destruction in a perfect diagonal across the island over the course of eighteen hours. It first hit the island's southeastern coast where it leveled sugar cane fields before passing through the *cordillera central*, where it decimated nearly every coffee plantation in its path. San Felipe sliced its way northwest over Puerto Rico, nearly destroying the city of Aguadilla, before

¹⁸ Sidney W. Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 111.

¹⁹ *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

its path turned toward southern Florida.²¹ Meteorologists claimed that at its height, San Felipe's wind velocity reached 200 miles per hour. Accurate readings could not be taken, however, as island weather gauges were destroyed by the time the storm's wind speeds had reached 150 miles per hour.²² Within a single twenty-four-hour period, rainfall had exceeded 29 inches, an amount one observer described as "phenomenal" and as "the heaviest ever recorded in Porto Rico."²³

Eyewitness accounts of San Felipe convey the dangerous fury of the storm. An officer on a New York-bound German steamer called the hurricane "an indescribable force," and likened the sound of its winds to a "New York subway going full speed passing switches." He recalled one-hundred-foot waves crashing over his ship's masthead as the boat's navigational equipment became so caked with salt that it was left unusable. Crew members risked their lives on deck in the gargantuan swell as they cleaned the salt from the hardware while tarps, hatches, and ventilators were shredded to bits and swept away.²⁴

An unidentified member of the U.S. military stationed at Puerto Rico's Henry Barracks gave an account to the *El Moro* newspaper on November 15, 1928, and remarked that despite "twenty some odd years of planning and working" to establish the American base, the elements had demonstrated to man "how impotent he was in their path." The day after the storm nearly all the base's forty buildings had been destroyed after a night of unrelenting and deafening winds. Constant, whipping rains loosened roofs and walls allowing water to pour into buildings and by the morning of September 14, barracks personnel and their families found themselves "homeless,

²¹ Charles L. Mitchell, "The West Indian Hurricane of September 10-20, 1928," *The Monthly Weather Review*, September, 1928), ed. Alfred J. Henry, 56, no. 9, W.B. no. 967, (Washington, D.C.: Weather Bureau, 1928), 347-350.

²² U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico,"4.

²³ Oliver L. Fassig, "San Felipe—The Hurricane of September 13, 1928, at San Juan, P.R." (San Juan, P.R.: Weather Bureau Office, 1928), 350.

²⁴ Mitchell, "The West Indian Hurricane," 348.

water-soaked, and in desperate straits." Although roads leading to the camp were made impassable by landslides and debris, hungry and displaced Puerto Ricans somehow found a way to make their way to the base, which only had enough rations to last three days. Little could be done there in the immediate aftermath of San Felipe as the camp lay under mountains of water-logged debris. Stationed high in the mountains and forty miles from the nearest supply outpost, the Henry Barracks was brought to its knees. Matters were made even worse by the heavy rains that refused to subside after the hurricane had passed. Remarkably, the military base suffered no casualties.²⁵

According to anthropologist Sidney Mintz, a sugar cane worker named Don Taso recalled an eerie calm as the storm approached, but as the winds steadily picked up speed, he decided it was time to seek shelter in a local store. He wrapped his arms tightly around his pregnant wife's waist and struggled against the strength of the mounting wind to get to the building, which was only yards away. The shelter grew so crowded that most of those inside were forced to remain standing for the duration of the hurricane. Throughout the day Don Taso witnessed workers' shacks crumbling and blowing away. He anxiously watched his own dwelling "moving backward and then swaying forward again with the force of the wind" and "...waited from moment to moment for it to fall to the ground." Although pieces of his house were carried away, Don Taso was one of the lucky ones—remarkably, his house remained standing once the hurricane subsided.²⁶ A community of poor people in the city of Arecibo did not fare so well, however, as their entire oceanside neighborhood was washed away by San Felipe's storm surge.²⁷

²⁵ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 6-8.

²⁶ Mintz, *Worker in the Cane*, 111-113, 115.

²⁷ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 37.

Don Taso's account is a testament to the fact that poor people's dwellings were hardest hit by San Felipe. This was largely due to their antiquated design and the shoddy building materials available on the island. The average laborer's home in 1928 was a flimsy construction built of discarded boards and topped by thatched palm or zinc roofing, a design which had changed little since the time of the Spanish conquest in the fifteenth century. The absence of both electricity and windows made for dark and claustrophobic living quarters especially when considering the fact that the average number of occupants was five and a half people per room in a space that measured somewhere between 54 and 250 square feet. Such conditions would persist well into the 1930s. For instance, New Deal colonial official James Bourne reported in the mid-1930s that occupants often cooked inside their shacks on makeshift stoves that were constructed from rocks or kerosene drums, using charcoal and lumber scraps as fuel with little to no ventilation. Furniture was usually constructed from metal scraps, recycled produce boxes or old barrels held together by wire, and when not sleeping on the floor, dwellers slept in hammocks made from the discarded canvas sacks of U.S. sugar corporations.²⁸ Although the island's poor proved to be incredibly resourceful in that they made do with what supplies they could afford or salvage, their ability to build hurricane-proof homes was seriously hampered by their lack of resources.²⁹

²⁸ "Report from James Bourne, Director of the PRERA, to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Director of the FERA in Atlanta, Georgia," RG 323, Records of the Engineering Division of the PRRA, Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), NYC; Ruby Black, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940) 296-297; Bailey W. and Justine Whitfield Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 213; The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 37.

²⁹ The American Red Cross, 32, 37; *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1929*, 13, 15, 20, 35; Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 210.

The fragile nature of their shacks was no match for the wrath of San Felipe— a storm that produced winds so strong that they turned "reinforced concrete and structural steel" into rubble.³⁰ As a result, over 440,000 homes, mostly belonging to the island's working class, were destroyed or badly damaged leaving one-third of the population, or roughly 500,000 people, homeless.³¹ The Secretary of the Bureau of Insular Affairs confirmed that most of the damage to property was done to "...dwellings, especially to those of the poorer classes." A newspaper article from the Dominican Republic written five days after the storm reported that "thousands of unfortunate families" were "wandering without a roof to shelter under" and that during the daylight hours they hovered near the rubble that once was their homes. At night they sought shelter in "public buildings, churches, theaters, and school houses."³² The ARC also observed that "the cabins of the poor were everywhere damaged or destroyed. With the winter's prospects of employment reduced to a fraction of the customary, with no reserves of cash, or credit left for the purchase of food, clothes, and shelter" the island's poor would necessarily need whatever emergency funds would be made available by the federal government.³³

Relief workers from the American Red Cross were astonished by what they found when they arrived in Puerto Rico and surveyed the damage on September 18th, describing the scene as "more critical than had been represented" in initial reports. In their accounts, Puerto Rico was now a decimated and "hopeless" wasteland. Its famously beautiful blooming flamboyant trees were now "leafless and barren" with limbs torn to shreds. Rural children were seen walking

³⁰ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 3.

³¹ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 12; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1929*, 12.

³² "Las pérdidas sufridas por Puerto Rico, en agricultura y propiedades han asciendido a unos \$50,000,000." *Listín Diario*, Santo Domingo, R.D. September 18, 1928, 1, 14.

³³ War Department, *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1930*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 15; U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 12; The American Red Cross, 12-13, 16, 19; Schwartz, *Sea of Storms*, 211-212; Mitchell, 15.

around in a stunned state, "nearly nude," having lost their clothing in the storm and the entire population of San Juan was in a "dazed" stupor.³⁴ On surveying the damage over a month later, U.S. Senator Hiram Bingham remarked, "as far as I know there has never been a hurricane of this intensity and which lasted so long. There has never been a calamity that affected the people so much or damaged so large a part of the industries in either State, Territory, or insular possession of the United States." In the words of Horace A. Towner, the U.S. appointed governor of the island, Puerto Rico was now a paradise lost, its "luxuriant flowered" landscape now resembled the "war-devastated areas of France or Belgium." What had taken four years to accomplish at the hands of warring men in Europe, however, had taken a matter of hours due to the unpredictable whims of nature in Puerto Rico.³⁵

As noted previously, according to official U.S. government reports, total losses from the storm were calculated at \$85 million and the agricultural industries upon which the poor depended for their survival were severely impacted by San Felipe. Puerto Rican sugar plantations incurred about \$17 million in damage due to new cane hybrids that increased crop yields but had weaker stalks that were susceptible to high winds. 142,000 mature coconut trees were destroyed and 32 percent of the plantations on which they grew were leveled. In addition to these sectors, the tobacco and citrus industries were badly weakened.³⁶ The coffee industry suffered the heaviest losses because the hurricane destroyed ninety percent of the 1928 coffee crop along with most shade trees necessary for its cultivation. Losses in the coffee sector topped out at \$18.2 million.³⁷ Almost immediately after San Felipe hit the island, a significant consequence of the damages incurred by Puerto Rico's agricultural sector became apparent. Unemployment rates,

³⁴ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 13-15.

³⁵ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 4; *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 1-3.

³⁶ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 32, 37.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 19,20; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 12.

which had hovered around twenty percent throughout the decade of the 1920s, quickly increased. By December of 1929, the number of jobless Puerto Ricans had jumped to thirty percent—a number that would steadily rise once the effects of the depression took hold in the following few years.³⁸ In spite of these statistics, federal relief measures enacted in the immediate aftermath of the storm would prove largely ineffective. This was due to the federal government’s practice of heavily relying on private charity and local funds to provide the bulk of relief funds in times of disaster. Although the quasi-governmental ARC did come to the assistance of Puerto Ricans after the storm, it employed a discriminatory disaster relief protocol that excluded impoverished islanders and re-entrenched the power of the very wealthy, particularly those associated with the sugar industry.

U.S. Disaster Relief Policies from 1886-1930: Contextual Background

During the 1920s, the U.S. government’s approach to disaster relief was one that primarily relied on local governments and private organizations to assist when calamities struck.³⁹ The impacts of San Felipe were so great, however, that the insular government was stretched beyond its financial means and the funds raised by the ARC and private donors did little to offset the losses incurred from the storm. Consequently, it became necessary for the federal government to step in and provide additional assistance to San Felipe’s victims. Continental lawmakers and the ARC applied discriminatory disaster relief policies in Puerto Rico that were honed in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Jim Crow South, where they reconstituted socioeconomic hierarchies after various crises. Such policies became a

³⁸ Diffie, 167.

³⁹ Historian Marian Moser Jones describes federal disaster relief in the late 1920s as a system which employed a “strategy of privileging local autonomy” thus fostering a reliance on “community-based self-help” rather than the state’s direct intervention. Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 200.

template for how disaster relief was distributed on the island after San Felipe—and they were policies that tended to favor large-scale, white Puerto Rican farmers and sugar corporations over the island working class.

In 1928, the ARC had only been in existence for fifty years and disaster relief as we know it today was still in its nascent stages. No formal federal disaster legislation existed until the Federal Disaster Relief Act of 1950, a law that was brought about by arrival of Cold War.⁴⁰ Prior to this law, the only legal protocol came from the War Department, which issued Special Regulation Number 67, "Regulations Governing Flood Relief Work in the War Department" (S.R. No. 67) in 1917, a regulation that also applied to other disasters as well as floods. At the time of San Felipe, the Federal government was not legally responsible for disaster relief and survivors were expected to depend solely on local support from families, friends, churches, as well as benevolent and fraternal organizations.⁴¹ If and when the ARC and the government stepped in, their involvement was usually brief, and their objective was largely to help local leadership jumpstart reconstruction efforts. According to historian Marian Moser Jones, the ARC's policy of offering humanitarian aid was one that was ostensibly grounded in ideals of neutrality, but critics of the organization claimed that its "hands off" approach created an atmosphere that reinscribed the socioeconomic dynamics in the localities where it served.⁴²

In the years that passed between the founding of the ARC in 1881 and San Felipe, the organization and the federal government had gained extensive experience with natural disasters due to a litany of calamities in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The 1886 Charleston earthquake, the Johnstown flood of 1889, the South Carolina Sea Islands hurricane of

⁴⁰ Andrew S. Mener, "Disaster Response in the United States of America: An Analysis of the Bureaucratic and Political History of a Failing System," (Masters Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 7-8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Marian Moser Jones, 199.

1893, the San Ciriaco hurricane of 1898, the 1900 Galveston hurricane, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, World War I, and the Mississippi Flood of 1927 provided the ARC and the federal government with a variety of opportunities to sharpen their disaster relief skills.⁴³ These skills sometimes included utilizing practices that served to reproduce power structures in the various locales where the ARC was deployed during times of crisis.

By the late 1920s, the ARC was wielding a great deal of power and clout due to its unique relationship with the federal government. After the ARC essentially became an arm of the government when it was nationalized in 1900, the two entities formed an ambiguous relationship which, according to historian Stuart Schwartz "...allowed Congress to maintain a fiction that disaster relief was still a local, religious, or private concern, but it also permitted the Red Cross to insist at times that it, and not the government, would determine what was, what was not, a 'natural disaster,' and thus what was the Red Cross's responsibility." This "curious arrangement" also gave the ARC a great deal of latitude when deciding who would be worthy of government relief funds as well as how those funds were distributed on the ground. In many cases, the extension of aid and the delegation of power in communities still served to benefit those in the local ruling class.⁴⁴

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927, which rendered 325,000 people homeless and decimated the agricultural industry in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi proved to be a turning point in the history of U.S. disaster relief. The efforts mounted by the ARC and the federal government were what Moser Jones describes as "more extensive than any...undertaken before. This project not only became a high-water mark for the interwar ARC; it marked the most significant federal intervention in the area's social and economic affairs between

⁴³ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁴ Schwartz, 211.

Reconstruction and the New Deal." Working in conjunction with then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the War Department, as well local and state officials, the ARC spearheaded a new type of fundraising campaign, which utilized the innovations of film and radio. The \$17 million raised by public donations were then distributed in the form of clothing, the rebuilding of permanent housing, food, and health and sanitation campaigns. Considered the brainchild of Herbert Hoover, this so-called "associative" relief distribution system was one that, for the first time in U.S. history, depended upon systematized and collaborative efforts of both federal and local officials.⁴⁵ One year later, the same methods would be applied in Puerto Rico, albeit with less effective results than those seen in the U.S. South. Nevertheless, the response to the back-to-back disasters would foreshadow the unprecedented involvement of the state and the ways it came to the assistance of both the colonial and the continental populations during the crisis of the Great Depression.⁴⁶

Hoover's associative system was rooted in disaster relief collaborations between the ARC and local officials during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such partnerships were often characterized by their deliberate discriminatory practices in the Jim Crow South where the Black press reported numerous accounts of "cruel and inadequate treatment" of African Americans by local whites working in conjunction with the ARC in the aftermath of various natural disasters.⁴⁷ For instance, after the Charleston earthquake, ARC officials were complicit in the efforts of white South Carolinian officials who employed aid eligibility requirements not unlike those used to prohibit African Americans from registering to vote under

⁴⁵ Marian Moser Jones, x, 199-200, 201-206; *The American Red Cross*, 14.

⁴⁶ Marian Moser Jones argues, however, that by the time of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927, the ARC had grown into such a powerful crisis management organization that it was able to bypass the need for more direct state intervention after natural disasters. As such, the ARC as a "voluntary body precluded the creation of a federal disaster-relief agency as part of the New Deal." *Ibid.*, x.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

Jim Crow. Charleston's homeless and destitute were expected to complete a complicated written application that essentially excluded the majority of African Americans in the city, 80 percent of whom were illiterate, from receiving home rebuilding assistance and other types of aid.⁴⁸

National security and disaster relief scholar James F. Miskel notes that because of such practices, the Army included a broadly worded anti-discrimination clause in S.R. No. 67. According to Miskel, the provision stated that "...aid was to be distributed directly to disaster victims whenever possible...[as] a response to reports of discrimination in past disasters in which [federal] aid was given to local relief committees that were responsible for distributing it to disaster victims."⁴⁹ As we shall see shortly, a decade after the resolution was issued relief efforts in Puerto Rico made it clear that little had changed in spite of this clause. The ARC's discriminatory disaster relief practices, first tested under Jim Crow, were exported to the Puerto Rico in 1928.⁵⁰

Initial Response in Puerto Rico

To their credit, federal officials responded to the crisis in Puerto Rico with rapid speed almost as soon as San Felipe's winds subsided. Prompted by a series of press dispatches and reports from their Puerto Rico chapter on September 14, a team of ARC advisors boarded a navy destroyer headed for San Juan where they arrived four days later. While the ARC officials were on route, they received a telegram forwarded by the Bureau of Insular Affairs from Governor Horace M. Towner containing a plea for the shipment of urgently needed food supplies.⁵¹

Meanwhile, on September 17, President Coolidge held a press conference after which he called

⁴⁸ James F. Miskel, *Disaster Response and Homeland Security: What Works, What Doesn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 10, 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 13, 14.

on the American people to “contribute promptly and most generously” to the ARC “so that sufficient funds may be received to alleviate the suffering of so many thousands” in Puerto Rico.⁵²

In spite of the extensive financial losses on the island, ARC officials in Washington, D.C. set a low bar for their fundraising campaign for Puerto Rico. In the days following the storm, the organization announced that it had set the goal of raising \$5 million through private donations by October 10 for medicines and the purchase of emergency food items and clothing. It was an amount that was less than one third of what had been raised one year earlier after the Mississippi Flood. Two months later, the ARC surpassed its target as continental citizens contributed \$5.5 million to the emergency fund.⁵³ The funds were divided down the middle, with \$2,750,000 split between both Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands with the other half going to hurricane victims in southern Florida. The distribution of funds raised alarm bells with some U.S. lawmakers, who argued that Puerto Rico was being unfairly treated considering the extent of the damage incurred there compared to that which had occurred in Florida, where only \$25 million in total losses were reported.⁵⁴ Senator Hiram Bingham pointed out that only 60,000 people had been impacted by the hurricane in Florida as opposed to the 500,000 who were affected in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, he went on to note that the standard of living on the island had been well below that of the mainland state prior to San Felipe, with agricultural workers in Florida having made five times the amount in wages than their counterparts in Puerto Rico. In Bingham’s opinion, to

⁵² “Text of President Coolidge’s Appeal to Nation to Relieve Hurricane Victims in the West Indies,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 1928, 1.

⁵³ U.S. Congress, “Relief of Porto Rico,” 13.

⁵⁴ National Weather Service, “Memorial Page for the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane,” <https://www.weather.gov/mfl/okeechobee>

deny the island of its fair share of emergency funds was essentially a way to “take a family in Porto Rico and care for it very much less than you can care for a family in Florida.”⁵⁵

While the almost-equal division of the ARC’s raised funds denoted a measure of inclusion for the colonies in the American national imagination, it belied the fact that, in terms of overall need in the wake of the storm, there were disparities in disaster relief that were not being addressed between the continent and the territories. For instance, immediately after the storm, Florida received \$1 million in ARC funds for building materials and construction labor, an amount that reached approximately 3,624 families. Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands also received \$1 million for the same purposes, but it was expected that the two colonies would split the amount equally, in spite of higher financial losses incurred in the Caribbean as a result of the storm.⁵⁶ The colonies were also excluded from access to other disaster relief services that were made readily available to Florida hurricane victims. For instance, unlike in Florida, in Puerto Rico, the ARC did not provide access to: equipment necessary for rescuing hurricane victims, funds for relief camps and tent cities, transportation funds to help relocate victims and their homes to safer locations, monies for feed for livestock and farm implements, or supplemental disaster monies that would provide rent and utility relief. Some of these omissions were perhaps due to the fact that Puerto Ricans had limited options in terms of utilizing such funds. The reality was that there *were* no safe locations left on the hurricane-ravaged island to move families out of harm’s way, nor had there been viable living quarters to relocate victims to as the majority of the population had lived in what amounted to shanty towns with no utilities to speak of. And finally, the ARC’s distribution of farm tools, stock and equipment for the average worker may have been deemed unnecessary as relief agents assumed such things would easily be replenished by the

⁵⁵ U.S. Congress, “Relief of Porto Rico,” 12.

⁵⁶ The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 74.

large agricultural corporations who had traditionally supplied such implements to their laborers.⁵⁷

The ARC's lackluster fundraising efforts for the colonies may have also been due in part to officials' faith in the associative system of disaster relief that was in place at the time of San Felipe. Traditionally in the wake of such crises a collaborative system consisting of federal and local government officials as well as non-governmental and religious organizations would emerge to meet the needs of the victims of natural disasters. In the months following San Felipe the Rockefeller Foundation as well as the insular branches of the Catholic and Protestant Churches stepped up health and social welfare initiatives aimed at controlling malaria and feeding and clothing storm victims in Puerto Rico.⁵⁸ In October of 1928, the president of the stateside Cigar Makers' International Union, an organization consisting of many Puerto Ricans who had migrated to the United States, sent a memo to local branches asking for donations to assist those affected by San Felipe. The union leader urged members to "remember, they need all they can get; that every mite helps some," and to please "act promptly." Local shops flooded the Washington office with small checks ranging from two to eleven dollars. One donor enclosed a memo with his three-dollar check noting that he wished to "help our brothers in the Islands."⁵⁹ As one observer wrote, however, such gestures were "a drop in the bucket" of what was needed to rehabilitate Puerto Rico.⁶⁰

As a part of the associative relief system, Puerto Rico's insular government was also expected to come to the assistance of islanders following San Felipe, but it found itself faced

⁵⁷ Ibid., 74, 89.

⁵⁸ Brookings Institution, *Porto Rico and Its Problems*, 88.

⁵⁹ Records of the Cigar Makers' International Union of American Records Administration: 1880-1974, microfilm series 1, roll 12, 100-102, from the Records of the American Federation of Labor, Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, College Park.

⁶⁰ Brookings, 88.

with a lack of available funds. One official noted that in the months immediately following the hurricane the insular government was essentially rendered impotent because “all sources of revenue” had been negatively impacted due to the extensive damage done to island agricultural sectors.⁶¹ In December of 1928, Governor Towner reported that the insular treasury had experienced a precipitous drop in revenue collections from income and excise taxes as well as customs duties due to San Felipe. Towner noted that the island treasury department had expected that revenues would be well over \$11 million, but by December 31, 1928, it had only collected \$5 million, less than half of what was anticipated. Per government protocol, a portion of revenue collections was usually earmarked for the insular general fund from which emergency appropriations were usually taken.⁶² With its revenue sources greatly depleted, the amount of money available to insular officials in the month’s following San Felipe was far from enough to offset the \$85 million in damages caused by the storm.

The economic damage caused by San Felipe was so great that the insular government and private organizations found themselves too financially strapped to make any meaningful difference. And so, during the first two months following San Felipe, the efforts of the ARC became the most viable solution for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico. Although the ARC responded rapidly and efficiently, its response did little to mitigate the devastating conditions experienced by the island’s poor people—conditions brought about because of San Felipe and the systemic issues that plagued Puerto Rico’s colonial society. To the contrary, ARC policies, particularly those dealing with rebuilding and housing the homeless, ultimately served to reconstitute a highly unequal relationship between prosperous islanders and the very poor.

⁶¹ U.S. Congress, “Relief of Porto Rico,” 97.

⁶² *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 100.

ARC Response in Puerto Rico

As soon as ARC officials arrived in Puerto Rico, they began a coordinated effort to meet the most immediate needs of hurricane victims, albeit with mixed results. Between late September and December, fourteen makeshift hospitals had been set up by the Red Cross where volunteers treated nearly 8,000 patients.⁶³ The sick and the homeless, especially from the hardest hit mountain regions, migrated to island cities in search of food, shelter, and medical care. Red Cross officials remarked that "patients were brought to the emergency hospitals by members of families or by friends in conveyances of all kinds, including litters made of a sugar-sack hammock suspended on a pole. It was a common sight to see men with shoulders to the pole ends, bringing sick persons down the mountain trails."⁶⁴ The infirmed sought treatment for a variety of illnesses that reached epidemic proportions after the hurricane, outbreaks the ARC sought to combat with aggressive, mandatory inoculation campaigns in the months following the storm. During their tenure on the island, the ARC administered an astounding 7.3 million units of vaccines and antitoxins (or approximately 7 shots per person who comprised a population of 1.5 million) for the prevention of such ailments as diphtheria, typhoid, and tetanus—diseases that saw dramatic increases after the storm due to tainted water supplies and a rise in puncture wounds inflicted by storm debris.⁶⁵ The ARC's inoculation campaign after San Felipe was a continuation of larger public health trends in place on the island since the early-twentieth century. For instance, as soon as the U.S. occupied Puerto Rico in 1898, the U.S. Army ordered

⁶³ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 18.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The American Red Cross reported an alarming rise in illnesses common to the island after San Felipe: "Reports by the Insular Health Department comparing the months of September and October of 1928—the hurricane emergency period—with the same months of the preceding year show these contrasts: Malaria cases—6,758 in the hurricane period as against 2,551 cases in the same period of 1927; influenza cases—5,379 in 1928 against 136 in 1927; typhoid cases—386 in 1928 against 180 in 1927; tetanus cases—82 in 1928 against 16 in 1927." The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 18.

the inoculation of every citizen on the island in order to eradicate smallpox. Those who defied military orders were subject to jail time and a costly fine of \$10.⁶⁶ The compulsory nature of these public health initiatives illustrates the dual effects of tropical medicine on colonial subjects. On the one hand, public health projects could be perceived as a positive demonstration of how scientific advancements might benefit the greater good as they fostered the overall health of the nation. On the other hand, such campaigns could be viewed as an imperial technology, in that the forcible inoculation of the population was an exercise in metropolitan power that infringed upon the bodily autonomy of colonial subjects.⁶⁷

One of the most successful of the ARC's initiatives was its clothing distribution program. As many hurricane victims had emerged from the storm with only the tattered clothes on their backs, the ARC issued a directive to its local continental chapters to collect as much clothing as possible through private donations. Initially the drive proved problematic as "supplies were insufficient and not altogether adapted to tropical requirements," thus prompting officials to contract with Puerto Rican factories for the manufacture of necessary garments at the cost of \$163,921. In addition to the 1,452 bundles of clothing collected in the U.S., Puerto Rican factories produced around 270,000 new clothing items and created temporary jobs for many unemployed Puerto Ricans, particularly women.⁶⁸

In the short term, the ARC's food distribution program was also successful. But, once it abruptly ended in February of 1929 it left a sizable part of the population without the proper

⁶⁶ José G. Rigau-Pérez, "Strategies that led to the eradication of smallpox in Puerto Rico, 1882-1921," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 59, no. 1 (Spring 1985), 79.

⁶⁷ Laura Briggs argues that since the Progressive Era, American reformers sought to "modernize" Puerto Rico through the introduction of tropical medicine programs. Tied to the Rockefeller Foundation, these programs were backed by a "racial theory that posited a metonymic relationship among race, place, and disease: the tropics were inhabited by a dark people whose bodies were a wellspring of disease." Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 100.

⁶⁸ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 19.

nourishment they needed for survival. In late October of 1928, the organization began distributing food rations on a regular basis to around 700,000 islanders and provided daily lunches to approximately 56,000 school children. By the time the ARC officially left the island in late February of 1929, it had distributed millions of pounds of fish, rice, beans, evaporated milk, coffee, sugar, as well as fruits and vegetables to hungry islanders.⁶⁹ Aside from continued ration disbursement in certain “industrially stagnant” island locales, once the ARC left the island in the winter of 1929, the majority of government food distribution efforts ceased and thousands went without daily meals.⁷⁰ As one continental observer wrote after the ARC ceased its operations in Puerto Rico, “the universal answer to the question ‘How are you getting along?’ is ‘Estamos muriendo de hambre’ (we are dying of hunger) or ‘There is nothing to eat’—always accompanied by a peculiar gesture of a half closed hand to an open mouth.”⁷¹ While the ARC’s food disbursement program was relatively effective in the months immediately following San Felipe, such efforts were temporary and did little to offset issues with hunger experienced by the working class once the agency vacated the island.

The ARC’s rebuilding and housing initiatives provide a glaring example of the organization’s discriminatory relief practices as they utilized the assistance of local elites who primarily acted in their own interests. Immediately after San Felipe, the ARC and visiting Washington politicians came under the counsel of a “distinguished group” of Puerto Rican civic leaders (including Puerto Rico’s Chief Justice Emilio del Toro Cuebas and Jorge Bird Arias, chairman of the local Red Cross chapter) who would hold a great deal of influence in terms of how ARC rebuilding funds would be distributed.⁷² Assembled by Governor Towner, the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 20, 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁷¹ Brookings, 37.

⁷² The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 16.

American Red Cross Disaster Relief Advisory Committee for Porto Rico was solely responsible for managing the smaller advisory committees, also manned by local civic leaders, that were in charge of determining which islanders would receive ARC rebuilding funds. Many members of the advisory committees were connected to the sugar industry. Thus a group of elite individuals would determine the course of housing relief in the aftermath of San Felipe—an arrangement that reflected the sugar-driven political economy by favoring the island’s mostly-white planter class.

Another “distinguished” advisor to the ARC was Guillermo Esteves, a Tufts-educated engineer who had served as the Insular Public Works Director and as Commissioner of the Interior since 1914.⁷³ While counseling American officials, Esteves proposed relief criteria that explicitly reinforced the island's sharply delineated class hierarchy. As historian Stuart Schwartz notes, in the wake of hurricane the Commissioner was adamant that existing socioeconomic divisions needed to be maintained to restimulate the Puerto Rican economy and to maintain social order. Priority for relief aid, Esteves claimed, should be given to large landholders. Esteves, along with other elites, saw landowners as morally sound individuals who could be relied upon to reconstruct the agricultural industries and provide housing for the poor with little to no government supervision.⁷⁴ The rebuilding of haciendas and plantations by their owners, according to Esteves, would ultimately lead to shelter and jobs for the working class. As Schwartz observes, the funneling of relief funds to landowners "...was a plan that responded to the specificities of the island's society, but that once again placed authority and resources in the hands of the planter class."⁷⁵

⁷³ Miles H. Fairbank, *The Chardon Plan and The Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1934-1954* (San Juan, P.R.: Fairbank Corporation, 1978), 30.

⁷⁴ Schwartz, 212.

⁷⁵ The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 13,16; Schwartz, 212.

The ARC also set up advisory committees in Florida that fell under the purview of local elites, which points to a policy pattern intended to maintain the racial and class status quo in areas hit by natural disasters. In fact, due to complaints from poor African American disaster victims in Florida who believed they were not receiving their fair share of relief funds, the ARC created a Colored Advisory Committee (CAC). The committee consisted of local African American community leaders who the ARC described as “people of high intelligence and educational attainments, capable of judging the existing situation without prejudice.”⁷⁶ The CAC’s members included the likes of noted educator and civil rights activist, Mary McLeod Bethune, who investigated complaints and determined, somewhat surprisingly considering Florida’s Jim Crow regime, that African American “storm sufferers are receiving adequate aid.”⁷⁷ The CAC reported that the Red Cross was not “inquiring as to color, but as to need, and with reference to actual storm losses.” In this regard, they suggested that the poor black people of Florida give the ARC “credit for this attitude” and stop issuing complaints.⁷⁸

Similarly, after the Mississippi Flood of the previous year, the ARC had set up a Colored Advisory Commission led by Dr. Robert Moton, director of the Tuskegee Institute. ARC historian Marian Moser Jones describes Moton as having espoused the accommodationist approach of his colleague, Booker T. Washington, “rather than the assertive ideology of the New Negro promoted by W.E.B. DuBois and the NAACP.” Like Washington, Moton’s philosophy with regards to disaster relief was one that reflected his accommodationist leanings. It was one of incremental change and political caution that focused on, in Jones’ words, ingratiating himself to whites by “identifying small problems” in the wake of the disaster, as opposed to “directly

⁷⁶ The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 71, 72.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

challenging the larger inequitable system of segregation” and racism in the southern U.S. Jones goes on to argue that the ARC used Moton and the commission as a “public relations tool that the ARC could use to counter criticism about unfair treatment of black flood sufferers.”⁷⁹ By all accounts a similar dynamic may have played out in Florida after the San Felipe hurricane. Florida Colored Advisory Commission members such as Mary McLeod Bethune came from an elite, educated class of African Americans who also embraced, to varying degrees, Washington’s gradualist, accommodationist approach to racial integration and equality.⁸⁰ Asking the poor black people of Florida to stop complaining about the ARC suggests that the CAC engaged in a type of respectability politics aimed at currying favor with the dominant culture while subverting the needs of the marginalized. A similar situation would play out in Puerto Rico. While island advisory committees were not necessarily formed around the specificities of race, the desire of their members to maintain existing class hierarchies indicated a continuation of elitist ARC relief policies that had been honed stateside under the Jim Crow order and the unequal U.S. class structure—policies that reconstituted existing power structures at the expense of the Puerto Rican poor who suffered the greatest losses after San Felipe.

In Puerto Rico, the “specificities” Schwartz noted with regards to the island’s class hierarchy included a tradition of exploitative, paternalistic relationships forged between island plantation owners and their workers. Agricultural workers were constantly faced with insecure working conditions due to the labor surplus created by the booming island population. Frequently subject to debt slavery as they, when they had work, lived in company towns where landowners often paid in scrip and obligated workers to buy their basic necessities at inflated

⁷⁹ Marian Moser Jones, 217-218.

⁸⁰ Christopher E. Linsin, “Something More Than a Creed: Mary McLeod Bethune’s Aim of Integrated Autonomy as Director of Negro Affairs,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 76, no. 1 (Summer 1997), 20.

prices at stores operated by land owners.⁸¹ Most rural workers were paid so little that they could not afford shoes, a necessary accessory that prevented the contraction of diseases which ran rampant on the island.⁸² Nevertheless, many continentals believed in a paternalistic plantation system where, as observer Knowlton Mixer noted in 1929, “the planter has, in exchange for the loyalty of the peon, assumed a certain measure of responsibility for his welfare.” Under such an arrangement, the agricultural worker “is treated as a child” by plantation owners “and is perfectly satisfied to be guided by them.”⁸³ Mixer’s assessment reflects prevailing beliefs held by many continentals and island elites that included the notion that poor Puerto Ricans, particularly poor Puerto Ricans of color, were helpless, childlike and unable to survive on their own without the guidance of those in positions of power on the colonial socioeconomic hierarchy. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, such beliefs provided justification for the continuation of colonial power dynamics that favored white men of means.

Infused with the feedback of conservative, wealthy island leaders, ARC officials reported to Washington lawmakers that prior to the hurricane large farmers and plantation owners had been generous with their employees. According to the ARC, planters were especially benevolent in terms of what they offered their employees in the way of lodging—noting that land owners gave “their workers ground, rent free, on which to build” or leased to them “home plots at a nominal rate.”⁸⁴ In reality, 82.2 percent of rural laborers lived in homes owned by plantation owners who provided the necessary, but inadequate, building materials with which workers could construct their own shacks. While workers lived rent-free they also had, according to a

⁸¹ Mathews, 8.

⁸² Brookings, 33.

⁸³ Mixer, 210-211.

⁸⁴ César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1924* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 20-21, 76; The American Red Cross, 32, 37.

Brookings Institution report written shortly after San Felipe, “no rights of occupancy except at the will of the landowner, and is ever faced with the possibility of forced removal.”⁸⁵ The substantial lack of land and home ownership among the island’s working class prior to San Felipe would be a significant factor in the inability of poor people to find adequate shelter after the storm.⁸⁶

In the end, very little direct rebuilding and housing assistance would be provided to working-class Puerto Ricans by the ARC. Per their faith in the paternalistic system already in place before San Felipe, the ARC’s discriminatory policies were rooted in a belief that the restoration of laborers’ living quarters was primarily the responsibility of land or company owners. When landowners failed to meet this responsibility (which, ARC officials noted, was a common issue), ARC leaders remarked that “they left a social problem on the hands of the community, for the victims had no work as well as no homes.”⁸⁷ Evidence of such social problems could be found, they said, in the refugee camps that were established by those who had been homeless prior to San Felipe. These “unauthorized and unregulated camps,” ARC officials noted, “menaced the health and morals of their inmates and accordingly had to be broken up.”⁸⁸ Some of those who were evicted were temporarily placed in official ARC camps where they were supplied with a canvas tent and “a small sum of money” to use for relocation to unspecified locations. However, due to a shortage of short-term refugee housing and no specific funds in the

⁸⁵ Brookings, 14.

⁸⁶ The ability of the working classes to access land was hindered by sugar corporations’ flagrant violations of the so-called 500-acre Law of 1900, which stipulated that it was illegal for any entity to own more than 500 acres of land in Puerto Rico. The federal law, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, did not include any enforcement measures, which enabled sugar industry violations for the first four decades of U.S. occupation; Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 240-243.

⁸⁷The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

ARC budget set aside for these purposes the majority of the displaced “were expected to provide for themselves.”⁸⁹

The ARC went on to observe that since the majority of working-class Puerto Ricans were paid subsistence wages and lived on company land, they were largely unable to own their own homes. Nevertheless, despite this observation or perhaps because of it, evidence of prior homeownership and possession of assets, as well as informal literacy requirements became key eligibility factors in the ARC's home rebuilding policies after San Felipe.⁹⁰ Because of these criteria, the ARC and its advisors ensured that those who benefitted from rebuilding funds were primarily people of means who had owned property prior to the storm.

To qualify for rebuilding assistance, the ARC required, as it had since the Charleston earthquake of 1886, a written application to determine proof of "losses and financial condition" and previous homeownership before supplies and funds would be distributed. It was a problematic method due to the fact that at the time of the hurricane around 60 percent of the Puerto Rican population over the age of ten was illiterate, thus narrowing the pool of candidates for rebuilding assistance.⁹¹ Furthermore, the ARC admitted in their San Felipe report that the majority of the Puerto Rican poor did not own their own homes and more often than not had no record of their finances. The organization's officials noted that with the "precarious economic condition of the peons...land ownership and the banking and savings are alike unknown among the masses of laborers, who live from day to day on their small wages, and on credit when idle." Nevertheless, they continued, “written applications demonstrating economic status and property

⁸⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁰ *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1929*, United States of America War Office (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929), 13, 15, 20, 35; Cesar J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom*, 20-21; The American Red Cross 32, 37; Schwartz, 210.

⁹¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930”(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 141; Mixer, 220.

ownership were mandatory” for rebuilding funds thus indicating that the bulk of assistance would be doled out to literate and relatively prosperous land and plantation owners.⁹²

The ARC claimed to have provided 37,000 rural households (or enough to rebuild homes for roughly 185,000 people) with building supplies after San Felipe—an amount that was far below what was required to house the 500,000 people left homeless by the storm. With the ARC’s discriminatory criteria in place it is likely that many of the island’s poor, illiterate, and propertyless did not directly benefit from the organization’s relief efforts.⁹³ Additionally, the building supplies distributed by the ARC to land owners for the rebuilding of workers’ shacks primarily consisted of rough pine boards and zinc roofing, materials that were of the same poor quality as those commonly used before the storm.⁹⁴ After San Felipe, ARC leaders boasted that the rebuilt workers’ shacks were “substantial and able to resist high winds,” but their claims were put to the test when an additional 25,000 homes, mostly belonging to the island’s rural poor, were destroyed by the San Ciprián hurricane of 1932—after which an additional 100,000 working-class Puerto Ricans were left homeless.⁹⁵

Congressional Intervention

By early October 1928, Puerto Rico Governor Horace Towner became aware that Red Cross donations and the insular general fund would not provide enough to rehabilitate the island and so he made an appeal to the U.S. Congress for relief appropriations. Specifically, he sent a telegram to Senator Hiram Bingham, chairman of the Senate Committee on the Territories and Insular Possessions, and to Representative Edgar R. Kiess, the chairman of the House Committee

⁹² The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 32-33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹⁵ Mathews, 19; The Puerto Rico Hurricane Center, “Hurricanes and Tropical Storms in Puerto Rico from 1900 to 1979,” <http://huracanado1.tripod.com/history2.html>.

on Insular Affairs, inviting the two men to travel to Puerto Rico to survey the extensive damage caused by San Felipe. It was Towner's hope that Bingham and Kiess would then advise members of their committees to release necessary emergency funds to the island.⁹⁶ In November 1928, Bingham and Kiess spent ten days in Puerto Rico where they gathered information about San Felipe's economic impacts from the Sugar Producers' Association, coffee plantation owners, members of the banking community, tobacco interests and the Fruit Growers' Association. They also met with the island's attorney general, Governor Towner, political leaders, the American Legion, and the Red Cross. It is unclear whether Bingham and Kiess met with the working-class Puerto Ricans who had experienced the hurricane's worst effects.⁹⁷ Their subsequent testimony before Congress demonstrates, however, that they, along with other lawmakers and witnesses, believed the key to rehabilitating the island's socioeconomic order would be to prioritize aid for the island's wealthy, and white, agricultural interests rather than provide direct relief to those who worked for them.

On December 10 and 11, a joint Congressional session was held to investigate the need for a bill "For the Relief of Porto Rico" during which Bingham and Kiess recommended that \$24 million be appropriated immediately to help rehabilitate the island's agricultural industries. Bingham based this figure on amounts that had been extended previously by Congress after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and following the Russian and Eastern European famines of the early 1920s.⁹⁸ To support their case, Bingham presented verbal and graphic photographic testimony of the devastation and destruction he had witnessed on his November trip. One

⁹⁶ *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 8,9.

⁹⁷ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Puerto Rico," 2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

photograph purportedly depicted the rubble of a former schoolhouse which had reinforced concrete walls that went “down like cardboard.”⁹⁹

Mirroring the argument of Puerto Rican elites such as Guillermo Esteves, Hiram Bingham testified that the key to repairing Puerto Rico’s economy was not a matter of rectifying the island’s class disparities, but rather, reinforcing them. Bingham concluded that “it is not so much the difference between the poor man and the large planter as it is in the condition of their plantations.” According to this line of reasoning, extending aid to repair large farms in excess of 25,000 acres would restimulate the Puerto Rican economy. Bingham suggested giving interest free loans directly to planters, who would then provide homes and jobs to agricultural workers who would make large farms profitable through their labor.¹⁰⁰

The hearings were stalled by a contingent of midwestern politicians who debated whether Puerto Ricans as an ethnic group were equipped to repair their nation should they receive federal assistance. A closer look at the political ties of some of these lawmakers reveals underlying financial motivations as well as racialized rationalizations for their reluctance to offer aid to Puerto Rico. For instance, the Republican Representative from Minnesota and chairman of the House Committee on Insular Affairs, Harold Knutson, was an anti-imperialist and an ally of the American sugar beet lobby. Members of the lobby frequently promoted independence for Puerto Rico and the Philippines, because they perceived the territories as rivals in the world sugar market.¹⁰¹ Knutson’s comments at the Puerto Rico hearings also indicated that he may have had

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰¹ According to historian Jim Norris, sugar beets had become a lucrative industry in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Nebraska during the interwar years with production steadily increasing over the course of the 1920s, thus turning sugar beets into a “dominant regional commodity.” Jim Norris, “Bargaining for Beets: Migrants and Growers in the Red River Valley,” Minnesota Historical Society <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/58/v58i04p196-209.pdf>; “Shift by Filipinos has sharp reaction: Washington views opposition at Manila to freedom now as vital development. Congress trend confused Farm Bloc Members advocating independence” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1931, 11.

objections to sending relief to the island based on discriminatory racial attitudes rooted in a belief in the innate inferiority of islanders. At one point during the hearings, Knutson remarked that he did not "see anything" in Bingham and Kiess's report "that gives any idea of the capacity of the Porto Ricans to take care of themselves."¹⁰² Governor Towner gave his reassurance, however, that at the very least the elite island planters could be counted on for proper use of relief funds because they were, in his description, "...white people" who were a "good, dependable, meritorious" sort.¹⁰³ Towner's response was echoed by journalist and wife of the Secretary to the Governor of Puerto, Elizabeth K. Van Deusen who testified that since the time of Columbus, Puerto Rico was "from the first a country of white people." She went on to note that only a small percentage of the island's population could be classified as "negro" or "mulatto" while 73 percent consisted of whites who were "mostly of pure Spanish descent." As a result of these demographics, she noted, "the intelligence of the Porto Ricans is keen" and consequently they had "in barely more than a quarter of a century, developed their island into a modern and progressive American community."¹⁰⁴ Witnesses such as Van Deusen and Towner did their best to convince doubting lawmakers that the white planter class should be prioritized in terms of receiving direct aid to repair the island's economy and society.¹⁰⁵ It was the belief of these observers that, due to their racial and financial positioning, prosperous islanders deserved "more help than anybody else" in Puerto Rico in the wake of the devastating storm.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 30.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Both Van Deusen and Towner's racialized justifications for relief were part of a larger pattern emerging in Puerto Rico during the first five decades of the twentieth century where the number of Puerto Ricans classified as white in the U.S. census steadily increased (from 1899 to 1950, the number of islanders considered "white" jumped from 61.8 percent to 79.7 percent). Sociologists Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muñiz attribute this change, in part, to the imposition of U.S. racial standards that privileged lighter skin—a phenomenon that frequently manifested itself in the discriminatory nature of national legislation such as disaster relief. As a result, many Puerto Ricans increasingly self-identified as white in order to avoid the "perceived and actual costs of being seen by Americans as

The testimony of witnesses such as Towner and Van Deusen provided some reassurance to Washington lawmakers that white, Puerto Rican elites would be responsible with government-appropriated disaster relief funds. Such assurances were not enough, however, to convince Congress to extend the full amount of what was needed to reconstruct Puerto Rico. After two days of testimony and two hours of deliberation, Congress voted to extend only \$10 million in relief to the island. The appropriation would benefit island elites rather than provide direct assistance to the working class as the funds were allotted mostly in the form of \$25,000 interest-free loans mostly given to large-scale planters. Congress further hindered the swift rehabilitation of Puerto Rico's economy by doling out the assistance over a three-year period, with only \$5 million being made available immediately; \$3 million was released on January 1, 1930, and the remaining \$2 million was made available on January 1, 1931.¹⁰⁷ The entire relief appropriation offered to Puerto Rico by Congress was less than half of the \$24 million initially requested by Bingham and far from what was needed to offset the \$85 million in damage done to the island after San Felipe. One year after San Felipe, the *New York Times* reported that only five hundred of these rehabilitation loans had been approved due to what reporter Harwood Hull described as "Washington procrastination" and "red tape."¹⁰⁸ The amount extended to Puerto Rico by Washington lawmakers was also five million dollars short of what was extended to Florida after the storm. In January of 1929, Congress appropriated \$15 million to assist the large-scale farmers who had incurred roughly \$25 million in damages in the southeast portion of the state.¹⁰⁹

nonwhite" during the Jim Crow era. This phenomenon was reflected in the changes in racial classification categories in U.S. Censuses, which were increasingly administered by Puerto Rican enumerators who oversaw the removal of the category of "mulatto" from questionnaires, thereby increasing the tally of "white" islanders by mid-century Mara Loveman and Jeronimo O. Muniz, "How Puerto Rico Became White: Boundary Dynamics and Intercensus Racial Reclassification," *American Sociological Review* 72 (December 2007), 915, 935.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 28-29.

¹⁰⁸ "Relief Fund Delay Dismays Porto Rico: Hurricane Sufferers Find Red Tape Hampers Obtaining Financial Aid. Only 500 Loans Approved," *The New York Times*, September 1, 1929, E8.

¹⁰⁹ Wayne Neely, *The Great Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928* (iUniverse: 2014), 285.

It is worth noting that the low appropriations extended by Congress to Puerto Rico's agricultural sector was due in part to the fact that the island's largest industry, sugar, was to some degree the least affected by San Felipe. By 1928, sugar accounted for 52.7 percent of the island's export economy and the single crop, controlled by continental corporations, had become what one observer described as "the backbone of the Island's commercial progress."¹¹⁰ Although their plantations incurred \$17 million in damages from San Felipe, sugar producers declined federal relief funds after the storm. This was due to the fact that the harvest, or *zafra*, had taken place between January and July of 1928 prior to the hurricane hitting the island. Although cane stalks had been damaged by San Felipe and production decreased by 200,000 tons that year, the industry was able to recover.¹¹¹ One year after San Felipe, island sugar plantations broke previous records for the amount of tonnage produced.¹¹² Because the colony's most lucrative industry was still intact, lawmakers believed that Puerto Rico's economy would eventually right itself.

The failure of Congress to extend the necessary relief funds to the island had serious consequences for the coffee industry, however. While it had comprised 60 percent of Puerto Rico's export economy at the beginning of the century, coffee had been on a steady decline due to damage incurred after the San Ciriaco hurricane, a lack of protective tariffs and because Puerto Rican coffee was usually far more expensive for American consumers who increasingly opted to purchase cheaper, weaker beans from South America.¹¹³ San Felipe dealt the coffee

¹¹⁰ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 28; Brookings, 70, Dietz, 104.

¹¹¹ Mathews, 4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹³ Historian Naoko Shibusawa argues that under a system of so-called "free trade imperialism" colonized nations are commonly denied the right to place protective tariffs on certain national industries by wealthier colonizing nations as a means for the latter to exercise "economic subjugation" over poorer zones of influence. Naoko Shibusawa, "U.S. Empire and Racial Capitalist Modernity," *Diplomatic History*, 45, no. 5 (2021), 856; Dietz, 100; Mathews, 7.

industry a blow from which it would never recover and by the end of 1928 the sector's exports would only amount to 2.5 percent of the island's economy. By 1935, that number had decreased to 0.3 percent.¹¹⁴

In the end, lawmakers failed to extend meaningful financial assistance and protective tariffs to the island's coffee industry, thus hastening its demise after San Felipe. The Insular Commissioner of Agriculture Carlos Chardón told Congress in December of 1928, that 99 percent of the coffee sector had traditionally been in the hands of native Puerto Ricans and was the "one local industry that foreigners [had] not gone into."¹¹⁵ Because coffee production was largely managed by local proprietors who owned farms of 47 acres or less and because the industry had already been in decline before San Felipe, there was less incentive for lawmakers to come to the assistance of the coffee sector.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, because Americans had never developed a taste for Puerto Rican coffee and received their caffeine supplies from places like Brazil, there was little need to revive an industry upon which U.S. consumers had never fully relied.¹¹⁷

Coffee's swift decline can also be traced in the employment statistics from the decades preceding and immediately following the hurricane. In 1917, the U.S. Bureau of Labor estimated that 156,700 Puerto Rican men and women were working in the industry. By 1929, that number had decreased to 6,520 people earning as little 25 cents per day.¹¹⁸ After San Felipe, the coffee industry was no longer able to sustain large-scale employment, which in turn led to a mass migration of laborers throughout the island. While some found work in the sugar industry, many

¹¹⁴ Dietz, 101.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 27, 36.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹⁷ Dietz, 100; Mathews, 7.

¹¹⁸ *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 741; Dietz, 101.

thousands more migrated to Puerto Rico's cities, where they settled on the outskirts in urban squatters' settlements.¹¹⁹ At the start of the Great Depression, facing overall unemployment rates as high as 66 percent and unable to find adequate shelter in the countryside, roughly 225,000 people had migrated to the island's urban squatters' settlements. 90 percent of people living in these settlements had moved to these neighborhoods from rural areas where the majority had worked in the sugar and coffee industries.¹²⁰

By 1930, one year into the depression, living conditions for the island working class were still as dire, if not more so, than they had been before San Felipe. Landowners continued to use the large island population to their advantage, especially in terms of denying housing to the legions left unemployed and homeless by San Felipe. As one observer wrote, "where labor is plentiful and to be had at will, there is no inducement for the landowner to provide a place for residence" to those who did not work for them.¹²¹ And, those workers who were provided with a home by their employers after the storm found themselves living in what the Brookings Institution described in 1930 as an "uncomfortable and unhealthful place of residence."¹²² A few years after San Felipe, many of the newly-constructed workers' shacks had begun to deteriorate because of the poor quality of materials used, which were no match for the island's heavy rainfall, strong sun and winds.¹²³

Also in 1930, the newly appointed Governor of Puerto Rico, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., implored Congress to release an additional \$3 million for hurricane relief. Two years after the storm, he reported that the island was still in a state of crisis. According to Roosevelt, forty

¹¹⁹ Mathews, 9.

¹²⁰ Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC; Brookings, 40.

¹²¹ Brookings, 36.

¹²² Ibid., 16.

¹²³ Ibid., 16.

percent of island children were still unable to get an education as their schoolhouses had yet to be repaired due to storm damage. San Felipe had also caused a health emergency in spite of aggressive inoculation campaigns. Roughly sixty percent of children remained underfed and malnourished while 40,000 poor Puerto Ricans contracted tuberculosis on a yearly basis with death rates that were 4.5 times higher than those in the U.S. Roosevelt also urged lawmakers to consider socioeconomic issues that went beyond the impacts of natural disasters. Puerto Rico's problems were not solely the result of hurricane damage, he noted, they were also due to the fact that "conditions on the island have never been good because there has never been a general diffusion of prosperity." Although Roosevelt's request was backed by President Herbert Hoover and the House Chairman of the Committee on Insular Affairs, Congress denied his request for additional funds.¹²⁴

As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, the type of federal underfunding for relief efforts in Puerto Rico after San Felipe foreshadowed the lack of government appropriations extended to the island during the early depression. For five years following San Felipe, Congress would extend no meaningful aid to Puerto Rico even though the island had been devastated by two hurricanes and the economic crisis. This was due in part to President Herbert Hoover's faith in the associative relief system he had helped create. Drawing upon this system, Governor Roosevelt called on Americans to donate to private charities to assist poor Puerto Ricans during their time of continuing need. The campaign, which lasted from 1929 to 1932, raised \$7 million which was used to feed hungry children through a school lunch program, to construct hospitals to accommodate the sick, and for a homestead relocation project that ended up resettling approximately 800 poor families.¹²⁵ By comparison, during this same period, the largest amount

¹²⁴ "Porto Rico Relief Urged by Roosevelt," *The New York Times*, Tuesday, May 13, 1930, p.36

¹²⁵ Mathews, 18.

allotted to Puerto Rican depression relief by Congress was \$770,000 which was appropriated in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression.¹²⁶

A Prescription for Change

After San Felipe, continentals such as Governor Towner, analysts at the Brookings Institution, and church leaders argued that congressional and ARC relief appropriations, no matter how large, would be useless unless the entire colonial economy was overhauled. The solution offered by these observers rested in the belief that Puerto Rico should move away from an economy that was solely dependent on the island's agricultural sector, which was, as San Felipe had demonstrated, highly susceptible to the forces of nature and under the control of powerful absentee interests based in the U.S. Their prescription for change was a move toward industrialization. But, when considering their plans to capitalize on Puerto Rico's vast labor force, the economic changes they proposed would not veer far from the exploitative system already in place.

One year after San Felipe, in 1929, Governor Towner proposed "waging a vigorous propaganda [campaign] in the United States with the purpose of awakening the interest of the American investors in the establishment of factories" in Puerto Rico.¹²⁷ To spread the word about the island's "intelligent and industrious workmen" and "tax exemption for new industries," Towner suggested the liberal use of media technologies such as advertising in U.S. periodicals and in "movie shows." Along with this media blitz, Towner called for the creation of trade schools to train Puerto Rico's working masses for a potential tripling of Puerto Rico's existing industrial shops should stateside investors move their manufacturing to the island.¹²⁸ According

¹²⁶ Dietz, 147.

¹²⁷ *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 737.

¹²⁸ According to Towner, there were approximately 5,157 industrial shops in Puerto Rico in 1929. *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, 737.

to Towner, the propaganda campaign should also underscore the compliant nature of the workforce by putting forth the notion that Puerto Rico had “no strike movement or any other factor affecting the industrial peace of the island.”¹²⁹ In the same report, however, Towner contradicted his own statements about the lack of a labor movement in Puerto Rico when he detailed a series of 1929 strikes. That year, over a thousand workers from a variety of island industries staged labor actions, demanding better wages, working conditions, and shorter workdays.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, Towner’s proposed media campaign would be void of such details. By convincing continental “capitalists” of Puerto Rico’s viability as a crisis-free, industrial paradise, the campaign would hopefully lure investment to the island that would create jobs for the “army of jobless people.”¹³¹

The Brookings Institution claimed that the problems Puerto Rico was experiencing after 1928 were not entirely due to San Felipe, but rather the real issue lay in island “poverty” and “insufficient income for proper nourishment” and for “lack of a right to a piece of land.” They concluded their argument with a warning that “until some change has been wrought in the economic status of the mass of people, most of the efforts will have a negligible or a temporary influence.”¹³² According to the institution’s experts in 1930, diversifying Puerto Rico’s economy through industrialization was “the only solution for the pressing problems of underemployment and low wages” experienced by the island’s working classes.¹³³ On the surface, the Brookings’

¹²⁹ Ibid., 737.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹³¹ Ibid., 737.

¹³² Founded in 1916, the Brookings Institution was a progressive think tank established as, according to the institute’s website, “the nation’s first independent organization devoted to public-policy research.” According to historian Margaret M. Power, the 1930 study cited here intended to explore the “island’s persistent economic difficulties” via social scientific methodology. It was primarily authored by Victor S. Clark, an economist who, like Rexford G. Tugwell, received his training at Columbia University. Brookings Institution, “Our History,” <https://www.brookings.edu/about-us/our-history/>; Margaret M. Power, *Solidarity Across the Americas*, 98; Brookings, *Porto Rico and Its Problems*, 88.

¹³³ Brookings, *Porto Rico*, 454.

experts proposed what seemed to be forward-thinking changes to the status quo. Upon closer inspection, however, their solutions included gendered and racialized assumptions about laboring Puerto Ricans that were reminiscent of those expressed earlier by witnesses at the San Felipe congressional hearings. Additionally, Brookings contradicted its concerns for the “underemployment and low wages” of the island’s poor, as ultimately the institution’s plans for industrialization centered on the exploitability of Puerto Rico’s working-class population.

Employing the same racialized notions about whiteness that informed Congressional debates about who would be deserving of receiving relief funding, the Brookings’ experts warned continental manufacturers that the island’s built-in labor force would take years to train into competent workers “approaching mainland standards,” if they could be trained at all. Puerto Rican women, especially women of color, they argued, were likely to be the least desirable candidates for manufacturing jobs as they had proven a lack of aptitude for learning certain trades. For instance, they noted that one study conducted in an island factory that manufactured watch pivot jewels showed that of the 230 white women hired in that industry in 1929, only 65 were able to learn the trade. They went on to note that only “one out of 70 negro girls proved capable” of doing the same job. “White girls,” they concluded “seem to show more aptitude for operations which require extreme attention.”¹³⁴ In spite of these perceived issues, the institution determined that continental manufacturers would still stand to profit from the island’s “cheap labor supply” and overhead costs, which were relatively low compared to those incurred on the mainland.¹³⁵

The Evangelical Union of Porto Rico, an association of U.S.-based Protestant churches, was also of the opinion that the secret to reforming Puerto Rican society rested in

¹³⁴ Brookings, 461.

¹³⁵ Brookings, 462, 463.

industrialization. The Union, which consisted of six denominations including the Baptist, Congregationalist, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Brethren churches, noted that future manufacturing efforts would be aided by the island's labor surplus, which thus far had not been tapped for its potential.¹³⁶ In December of 1928, its leaders observed that "the wealth of Porto Rico consists in its large population. However, the people are not producing as they should." Through industrialization and the creation of vocational schools, they argued, Puerto Rico's masses "could be converted into a very important producing class." Furthermore, Evangelical Union members stated that savings gleaned from low wages would prove to be a perk for continental manufacturers who might "offset to a certain extent the cost of bringing in raw materials for manufacture."¹³⁷

Governor Towner, the Brookings Institution, and the Evangelical Union called for the reformation of Puerto Rico's economy, but due to their promises of a cheap, docile, and abundant labor force, their plans were reminiscent of the exploitative system already in place. While industrialization had the potential to create a greater variety of jobs for poor Puerto Ricans and move the economy away from its dependence on agriculture, under the guidelines these observers put forth, it would do little to improve both the agency and the upward mobility of working-class islanders.

Despite these calls for change, Puerto Rico's economy would primarily rely upon its agricultural industries, particularly Big Sugar, in the early depression years—a reliance that was

¹³⁶ Each of these denominations had a presence in Puerto Rico dating back to the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898. Their original missionary work included conversion of islanders to Protestantism which would move them away from the "spiritual darkness, ignorance, and superstition" that came from the practice of a combination of vernacular religions and Catholicism. Missionaries also sought to "Americanize" Puerto Ricans and redeem them from the "sexual laxity" that led to island "overpopulation." Quoted from Angel Santiago-Vendrell, "Give Them Christ: Native Agency in the Evangelization of Puerto Rico, 1900-1917," *Religions* 12, no. 196 (March 2021), 1; Unity at Work in Porto Rico," (Commission on Christian Unity, 1922), *The Christian Union Quarterly*, 12, 280.

¹³⁷ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," 36.

in part made possible by disaster response protocols that reinforced the existing class and political hierarchy on the island. Another impact of the federal government's failure to extend the funds and programs necessary to rehabilitate Puerto Rico after San Felipe and the onset of the depression was the continued impoverishment and displacement of the working classes, who found themselves migrating to the island's swelling squatters' settlements. A degree of hope would come with the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 whose promises of a "New Deal for the American people" via a program of relief, reform, and recovery seemed to include Puerto Rico.¹³⁸ Beginning in 1933, FDR would establish the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA) with the intent of providing direct relief and jobs creation programs to poor islanders. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, however, the PRERA, under the direction of James Bourne, would be plagued by federal funding problems and the hostility of the pro-Sugar political and economic bloc that had also dominated San Felipe relief efforts. Under such conditions, the PRERA was rendered largely ineffective in terms of offsetting island poverty. And so, class disparities lingered in Puerto Rico and the majority of the island's population would continue to lack access to the necessities of life such as food, employment, land, and housing.

¹³⁸ The National Park Service, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial: Quotations," <https://www.nps.gov/frde/learn/photosmultimedia/quotations.htm>.

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Chapter Two

The Early Depression: 1928-1935

Between 1928 and 1933, Puerto Rico's economic and social stability were rocked by three major crises in the form of two hurricanes and the Great Depression. During this five-year period, rampant unemployment, homelessness, disease, and hunger became the norm for the majority of Puerto Rico's working classes who increasingly protested through labor actions and a turn toward radical nationalism. Despite the dire situation facing poverty-stricken islanders, little effort was made by the federal government or insular politicians to rectify the deplorable economic conditions during the five years following the 1928 San Felipe hurricane. This was in part due to President Herbert Hoover's belief in the associative system of relief under which the federal government took a largely hands off approach to supplying aid to the nation's needy. For their part, island elites, who had been enabled by disaster relief efforts after San Felipe, had little motivation to address the economic woes of the working class. They continued to benefit from a colonial system built on the interests of U.S. sugar corporations. Corporate profits were contingent upon the exploitation of a labor surplus of desperate agricultural workers who, if they managed to find seasonal work in the fields, found themselves living in abject poverty in rural company towns. Paid subsistence wages, sometimes in scrip rather than cash, most were barely able to afford the bare necessities of life such as food, let alone land or their own home.¹ When Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, his administration became aware of a restive

¹ César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1924* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 20-21; 76; The American Red Cross, *The West Indies Hurricane Disaster, September 1928: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, The Virgin Islands, and Florida* (Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1929) 32, 37.

socioeconomic situation on the island which some continental officials believed was teetering on the edge of revolution. That same year, FDR created the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA). The PRERA, which lasted until 1935, was created to quell social unrest and bring relief to suffering islanders via direct welfare payments and works projects.

As the following chronological account of the early depression years (1928-1935) demonstrates, sugar corporations, entrenched in the island political economy, hampered the Roosevelt Administration's attempts to initiate both temporary and long-term relief measures under the PRERA. Sugar-backed insular politicians attempted to thwart any federal policy measures that would potentially empower the working classes upon whom they depended for labor. Additionally, despite the recommendations from continental and insular observers, the federal government did little to diversify the island's economy and move away from a dependence on the agricultural industries controlled by continental corporations. Compounding the problems of the PRERA were matters of federal underfunding for its programs and the fact that some New Deal operatives on the island worked at cross purposes. As a result, during its two-year existence, the PRERA failed to bring any meaningful changes to Puerto Rico's society and economy and working-class Puerto Ricans still found themselves facing crushing poverty, lacking adequate housing, and living in urban squatters' settlements.

The Economic Crisis and the Establishment of the PRERA

As examined in the previous chapter, the San Felipe Hurricane of 1928 severely damaged all of Puerto Rico's agricultural industries, which in turn sparked employment and housing shortages in the countryside. As a result, those lacking work in the cane fields and on coffee plantations became a part of a mass internal migration to urban areas.² At the end of 1929, the

² Luz Marie Rodriguez, "New Deal Communities for Puerto Rico: The urban housing projects of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," (MA thesis, Mississippi State University, 1994), 28.

arrival of the Great Depression would bring even more hardship for Puerto Rico's struggling working class. Already seriously weakened by San Felipe and unable to recover in time for the depression's arrival, Puerto Rico's economy saw a swift downturn when world sugar markets plummeted and demand for the island's agricultural products steadily decreased after 1929. As island export markets declined, Puerto Rico's unemployment rates skyrocketed beyond those seen on the mainland and homelessness steadily increased.³ In the first few years of the depression the unemployment rate on the island hovered somewhere between 36% and 66%—numbers dependent not only on the effects of the economic crisis but also on the seasonal nature of agricultural work, if there was work at all.⁴ Consequently, due to the impacts of natural disasters and the economic crisis, almost 225,000 Puerto Ricans migrated from the countryside and into squatters' settlements in the island's cities during the depression.⁵

Compounding the socioeconomic crisis on the island was the fact that the federal government's policies had, until the depression era, largely neglected the Puerto Rican people in favor of the sugar industry. With little oversight from the federal government from 1898 through the Great Depression, the sugar industry ruled island politics, the economy, and the Puerto Rican labor force. One effect of Big Sugar's chokehold over island society was that by the time of the depression, the island was embroiled in a land and housing crisis that had roots extending back to the U.S. takeover in 1898. Although the 1900 Foraker Law contained a clause stipulating that it

³ James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 139.

⁴ By comparison, 1930 unemployment rates in the U.S. were approximately 8% reaching a height of 25% three years later in 1933. Manuel Rodriguez, *A New Deal for the Tropics* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2011), 23; The Graduate Center-CUNY, American Social History Project, "Graph of U.S. Unemployment Rate, 1930-1945," <https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1510>

⁵ "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA), Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

was unlawful for anyone to own more than 500 acres of island land, federal lawmakers failed to include any provision for its enforcement.⁶ Consequently, wealthy U.S. agricultural conglomerates and insular elites flagrantly violated the legal acreage limit by buying huge tracts of land. In 1901, the Hollander Act added insult to injury by increasing land taxes for Puerto Rican farmers, making land ownership available only to the privileged few who could afford it, namely large sugar corporations. And so, by the 1920s U.S. corporations and large Puerto Rican sugar producers had almost total control over agriculture and were the island's largest employers and land holders. Together both groups owned nearly 76 percent of arable land, which was primarily used for growing sugar cane.⁷ As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, the power of these agricultural interests was sustained by a pro-sugar political elite that dominated Puerto Rican politics in various party formations for the first four decades of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, these politicians who were backed by sugar corporations did little to protect the rights of laborers or to enforce the 500-acre limit on landholding.⁸

As the federal government failed to enforce the 500-acre land limit, there was little land left for small holdings and the cultivation of the affordable foodstuffs necessary for human survival. As a result, Puerto Rico had become almost totally reliant on U.S. food imports by the time of the depression. This arrangement was legitimated by Section 27 of the 1920 Jones Act. The clause stipulated that all trade of merchandise between Puerto Rico and the United States be conducted on ships built in and owned by citizens of the United States.⁹ As a result, by 1930,

⁶ Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 240-243.

⁷ Pedro A. Caban, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1999), 2, 91, 76, 113; U.S. Census, 1930 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 171.

⁸ Jorell A. Melendez-Badillo, "Imagining Resistance: Organizing the Puerto Rican Southern Agricultural Strike of 1905," *Caribbean Studies*, 43, no. 2 (July-December 2015), 41.

⁹ U.S. Congress, "The Merchant Marine Act, 1920," (New York, N.Y.: The American Exchange National Bank, 1920), 22. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ien.35556042481275&view=1up&seq=2>

upwards of 90 percent of staples such as rice, beans, flour, cod, and cornmeal were imported from the mainland at exorbitant prices. According to anti-imperialist historians Bailey and Justine Diffie, for the majority of poor Puerto Ricans in the 1930s, feeding one's family on a shoestring budget was an anxiety-producing struggle that outstripped the depression-era experiences of their mainland counterparts. This was especially apparent when considering the differences between food costs and income for both groups. For instance, at the start of the depression, an average Puerto Rican, whose net income hovered around \$230 per year if they had employment, incurred food costs that were about 14 percent higher than what their fellow Americans in New York City or Mississippi were paying, with the latter groups netting an income average of \$4903 and \$1242 per year respectively.¹⁰ About such disparities the Diffies remarked, that "no great stretch of the imagination is necessary to conceive the enormous difference between the standard of eating, not to say the standard of living of the American citizen of Porto Rico and of the United States."¹¹ In 1932, the U.S. Bureau of Commerce corroborated the Diffie's assessment when it reported that malnutrition was the number one cause of death among the Puerto Rican poor.¹²

Adding to the plight of the island working classes was the fact that for the first three decades of U.S. occupation they lacked a strong labor organization willing to fully act in their interest. Almost immediately after Puerto Rico's primary labor union, the Federación Libre de los Trabajadores (FLT), was founded in 1899, it aligned itself with the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL). Like the AFL, the FLT soon became an exclusive organization that

¹⁰ Bailey W. and Justine Whitfield Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 163, 213.

¹¹ The American Red Cross, 20; Diffie, 179; U.S. Treasury Department, Bureau of Internal Revenue, *Statistics of Income for 1931* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 59.

¹² The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Mortality Statistics, 1932: Thirty-Third Annual Report" (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1932), 470-473.

mostly represented skilled, urban industrial workers. Since the majority of Puerto Ricans were unskilled agricultural workers living in the countryside, the FLT's impact on their lives was negligible. And, even if agricultural workers had been able to join the FLT, most would have been unable to pay union dues or strike fees due to the fact that average laborers earned subsistence wages.¹³ Additionally, by the time of the depression many of the FLT's most influential members would accept political posts offered by the U.S. and insular governments, a fact that called into question the nature of their loyalty to the working classes. For instance, the FLT's founder, the former anarchist-turned political moderate Santiago Iglesias Pantín, would serve as Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner to the U.S. Congress from 1933 through 1939 where he was known to lobby against legislation that would directly benefit the Puerto Rican working class.¹⁴

As historian James L. Dietz has noted, those who did have employment in the early 1930s were likely to have seen a dramatic change in their take home pay during the first three years of the depression when the island's per capita income fell by an astounding 30%. For instance, wages for sugar workers dropped from 90 cents per day down to as low as 50 cents per day in 1931. As Dietz observes, wages earned in the sugar industry reached turn-of-the-century levels by 1932. Meanwhile, the cost of living rose by one-third between 1932 and 1933. The price of basic necessities such as rice, beans, milk, and codfish more than doubled in the early depression forcing poor islanders to spend as much as 94 percent of their income on food imported from the United States. The disparities between wages earned and the rising cost of living were such that many faced starvation and poor health. Rampant unpaid wages, unlawful

¹³ Miles Galvin, "The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, *Puerto Rico: Class Struggle and National Liberation* 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1976), 25-26.

¹⁴Melendez-Badillo, "Imagining Resistance," 40; Galvin, 17-18; Caban, 235.

firing, coercion to sign share-cropping contracts, long workdays as well as deplorable living and working conditions contributed to growing working-class unrest. According to the island's Department of Labor, during the depression's early years, the island experienced numerous strikes in which laborers demanded equitable treatment by their employers.¹⁵ Many laborers, including workers in the sugar, needlework, baking, dock work, transportation, and *publico* (or private taxi) industries, went out on strike to demand equitable treatment by their employers and to protest the federal government's lack of attention to the unemployment, hunger, and homelessness problems so prevalent on the island.¹⁶

Similar to events taking place at the same time in the continental U.S., between 1930 and 1932, two of Puerto Rico's major banks failed and a sizable amount of the island's commercial industries went bankrupt.¹⁷ In 1932, another massive hurricane known as San Ciprián hit Puerto Rico destroying a large number of plantations that had been left untouched by San Felipe and causing an additional \$35 million in property damages. With the hopes of offsetting the disastrous unemployment figures, the insular and federal governments created a public works program funded by loans from the Hoover-era Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Emergency Relief Administration. However, as one federal official noted, the economic effects of the early depression and the two hurricanes were so extensive that the "legal borrowing capacity" of the insular government "was practically exhausted" thus preventing Puerto Rican lawmakers from obtaining sufficient lines of credit. As a result, the Puerto Rican government

¹⁵ Dietz, 139; Rodríguez, 23; Government of Puerto Rico, Department of Labor, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor submitted to the Governor of Puerto Rico, 1931-34* (San Juan, PR: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1934), 94, 40, 13.

¹⁶ Dietz, 163.

¹⁷ Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA), *Second Report of the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration from September 1, 1934 to September 30, 1935 and Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for Puerto Rico from October 1, 1935 to June 30, 1936 in Liquidation to October 1937* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 1.

lacked the necessary funds to kickstart public works projects and provide jobs for the masses of unemployed workers.¹⁸

To rectify the economic and social conditions in Puerto Rico and in the continental U.S. (where one in four workers was facing unemployment and 20,000 World War I veterans marched on Washington demanding cash payments for their military service), the newly elected president, Franklin D. Roosevelt prompted Congress to pass the Federal Emergency Relief Act on May 12, 1933.¹⁹ The act established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) which absorbed Hoover's Emergency Relief Administration, an agency that had loaned federal money to states to run their own relief projects. The FERA differed from Hoover's ERA in that it extended grants to the states and Puerto Rico for direct relief in the form of cash. The funds were intended to cover food and housing costs as well as the establishment of state work relief programs. Although the Roosevelt administration took more of a direct role than its predecessor in providing relief through the FERA, states retained a great deal of discretion as to how funds would be distributed—a system that fostered the retention of local power structures which in turn encouraged discrimination toward marginalized groups such as African Americans and women.²⁰ As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the distribution of FERA funds in Puerto Rico differed from what took place stateside in that federal officials, working under the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA), had more of a direct role in distributing federal grants. As a result, this arrangement proved threatening to the island's political and economic old

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹ Library of Congress, "Americans React to the Great Depression," <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/americans-react-to-great-depression/>

²⁰ National Archives, "Family Experiences and New Deal Relief: The Correspondence Files of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 1933-1936," <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2012/fall/fera.html>; Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989), 195-196.

guard. Insular politicians sought to retain existing power structures that largely benefitted U.S. sugar corporations and their insular allies rather than the average Puerto Rican citizen.

The FERA was directed by Harry Hopkins, who had worked in New York City's settlement houses before moving on to lead that state's ERA under then Governor Franklin Roosevelt. Hopkins was, according to New Deal historian Anthony Badger, an idealist that "dreamed of a welfare system in which every American was guaranteed a measure of economic security."²¹ The FERA, which was modeled after Hopkins' New York ERA, immediately made \$500 million available for relief in the states and territories. \$250 million of this budget came in the form of a matching funds system in which one federal dollar was granted for every three dollars provided by individual states. The other \$250 million was given outright in the form of grants based on need.²² Badger observes that the FERA's disbursement requirements were flawed in that they favored prosperous states that were able to put up the necessary matching funds. FERA literature from the era supports Badger's assertion. The agency's officials admitted that for those states that were the most seriously impacted by the depression, coming up with matching funds proved difficult. For instance, the states hit by the Dust Bowl received far less FERA funding than their relatively prosperous and industrialized northern counterparts. From 1933 to 1941, Oklahoma and Arkansas received only \$47 million and \$46 million, respectively, in emergency relief funds as opposed to the states of New York and Pennsylvania which received \$412 million and \$208 million during the same period. Puerto Rico was granted even lower allocations under the FERA, with its totals amounting to \$31 million over the course of the 1930s.²³ According to Badger, average relief payments for well-to-do northern and western states

²¹ Badger, 191.

²² Ibid.

²³ Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), "Analysis of FERA Funds," *Final Statistical Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1942),103.

during the FERA's tenure were approximately \$15.07/month per person, but in the poor South and in Dust Bowl states these payments were often far lower. For example, average relief payments in Mississippi in 1933 ran at about \$3.96/month per person.²⁴ Badger fails to note that these numbers were even lower in the U.S. colonies. During the first months of the FERA's presence in Puerto Rico in 1933, relief payments sometimes averaged as low as 49 cents per month.²⁵ According to Badger, the FERA's deficiencies were eventually corrected by the distribution of direct relief based on need. But, when one considers repeated complaints issued by PRERA officials about the continued lack of forthcoming federal funds required to improve socioeconomic conditions, need-based requirements were largely ignored by Washington officials when it came to extending aid to Puerto Rico.²⁶

After Roosevelt established the PRERA, its existence was made official via an executive order issued by Puerto Rico's governor, Robert H. Gore on August 18, 1933. The order stated that the agency was "charged with the entire responsibility, subject to the general direction of the Governor, of the administration of all funds available from all public sources for the relief of the destitute unemployed of the island of Puerto Rico."²⁷ Almost as soon as the PRERA was established, federal officials determined that it would be mostly funded by FERA allocations because Puerto Rico's treasury was nearly drained in 1933.²⁸ In spite of the wording of Gore's executive order, the governor was to work in conjunction with Roosevelt appointee James R.

²⁴ Badger, 193.

²⁵ "Bureau of Investigation and Direct Relief: General Report, August 28-October 7, 1933," Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA), Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (NARA II).

²⁶ Badger, 193.

²⁷ PRERA, "Second Report of the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration," 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

Bourne, who became the federal relief administrator for the PRERA—a position that gave him the power to ask for FERA funds from D.C. and to oversee their distribution.

The PRERA’s long- and short-term aims were to provide immediate relief as well as long-lasting socioeconomic rehabilitation. Its track record in both regards can be viewed as less than efficacious in that the administration provided, at best, temporary measures that did little to offset the longstanding, structural problems plaguing Puerto Rican society. Nor was it successful in rectifying the persistent unemployment and starvation facing working-class Puerto Ricans during the early depression. In part this was due to the fact that the PRERA lasted for only 25 months (from 1933 through 1936) and received approximately \$20,699,741 from the FERA while the insular government was only able to contribute a mere \$70,201 for relief efforts. Although officials reported that the PRERA provided an average of \$576,120 per month in direct relief benefits and works projects—an amount they claimed reached about two-thirds of eligible cases in some capacity—the amount of federal funds fell far short of what was needed to right Puerto Rico’s struggling masses.²⁹ During its two year tenure, PRERA offices were unable to keep up with the flood of relief applications from the unemployed and needy which, according to FERA reports, sometimes totaled between 500,000 to 600,000 per month.³⁰

The agency’s initial goal was to provide immediate assistance to Puerto Rico, but its ultimate objective was to find “a more permanent and drastic” solution rather than dole out direct relief on a continuing basis. At the end of the agency’s tenure, PRERA leaders stressed that the administration had put into effect a number of “constructive activities” that would lead to the

²⁹ Ibid., 2, 5.

³⁰ Estimates of the number of relief applications by the Department of Interior in 1935 were far lower than what the FERA reported at the end of its tenure on the island in 1942. The former agency marked the average number of relief applications as being somewhere around 50,000 per month at the end of the PRERA’s tenure on the island. Department of the Interior, *The Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico, Honorable Blanton Winship* (San Juan, P.R.: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1935), 9; FERA, “Analysis of FERA Funds,” *Final Statistical Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration*, 142.

island's economic rehabilitation. For instance, they noted that the PRERA's employment programs included public works programs, agricultural rehabilitation in the form of community gardens, the production of goods, social service projects, educational programs for new teachers, and the "development of natural resources and large-scale commodities" to offset the high cost of imports from the United States. Although officials were well aware of the island's swelling shantytowns and homelessness problem, the PRERA made little effort to address these issues.³¹

Despite these programs, the PRERA's works programs had a minimal impact on Puerto Rico's crippled economy. At the end of its 25-month existence, little evidence remained of its public works projects. For example, its road improvement programs had only constructed and repaired 99 miles of streets, highways, and sidewalks—a minor improvement on an island with the area of 3,500 square miles and a subpar transportation infrastructure. Officials stated that 97 percent of direct assistance given by the PRERA was for food purchases made by "the enormous numbers of people who were slowly starving, many of whom were so weakened by hunger that physical labor was impossible for them."³² PRERA leaders went on to admit that its works programs were largely ineffective as unemployment figures consistently hovered around 65 percent from 1933 through 1935 and funds spent on expensive food imports from the U.S. remained in the ninetieth percentile.³³ PRERA literature written during the depression also noted that any food distributed to islanders was done in exchange for work that was the "equivalent of what they received" in rations.³⁴ The policy was likely designed to placate continental lawmakers

³¹ "Brief Resume of the Program of Activities of the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration, State Series, March 1933-1936," PRERA, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, Puerto Rico, RG 69, Box 261, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

³² PRERA, "Second Report of the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration," 7.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Brief Resume of the Program of Activities of the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration," RG 69, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36."

who believed Puerto Ricans might become too dependent on U.S. welfare should direct relief continue. And so, in many cases, what was supposed to be direct relief took on a transactional nature that likely stretched the limits of those working-class islanders who had already reached a physical breaking point due to ill health and hunger.

The federal government also extended other New Deal programs to the island almost as soon as Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933—programs that had minimal, or in some cases detrimental, impacts on the Puerto Rican economy. Beyond the PRERA, some of the first measures put into effect on the island were the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Like the PRERA, all of these programs were plagued by government red tape, inadequate budgets, corruption in their local administration, and opposition by insular lawmakers, thus preventing any meaningful relief from reaching the pockets of the majority of Puerto Rican poor throughout the depression years.

For instance, the NIRA did very little to provide assistance to struggling Puerto Ricans as its provisions were concerned with relief for the industrial sector. Operating under the NIRA was the Public Works Administration (PWA), an agency designed to provide employment through large-scale public construction projects. It would be doomed to fail in Puerto Rico, however, due to budget shortfalls. In a letter he wrote to Franklin Roosevelt, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes quoted a complaint from Governor Blanton Winship that claimed the PWA was underfunded. According to Winship, in the first three years of the PWA's existence on the island, Puerto Rico had only received a total of \$690,000 for public works and jobs creation programs. Winship drew attention to the fact that "no allotment has been made for PWA projects in Puerto Rico... although applications for the construction of waterworks, sewers, schools and hospitals

have been favorably recommended."³⁵ He went on to say that Puerto Rico's PWA funding was out of line with what was being allotted stateside, noting that "Puerto Rico received a very small percentage of what it was entitled to on the basis of population or any other yardstick that might be applied." Harold Ickes let the president know that he was in "hearty accord" with Governor Winship's complaints.³⁶ Winship and Ickes' conclusions were not entirely accurate, however. For instance, in 1933 the PWA had earmarked \$12 million for road construction projects in the state of Alabama. By 1939, the southern state only received \$600,000 from the PWA in loans and grants. As historian Robert Pasquill notes, one reason for the disparity in funds was that the \$400 million of the PWA's budget was redirected into the coffers of the Civil Works Administration—an agency that barely had a presence in Puerto Rico—in 1933.³⁷

Franklin Roosevelt's reasoning for the PWA's underfunding in Puerto Rico highlights the confounding ways in which government officials sometimes brushed aside the island's dire conditions and need for relief during the early depression years. In a letter to Ickes' addressing the PWA budget issue in Puerto Rico, the president provided somewhat confusing rationale for denying funds for what might have been a significant jobs creation project. FDR told Ickes that the PWA construction applications had never reached his desk and "as there was no indication whether or not sufficient workers were available to carry out these projects, I did not include them in the \$22,742,034 which I approved at that time" for projects in Puerto Rico and the

³⁵ According to historian Robert Pasquill, the PWA had the authority to directly finance construction projects in states or territories based on the agency's acceptance of applications drafted and submitted to the PWA by said states or territories. Robert Pasquill, *The Civilian Conservation Corps in Alabama, 1933-42: A Great and Lasting Good* (University of Alabama Press, 2008), 7; "Harold Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 29, 1936," General Records of the Federal Works Agency (FWA), Administrative Records, Records Relating to PWA Projects in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, 1936-43, RG 162, Box 1, Entry 25, NARA II.

³⁶ "Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harold Ickes, September 16, 1936," General Records of the FWA, Administrative Records, Records Relating to PWA Projects in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, 1936-43, RG 162, Box 1, Entry 25, NARA II.

³⁷ Pasquill, *The Civilian Conservation Corps*, 8.

Virgin Islands. Roosevelt's response is puzzling in that he first mentions that he was unaware of the proposed PWA projects as they were supposedly never brought to his attention. By mentioning the potential lack of workers for such projects, however, he essentially admitted an awareness of the PWA projects. This point is particularly perplexing considering government officials' awareness of the extremely high unemployment rates on the island at this time, not to mention its ever-expanding population, which had created a constant labor surplus for the prior three decades.³⁸

For those Puerto Ricans who were employed in the island's tiny industrial sector who were vastly underpaid with wages as low as 9 cents per hour, their inclusion under Section 7a of the NIRA undoubtedly brought a degree of hope.³⁹ The provision granted workers the right to collective bargaining and a minimum wage of 25 cents per hour. But as historian Felix O. Muniz-Maz has shown, Section 7a was never fully enforced in Puerto Rico. The primary reason for this was that the Puerto Rican Manufacturers' Association, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and the FLT along with its former leader and now Resident Commissioner in Washington, D.C., Santiago Iglesias Pantín, opposed the provisions. They argued before Washington lawmakers that increased wages meant lower profits for manufacturers and higher prices for the consumer, which would, they claimed, lead to layoffs and more unemployment, especially in the needlework industry. As Muniz-Maz notes, the formerly radical FLT and its political branch, the Socialist Party, had a choice in this moment whether to "gain access to the colonial state, or

³⁸ "Harold Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 29, 1936," General Records of the FWA, Administrative Records, Records Relating to PWA Projects in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, 1936-43, RG 162, Box 1, Entry 25, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.; "Franklin D. Roosevelt to Harold Ickes, September 16, 1936," FWA, RG 162, Box 1, Entry 25, NARA II.

³⁹ According to historians Bailey and Justine Diffie, who wrote a seminal 1931 study of Puerto Rico offering a harsh critique of American imperialism, average daily wages for both unskilled and skilled Puerto Rican laborers were roughly 93 cents per day or approximately 9 cents per hour for the average ten-hour workday. Diffie, *A Broken Pledge*, 173.

...fight for the working class," and they chose the former. The efforts of these lobbyists were successful in that the NIRA was never fully implemented in Puerto Rico and consequently the island's urban workforce saw little benefit from its protections.⁴⁰

The concerns voiced by these Puerto Rican lobbyists about potential job losses were not entirely unfounded particularly when one looks at the racialized hiring and firing practices utilized by managers in the continental U.S. For instance, according to social scientist John Brueggemann, the NIRA had established minimum wage codes for various industries in the U.S. but in those industries where there was a significant wage increase a “disproportionate” amount of African Americans were laid off. Throughout the depression African Americans were the “last hired, first fired” and their previously undesirable menial jobs were increasingly coveted by white workers who were desperate for jobs. According to Brueggemann, such patterns were “amplified by the NIRA.”⁴¹ The NIRA enabled racially motivated discrimination in the continental U.S. moreso than what was seen on the ground in Puerto Rico, where such practices were grounded more in matters of class. Per the aforementioned fears of island lobbyists, management in Puerto Rico had the potential to use the Act to lay off workers as a cost cutting measure, thus expanding the already robust number of unemployed laborers. Similarly, in the U.S. the enablement of discriminatory employment practices by the NIRA had disastrous results for African American workers who were already facing disproportionately high unemployment rates which had reached 50 percent by 1932.⁴²

⁴⁰ Felix O. Muniz-Mas, "Gender, Work, and Institutional Change in the Early Stage of Industrialization: The Case of the Women's Bureau and the Home Needlework Industry in Puerto Rico, 1940-1952," in *Puerto Rican Women's History: New Perspectives*, ed. Felix Matos-Rodriguez and Linda Delgado (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 183-184.

⁴¹ John Brueggemann, “Racial Considerations and Social Policy in the 1930s,” *Social Science History*, 26, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 148.

⁴² By contrast, unemployment highs for white Americans had reached a high of 25 percent by the same year. Amistad Digital Resource, “The Great Depression,”

President Roosevelt and insular officials also collaborated on efforts to enact soil conservation and reforestation programs under the CCC in Puerto Rico—a plan that was also met with funding issues and political opposition in Puerto Rico. While New Deal administrators on the island had called for enough funding to put at least 25,000 young men to work in rural CCC camps, the initial federal appropriation of \$197,610 was only enough to create approximately 1,200 jobs.⁴³ Consequently, relatively few CCC camps were constructed to house job recipients. Those that did exist became the subject of harsh criticism by influential anti-New Dealers in the Puerto Rican Legislature.⁴⁴ For instance, in a letter to the *Baltimore Sun*, the President of the Puerto Rican Senate and pro-sugar Union-Republican Party member, Rafael Martinez Nadal claimed that the CCC camps had cost a total of \$2 million to build, had remained mostly vacant, and were demolished with their contents sold at public auction. He criticized their construction as a waste of money and as being counter to "the psychology inherent to the people of Puerto Rico" who would "rather starve than to live in a camp." Such camps, he said, should be left "to the boy scouts and others who rejoice themselves with those things." If the federal government had "consulted [the] well-informed officials of the island, instead of operating a political machinery...they would have known beforehand that the construction of these camps was...a foolish enterprise."⁴⁵ Martinez-Nadal's rebuke is unsurprising considering the fact that his

https://www.amistadresource.org/plantation_to_ghetto/the_great_depression.html#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20as%20people%20fled%20the,50%20percent%20for%20Black%20Americans.

⁴³ Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics in the New Deal*, 120.

⁴⁴ Although the CCC would prove to be one of the New Deal's most popular programs on the continent and received widespread bipartisan support, it was subject to criticism. Primary opponents included wilderness protectionists, rather than conservative anti-New Dealers who believed that the CCC's camp building programs were destructive to natural habitats. See Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9; Sarah T. Phillips, Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78.

⁴⁵ "Rafael Martinez Nadal to the Baltimore Sun, September 23, 1938," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office: General Records 1935-1945, Correspondence, general (March 1942) to Equipment, PRRA Criticism, RG 323, Box 8, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

political party was, as historian Thomas Mathews describes, highly “favorable to” the ideals of most stateside Republicans who ran in opposition to Democratic policies under the New Deal.⁴⁶

The AAA’s presence in Puerto Rico largely served to benefit Big Sugar, but it had harmful effects on average islanders.⁴⁷ Governor Winship praised the success of the Puerto Rican AAA in reducing crop surpluses and controlling prices during a period of depressed world markets. But the AAA also negatively impacted the pocketbooks and stomachs of average Puerto Ricans. The AAA contained an agricultural processing tax that was intended to curb crop growth and production in order to stimulate demand, similar to measures taken in the stateside agricultural sector. In terms of how the tax affected the Puerto Rican sugar industry, Winship was happy to report that cane growers were “now working with regained confidence and healthy optimism.” The AAA tax had been “beneficial to the sugar industry of Puerto Rico” because it had “proven effective in correcting the market which was menacing the industry.”⁴⁸ What Winship did not note, however, was that the tax also raised prices on agricultural products in the consumer sector, an increase that had a devastating effect on working-class families who were already struggling to put food on their tables.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, as Winship’s quote demonstrates, the main goal of government officials was to ensure that Big Sugar corporations regained their

⁴⁶ Historian Neil M. Maher notes that although the CCC was extremely popular with both the Democratic and Republican continental American public and was essential in building the so-called Roosevelt Coalition, it was met with opposition by many stateside Republicans who opposed the New Deal in general as well as preservationists who believed its public works projects were upsetting ecosystems. Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11; Mathews, 44.

⁴⁷ The AAA’s tendency to favor large-scale sugar planters in Puerto Rico had its roots in the Act’s continental origins. As the AAA was being drafted in the U.S. Congress its provisions were, as historians Jonathan Coppess and Anthony Badger note, dictated by large-scale southern cotton growers represented by the American Farm Bureau Federation who sought to benefit from government supply controls that would increase their profits through eventual price inflation. Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989), 158; Jonathan Coppess, *The Fault Lines of Farm Policy: A Legislative and Political History of the Farm Bill* (ebook, 2018), 20.

⁴⁸ Mathews., 36.

⁴⁹ Dietz, *Economic*, 147-148; Department of the Interior, *Thirty-fifth Annual Report*, 9.

pre-depression profit margins even if this achievement negatively impacted the laborers upon which the industry depended for crop growth and production.⁵⁰

An indicator of the federal government's inability to provide sufficient relief was the continued social and political unrest prevalent on the island during the early years of the depression. From 1933 through early 1935, dozens of workers went on strike in numerous industries from chauffeurs, dockworkers, bakers, tobacco strippers, sugar and needleworkers to students.⁵¹ PRERA leaders reported to Washington that strikes had created problems for the organization as they sought assistance from the underfunded agency. James Bourne wrote to FERA director, Harry Hopkins, claiming that those who were turned away by the PRERA resorted to violence against the administration's employees. "At least in three cases," Bourne claimed, PRERA workers "have been threatened by disgruntled applicants either with a pistol or a knife."⁵² Adding to what one official described as a potential "social catastrophe" was the rise of the radical Puerto Rican Nationalists, whose leader, Pedro Albizu Campos, had a few years prior called for the "immediate ending of American colonialism in Porto Rico."⁵³ Along with the Nationalists, the Roosevelt administration also faced stiff opposition from the two majority parties in the Puerto Rican legislature—the Union Republicans and the Socialists—who had

⁵⁰ Jonathan Coppess notes that the impacts of the AAA on poor southern sharecroppers were also deleterious. He argues that large-scale cotton planters used the Act's acreage reduction stipulation as a means to drive black sharecroppers off their land. Displaced and destitute sharecroppers were often too poor to move out of the southern regions where they worked and lived and thus added additional stress to the depression-era labor surplus problem. Coppess, 33.

⁵¹ Government of Puerto Rico, *Department of Labor, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor submitted to the Governor of Puerto Rico, 1931-34* (San Juan, PR: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1934), 23, 54, 57, 62, 64, 70, 179, 208, 225,

⁵² "James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 19, 1933," Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, RG69, NARA II.

⁵³ "Nationalists Seek to Free Porto Rico: Campaign for Independence to Be More Aggressive," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1930, 35.

recently formed what was known as the Coalición. This pro-sugar political bloc would attempt to thwart the New Deal's progress on the island at almost any cost.

Puerto Rican labor mobilization was taking place at the same time as widespread stateside unionism during the depression years. The two movements differed, however, in terms of labor protections granted under the New Deal order. Because the U.S. labor movement was largely industrial in character its members were, in theory, able to benefit more fully from the provisions contained under the N.I.R.A. and the 1935 Wagner Act, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein describes the 1930s U.S. labor movement as "state-assisted" unionism because workers were relatively successful in lobbying the U.S. government for labor protections.⁵⁴ Because Puerto Rican workers were largely unsuccessful in agitating for change within the colonial agricultural system during the same era, their movement might be viewed as "state-resisted" unionism. Beyond the federal government's failure to extend New Deal labor protections to Puerto Rican agricultural laborers, the state's resistance to their demands was palpable in its local responses. It was not uncommon during the early depression for the island's federally appointed chief of police to call up troops used for the protection of sugar corporations and to suppress the collective actions of their workers.⁵⁵

The sociopolitical situation in Puerto Rico was so volatile that it prompted one PRERA official to note that "there is danger that political excitement will temporarily distract attention from economic questions" as "people," particularly those in the working class, "are in a mood to demand" what they believed to be was lawfully theirs as U.S. citizens under the New Deal.⁵⁶ Or,

⁵⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 30.

⁵⁵ Dietz, *Economic*, 164-165.

⁵⁶ "Report prepared by Professor of Economics at the University of PR, Rafael Cordero; Professor of Sociology at the University of PR, José Rosario; President of the PR Railway, Light and Power Company, Frederick Krug; Social Worker and wife of James Bourne, Dorothy Bourne," PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

as was the case with the Coalición and the Nationalists, the “people” wished either to maintain the economic status quo at the expense of the working class or break from U.S. control altogether. As this quote demonstrates, many continental colonial agents who worked for the PRERA believed that the political volatility rocking the island was merely a symptom of underlying and pervasive economic issues that could be fixed with more funding. By this reasoning, more federal dollars for social welfare programs would placate Puerto Ricans and political stability would ensue. What was needed to quell such upheavals in Puerto Rico, according to James Bourne and others, was more federal money and major changes to a colonial situation which favored sugar corporations over the needs of the people who worked for them. It was the opinion of PRERA leaders that the half a million dollars being spent in Puerto Rico each month by the federal government fell far short of what was required for change. The amount did little to pacify the struggling working-classes who were taking the brunt of the effects of the two hurricanes, the economic downturn, and the long-running impacts of colonialism. According to Coalición and the Nationalists, however, the New Deal’s attempts to reform Puerto Rican society through its programs had already been far too interventionist in nature. The Coalición would prove particularly uncooperative when it came to PRERA activities on the island, thus hampering the efficacy of New Deal programs during the early depression.

While many insular and continental operatives offered solutions to ameliorate the problems facing Puerto Rican society during the early depression years, as the following chronological account shows, federal underfunding, bureaucratic red tape, and insular political opposition to the New Deal rendered James Bourne and the PRERA unable to meet demands for short term relief and long-range rehabilitation. Consequently, the disastrous effects of the Great

Depression and the two hurricanes were prolonged during the two years of the PRERA's existence, thus leading to further social unrest, the re-entrenchment of the pro-sugar political bloc, and the continued impoverishment of the Puerto Rican working classes.

1933

During the first year of the PRERA's existence, director James Bourne and other continentals complained frequently to Harry Hopkins and other officials that the federal funds promised to the agency were inadequate or were delayed in terms of their distribution from Washington. These factors created a cycle of inactivity that led to further underfunding which in turn prevented the agency from providing adequate relief to poor islanders. For example, in October of 1933, F.T. Wilson of the PRERA's Bureau of Records wrote to his superior in Washington alerting them to the fact that grants made to Puerto Rico by the FERA from August through October had only totaled \$445,472, a figure that fell far short of what was promised. Wilson noted that while the money had been given outright, other funds had been withheld due to the lack of a mandated progress report on the agency's operations, which had been required of Bourne and the PRERA in order to receive federal allocations. Wilson explained that Bourne had not filed the reports as he had not received the forementioned grants until late September—a situation that left the PRERA understaffed and unable to write an account of the administration's activities. Furthermore, according to Wilson, the lack of funds rendered the agency unable to provide substantial relief except in "very urgent cases." In short, the lack of forthcoming grants prevented the PRERA from instituting the type of programs that would provide fodder for the writing of the reports required to claim additional federal funding. Without written proof of

active projects there was no proof of need for project funding, and so, the PRERA was unable to kickstart its relief efforts during the early months of its operations.⁵⁷

Bourne failed to file a comprehensive report, but as a stopgap measure, he wrote a letter to Harry Hopkins describing one of the first works projects undertaken by the PRERA. His account detailed how the lack of forthcoming grants plagued the works projects. One particular project consisted of the repair and building of municipal roads in fifteen municipalities, which employed men who were paid 12.5 cents/hour for unskilled labor and 30 cents/hour for skilled labor. Bourne noted that these payrates were “government standard” and were double the rates paid by sugar companies or by large-scale farmers. Although the pay was relatively fair by Puerto Rican standards, there were too many applicants for the minimal number of positions. Without additional funding the PRERA could not expand the scope of the project. Bourne reported that the laborers only worked an average of three days every five to six weeks and “that only about 200 to 250 men are employed at any one time on these road projects and there are 2000 or more in each municipality who need relief work.” Bourne informed Hopkins that “the funds we have are totally inadequate to care for the situation” and that direct relief was also coming to a standstill due to the disproportionate ratio between applicants and available funding. He also noted that very little in the way of food and rent relief were provided and many families were “actually thrown out in the street.”⁵⁸

According to Bourne, lack of federal appropriations from the FERA hindered the PRERA’s ability to provide enough relief to offset the economic conditions in Puerto Rico which

⁵⁷ “F.T. Wilson, Bureau of Records to Mr. Bookman, Puerto Rico Office of the FERA, October 30, 1933,” Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

⁵⁸ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 18, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

in turn worsened a tumultuous political environment. Repeatedly, Bourne stressed the need for additional FERA funds as there was “a tension quite noticeable among all the people from the lowest peon all the way up through to the top, that is very distressing. Anti-American feeling is growing rapidly among all classes.”⁵⁹ Beyond the rise of the Nationalists and growing working-class unrest, correspondence between Bourne and his Washington superiors in 1933 reveals that he was driven to distraction by the political opposition he encountered from Governor Gore and his allies in the Puerto Rican Legislature. Gore, a successful newspaper publisher and a politically active fiscal and socially conservative Southern Democrat, was closely aligned with the pro-sugar Coalición during his tenure as governor. Bourne, who favored the island’s New Deal-aligned Liberal Party, was an idealistic former farm manager with no public service experience. He received his appointment to the PRERA solely because of his close friendship with the Roosevelts.⁶⁰ The two men’s opposing political affiliations and differing visions for how aid should be disbursed led to conflicts that hampered the ability of the PRERA to run efficiently in its early months of operation.

In a report compiled in October 1933, Bourne gave an outline of the various political parties in Puerto Rico. In addition to his insights into the parties’ views on colonialism and their stance on the New Deal, the report also contained Bourne’s personal assessment of Governor Gore. Bourne noted that the primary political party representing the working class during the depression was the Partido Liberal. Formed in 1932, its members quickly established a tradition of criticizing the federal government for failing to acknowledge Puerto Rico's struggling

⁵⁹ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 30, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

⁶⁰ Bourne’s wife, Dorothy Dulles Bourne, was a Smith College trained social worker and cousin of John Foster Dulles, the future Secretary of State. She would work closely with her husband and the PRERA as she trained a legion of island social workers after establishing the School of Social Work at the University of Puerto Rico in 1933; “Mrs. Dorothy Dulles Bourne, Educator in Puerto Rico, Dies,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 1969, 33; Mathews, 127.

economic situation. The Liberals, who were pro-independence, became the sole political group supporting the efforts of federal programs under the New Deal. According to Bourne, the two parties that made up the opposing Coalición, the Union Republican (or Republican) and the Socialist Party, had aligned with each other because of their pro-statehood platforms and held the majority in the Puerto Rican Legislature.⁶¹ The Republican Party was essentially a mouthpiece for U.S. agribusiness, particularly sugar corporations. The Socialist Party was an outgrowth of the Puerto Rican's primary labor organization, the FLT, but by 1924 had distanced itself from its anti-imperialist, anarchist-socialist beginnings to adopt U.S. statehood as one of its key platform issues. In 1932, factions from these parties broke away to form a political alliance known as the Union-Republican Party or Coalición that would rule the Puerto Rican legislature through 1940. As historian Anne S. Macpherson notes, the Coalición blocked most efforts made by the Roosevelt Administration that hinted at restructuring the Puerto Rican agricultural economy controlled by insular elites.⁶² A closer look at the Coalición's leadership illustrates the political bloc's ties to big sugar. For instance, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Miguel A. Garcia Mendez; the President of the Senate, Rafael Martinez Nadal; and the President of the Union Republican Party, Alfonso Valdez; were all lawyers and businessmen who, according to James Dietz, "represented the interests of business and especially the sugar companies, including the absentee corporations."⁶³ Bourne reported to Hopkins that Gore had taken these three leaders on as his primary political advisors. The alliance, Bourne argued, was detrimental to the political

⁶¹ "James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 30, 1933," PRERA, Records of the WPA.

⁶² U.S. House of Representatives, "Political Parties of Puerto Rico, Founded 1898 through 1945," <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/HAIC/Historical-Data/Political-Parties-of-Puerto-Rico/>; Anne S. Macpherson, "The Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage: The Struggle over the Fair Labor Standards Act in Puerto Rico, 1938-1941," *The Journal of American History* (December 2017), 659; Jose O. Sola, "Partisanship, Power Contenders, and Colonial Politics in Puerto Rico, 1920s," *Caribbean Studies* 38, no. 1 (January-June 2010), 6.

⁶³ Dietz, 148; Mathews, 30, 31.

situation in Puerto Rico as the triumvirate “dictated appointments and undermined reputations established on professional accomplishment.” Bourne also complained that Gore did not “take time to learn anything of the customs, tastes and feelings of people of a different race and culture.” In Bourne’s opinion, this led Gore “to make needless mistakes in etiquette and judgement” that sometimes proved insulting to Puerto Ricans.⁶⁴

Under the advisement of the Republicans, Gore, who had the right to do so via the powers granted to him by FDR upon the agency’s establishment, began to dismiss PRERA employees he deemed to be too closely associated with Liberal Party. The PRERA contained many Liberal employees whom Bourne described as “responsible” and “trained competent persons” mostly from the island’s “educated classes.” Bourne cited the example of an experienced public health nurse who had been responsible for training island mid-wives for over two years. When she came to the Relief Administration looking for employment, she was turned away by the Assistant Commissioner of Health whose political affiliations rested with the Coalición. The commissioner said he was impressed with the nurse’s work but that he had “orders from Governor Gore not to employ anyone we think is Liberal.” Bourne went on to note that the nurse had not voted in any of the most recent elections, so “therefore there was no proof that she was a Liberal.”⁶⁵

On October 18, 1933, Bourne sent a follow up letter to Hopkins raising the issue of resigning over what he deemed to be his unfair treatment at the hands of Governor Gore and island Republican Party leaders. “The political situation here is becoming intolerable for almost

⁶⁴ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 15, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

⁶⁵ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 15, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II.

everyone,” he noted while also warning Hopkins that if he did resign there was danger that the PRERA “would be turned over to the Republican politicians of this island, who would use the money for their own benefit.” He also informed Hopkins that the PRERA payroll lists were stolen from the Puerto Rico Auditor’s Office by thieves he suspected were Republican operatives. Apparently, Gore had been shown the lists by Coalición leader Martínez Nadal who accused Bourne of hiring a disproportionate number of Liberal Party members in order to create a bureaucracy that would be more closely aligned with the goals of the New Deal. Bourne assured Hopkins that he had the lists checked by an independent party who informed him that “many” of the people employed by the PRERA were also Republicans and Socialists.⁶⁶ A few days after sending this letter to Hopkins, Bourne met with Gore and was informed that the governor had intended to place a spy in the PRERA’s administrative offices to ensure that Liberals were not dictating funding distribution.⁶⁷ Bourne noted that there were no complaints made against him by the Liberal Party and that “it just so happens that the only cases of attempts of coercion [had] come from the party in power.”⁶⁸ Bourne was adamant in his assertion that both he and the Liberals had no intention of imposing their political agenda onto the various programs the PRERA offered.

As 1933 drew to a close, Bourne continued to bombard Harry Hopkins with reports of federal underfunding and insular political machinations that were plaguing the PRERA and prevented the agency from providing adequate relief to islanders. In late October, he informed his superior in D.C. that additional funds were still needed from the FERA as political and

⁶⁶ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 18, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, RG69, Box 260, NARA II.

⁶⁷ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 23, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

popular unrest continued to signal anti-American sentiment on the island. It was his concern that if the working classes were not appeased through welfare programs that would put food on their tables and a roof over their heads, then popular sentiment might sway in favor of the anti-American Nationalists who were slowly gaining traction on the island.

Compounding the lack of tangible relief from the FERA in late 1933, the Coalición-led Insular Legislature voted to cut the relief and reconstruction budget, which was being used to repair the damage incurred by the last two hurricanes, by almost a million dollars. The legislature instead placed the responsibility for disaster rehabilitation in the hands of the federal government. In addition to the minimal funds offered by the FERA, the federal government had not provided adequate aid for hurricane rehabilitation.⁶⁹ By December of 1933 the FERA had only allocated \$400,000 of the \$600,000 promised to Puerto Rico. The amount was described by Bourne as “inadequate” as the bulk of these funds had to be used immediately for direct relief and were quickly exhausted due to “so many desperate cases of hunger.”⁷⁰ In short, the federal government was continuing the trend which began after San Felipe of withholding enough funds to bring both immediate relief and long-term rehabilitation to the island.

This trend seemed to be in the process of reversing once Hopkins took Bourne’s reports of mounting social unrest into account. According to a clerical note at the bottom of one of Bourne’s letters, by late December, Hopkins sent the remaining \$200,000 to the PRERA.⁷¹ Additionally, on December 28, 1933, the FERA also sent a grant of \$500,000 per the request of

⁶⁹ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, October 30, 1933,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

⁷⁰ “James Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, December 6, 1933,” Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

⁷¹ “James Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, December 6, 1933,” Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

Acting Governor Benjamin Jason Horton, who was in the process of replacing Gore after the latter official's resignation late in 1933. Although the grant was generous by previous allocation standards, it amounted to one third of the \$1.5 million requested by Horton.⁷² By comparison, it was also far less than the \$2.1 million in relief appropriated to Florida, a state that was also still reeling from the aftereffects of the 1928 hurricane and the depression.⁷³ Newspaper accounts show, however, that Hopkins and the FERA ultimately decided to honor Horton's and Bourne's calls for further monetary assistance. In June of 1934, the *Washington Post* reported that from May 1933 to May 1934, the federal government extended grants to Puerto Rico totaling \$6,301,000. As noted previously, the Coalición-dominated Puerto Rican Legislature contributed only \$70,201.⁷⁴ Hopkins' release of additional funds signaled that Washington officials were taking note of the tumultuous sociopolitical situation in Puerto Rico. While the allocation enabled the PRERA to offer more direct, short-term assistance to needy islanders, political and financial struggles would continue to plague the agency and prevent any meaningful change from happening during the first year of the administration's presence in Puerto Rico. As 1933 drew to a close, certain islanders took note of the administration's lack of a future-oriented rehabilitation plan, which prompted them to lend their opinion of what needed to be done in terms of long-term socioeconomic solutions.

⁷² "Mr. Corrington Gill (Director of Research and Statistics of the FERA) to FERA Bureau Chief Creed F. Cox, December 28, 1933," PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

⁷³ "\$70,000,000 to Aid Needy: Seven States Yet to Get Federal Funds in July," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1934, 5.

⁷⁴ By comparison, however, during that same year the poorest states in the continental U.S. received far more in the way of emergency relief funds: Alabama received a total of \$15,198,762; Mississippi received \$11,563,682; Oklahoma received \$10,950,598. But there were states that received far less than Puerto Rico. For instance, Maine received \$2,286 in federal grants while Montana and Nebraska received \$4,686 and \$4,895 respectively. "FERA Grants to States," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1934, 2.

In the fall of 1933, Puerto Rican economist Rafael de Cordero sent an analysis entitled, “Some of the Outstanding Economic Difficulties of Puerto Rico” to FERA officials in Washington, D.C.⁷⁵ Echoing the view of many continentals from the same era, he cited the island’s large population as one of the major problems inhibiting Puerto Rico’s economic health. “When every square mile of arable land has to support 1400 persons” Cordero observed, “it is not difficult to guess at the outcome in the standard of living of the mass of people.” According to Cordero, part of the problem was that Puerto Rico lacked the natural resources to support such a large number of people. This reality, along with the fact that the majority of the population fell prey to low wages and unemployment, was a major cause of island poverty. Cordero argued that to rectify the “social evils” of “unemployment, underemployment, low wages, poverty, diseases of all kinds, poor housing conditions, inadequate and unbalanced diet, inadequate school facilities, inadequate medical attendance and hospital facilities,” Puerto Rico’s economy needed to be diversified through industrialization. Like Liberal Party leader Luis Muñoz Marín and many stateside New Deal reformers, Cordero also believed that reducing large land holdings and redistributing acreage among the poor for the production of food and commercial crops would address hunger and homelessness. He argued that without economic diversification, such measures would be nothing more than short term solutions. But Cordero had little hope for the island’s transformation into an industrial complex as long as the growing population provided an almost endless stream of cheap labor for the agricultural industries ruling the economy. Cordero warned that should the federal government promote industrialization it should not do so with

⁷⁵ Cordero ultimately became an auditor of Puerto Rico, a presidential appointment. Before that he served as a manager for the PR state insurance fund which was in charge of workman’s compensation claims in PR. He was a Columbia educated economist who taught at the University of Puerto Rico for fifteen years, heading the economics department where he taught a course on the economic problems of PR. U.S. Congress, *Independence for Puerto Rico, Joint Hearings, April 23-May 8, 1945* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 268.

“promises of very low wages and tax exemptions.” He went on to suggest that measures be taken “to avoid the exploitation of the workers and the evasion of reasonable taxes” as had been the practice of island sugar corporations.⁷⁶

FERA records from 1933 also contain a report by an unnamed Puerto Rican source who was wary of the long-range effects of the direct relief provided by the PRERA. The author wrote that direct relief to Puerto Ricans was nothing more than a “palliative” measure that would “intensify the very evil which it attempts to cure,” namely poverty and dependence on the U.S. for social welfare. The report noted that Puerto Rican income per capita per year between 1928 and 1933 was an estimated \$400/year as opposed to the \$2,677/year being earned on average in the United States. Such low figures for Puerto Rico allowed the reader to “easily infer that our low standard of living will not be raised” by small handouts from the U.S. government. Long term solutions were needed to curb population density, high death and infant mortality rates (which, according to the report were increasing by 25,000 people annually), as well as crushing hunger and poverty.⁷⁷

Long-term solutions proposed in the report included the federal government’s delivery of rabbits, goats, pigs, chickens, bulls, and 350 agricultural agents to assist with farm extension work. The “establishment of birth control clinics,” that might ease population growth were also proposed. However, the author believed this was improbable due to “adverse public opinion.” Like other observers during the era, the author believed that encouragement of non-agricultural industries such as needlework, tapestry work, and rug weaving would stimulate employment.

⁷⁶ “Some of the Outstanding Economic Difficulties of Puerto Rico by Rafael de Cordero,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, Box 260, NARA II.

⁷⁷ “Basic Factors for the Improvement of Economic Conditions in Puerto Rico,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, “Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933,” RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Box 260, NARA II.

And finally, to solve the homelessness problem on the island, the report called for the construction of ten thousand small houses for rural workers which would, by the writer's estimate, house "50,000 of the poorest peasants" and "give work to 3,000 workers for half a year at a cost of \$1,500,000."⁷⁸ The suggestions contained in this report along with Cordero's analysis reveal that five years after San Felipe had devastated Puerto Rico and prompted calls for major reforms to island society, U.S. and insular officials had done little to remedy socioeconomic inequality brought on by a continued reliance on agricultural industries, particularly the sugar sector. As both the author of the FERA report and Cordero argued, the federal government was essentially promoting a relief system that addressed crises with policies aimed at alleviating the symptoms of Puerto Rico's problems rather than their underlying causes.

1934

1934 saw little improvement in terms of the social strife and political infighting on the island, which had occurred under Governor Robert Gore's watch. Gore, the former newspaperman who had been closely aligned with island sugar interests, stepped down from his post on January 8, 1934, citing ill health and "island politics" as reasons for his retirement. Roosevelt's choice of General Blanton Winship as Gore's replacement was founded in a hope for the restoration of law and order in Puerto Rico. It was FDR's hope that Winship's extensive administrative experience in the military and his purported political neutrality would make him more suitable to providing an antidote to the "chaos" created by the political partisanship and inexperience of his predecessor.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Winship Replaces Gore as Puerto Rico Chief: Roosevelt Names Army General to Succeed Retiring Governor," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 1934; Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics*, 113.

According to the Puerto Rican Department of Labor, however, workers in the sugar industry, inspired by the policies outlined in the National Recovery Act, continued to stage a number of labor strikes. Passed in 1933, the Act promised such improvements as pricing codes, higher salaries, shorter workdays, and recognition of unions, which, according to the Department of Labor, inspired in Puerto Rican workers “great hopes which they wished to see fulfilled without delay.” As it was on the continent, the NRA only covered the industrial sector, so those working in island agriculture were left out of its promises and “hence,” bureau officials explained, led to “the great number of strikes which occurred during the early part of the fiscal year.”⁸⁰ Even PRERA relief workers were disgruntled as their pay was decreased from 16 cents to 12.5 cents per hour. And so, hundreds of PRERA employees went on strike. James R. Bourne addressed the strikers on March 9, 1934 and stated that the pay decrease was implemented under orders from Washington officials who deemed relief workers “non-essential.”⁸¹

An article in the *New Masses* from February 1934 provided an overview of Puerto Rican society which illustrated that conditions remained intolerable in Puerto Rico in spite of New Deal’s policies.⁸² According to Josephine Garwood and K.G.D. Little, two members of the Communist Party of the United States of America who were sent on assignment to the island by the *New Masses*, “nowhere has the New Deal proved more ruinous than in Puerto Rico.”⁸³ The two reporters noted that during the continued crisis of the depression prices in Puerto Rico were at a level that was at least 25 percent higher than those in New York City. The cost of living had

⁸⁰ Government of Puerto Rico, Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1931-34*, 377-379.

⁸¹ “Upholds Puerto Rican Pay,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1934, 4.

⁸² The *New Masses* was a newspaper established in May 1926 by a group radical American writers and artists who were members of the Communist Party of the United States of America. The paper’s name was an homage to the defunct periodical, *The Masses* (1911-1917), which had been the target of U.S. government censorship due to its anti-war stance on the verge of World War I, Martin H. Goodman, “Introduction to the *New Masses* digital archive on Marxists Internet Archive,” Marxists.org, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/intro.htm>

⁸³ Josephine Garwood and K.G.D. Little, “The NRA in the Tropics,” *The New Masses*, Issue X, February 13, 1934, 14, 15.

risen 33 percent in Puerto Rico while laborers continued to earn “colonial wages,” and the economic crisis had proven to be “even more devastating in the colonies than in the home countries.” Evidence of this gap between wages and prices could be seen in the island shantytowns where the majority of Puerto Rican workers were living. Puerto Rican “slums,” they noted, might be compared to the pervasive American shantytowns known as Hoovervilles except for the fact that many of the buildings in these crowded island settlements were constructed “on stilts and often thrust far out over the waters of a malaria-breeding swamp.” There was no land on which the masses might build homes because “sugar must be raised on every inch of arable soil” all for “the benefit of absentee American corporations.” In the Puerto Rican countryside, Garwood and Little witnessed more evidence of the pervasive poverty plaguing the island. Everywhere they looked they seemed to see shoeless children with “legs crooked from malnutrition and their bellies bulging from hookworm.” At one point they met a nearly blind woman earning thirteen cents a dozen for hand-sewing lace handkerchiefs. Her daughter had recently been ill and remarking on her recovery, the old woman smiled and said, “You should see her now. She almost looks like an American.”⁸⁴ Their encounter with the woman led them to believe that the poor Puerto Ricans they encountered possessed an awareness that their bleak living conditions were in stark contrast to those of their relatively prosperous continental counterparts.

According to Garwood and Little, Puerto Rico possessed two classes: the very wealthy and the very poor. What existed of a middle class consisted of a handful of “shopkeepers, doctors and lawyers, teachers and small landowners” who were beholden to the larger sugar centrales and whose standard of living was “about equal to that of an American factory worker.” Tired of

⁸⁴ Ibid.

paying inflated prices for low-quality, imported goods from the continental U.S., the middle class was growing increasingly discontent and could be found reading newspaper articles about the Soviet Union or copies of *Das Kapital* translated into Spanish and available at local bookstores. “A deep dislike of the Americans runs through all groups on the island, and when the workers take the lead,” Garwood and Little observed, “the middle class gives them enthusiastic support.” They predicted that as long as prices continued to climb, wages remained low, and the majority of land was in the hands of American corporations the result would be “literal mass starvation” for America’s “model colony.”⁸⁵

As it had been during the previous year, James Bourne continued to face funding issues and political opposition from the Coalición, further hampering the PRERA’s ability to run effectively. In March of 1934, the President of the Senate, Rafael Martinez Nadal, cabled President Roosevelt warning against the continued allocation of direct relief grants, which, he intimated, would produce a situation that would essentially render the majority of islanders dependent on welfare. Continued handouts would not, he said, “produce the maximum salutary effect unless the greatest proportion of it is spent on the basis of a general plan with a view to permanent recovery and reconstruction.” Based on his political affiliation with absentee American corporations, it was likely that Nadal’s plan for reconstruction was one that would largely benefit large corporations, particularly Big Sugar, through tax breaks and tariff protections.⁸⁶ One might also infer from Nadal’s comment that direct relief would remove from workers the incentive to seek low paying jobs in the sugar industry, thus impacting corporations’

⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁶ “R. Martinez Nadal, President of the Senate to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 27, 1934,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Box 260, NARA II.

tradition of using the vast expendable labor force to its financial advantage. Around the same time, Bourne warned Hopkins that “sugar men,” the Commissioner of Labor, and the Governor were going to Washington to discuss the “sugar question” with the head of the FERA. Bourne wanted to make Hopkins aware that “at the present time most of the good land in Puerto Rico is held for sugar and the more land that is given over to sugar, the less there is for homesteads and subsistence gardens” for the Puerto Rican people. He assured Hopkins that the PRERA was in the midst of planning several projects such as homestead construction, “slum clearance,” and industrial complex developments that would require land held by sugar corporations. Bourne urged Hopkins to not be swayed by the influence of the Puerto Rican lobby that was headed his way.⁸⁷ However, plagued by political infighting and lack of funding, the majority of these PRERA projects would stall before they even started.

Because of the continued social instability and political infighting, high-ranking federal officials increasingly feared potential threats to U.S. control over the island. As a result, the Roosevelt Administration took on a more visible presence in Puerto Rico as a means of winning the hearts and minds of colonial subjects. Roosevelt and his advisors also sought to increase pressure on island leaders to find more permanent solutions to Puerto Rico’s socioeconomic problems. For instance, Eleanor Roosevelt, per the request of her husband, visited Puerto Rico both as a good will ambassador and negotiator in early March of 1934.⁸⁸ Inspired by a visit to the island’s squatters’ settlements, the First Lady made a point to contribute to talks held at the

⁸⁷ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, April 25, 1934,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, May-December, 1933, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Box 260, NARA II.

⁸⁸ The First Lady’s trip to the Caribbean would last ten days and would include a few short trips to the Dominican Republic and the Virgin Islands before she settled in Puerto Rico for a few days during which she would meet with island leaders. Accompanying Roosevelt were the American journalists Lorena Hickock and Ruby Black as well as the Undersecretary of Agriculture, Rexford G. Tugwell. For more on Eleanor Roosevelt’s trip to Puerto Rico, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

governor's mansion, *La Fortaleza*, in San Juan. The meeting was attended by both Puerto Rican and continental officials including Governor Winship, James Bourne, Commissioner of Agriculture R. Menéndez Ramos, and Chancellor Carlos Chardón of the University of Puerto Rico. On the table at the conference were proposed reforms in the areas of education, the economy, sanitation, crop diversification, housing, slum eradication and land distribution. Surprisingly, considering the views held by FDR, Governor Winship, and many Puerto Rican elites, the matter of Puerto Rican "over-population" was not discussed.

Perhaps the most controversial idea on the table was that put forth by Chardón who suggested nationalizing the sugar industry and requisitioning its landholdings for subdivisions comprised of fifty-acre homesteads with small sugar mills or *colonos*. According to the plan, under the guidance of the Homestead Commission, the plots would be doled out to nearly 3,000 homeless families who would operate the *colonos*, thus providing them with both land to live on as well as gainful employment.⁸⁹ Using Chardón's plan as a guideline and under the advisement of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Rexford Tugwell, a Puerto Rican version of the U.S. Resettlement Administration was planned, which was to distribute land using a sugar processing tax with the goal of providing 5,000 homes to landless families. For now, however, nationalization of the sugar industry and an all-out enforcement of the 500-acre Law was put on hold.⁹⁰ This may have been so for a number of reasons including the fact that the federal appropriation of an entire industry might have been deemed too collectivist in nature by New Deal opponents. Such actions were more suited for the style of government employed by socialist countries such as the U.S.S.R. rather than the U.S., which ostensibly championed free

⁸⁹ Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics*, 157-58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

enterprise.⁹¹ Furthermore, a much-needed political sea change in Puerto Rico had yet to come. For the time being, the pro-sugar political bloc was stymying any efforts to enforce the 500-acre law.

One outcome of the March talks held at the governor's mansion was the establishment of the Puerto Rico Policy Committee, which would be headed by Carlos Chardón. After a few months of research and deliberation, the committee made its findings public in San Juan on July 27, 1934. The report, which would come to be known as the Chardón Plan, called for the enforcement of the 500-acre limit on landholding and, in Chardón's words, "basic changes in land policy, providing for the progressive reduction of large land holdings for redistribution to the present landless as the first step in a large homesteading program." At the time of the report, 150,000 people were unemployed in Puerto Rico and nearly 500,000 people remained homeless.⁹² Chardón wrote the plan with Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce, R. Menendez Ramos under the advisement of Rexford Tugwell. Together the three called for the construction of 30,000 homesteads for the landless which would house roughly 200,000 people. These were to be built on requisitioned sugar lands. Chardón warned that if the plan were not adopted, Puerto Rico "would be confronted with a major social catastrophe within twenty years unless fundamental economic changes were undertaken" to rectify high unemployment and the landlessness problem. With approval from Washington, the program was to be funded by a sugar processing tax. The tax was stipulated by a clause in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration

⁹¹ Ibid., 162

⁹² To provide scale and contrast between the homelessness problem in Puerto Rico versus the continental U.S. some statistics must be provided. In 1935, continental U.S. homelessness brought on by the depression reached a peak of roughly 2 million people or approximately 1.5 percent of the country's population of 127 million people. In Puerto Rico, the number of people rendered homeless by the two hurricanes and the Great Depression hovered at roughly one-third of the island's population. Carol L.M. Caton, *Homeless in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 10; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Historical Population Change Data (1910-2020), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>.

Law which broadly allowed for funds to be used for such purposes.⁹³ In an effort to further industrialize Puerto Rico, Chardón also proposed the establishment of produce canning and bottling facilities, a cardboard factory, as well as the promotion of tourism to the island.⁹⁴

President Roosevelt, who visited Puerto Rico for one day on July 7, 1934 per the prompting of his wife, gave his preliminary approval to the plan during a radio broadcast from San Juan. Although the President noted that he and his advisors were still considering the plan as a whole, Roosevelt told the citizens of Puerto Rico that “we have all come to an agreement in principle for the rehabilitation of Puerto Rico” and he urged Puerto Ricans to “do your part in making the plan a success.” As will be discussed in a later chapter, the Chardón Plan would lay the foundation for the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA), a rehabilitative arm of the federal government on the island that would be instituted one year later, in 1935.⁹⁵ Prior to the PRRA’s arrival, however, no significant efforts were made by the federal government to clear Puerto Rico’s shantytowns and provide shelter on the same land or on the outskirts of island cities for the displaced masses.

Initial response to the Chardón Plan was contentious. Unsurprisingly, to U.S. sugar corporations and their representatives in the Coalición opposed the plan’s intentions of breaking up land monopolies and diversifying the colony’s economy through industrialization measures proved threatening to profits and their interests. U.S. efforts to reform Puerto Rican society did little to placate the Nationalists who, according to historian Gabriel Villaronga, “stepped up their militant front” over the course of the next two years—a turn that led to numerous instances of

⁹³ “Puerto Rico Plan Asks Estate Cuts: Policy Committee Recommends Large Tracts Be Broken Up—Sets a 500-Acre Limit.” *The New York Times*, July 28, 1934, 4.

⁹⁴ Gordon K. Lewis, *Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean* (New York: MR Press, 1963), 125; César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 102-103; Mathews, 173.

⁹⁵ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Extemporaneous Remarks in San Juan, Puerto Rico, July 7, 1934,” *The Public Papers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, vol. 3 (New York: Random House, 1938), 344.

violence and casualties. And, for the working classes, the Chardón Plan proved anemic at best in terms of its ability to rectify unemployment problems. Consequently, as will be noted later in this chapter, Puerto Rican workers continued to voice their demands via labor actions.⁹⁶

For his part, James Bourne felt the sting of exclusion when it came to his involvement in negotiations for the Chardón Plan. His correspondence regarding this matter reveals that he and Rexford Tugwell along with Harry Hopkins were working at cross purposes or, at the very least, the latter two men were dismissive of the former's efforts to assist in rehabilitation efforts. Bourne informed Hopkins that he had sent a letter to Rexford Tugwell outlining the PRERA's efforts for long-term rehabilitation but complained that Tugwell's response was unnecessarily dismissive. Tugwell thanked Bourne for his "suggestions concerning plans for the improvement of housing, homesteading, and the creation of new industries in Puerto Rico." Then, Tugwell succinctly let Bourne know that Dr. Chardón was already in the process of working out a "general plan for economic and agricultural rehabilitation for the Island," but that he would refer Bourne's letter to him for consideration. Bourne took the brief response as a snub and wrote a complaint letter to Hopkins on June 8, 1934 in which he told the FERA director that he felt "excluded" from rehabilitation plans and noted that his "organization knows much more about the subject than any other person or group of persons interested." He went on to say that like Hopkins and others involved on the island, he felt that direct relief was "only a palliative" and that the PRERA's work should not be viewed as a "stop-gap between starvation and rehabilitation." Proof of the organization's usefulness, he noted, were the several reports already compiled on housing conditions and the PRERA was in the process of surveying municipal lands being turned over for the construction of "working men settlements." He suggested to Hopkins

⁹⁶ Gabriel Villaronga, *Toward a Discourse of Consent: Mass Mobilization and Colonial Politics in Puerto Rico, 1932-1948* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 22, 25.

that whatever plan was being formulated should take into consideration that the island could not be rehabilitated strictly through agricultural programs. Echoing other continentals and islanders who warned against continued reliance on a monocultural economy, Bourne remarked that even with “the very optimum use of land no more than one million people can be supported; therefore, the other 600,000 must turn to industry for their livelihood.”⁹⁷

Due to continued complaints from Bourne and his political adversaries, Harry Hopkins decided to send an FERA field examiner to Puerto Rico to investigate the socioeconomic and political conditions on the island. The examiner, Robert B. Watson, whose jurisdiction covered the southeastern portion of the United States, spent one month in Puerto Rico from June 6 through July 3, 1934. Watson discussed his findings in a report that was comparative and transnational in scope. For instance, he noted that while hookworm and malaria had a relatively small presence in the continental U.S., in Puerto Rico these maladies impacted upwards of two-thirds of the population at all times. According to Watson, while there might be similar problems confronting stateside relief administrations to those seen on the island, those problems “could be magnified one hundred-fold in Puerto Rico” where, by his estimate, “1,000,000 out of the 1,600,000 population are eligible for relief.”⁹⁸ Watson repeatedly remarked on the magnitude of Puerto Rico’s problems as compared to those seen in the continental U.S. He concurred with other officials that both additional funding and an overhaul to the agricultural economy were needed to improve the island’s socioeconomy.

⁹⁷ “James R. Bourne to Harry L. Hopkins, June 8, 1934” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, June-September, 1934, Box 260, NARA II.

⁹⁸ “Robert B. Watson, Field Examiner, Southeastern Area, FERA, Field Visit to Puerto Rico-June 6, to July 3, 1934,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, June-September, 1934, Box 260, NARA II.

Watson also observed that as it was in the American South, where cotton and tobacco held sway over local economies, sugar was “the dominating factor in the economic life of Puerto Rico.” The power of sugar corporations, he observed, was evidenced by their immunity to the law, particularly local tax law. Watson noted that the largest sugar mills had made consistent profits during the depression, but had not paid a fair amount of taxes, especially local land taxes. As a result, for approximately eight years, municipalities had “exhausted their credit” due to lack of tax revenue. In many cases municipalities, which were responsible for collecting local land taxes, were unable to pay their employees for the previous four years and many towns and cities were unable to contribute financially to FERA projects. Watson reported that the same sugar producers were notorious for their exploitation of labor, paying employees as little as 20 cents per day for 14-hour workdays. Due to the seasonal nature of sugar work, he continued, the industry shut down from mid-June through September, leaving hundreds of thousands of workers and their families unemployed during this so-called “dead season.” It is for this reason that Watson recommended to his superiors that extra relief funds be provided from July through October each year.⁹⁹

Watson reported that along with sugar corporations, other island financial elites had been standing in the way of other New Deal programs such as the NRA. He noted that since the NRA had been implemented in January of 1934, the boards in charge of writing trade practice and price codes had failed to write a single code by the time his report was written. Watson offered his assumption that the reason the codes had not been written by island businessmen was that “Puerto Rican merchants and manufacturers are highly individualistic by nature. They know nothing of the basic principles of cooperation and their business standards are quite different

⁹⁹ “Robert B. Watson, Field Examiner, Southeastern Area, FERA, Field Visit to Puerto Rico-June 6, to July 3, 1934,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, NARA II.

from those practiced in the states.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, according to Watson, because many Puerto Rican products were not covered by NRA codes, they were denied a market in the continental U.S. The omission of many Puerto Rican goods from NRA eligibility negatively impacted the island economy and disincentivized NRA board members from writing codes for the few products that were covered.¹⁰¹ Watson’s assumptions about the Puerto Rican NRA boards being different from those on the continent were not necessarily grounded in reality. Continental NRA boards frequently drafted minimal price codes that suited their desires to increase production and maximize profits as opposed to setting price levels that would encourage fair competition overall.¹⁰² Watson also overlooked the crucial fact that the NRA also called for the right of collective bargaining for employees. It is safe to assume, considering the exploitative labor environment on the island, that Puerto Rican businessmen saw little incentive to take part in cooperating with workers’ unions as stipulated by the NRA.

In part, Watson compiled his report per the request of Bourne who had been complaining of “serious difficulty” with the Insular Government’s Auditor’s office. In particular, the Auditor was running behind disbursing payment to those who had signed up for relief work. At the time of the report, more than 3,000 payment vouchers had not been honored and the PRERA was “getting complaints from the whole island because of the delay in payment.” Watson noted that one reason for the slow response of the Auditor’s office was the misappropriation of FERA funds. He discovered that insular officials were depositing FERA funds into the Puerto Rico

¹⁰⁰ According to Watson’s value judgement, Puerto Ricans lacked the type of business acumen and know-how he associated with their counterparts in the states—an opinion that reflected widely-held continental beliefs in the inherent inferiority of islanders. Watson’s portrayals of Puerto Rican businessmen as being somehow inferior or inept when compared to U.S. merchants and manufacturers was part of a larger continental discourse that positioned colonial subjects in a subordinate position to elite white identities in order for the latter to justify colonial rule. This will be discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² National Archives, “National Industrial Recovery Act (1933),” <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/national-industrial-recovery-act>

General Fund rather than into the PRERA account which was earmarked specifically for relief projects. After reviewing vouchers paid, Watson noted that FERA funds were being used by the Insular Government to finance the payroll of regular government employees such as teachers. The Auditor's office prioritized payrolls for government workers while delaying payment for FERA jobs. After reviewing these practices, Watson concluded that the FERA's disbursement system was "inadequate and unnecessarily complicated" and needed to be overhauled.¹⁰³

Like other observers, Watson also recommended that there should be long term rehabilitation plans for Puerto Rico "along three lines of attack: industry, agriculture, and housing" and noted that Chardón's commission had already been established to formulate a plan in this regard with tentative backing from President Roosevelt. He informed Hopkins that Governor Winship and other officials supported various housing projects, but that federal funds had not been made available to kickstart these programs. After a meeting with Winship, who thus far had been far more open to the idea of reforming Puerto Rican society than his predecessor, Watson came to support the housing programs. Watson concluded that "any program which does not have for its objective the complete elimination of the "slum" areas of San Juan, Mayaguez, Ponce, Arecibo, and Guayuma and the other urban centers and the provision of hurricane proof homes in the rural areas will fall far short of the mark." He also advised that the government have first aid, building materials and provisions on hand at all times in the event of future hurricanes, remarking that the population lived in fear of another devastating storm based on their experiences with the hurricanes of 1927, 1928, 1930, and 1932—events from which the island had never fully recovered. And finally, he recommended that an emergency hurricane fund be established by the federal government, noting that after the

¹⁰³ "Robert B. Watson, Field Examiner, Southeastern Area, FERA, Field Visit to Puerto Rico-June 6, to July 3, 1934," PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, NARA II.

hurricane of 1932, the American Red Cross, which had primary responsibility for disaster response and relief, saw its funds “depleted” after “\$125,000 was spent.”¹⁰⁴

In the fall of 1934, both Watson and Bourne’s calls for more federal relief funds were echoed by other island officials such as Governor Blanton Winship, who complained to Washington that Puerto Rico needed to be more equitably included in the national relief project. On October 25, Winship wrote to Hopkins expressing gratitude for the help extended to the island by the FERA thus far. But, he also noted that Puerto Rico had not received its proper share of relief funds. According to Winship, the total of relief extended by federal agencies in the United States totaled \$14,547,563,764, but Puerto Rico had only received \$21,925,538 by the time he wrote his letter. By Winship’s calculations, based on Puerto Rico’s population of 1.6 million, the island should have received 1.27 percent of all federal funds expended for a total of \$184,754,059. What it had received in federal monies only amounted to a mere 12 percent of what it was due based on population. It was unclear whether the governor was aware that FERA relief eligibility was not determined based on population, but it may be that Winship, faced with hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans in need of assistance, was making a case that it should be.

Winship also noted that Congress lagged behind in its appropriations to the island. For instance, he remarked that during the previous congressional session, lawmakers had voted to grant \$120 million to the states for road building, but Puerto Rico was not included in the legislation. In response to the island’s omission from the bill, Winship noted that in terms of need, “there is no locality in the entire United States that should receive so large a proportion of relief funds as Puerto Rico, for there is not another place in the whole nation as greatly in need of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

relief as that island.”¹⁰⁵ As a result of congressional neglect, the total length of insular roads constructed in 1934 was a mere 19 miles, primarily financed through locally issued bonds.¹⁰⁶

The bill Winship may have been referring to was Hoover’s Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932. The bill did extend \$120 million for the construction of highways and roads to both the states and territories, but the appropriations were made in the form of loans and matching grants. As noted earlier in this chapter, due to the dire economic situation in Puerto Rico caused by the two hurricanes and the depression, as well as sugar corporations failing to contribute their share to local tax coffers, the legal borrowing capacity of the insular government had been adversely affected. So it was possible that officials declined potential road building funds because they knew that there would be insufficient funds to either pay back potential federal loans or to provide enough money to finance the island’s portion of the matching federal grants.¹⁰⁷

Like other continental observers, Winship also offered his recommendations for long-range plans to make the Puerto Rican poor more self-sufficient. Beyond suggesting that the FERA provide an additional \$250,000 in relief funds each month to Puerto Rico, Winship also proposed that extra appropriations be earmarked toward the establishment of subsistence settlements for the island’s poor. Out of the island’s 2.1 million acres, Winship noted that only 540,000 acres were under cultivation for the purposes of feeding Puerto Rico’s starving population. By establishing small settlement farms where the inhabitants would cultivate crops

¹⁰⁵ “Puerto Rico Official FERA, October-December, 1934,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Box 260, NARA II.

¹⁰⁶ Department of the Interior, *Thirty-fifth Annual Report*, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Fraser/St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, Discover Economic History, “Full text of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932,” <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/emergency-relief-construction-act-6364/fulltext>;

for their own consumption, Winship reasoned the dependence on costly food imports from the United States would be diminished and the cost of living lowered.¹⁰⁸

1934 would be a turning point in terms of Puerto Rico's visibility to the Roosevelt Administration. Prompted by the sociopolitical unrest and the complaints and eyewitness reports of those working on and visiting the island, the administration increasingly sought to include Puerto Rico in New Deal welfare programs and find more permanent solutions to the ills of island society. Long-term rehabilitation plans would not be fully operational until the middle of the following year, however, and so for much of 1935 the PRERA continued to be the primary New Deal agency in Puerto Rico. During the last months of the PRERA's existence, the agency and its director James Bourne faced even more political challenges that hampered his ability to run the organization effectively and provide adequate assistance to those in need. Although the FERA increased its monthly allocations to the PRERA from half a million to almost \$1 million per month, the agency's officials still claimed the amount was insufficient. According to accusations made against the organization by its opponents (accusations that were corroborated by an official federal investigation), part of the reason for the PRERA's inability to provide adequate relief to the working-classes rested in its high administrative costs and in hiring practices that favored privileged Liberal Party members.

1935

In 1935, the PRERA continued to be plagued by criticism from insular politicians and businessmen who had a vested interest in maintaining a status quo dominated by sugar interests. On January 26, 1935, Filip L. De Hostos, President of the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce,

¹⁰⁸ "Puerto Rico Official FERA, October-December, 1934," PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico 400, Box 260, NARA II.

gave a speech in which he claimed that the increased import costs, declining exports, price controls, and floor taxes (an excise tax placed on goods and commodities) brought about by the NRA had cost Puerto Rican businesses at least \$9,193,651 over the course of the previous two years. According to De Hostos such costs were the result of a twelve percent decrease in total production brought on by the NRA, which had disrupted various industries' income sources and created a deficit. In De Hostos opinion, the deficit had forced island industry to seek assistance from the U.S. government, the very entity that, because of recovery legislation, had fomented "grave injury" to the Puerto Rican economy in the first place. As a result, De Hostos concluded that "the New Deal has been for Puerto Rico, a raw deal." One month later, De Hostos sent the text of his speech to members of the U.S. Congress with the request that they "fundamentally modify the regime through which funds assigned to Puerto Rico by the Emergency Relief Administration are being administered" so as to ameliorate the "very grave and acute crisis" Puerto Rico was facing.¹⁰⁹ De Hostos' complaints give further insight into Robert Watson's observation about the reluctance of the Puerto Rican business community to embrace the NRA. Island businessmen were in part resistant to New Deal programs that had the potential to increase workers' pay, raise taxes that would enable a further trade deficit, and, in turn, impact their profits.

A few months after De Hostos gave his speech, James Bourne became the subject of official censure on behalf of the Coalición-led Puerto Rican Senate. In his correspondence to his superiors in Washington, D.C. it was clear that the proceedings were driving Bourne to

¹⁰⁹ "Speech Delivered by Filip L. De Hostos, President of the Chamber of Commerce of Puerto Rico, at the Annual Convention of the Chamber in San Juan on the 26th Day of January, 1935" PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935, Box 260, NARA II.

distraction. March 22, 1935, Republican Senators Bolivar Pagán and Alfonso Valdés introduced Resolution No. 13 which denounced Bourne as “undesirable” and called for his immediate removal from the PRERA and expulsion from Puerto Rico. The senators claimed that under Bourne’s tenure the PRERA exhibited “political partiality” in hiring practices that favored the Liberal Party. The resolution also stated that Bourne was “ignorant” and ill-prepared for his job as director of the PRERA due to his “limited education” and lack of “executive ability.” Other charges against Bourne painted him as a corrupt autocrat who supposedly accepted bribes for island construction jobs. The senators went on to say that Bourne had refused to cooperate with all branches of the Insular Government. Bourne, they said, acted in a “morally abusive” manner toward his subordinates whom he purportedly coerced into sending messages of support for the PRERA to Washington lawmakers with the purpose of “retaining the confidence of authorities” while he simultaneously “lost the confidence of the people of Puerto Rico.” Therefore, the senators declared that “James R. Bourne” was “a Public Enemy of the People of Puerto Rico.” Because the Coalición held the majority in the island legislature, Resolution No.13 passed with little debate in the Puerto Rican Senate.¹¹⁰

Bourne’s censure by the Coalición-led Puerto Rican Senate mirrored stateside Republicans’ opposition to Roosevelt and the New Deal as a whole. For instance, in June of 1935 continental Republicans from ten Midwestern states held a conference in Springfield, Illinois where they roundly criticized Roosevelt’s policies as “unsound, un-American and unconstitutional.” The president’s programs were, according to the delegates, “promoted by demagogic methods and academic theorists,” who were conspiring “to establish the paternalism

¹¹⁰ “Senate of Puerto Rico, 13th Assembly, 3rd Legislature: Concurrent Resolution of the Senate, No. 13, In the Senate of Puerto Rico, March 22, 1935, Introduced by Bolivar Pagán and Alfonso Valdés,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935, Box 260, NARA II.

of a bureaucratic oligarchy” and undermine the power of the U.S. Constitution. To thousands of continental Republicans, the New Deal was nothing short of a “horrible nightmare” which needed to be opposed at any cost to preserve “orderly human liberty.”¹¹¹

In Puerto Rico, Resolution No.13 set off a firestorm of rebuttals from Bourne and from those who wished to defend the director and the PRERA. The official Liberal Party response to Resolution No.13 described the work of the PRERA as a “high humanitarian mission” and claimed that had the organization not come to the aid of islanders when it did, social mayhem would have ensued. The author cited numerous instances of how the PRERA cooperated with insular government departments, contrary to how Bourne’s agency was portrayed in Resolution No. 13. Although the document’s author conceded that the organization was far from perfect, he “vigorously” affirmed that the PRERA was “functioning with higher efficiency” than similar emergency relief administrations in the U.S. states.¹¹² One might assume from the latter comment that the author was unaware of the more than half a million unprocessed relief applications PRERA officials were mostly unable to process at the time of the document’s publication due to underfunding.¹¹³ Additionally, the Liberals demonstrated support for an organization that possibly was favoring their party in terms of hiring practices and political favoritism.

The Liberals believed that the PRERA was giving “economic protections” to thousands of workers, “which in proportion is by far larger than the number of workmen benefited by this help in the United States.” Although the author provided no statistics for the continental U.S. he

¹¹¹ “Platform Drafted by ‘Grass Rooters’ Opposes New Deal,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1935, 1.

¹¹² “Liberal Party Response to Resolution No.13 translated by Rafael L. de Acosta” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935, Box 260, NARA II.

¹¹³ Department of the Interior, *The Thirty-fifth Annual Report*, 9; FERA, Final Statistical Report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, “Analysis of FERA Funds” (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1942), 142.

did note that by August 31, 1934 at least 55,332 people “directly benefited” from federal assistance and works projects under the PRERA. He then multiplied that number by 5.6 (the average size of a Puerto Rican family) to increase his original statistic to 309,859 persons. He went on to say that the timing of the PRERA’s arrival in Puerto Rico in 1933 was fortuitous as “the forsaken population of Puerto Rico was reaching the limit of human endurance.” Had the organization not started distributing aid that limit may have been passed and the island would have “entered into a period of purposeless disorders to the point of violence, not revolutionary violence, but the condition of despair in which collective tragedy expresses itself in instinctive rebellion against its suffering.” The PRERA had, in his opinion, “kept our people in social peace in the presence of a crisis which could not be controlled by the organisms which have the governmental direction in our country.” Because the PRERA had arrived when it did, the island had avoided “tragical outbursts” that would have led to “human sacrifices.” He concluded by denouncing Resolution No. 13, saying that to endorse the legislation was to support “political patronage over and above the imperious reasons of human hunger and suffering.”¹¹⁴

The Liberals sentiment was echoed by other PRERA supporters who sent a barrage of letters to the media and lawmakers in San Juan and Washington, D.C. excoriating the Coalición and its anti-New Deal activities. The day Resolution No.13 passed, one outraged Puerto Rican citizen, Vincente Leon, Jr., wrote an editorial in *El Mundo* directed at the President of the Puerto Rican Senate, Rafael Martínez Nadal, in which he called for the closure of the Coalición-dominated legislature. “Once it is closed,” Leon said, “the true reconstruction of this suffering country would start. An era of prosperity would emerge and we would have a really good government” which would put an end to the Coalición’s perpetuation of the “misery and

¹¹⁴ “Liberal Party Response to Resolution No.13 translated by Rafael L. de Acosta,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, RG 69, NARA II.

suffering of a whole country.”¹¹⁵ On March 27, 1935, leaders of the Association Pro-Rehabilitation Puerto Rico sent a letter to President Roosevelt “emphatically” stating that Resolution No. 13 did not represent popular opinion of the PRERA and all it had done for the Puerto Rican people. Association members claimed that true public opinion was that Bourne and the PRERA had “done great and noble work for this island” and should not be forced to leave Puerto Rico. To do so would leave the rehabilitation of the island in the hands of “a political machine” comprised of the “unscrupulous politicians” of the pro-sugar Coalición.¹¹⁶

Around the same time, a group of concerned Puerto Rican citizens found themselves exasperated by the political debates they believed were delaying relief from reaching the masses. In an advertisement run in several island newspapers beginning on March 24, the Society for the Rehabilitation of Puerto Rico quoted Harry Hopkins as saying “hunger is not debatable.” Political debates, they noted, were “threatening to upset the rehabilitation programs” of the PRERA. “The forgotten people” they implored, “should raise their voices in energetic protests against the politicians who endanger their well-being.” In other words, every effort of island politicians to thwart the federal government’s efforts to provide relief brought the population one step closer to mass starvation.¹¹⁷

One week after he was declared a “Public Enemy of the People of Puerto Rico,” Bourne wrote to FERA administrator Perry A. Fellows informing him of the “offensive charges” leveled against him by the Puerto Rican Coalición. Bourne also noted that he had asked Hopkins to

¹¹⁵ “Vicente Leon, Jr. to Hon. Rafael Martínez Nadal, President of the Senate” in *El Mundo*, March 22, 1935, PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935, Box 260, NARA II.

¹¹⁶ “Association Pro Rehabilitation Puerto Rico, District of Fajardo to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 27, 1935,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico 400, Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935, Box 260, NARA II.

¹¹⁷ “Charge Threat to Relief: Puerto Ricans Say Politicians Are Endangering Program,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1935, 2.

“make some expression of confidence” in him.¹¹⁸ Hopkin’s response was to send FERA Field Representative Vernon D. Northrup to Puerto Rico to conduct another investigation to determine whether the Senate’s charges against Bourne were merited. On April 23, 1935, Northrup sent a “Summary of Report on PRERA” to Harry Hopkins outlining the current economic, social, and political situation of Puerto Rico as well as an analysis of the PRERA’s activities to date. Northrup noted that with a population of 1.6 million in need of assistance, the one million dollars granted to the PRERA per month was inadequate to improve over all conditions on the island. The amount of relief monies granted to Puerto Rico essentially provided one dollar per person per month with the expectation that it would be enough for them to survive in the face of unemployment and the high cost of living. But, according to Northrup’s analysis, the entirety of relief funds assigned to Puerto Rico was not fully reaching the general population due to the high overhead costs of the PRERA. By his estimate, only 38 percent of the one million dollars granted per month were doled out in the form of work and food relief. He determined that the other 62 percent was being earmarked for “administration costs, ‘white collar’ salaries, transportation, materials and equipment.” Although the outlay for administrative costs was excessive and rightly opened the PRERA up to criticism, Northrup believed that the agency could not be entirely blamed for its inability to meet the “problems for which it does not have the resources.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ “James R. Bourne to Mr. Perry A. Fellows, Administrative Officer FERA, Washington, D.C., March 29, 1935,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, RG69, Puerto Rico 400, “Puerto Rico Official FERA, February-March, 1935,” Box 260, NARA II.

¹¹⁹ “Vernon D. Northrup, Special Field Representative, to Harry L. Hopkins, April 23, 1935,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400-450, Puerto Rico Field Reports, Box 261, NARA II.

The high administrative costs of the PRERA mirrored those of stateside emergency relief administrations. According to the *New York Times*, by mid-1935, national administration costs were averaging ten cents on every dollar, with some states spending far more in this regard.¹²⁰ For instance, in the state of Virginia in April of 1934, auditors discovered that for every \$75,000 doled out for direct relief, over \$154,000 was being spent for administrative purposes. One Virginia county spent \$576 on administrative costs as opposed to the \$6 in relief funds it administered for the entire month of April.¹²¹ In May 1935, the *New York Times* reported that “alleged irregularities” in administrative costs for the New York emergency relief administration created talk of a special Congressional investigation into the agency’s operations.¹²²

Northrup’s assessment of the PRERA’s purported favoritism toward “white collar” workers was supported by complaints emerging from the Puerto Rican working-classes. On April 24, 1935, Leonides Rodríguez, the self-styled “protectress of union workers” from San Germán wrote to President Roosevelt complaining that the PRERA was an institution designed “only for privileged persons who have some political influence.” Rodríguez claimed that those who tended to be hired by the PRERA were already of “good social condition” and were taking jobs away from those “without work who have not anything to eat.” She implored the President to use his “personal influence” to find a solution for the “poor situation of the workers of our island.”¹²³ A citizen of Cayey, a man named Pedro Rivera Pagan, wrote to officials in Washington complaining of corruption and preferential treatment within the PRERA’s ranks. While Rivera conceded that between \$150 to \$225 was being given to some families every two

¹²⁰ “Relief Overhead is 10% of Outlay,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 1935, 4.

¹²¹ “Relief in Virginia Now Major Issue: Hopkins’s Statement May Force Special Session of the Legislature,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 1934, E7.

¹²² “Relief Overhead is 10% of Outlay,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 1935, 4.

¹²³ “Leonides Rodríguez, San Germán, PR to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 24, 1935,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-1936 State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico, 460 General, Box 264, Porto Rico: Complaints, NARA II.

weeks in the form of direct relief, he claimed that “very few” people were actually receiving such aid. He charged that most of the organization’s money was being devoted to the “white,” middle class office workers who spent their paychecks on “good cars” while “making politics and deceiving the people in a disastrous manner” as they were “starving to death right on the streets.” To receive relief, Rivera intimated that one was required to declare allegiance to the Liberal Party before they would be allowed to work, to some degree substantiating the Coalición’s charges of Bourne’s political favoritism. “What I am writing,” Rivera said “is absolutely the truth, and I am ready to prove it any court of justice if that would be necessary, and I would be backed by all the people.” Apparently unaware of Northrup’s activities on the island, Rivera went on to suggest that the PRERA be investigated by Washington officials.¹²⁴ Rivera’s political affiliation is unclear, but his complaints are those of a non-elite who was bearing witness to the ramifications of divisive partisanship permeating the debates over the role and function of the PRERA.

Vernon Northrup also reported on the controversy surrounding Resolution No. 13 explaining that its enactment in part emerged from the pro-sugar Coalición’s desire to set up a corporation that would oversee federal funding and replace the PRERA. The legislature passed an act establishing the corporation but the bill was vetoed by Governor Winship. In protest to Winship’s “dictatorial action,” the Legislature adjourned early, but not before accusing Bourne of favoring Liberals and declaring him a “public enemy.” According to Northrup some members of the Liberal Party leadership also expressed their no-confidence opinion of Bourne. Northrup noted that Liberal Party head, Luis Muñoz Marín (whom Northrup described as a “fluent

¹²⁴ “Mr. Pedro Rivera Nagan or Pagan, Cayey, Porto Rico to the Honorable Administrator of the National Rehabilitation, Washington, D.C., October 7, 1935,” Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-1936 State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico, 460 General, Box 264, Porto Rico: Complaints, NARA II.

speaker, well educated and very impressive) informed him that the PRERA and Bourne would ultimately be incapable of rehabilitating the island. To calm the current political unrest, Northrup recommended that the FERA send an “impartial” representative to Puerto Rico who would be responsible for overhauling the PRERA and its spending habits.¹²⁵

Northrup’s report on the legislature’s intent to set up a corporation was corroborated by a letter written to President Roosevelt by Coalición leaders late in March of 1935. The letter stated that it was within the legal bounds of the legislature to set up a corporation to oversee and distribute FERA relief funds and to make plans for the island’s rehabilitation. Coalición leaders cited the “example of many states of the Nation” which had similar corporations created to “facilitate the cooperation” between the local and federal governments in carrying out the Federal Emergency Relief Act. The “corporations” they were referring to were state relief agencies which relied upon local officials to procure and distribute federal funds. Their desire to do so would have placed relief appropriations directly under the Coalición’s purview as opposed to that of the federally operated PRERA. They also claimed Bourne and the Liberals had set up a so-called “supergovernment” that circumvented the checks and balances system established in Puerto Rico under the 1917 Jones Act. In other words, the federally controlled PRERA superseded the democratic decision making of the local, insular government. In the opinion of Coalición leaders, the seemingly overarching authority of Bourne and the PRERA demonstrated that the island legislature did not possess the power to create relief policy for Puerto Rico as it did not have the confidence of the current administration.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Miguel A. Garcia Mendez, Speaker of the House of Reps.; R. Martinez Nadal, President of the Senate; Alfonso Valdez, President of the Union Republican Party; Bolivar Pagan, President of the Socialist Party; to the President, the White House, March 21, 1935,” PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-1936 State Series, March 1933-1936, RG 69, Puerto Rico, 460 General, Box 264, Porto Rico: Complaints, NARA II.

The federal government's desire to bypass the power of sugar-backed politicians in order to proceed with its relief agenda was also present on more local levels. Jovito Quinones, the Secretary-Auditor of the Municipal Administration of the sugar-producing town of Fajardo issued a complaint to the FERA that the PRERA circumvented the authority of local officials with the implementation of its housing programs. Quinones wrote that the town had donated the required land for the purpose of constructing 49 houses for homeless families. He noted that under the PRERA guidelines, it was stipulated that the municipal government had the final say as to who would be granted a home. Echoing the Coalición's claims that the PRERA was acting as a "supergovernment," Quinones claimed that the administration selected housing recipients without the consultation of Fajardo's government officials. In doing so, Quinones said, the PRERA acted in a "gross ignorance of the autonomy and faculties of this Municipal Legislative organism which was constituted by the Organic Charter of Puerto Rico and other existing laws."¹²⁷

With so many complaints and critiques about Bourne and the PRERA emerging from various sectors of Puerto Rican society, it became difficult for high-ranking federal officials to ignore the potential impacts on the political stability of Puerto Rico as well as how the Roosevelt Administration's reputation was being diminished in its "model colony." Evidence of the effects of political gridlock and federal underfunding had on the PRERA's ability to provide adequate relief are illustrated by statistics gathered in 1935. For instance, by June of that year, there were over 328,000 unemployed Puerto Ricans or roughly 41 percent of eligible workers. As noted before, due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work, there were times during that year when

¹²⁷ "Jovito Quinones, Secretario-Auditor of the Municipal Administration of Fajardo, Puerto Rico, May 7, 1935," PRERA, Records of the WPA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-1936 State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico, RG 69, 460 General, Box 264, Porto Rico: Complaints, NARA II.

unemployment figures were as high as 61 percent—a figure that remained consistent with statistics gathered at the beginning of the PRERA’s tenure on the island.¹²⁸ Furthermore, in April of 1935, the NRA implemented a minimum wage code for many island industries that would be 60 percent less than what comparable workers were earning on the mainland.¹²⁹ During the first two years of the New Deal’s presence on the island, Puerto Rico consistently ranked last (next to the U.S. territory of Hawaii) on the list of federal aid offered to the states and territories. From 1933-1935 the total per capita regular aid offered to Puerto Rico averaged about \$1.44 with emergency aid averaging at \$16.91 per person per year. By comparison, Nevada, which ranked number one on the list during this period, had a regular federal aid average of \$53.76 per capita and an emergency aid average of \$128.81 per person.¹³⁰ The PRERA had not remedied the housing issue and Puerto Rico’s shantytowns were still growing. Some estimates claim that urban squatter populations increased by at least five percent from the time the depression began to the end of the PRERA’s tenure on the island.¹³¹ This phenomenon was compounded by the fact that the federal government was doing little to enforce the 500-acre land limit and implement land distribution and housing programs. 1935 also brought numerous strikes in the sugar and coffee sectors and among Puerto Rican dockworkers—actions that were indicative of the federal government’s ineffective programs on the island.¹³²

¹²⁸ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Territories, Seventy-Fourth Congress, First Session, “A Bill to Enable the People of Puerto Rico to Form a Constitution and State Government and Be Admitted Into the Union On An Equal Footing with the States,” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), 5.

¹²⁹ “NIRB Drops Action On Pig Iron Plant: Imports are found dwindling and not harmful to the domestic industry, Minimum Wage in Puerto Rico will be 60 Percent of that on Mainland,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 1935, 9.

¹³⁰ Department of the Interior, *The Thirty-seventh Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico*, 188.

¹³¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Squatters, Politics, and State Responses: The Political Economy of Squatters in Puerto Rico, 1900-1992” (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993), 140; “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA-NYC.

¹³² “Puerto Rican Coffee Faces a Strike Tie-Up,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1935, 37; “Dock Strike in San Juan: Boys Load and Unload Ships in the Puerto Rican Port,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 1935, 6; “Confer on

Between 1933 and 1935, New Deal initiatives had reached Puerto Rico with the intention of providing immediate assistance to its suffering and restless population. But due to issues such as underfunding, metropolitan neglect, and political infighting, PRERA officials such as James Bourne were unable to fulfill their short term goals of ameliorating poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. It became increasingly clear to colonial officials that not only was there a dire need for further federal financial aid, but also a need to question the social, political, and economic systems that had developed since the U.S. takeover in 1898. Most notably, the power of an entrenched political old guard beholden to the sugar industry. This political bloc, along with sugar corporations, fiercely guarded their power, their extra-legal ownership of land, and a class system that favored island elites and prevented the upward mobility of the working class. Fears of social unrest among poor Puerto Ricans, who threatened to topple U.S. control, was a significant factor in motivating New Dealers to call for more federal intervention on the island during the early depression. As will be discussed in the next chapter, however, once many of these same continental actors witnessed the day to day poverty of Puerto Ricans they began to dig deeper to find the systemic causes of what they often called the Puerto Rican “problem.” Although some blamed poor Puerto Ricans for their own living conditions and poverty, others, fueled by a sense of shame and fears of an island revolution, became openly critical of colonialism and the role of the federal and insular governments played in creating and sustaining a deeply unequal society.

Sugar Strike: Puerto Rican Labor Delegates Insist on Collective Bargaining,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1935, 32.

Chapter Three

A Sense of Shame: A Shift in Continental Attitudes and Assumptions About the Causes of Puerto Rican Poverty During the Great Depression

*El Fanguito, the shack city over the marshes beside the Martin Peña Channel, had, in 1934, consisted of a few hundred squatters' houses; now we saw it stretching up toward Rio Piedras miles away in a seemingly endless spread of squalor. It had a kind of order and governance of its own, such as a homunculus or some other low form of life has: the shacks were in rows, that is, which left some open space for filth to accumulate... What startling evidence of the failure of our efforts to outpace, with schemes for housing and public works, the forces of disintegration so powerfully at work on this island!¹—Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land**

When Rexford Tugwell made these observations in 1941, it had been roughly eight years since the New Deal had arrived in Puerto Rico. And yet, as the soon-to-be governor of the island noted, Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements seemed to be growing in spite of New Deal initiatives in place including direct relief and low-income housing programs. In fact, by the time he took the governorship that same year, Tugwell estimated that about two-thirds of the Puerto Rican working class were living in "slum" areas, which were defined by the United States Housing Authority as "any area where dwellings predominate which, by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health, or morals."² This chapter will examine in more detail what Tugwell and outside observers believed were the "forces of

¹ Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico* (New York, Praeger, 1946), 55, 73.

² Tugwell, *The Stricken Land*, 55, 73; Federal Works Agency, U.S. Housing Authority, "The United States Housing Act of 1937 (as amended) and Provisions of Other Laws and Executive Documents Pertaining to the United States Housing Authority" (Washington, D.C.: Federal Works Agency, U.S. Housing Authority, 1939), 2; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses: The Political Economy of Squatters in Puerto Rico, 1900-1992" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993), 140; "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, National Archives and Records Administration, NYC (NARA NYC).

disintegration” responsible for the exponential spread of poverty and island squatters’ settlements before and during the depression era. It was a phenomenon described by many continentals as the Puerto Rican “problem.” In the minds of many stateside observers, it was a problem that was partially due to the culturally inferior qualities assumed by colonial officials to be possessed by Puerto Ricans that rendered them unable to care for themselves. Social Darwinist explanations and ideas remained a part of the ideological landscape by the time the Great Depression arrived. For instance, some observers asserted that working-class Puerto Ricans possessed certain inherent qualities— such as robust fertility— which were directly linked to their poverty and living conditions. By this reasoning, Puerto Ricans were prone to a type of uncontrollable, hypersexuality that led to unsustainable families who perpetuated their own poverty and employment problems, which in turn forced them to migrate to the island’s swelling shantytowns.³ Many colonial officials had, since the U.S. takeover in 1898, observed what they deemed to be Puerto Rico’s “overpopulation” issues. Prior to San Felipe and the depression U.S. officials and politicians were, as discussed in chapter one, confident that the island’s swelling population would be provided for by the elite planters and corporations who employed them. So long as the working class remained in rural areas where they were employed and housed by sugar companies and where they might supplement their diets by growing their own food, colonial officials believed there was little need for federal policy intervention. The San Felipe and San Ciprián hurricanes and the depression led to a dramatic increase in working-class migration to urban areas where no such system was in place, however. Therefore, to rectify

³ According to historian Richard Hofstadter, “the Darwinian mood sustained the belief in Anglo-Saxon racial superiority which obsessed many American thinkers in the latter half of the nineteenth century” as the U.S. made its first real attempts at achieving “world dominion.” He goes on to say that Americans’ belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority was “the dominant abstract rationale of American imperialism.” Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1944), 172-173; Tugwell, *Stricken*, 126-127

the particular “problems” of urban overcrowding and “overpopulation,” some New Dealers proposed measures to curb islanders’ reproduction. In doing so, they often refused to acknowledge the structural causes of economic disparity on the island rooted in the exploitative U.S. colonial sugar economy.

However, once some of these colonial officials actually spent time in Puerto Rico and witnessed its urban squatters’ settlements and interacted with the people who lived in them, their reasoning for the causes of island poverty grew to include critiques of the colonial system itself. Armed with a new outlook on the systemic causes of poverty and concerned with mounting social unrest during the depression, many of these actors called on the federal government to make substantial changes to the colonial order and reform Puerto Rican society.⁴ Although many reforms designed to overhaul Puerto Rican society would not arrive until the end of the depression (with many more coming into play during the post-World War II era), it was in part due to these continental observers’ desire to draw federal attention to Puerto Rico that the island status quo began to slowly transform, albeit with mixed results, beginning in 1935 with the arrival of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA).⁵

Prior to and during the depression, many continental officials placed at least part of the blame for Puerto Rico’s problems on the island’s poorer classes by discursively divorcing matters of island poverty from the structural issues caused by monocultural agricultural capitalism. As Michel Foucault, Ann Laura Stoler, Edward Said and others have argued, such

⁴ Historian Alan Brinkley notes that “like the progressives before them, few New Dealers were genuinely hostile to capitalism. But they were not uncritical defenders. The belief that something was wrong with capitalism and that the government should find a way to repair it was, therefore, a central element of liberal thought throughout much of the 1930s.” Contrary to Brinkley, who argues that New Dealers had lost the moral concerns of early 20th century progressivism, I argue that there were, in addition to fears over popular unrest, moral concerns over Puerto Rican poverty that prompted many New Dealers to reform the island’s socioeconomy. Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 5.

⁵ Such results will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

discursive practices highlight the fact that colonial power is not achieved strictly through structural, or material means. It is often exercised and maintained through the production of knowledge and discourses that naturalize the “inferiority” of certain racial or ethnic groups.⁶ This knowledge positioned colonial subjects as “naturally” subordinate as a means to construct the superior, elite identities of white colonizers. In this way, ideas produced by white American observers and officials legitimated reform efforts and U.S. hegemonic control over its colonies. Metropolitans often placed the blame for colonialism’s failures on the backs of working-class colonial subjects, who supposedly needed, due to what was perceived as their innate incapacities, the oversight and tutelage of U.S. reformers and technocrats.⁷ Not only did the “problem” discourse serve as a political tool for the justification of American superiority and colonial control in Puerto Rico, but it also obscured the impacts of the exploitative economic system that governed the colony during the first three decades of the twentieth century. As Amy Kaplan has argued, from the nineteenth-century emergence of the North American imperialist project, U.S. foreign relations became reliant on the construction of the continental nation as a familiar, civilized domestic sphere. This domain worked in contrast to foreign, hostile territories where it became the burden for U.S. whites to “domesticate,” or to civilize and tame child-like savages living abroad.⁸ In line with Kaplan’s assertion, working-class Puerto Ricans became the target of such rhetoric uttered by continental politicians, administrators, capitalists, the media,

⁶ See: Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

⁷ According to historian Paul Kramer similar discourses among U.S. colonial officials were present in the Philippines in the years following 1898. In the Philippines, “hierarchies of difference were generated and mobilized in order to legitimate and to organize invasion, conquest, and colonial administration” by U.S. colonial agents. Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.

⁸ Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70, no. 3, No More Separate Spheres! (Sept. 1998), 582, 589.

and various Presidents of the United States. When the depression hit Puerto Rico, unemployment levels rose, Puerto Rican squatters' settlements expanded, and poverty plagued the island, all of which became frequent topics of discussion among mainlanders who constructed Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rico itself as a "problem" that the U.S. and its advisors needed to solve.⁹

This rhetorical positioning had been in practice since the time of the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898 and by the time of the depression many continentals were solid in their belief that islanders, especially poor islanders of color, were childlike, uncivilized, dependent on the federal government, exceedingly fertile, and incapable of managing their society on their own.¹⁰ One piece of evidence that sums up these discursive practices is the Louis Dalrymple cartoon, "School Begins" published in *Puck* magazine in 1899. The oft-analyzed image portrays Uncle Sam as a schoolhouse teacher chastising four infantile, dark-skinned pupils each wearing a banner from the recent colonial acquisitions of the Philippines, Hawaii, "Porto Rico," and Cuba. The students sit slouched and surly, reluctant to take the tutelage of their new master, Uncle Sam, who dominates the foreground of the image with a switch in hand ready to inflict discipline. This type of racialized rhetoric was also employed by turn-of-the-century Washington lawmakers as they considered whether to extend relief funds after the San Ciríaco hurricane that had decimated the island in 1899. Some U.S. politicians compared Puerto Rico's population to "needy" and "lazy" former slaves in the Jim Crow South and feared that the hundreds of thousands of poor people of color on the island would become unproductive workers who would

⁹ According to historians Bailey and Justine Diffie, Puerto Rican unemployment rates saw a steady increase from the time of the U.S. occupation to the start of the Great Depression. Their statistics show unemployment rates hovering at 17% in 1899, 20% in 1920, and 36% in 1929; Bailey W. and Justine W. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1931), 166-167.

¹⁰ Puerto Rican "problem" rhetoric was especially apparent in early twentieth century political and media discourse over the pending status of the island, particularly in debates over the extension of a civil government under the Foraker Act in 1900; "Tangle in Congress: The Puerto Rican Problem A Hard One to Solve," *The New York Tribune*, March 13, 1900, 4; "The 56th Congress: Puerto Rican Relief Bill Passed by Senate, 35 to 15," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 24, 1900, 2.

place a financial burden on the state. For instance, the noted white supremacist Democratic senator from South Carolina, Benjamin Tillman, declared during Senate debates that “so long as the Freedmen’s Bureau was maintained in the South, the colored race there amounted to nothing. That’s a characteristic of the race. So long as you give food to those Puerto Ricans they will never do a stroke of work.”¹¹

The notion that Puerto Ricans, especially working-class Puerto Ricans of color, were incompetent, needy, and uncivilized persisted into the depression era. By the 1930s, many continentals were solid in their belief that islanders, particularly darker skinned Puerto Ricans, were childlike, dependent on U.S. largesse, barbaric, and exceedingly fertile and thus incapable of managing their society on their own.¹² For instance, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, during hearings to determine whether congressional aid would be extended to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of the San Felipe Hurricane of 1928, Representative Harold Knutson, remarked that he did, “not see anything in this report that gives any idea of the capacity of the Porto Ricans to take care of themselves.” Knutson’s comment fell in line with common perceptions held by many continentals who operated under the assumption that Puerto Rican poverty, particularly that of people of color, was a product of islanders’ inherent shortcomings, which were born of racial or ethnic inferiority. Governor Horace Towner’s reply to Knutson, intended to assuage the doubts of U.S. lawmakers, underscores such racialized beliefs. Towner argued that aid should, at the very least, go to elite island planters who could be counted on for proper use of relief funds because they were “white” and therefore, responsible enough to handle government

¹¹ There were those, however, who did not believe that Puerto Ricans were overly dependent on government welfare. One exception was Governor Theodore Roosevelt Jr. who noted in 1930 that “hundreds” of unemployed workers came “to the government offices weekly, with but a single request—work. They do not ask for a dole, merely the opportunity to earn a livelihood”; Diffie, 167; “The 56th Congress: Puerto Rican Relief Bill Passed by Senate, 35 to 15,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 24, 1900, 2.

¹² Diffie, 167.

appropriations.¹³ For many U.S. politicians, it seemed that whiteness and wealth became synonymous with worthiness and inclusion in government relief projects after the hurricane.¹⁴

The language employed by many New Dealers also included characterizations of Puerto Ricans that spotlighted islanders' purportedly negative stereotypical qualities or epitomized their deficiencies as a cultural group. During the 1930s and '40s, as continentals debated the allocation of relief funds to Puerto Rico, New Deal officials such as Rexford Tugwell, FDR and James Bourne, used rhetoric that essentialized islanders' general character—portraying them as intrinsically flawed, responsible for the existence of working-class squatters' settlements, or somehow content with poverty. For instance, Tugwell once observed that, in general, average Puerto Ricans “were polite,” yet almost pathetic in their “desire to please” any continental with whom they came into contact. According to Tugwell, Puerto Ricans also possessed a “a tendency to exaggerate...the real poverty and the genuine dangers” of life under U.S. colonialism.¹⁵ In 1935, James Bourne remarked that although overcrowding in the island's shantytowns may have been a concern for many colonial officials, “unless extreme” this matter was “not objected to by the Puerto Ricans” who were “a naturally gregarious people” who, he believed, enjoyed living in overcrowded, squalid quarters. According to Bourne, it seemed that shantytown dwellers were unconcerned with what he perceived as intolerable living conditions “so long as the roof is rain-

¹³ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Puerto Rico," *Joint Hearings before the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions United States Senate and the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventieth Congress, 2nd Session on S.J. Res. 172 and H.J. Res. 333, A Bill for the Relief of Puerto Rico, December 10 and 11, 1928* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Printing Office, 1929), 48.

¹⁴ For more on the politics of difference and imperial rule, see historian Paul Kramer's study of U.S. imperial rule in the Philippines, *The Blood of Government*. The work examines what he describes as “the racial politics of empire” and the generation of “hierarchies of difference” which were used by the U.S. government to “legitimate and to organize invasion, conquest, and colonial administration” in the Philippines after the Spanish American War of 1898. Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (eBook: 2006), 2.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Puerto Rico," 40-41.

proof, as the weather is always mild.”¹⁶ According to Bourne and other officials, such conditions did not live up to continental living standards, however, and therefore it was up to federal officials to improve the lives of poor Puerto Ricans. FDR also seemed prone to believe that Puerto Ricans were somehow inherently unable to care for themselves. When Tugwell brought photos of the expanding El Fanguito shantytown to the president, FDR grew apoplectic, saying “damn it, he had told every Governor since he had been President that it was his business to clean up that disgrace to the flag.” Why, after nearly a decade had passed was Tugwell providing evidence “that it was many times worse than at the beginning? What was the matter,” the president asked, with Puerto Rico?¹⁷

In addition to focusing on Puerto Ricans’ purportedly pathetic nature and blithe acceptance of their living conditions, many continentals pointed to islanders’ robust fertility as being part of the cause of “slum” expansion and poverty. In the eyes of many U.S. colonial agents, Puerto Ricans seemingly could not control their propensity for reproducing. Historian Eileen J. Findlay notes that such beliefs were part of a long-standing discourse on behalf of American colonial agents in Puerto Rico who sought to reform “the sexual practices and definitions of the Puerto Rican poor” and impose heteronormative, moral standards to create a sense of “order” on the island. Findlay notes that such practices inscribed a sense of difference between the colonizers and the colonized as the former constructed “absolute moral oppositions between their ideas of themselves and their conceptions of Puerto Ricans.”¹⁸ Case in point came

¹⁶ “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator of the PRERA,” Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA), Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Surveys Section, Slum Clearance, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC.

¹⁷ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 126.

¹⁸ Eileen J. Findlay, “Love in the Tropics: Marriage, Divorce, and the Construction of Benevolent Colonialism in Puerto Rico, 1898-1910,” in *Close Encounters of Empire*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. Legrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 141.

with Tugwell's observation that one explanation for the spread of Puerto Rico's shantytowns lay in the fact that each year the island saw about 6,000 new families being created, 92 percent of which settled in the shantytowns where they squatted or paid little rent as they faced starvation and disease.¹⁹ Consequently, Puerto Rico was burdened with an "overpopulation" problem for which the state was obligated to find a solution.²⁰ If no solution was found, officials like FDR and Tugwell feared Puerto Rico's shantytowns would continue to expand and those who inhabited them would potentially become a constant burden on the U.S. welfare state, particularly if islanders chose to migrate to the United States.²¹ Tugwell recalled FDR demanding during an advisory meeting that "the frightening increase of the population be stopped." And so, the president hatched a plan to control the "future increase" of the Puerto Rican population.²² In 1935, FDR and his Puerto Rico advisors began to develop a two-pronged policy that included population control initiatives such as forced sterilization programs and government sponsored birth control clinics, as well as a plan to increase food supplies to the

¹⁹ Ibid., 126-127.

²⁰ One statistic provided by the Diffies states that by the 1930s the island's population stood at nearly 1.7 million people and for every square mile of land there were approximately 9,000 Puerto Ricans "who must be fed, clothed, housed...and educated. By comparison, most states on the mainland fared much better than their colonial counterpart in terms of population density. For example, South Carolina averaged about 55 people per square mile and Nevada, 80 percent of whose citizens lived in rural areas and whose per capita wealth was thirty times that of Puerto Rico, averaged about one person per square mile. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge*, 163.

²¹ Tugwell also argued that poor Puerto Ricans held a belief left over from the time of slavery that paying rent was "unjust." And so, according to his reasoning, most of them chose to move to shantytowns where often they could live for free. What Tugwell failed to note was that the majority of rural Puerto Rican workers were tied to an exploitative system of debt peonage. This system was marked by an arrangement in which rural families' housing was owned by plantation owners/employers who could hire and fire at will. In the event of unemployment, rural workers not only lost their jobs, but their housing as well. Although shantytown living conditions may frequently have been deplorable, housing in these neighborhoods was not tied to employment. In this way, living in shantytowns provided a degree of autonomy away from exploitative sugar corporations who controlled rural housing. Tugwell, *Stricken*, 126-127; Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 159-60.

²² The Roosevelt Administration's efforts to stem population growth in the 1930s was part of a global trend marked by various governments' efforts to dictate the parameters of national belonging based on exclusive determinants such as race and class. For more on this see: Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008) and Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Tugwell, *Stricken*, 126.

island, with the intent of curbing reproduction and improving the overall health of the existing population.²³

The population control measures proposed in Puerto Rico under the New Deal were rooted in the Social Darwinist and eugenics-based continental policies of the Progressive Era. For instance, according to historian Karen Miller, the era gave rise to many white continental reformers who, when responding to the influx of poverty-stricken black migrants to Detroit from the South, “blamed African Americans’ exceptional difficulties on black deficiencies” and consequently designed measures seeking to correct perceived faults rather than address “white supremacy or discrimination” as root causes of such difficulties.²⁴ Such views persisted in the early decades of the twentieth century and were a driving force behind U.S. expansion and imperial administration.²⁵ Officials’ views on reproduction in Puerto Rico during the depression are a testament to the fact that, U.S. progressivism and its organizing principles and goals were transnational in nature and did not disappear after the 1920s, the purported end point of progressivism. As Robyn Muncy notes about mainland progressivism, reformers may have seen setbacks after the 1920s, but “the embers of progressivism were smoldering” and its ideals “survived to shape the policies and institutions of the New Deal in the 1930s.”²⁶ Official attitudes about Puerto Rican reproductive rights were a case in point. Tugwell recalled that FDR’s thinking was in line with progressivist “social workers and others who came into close contact

²³ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 80, 107.

²⁴ Karen R. Miller, *Managing Inequality: Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 172-173.

²⁶ Robyn Muncy, *Relentless Reformer: Josephine Roche and Progressivism in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4. For more on the progressivist influences on New Deal policy-making, see: Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*; Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

with poor people: there were too many of them.” For FDR, “it was better to stop them at the source than to connive at the high death rate which is nature’s way of keeping a workable balance between numbers and resources.”²⁷ FDR, according to Tugwell’s recollection, was adamant that birth control and sterilization efforts were a preferable alternative to the potential burden placed on the U.S. welfare state by an uncontrolled, unhealthy population.²⁸ FDR, like other liberal U.S. reformers, believed population control measures such as compulsory sterilization for poor people, especially poor women of color (much like those applied in U.S. cities and in the South) were modernizing initiatives for Puerto Rico.²⁹ With such policies in place, they assumed that Puerto Rican society would achieve a degree of social progress not unlike what was seen in the cities of the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁰ Controlling reproduction would make working-class families healthy and less likely to fill city squatters’ settlements, thus improving the quality of life for Puerto Ricans and the island nation as a whole.³¹

Rexford Tugwell had mixed feelings about the President’s two-tiered plan. He agreed with FDR’s concerns over the booming island population and with the president’s measures to increase and diversify island food supplies. Tugwell argued, however, that state-sponsored population control policies were perhaps an affront to the tenets of the Catholicism which was widely practiced on the island. Reflecting on the issue in a memoir written in the late 1940s, he remarked that he was also concerned with “dysgenic probabilities” of FDR’s idea to increase the food supply while decreasing Puerto Rico’s population. In other words, he agreed with those

²⁷ Tugwell, *Stricken* 35-36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 99.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

who believed in a version of Social Darwinism known as “dysgenics” which eschewed state policies designed to enhance the well-being of the genetically inferior, working poor.³² To do so would promote the survival of the “worst human stock” at the expense of society’s fittest. If the Puerto Rican poor were well-fed and allowed to procreate, they would inhibit the proliferation of the more intelligent “better stock” and their abilities to make “contributions to the future population.”³³ Tugwell expressed similar views early in his career as a New Deal official, illustrating the underlying racialized fears of many U.S. policymakers who considered the potential implications of Puerto Rico’s growing population. In a 1934 letter to the Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, Tugwell remarked that it should be a high priority to “control the increase” resulting from Puerto Ricans’ “enormous fecundity.” He went on to warn that if population growth was not curbed in Puerto Rico, then the U.S. might face an immigration wave of “lowly...mulatto, Indian, Spanish people” who “make poor material for social organization.”³⁴ According to Tugwell, if the Puerto Rican population was allowed to continually expand, the result would be a mass migration of an undesirable ethnic group to the mainland not unlike what was seen at the turn of the century when millions of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe poured into the United States.³⁵

³² For more on dysgenics see: *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900-1945*, ed. Marius Turda (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Karen Weingarten, “The Inadvertent Alliance of Anthony Comstock and Margaret Sanger: Abortion, Freedom, and Class in Modern America,” *Feminist Formations*, 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 42-59.

³³ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 36

³⁴ Tugwell quoted in Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics*, 159-60.

³⁵ Tugwell’s concerns may have been compounded by the fact that Puerto Ricans, as American citizens, were able to freely migrate to and from the continental U.S. According to historian César Ayala, however, such fears were unfounded during the depression years as out-migration from Puerto Rico decelerated. The slowdown of migration to the mainland was largely due to the fact that high levels of poverty prevented many islanders from being able to afford the cost of travel combined with the fact that struggling mainland industries could not absorb migrant workers; César Ayala, “The Decline of the Plantation Economy and the Puerto Rican Migration of the 1950s,” *Latino Studies Journal*, 7, no. 1 (Winter, 1996), 6-7.

Tugwell's concerns about Puerto Rican migration likely stemmed from his educational background and the years he spent under the tutelage of economics professors who espoused beliefs in the detrimental or "dysgenic" effects of the late 19th century immigration boom on American racial purity. At the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, Tugwell had been a protégé of the radical economists and eugenics proponents, Scott Nearing and Simon Patten. As historian Thomas C. Leonard notes, the two economists were not alone in wedding economic theory to progressivist Social Darwinist thought. According to Leonard, during the early decades of the twentieth century, the "systematic use of biological, deterministic discourse to explain and to remedy, often using racial categories, the root causes of economic problems" was not uncommon and had "widespread intellectual and political influence."³⁶ Therefore, Tugwell's occasional racialized expressions of fear over an influx of Puerto Rican migrants to the continental U.S. might be traced to the fact that he came of age amidst the academic zeitgeist of the Progressive Era where the tenets of Social Darwinism and eugenics were pervasive.

Tugwell mentor Scott Nearing was a Marxist who made his contribution to the eugenics movement with the 1912 publication of a work titled *The Super Race*, which Leonard describes as, "a virtual museum piece of eugenicist thought."³⁷ For his part, Simon Patten theorized at the turn of the century that the "unfit" or genetically inferior members of American society (i.e., African Americans and the new immigrant population) were being allowed to reproduce and survive due to a higher standard of living made possible by the technological innovations of industry. Or in Patten's words, "every improvement which simplifies or lessens manual labor

³⁶ Thomas C. Leonard, "More Merciful and Not Less Effective': Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era," *History of Political Economy* 35, no. 4 (2003), 688.

³⁷ Leonard, "More Merciful and Not Less Effective': 706; Scott Nearing, *The Super Race: An American Problem* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1912).

increases the number of deficiencies which the laboring classes may possess without their being thereby overcome in the struggle for subsistence that the survival of the ignorant brings upon society.”³⁸ According to Patten’s assessment, increases in productivity and technology enabled the poor and the ignorant to bypass the natural selection process and draw resources away from societal elites.

In Patten’s opinion, social progress mattered more “than equality, and a nation must choose it at any cost”— anything less would be “suicide” for the white races.³⁹ He believed that to prevent racial suicide and overpopulation, it was up to the state to intervene with population control methods and work toward the “eradication of the vicious and inefficient.”⁴⁰ Unlike his mentors, however, Tugwell did not totally espouse the Malthusian notion that overpopulation resulted in a scarcity of resources that would make it more difficult to keep the fittest of the world alive. After spending time as a colonial official in Puerto Rico during the depression era, he came to believe that as long as private enterprise found a way release the flow of goods, “there would certainly be enough of everything for everybody.”⁴¹

Tugwell’s economic views along with his opinion that tampering with islanders’ reproductive rights would be an affront to the Catholic church were ignored by President Roosevelt. And so, to halt the exponential increase in Puerto Rico’s population and in turn the spread of its squatters’ settlements, at the end of the decade FDR and family planning advocates formalized birth control and compulsory sterilization policies on the island. On Friday May 14, 1937, Governor Blanton Winship signed a bill that was rooted in Progressive Era eugenics-based, family planning practices. The bill legalized the distribution of pessaries, and spermicidal

³⁸ Simon Patten Quoted in Leonard, 693-694.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 36.

foams and jellies through rural health clinics. It also legalized involuntary sterilization for the “insane,” for those requesting it on their own behalf, or for those women who were deemed “unfit” to procreate after a routine medical examination by government and private physicians, particularly in rural health clinics which served working class populations. Specifically, this latter category largely targeted poor women of color who were subject to the whims of physicians with regard to their bodily autonomy.⁴² The bill, which was backed by Winship, insular elites and a cadre of U.S. and Puerto Rican social workers (including James Bourne’s wife Dorothy), also established a Puerto Rican “eugenics board” (*La Junta Insular de Eugenesia*) which oversaw sterilization efforts and enforced regulations at their own discretion.⁴³ Winship publicly vowed in the Puerto Rican press to assist the board in determining its “powers and duties” as he viewed the project as a means to “improve the human race.”⁴⁴

Federal intervention into the realms of Puerto Rican reproduction in the 1930s, particularly government-sponsored birth control and population control measures, ran counter to how such policies were traditionally approached by federal officials on the continent during this era. Historian Ellen Chesler notes, that from the 1930s through the World War II era, officials tended to steer away from the topic of birth control altogether due to long-running controversy and dissent over women’s reproductive rights. As a result, according to Chesler, “timid politicians shied away from sexual controversy and refused to reform anachronistic obscenity laws.”⁴⁵ From the 1870s enactment of the Comstock Laws in the U.S.—laws concerned with the moral uplift of U.S. society— through the depression, the topic of birth control remained so

⁴² Eileen Findlay, *Imposing Decency*, 93; Briggs, *Reproducing*, 107; Bonnie Mass, “A Case Study of Population Control,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 4, No. 4 (Autumn 1977), 68.

⁴³ “Winship Signs Sterilizing Bill,” *The New York Times*, Saturday May 15, 1937.

⁴⁴ “Se Est Ablecera Una Junta Insular de Eugenesia: El Gobernador Winship Firmó Ayer Una Ley A Tales Efectos,” *El Mundo*, May 15, 1937, 5.

⁴⁵ Ellen Chesler, *Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 15.

controversial that federal officials were generally reluctant to discuss it and birth control and population control measures were generally left up to the states.⁴⁶ Contraceptives were viewed by the state as “obscene” materials and the shipping of such products across state lines was outlawed in 45 states until the repeal of the anti-obscenity-based Comstock Laws in 1965 with the *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court Decision.⁴⁷ According to historian Jennifer Nelson, in the years that followed, under Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, the federal government intervened in the realms of birth control and “population reduction” in earnest on the American continent. Such efforts were introduced in order to reduce poverty among poor people of color as they had been in Puerto Rico three decades earlier.⁴⁸ Historian Laura Briggs argues that the federal government’s intercession into the reproductive lives of Puerto Ricans during the 1930s was largely infused by a historical moment that was marked by “widespread poverty and hunger” and political instability, including the rise of a radical Nationalist Party, that threatened to topple the U.S. colonial regime. Federal officials were invested in controlling the reproduction of the Puerto Rican working class because doing so would ensure that enough resources would be made available to islanders who, in turn, would be healthier and more subdued, thus becoming less of a threat to the colonial status quo.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Iris Lopez argues that “a distinction needs to be made between birth control and population control” noting that “birth control” was “developed to meet women’s needs to space births and/or prevent pregnancy.” Lopez observes that when the state enters into the realms of birth control its efforts are largely designed to control populations, particularly those compromised of women of color. Iris Lopez, *Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Rights* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), xiii; Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 4, 8; See also: Constance M. Chen, *“The Sex Side of Life”: Mary Ware Dennett’s Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 160.

⁴⁷ Martha J. Bailey, “Fifty Years of Family Planning: New Evidence on the Long-Run Effects of Increasing Access to Contraception” (Brookings Institution, 2013), 344, 345; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4203450/>

⁴⁸ Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color*, 4.

⁴⁹ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing*, 75.

The state's intrusion into Puerto Ricans' bodily autonomy had roots dating back to the late 1800s. Eileen Findlay has argued that between 1870 and 1920, a disproportionate number of poor women of color, particularly those who worked as prostitutes, were targeted by government public health campaigns in Puerto Rico intended to eradicate sexually transmitted diseases that posed a threat to middle class, elite notions of Puerto Rican and American "decency." The forced hospitalization of "sexually suspicious women" in "hygiene hospitals" steadily increased over the course of the Progressive Era and these women were subject to a variety of "treatments" that included the use of toxic, if not lethal, substances such as mercury and arsenic.⁵⁰

1930s' U.S. policies concerning Puerto Rican reproductive control, particularly involuntary sterilization, emerged from eugenicist anxieties that had been prevalent in U.S. middle and upper class circles at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵¹ According to legal scholar Laura I. Appleman, the eugenics movement, which had gained traction in the U.S. in the early 1900s, "metastasized" in the 1920s and 1930s—a phenomenon that was enabled by the financial sponsorship of American titans of industry who were concerned with the genetic purity of the nation's population.⁵² As historian Rebecca M. Kluchin notes, during that era white middle and upper class Progressive eugenicists felt "besieged by the transformations to the world as they knew it" as they were faced with their own falling birth rates and the climbing birthrates of the purportedly genetically inferior and "less desirable," people of color and immigrant populations

⁵⁰ Eileen Findlay, *Imposing Decency*, 93.

⁵¹ In the early decades of the 20th century conversations were also being held among African American "moral uplift" progressivist activists who were also concerned with the social and genetic purity of their race. Such debates mirrored those being held among white progressive reformers who rooted their arguments in eugenics theory. As historian Michele Mitchell notes, elite "reform-minded black women and men" during this era "proceeded to contend that race progress was contingent upon eradicating vice, increasing the number of 'well-born' children, and monitoring sexuality" among poor African American communities in the United States. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 80.

⁵² Laura I. Appleman, "Deviancy, Dependency, and Disability: The Forgotten History of Eugenics and Mass Incarceration," *Duke Law Journal*, 68, no. 3 (December 2018), 443.

that were filling America's cities.⁵³ In the early decades of the century, a series of research facilities were founded by white eugenicists where quasi-scientific tests were conducted on human subjects to determine their social "fitness" and therefore their place on social, economic, and racial hierarchies. Funded by such American scions of industry as the Rockefellers, Carnegies, the Harrimans, and the Kelloggs, these research facilities became laboratories for determining the links between social fitness and genetic predisposition toward illnesses and behaviors such as "epilepsy, alcoholism, prostitution, criminality, illegitimacy, and sexual promiscuity" and "feeble-mindedness."⁵⁴ Their findings would lay the groundwork for criteria used in determining which citizens would be good candidates for compulsory sterilization programs which were instituted in institutions such as asylums and prisons between 1905 and 1922 in eighteen U.S. states. Eugenicists believed at the time that stemming the reproduction of "degenerate" populations, particularly poor populations of color, would, in turn, prevent the reproduction of social problems. This would ensure that the socially and biologically superior white race, particularly its upper classes, would stand a better chance at flourishing, which in turn would benefit society as a whole.⁵⁵ After the landmark Supreme Court case of *Buck v. Bell* (1927) determined that the State of Virginia's compulsory eugenics-based sterilization laws were constitutionally viable, sterilization programs were established in thirty states and in Puerto Rico by 1942. In the *Buck* decision, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes noted that "it is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."⁵⁶

⁵³ Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 12, 14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Oliver Wendell Holmes quoted in Kluchin, 16.

Holmes went on to write that it was the responsibility of the nation to stem the procreation of any U.S. citizen who might “sap the strength of the State.” The Court’s 8 to 1 endorsement of state sterilization measures would, according to Holmes, “prevent our being swamped with incompetence.”⁵⁷

As is evidenced by debates over Puerto Rican fertility during the depression, when continentals’ rationalizations fashioned Puerto Ricans as being culpable for their own plight their discourse sometimes had, by twenty-first century standards, questionable ethical implications when put into policy. There were others, however, who voiced their opposition to arguments about Puerto Ricans’ supposed culpability for their own problems, particularly when it came to matters of “overpopulation.” In 1930, the anti-imperialist historians Bailey and Justine Diffie argued against those who were “inclined to blame the Porto Ricans for being the main cause of their own misery.”⁵⁸ It was a comment directed at officials who believed that “if they would retard the natural increase in population the condition of the masses would improve.”⁵⁹ Drawing from U.S. Census data, the Diffies sought to challenge this underlying myth that Puerto Ricans had a propensity toward robust natural increase. They calculated that from 1920 to 1930, the

⁵⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. quoted in Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2016), 1-2.

⁵⁸ In his 1983 obituary on Dr. Bailey W. Diffie, historian Stuart B. Schwartz remarked that in the 1920s, Diffie had begun to investigate various Latin American countries due to his sense of “fair play and justice” and concerns over U.S. military and colonial interventions in the Western Hemisphere. Professor Diffie was described by Schwartz as having taken a keen and compassionate interest in those of his students who came from immigrant families, particularly those from Latin American countries, thus making him a “popular teacher.” Contrary to the other colonial observers discussed in this chapter, however, Bailey Diffie would move away from his 1930s defense of marginalized colonized groups, including Puerto Ricans, and toward a more conservative view of the “overpopulation” problem. Ten years after he and his wife published their report on Puerto Rico, *A Broken Pledge*, Bailey Diffie remarked in 1940 in a tone that was reminiscent of contemporary eugenicists and colonial birth control advocates that “Puerto Rico has a choice between a lower standard of living for more people, or a higher standard for fewer people. The time has arrived when she must use modern methods for selecting her population.” Stuart B. Schwartz, “Bailey W. Diffie (1902-1983),” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 63, no. 3 (August 1983): 593-595; American Council on Public Affairs, *Puerto Rican Problems* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1940), 12; Diffies, *A Broken Pledge*, 164.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

average increase in population in the states of New York and New Jersey was roughly 24.5 percent for the decade. During the same period, Puerto Rico saw an increase of only 18.8 percent, demonstrating that while the ratio of people to land might be an issue on the island, Puerto Ricans' reproductive habits were not. Although they agreed that Puerto Ricans' quality of life might improve with decreased population density, they asserted that since the large population already existed it "must be accepted as one of the difficulties to be met in working for better social conditions." Overpopulation, in their opinion, was not to be used as a "lame excuse" for the policy failures of the federal government in terms of providing proper housing and a living wage for the island working class.⁶⁰

As the 1930s wore on and class disparity widened on the island, as was evidenced by Puerto Rico's expanding shantytowns, it became increasingly difficult for continental observers like Rexford Tugwell to place blame solely on Puerto Ricans for the growing scale of their own poverty. Testimony given by stateside observers during this era offers a view into the conditions under which the bulk of islanders were living during the depression era, revealing colonialism's impacts on the day to day lives of Puerto Ricans and the granular, human details of island life among the poor as documented by continentals. Much of this evidence was intended to influence policy change. As seen earlier, several of these mainlanders had a tendency to make blanket assumptions about Puerto Ricans as a whole. It is through the observations of many of these same actors, however, that we also gain a nuanced understanding of the living conditions working-class islanders endured as a result of unchecked capitalism and metropolitan neglect. Their observations, made over the course of the 1930s, also demonstrate a shift in discourse away from the "problem" rhetoric which held Puerto Ricans liable for their own societal issues

⁶⁰ Ibid., 164-165.

and toward an examination of the failures of U.S. policy. While many of these observers employed rhetoric that essentialized islanders, they simultaneously grew increasingly aware of the structural issues that fostered island poverty and sought to include Puerto Ricans in New Deal welfare projects and socioeconomic reforms.

For instance, as he spent more time on the island over the course of the depression, Rexford Tugwell increasingly eschewed his beliefs that Puerto Ricans, as a purportedly inferior ethnic group, were undeserving of the full benefits of American citizenship. He grew to understand that it was the exploitative colonial system that prevented average islanders from achieving upward mobility and socioeconomic equality. Tugwell noted, that one result of this arrangement was that by the 1930s many Puerto Ricans harbored a deep-seated “resentment at the assumption of Anglo-Saxon superiority” and the class disparity brought on by “the system.”⁶¹ He explained further that like the relationship between the original thirteen colonies and Great Britain, the U.S. had fostered an exploitative mercantilist system under which Puerto Rico had become wholly dependent on the “mother country.” In exchange for its sugar exports, the island nation had no choice but to purchase its food and goods from the mainland at exorbitant prices which became harder to afford as the depression wore on. Puerto Rico was desperately in need of reform and relief, which, Tugwell observed, “Congress made Puerto Rico beg for, hard, and in the most revolting ways, as a beggar does on a church step, filthy hat in hand, exhibiting sores, calling and grimacing in exaggerated humility.”⁶² He came to believe that it was the responsibility of the United States “to make free people of Puerto Ricans, to give them self-government” without them having “to beg” for their rights.⁶³

⁶¹ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 40-41.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 45.

Tugwell's change in attitude was in no small part due to his encounters with the Puerto Rican people who recounted time and again to him how the unjust colonial system had impacted their lives. Tugwell spoke of their bitterness and the harshness of their living conditions, realities which initially caught him off guard when he first arrived on the island in 1934. By 1941, when he took over the governorship, he possessed an awareness that infused and transformed his beliefs about Puerto Ricans. He later recalled that he was "to begin with, taken by surprise to find that Puerto Ricans felt themselves badly treated by the United States." He went on to note that nearly every islander he met "spoke bitterly of our policy" and that he "heard of Yankee imperialism in such terms of hatred as could only originate in a penetrating fear."⁶⁴ The anti-imperialist sentiment seemed to be "alive and growing" during the depression years, particularly among the working classes who lived in island shantytowns. It was in these poor urban areas, Tugwell recalled, where the increasingly restive working classes "lived at subhuman levels" in houses made of "a few ill-assorted boards picked up from somewhere, eked out with flattened oil cans; their diet was rice, beans, dried fish, and never enough of these; they lived as they might, hosts to innumerable parasites, often burning and shivering with malaria." Tugwell went on to note that "all this belonged back in the Middle Ages" and not under the watch of one of the most powerful and wealthiest nations in the world.⁶⁵

As the socioeconomic situation worsened in Puerto Rico due to the lack of viable government relief policies during the depression, other eyewitness accounts written by those who worked for the federal government and by non-governmental operatives began to contain critiques of the colonial system similar to Tugwell's. Some of these critiques, such as those written by Bailey and Justine Diffie, were overt while others appeared in official reports that

⁶⁴ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

provided vivid descriptions of the abject poverty in Puerto Rico’s squatters’ settlements. That such descriptions exist is a testament to the intent of their authors to draw stateside attention to the impacts of colonialism on working-class Puerto Ricans—particularly when it came to the state of their homes and neighborhoods. Although others, like Tugwell, were fueled by sympathy for average Puerto Ricans, their desire for reform was tinged with alarm over the mounting anti-American unrest that threatened to topple U.S. colonial dominance. After bearing witness to the harsh realities of Puerto Rican society in the 1930s, many mainlanders began to call for changes to the colonial system via policies that would directly impact working class Puerto Ricans and thus include them, as American citizens, in the New Deal project.⁶⁶

Rexford Tugwell summed up the impetus for reformation of the colonial order when he noted that he rarely met a mainlander who said ““well, it’s not half as bad as I was told!”” after “actually coming to Puerto Rico, and being around for a day or two, [and] seeing the worst there was to see.”⁶⁷ Tugwell and others saw Puerto Rican shantytowns expanding across the island’s urban and rural areas, across its mud flats and up its hill sides. As the squatters’ settlements grew, they became a source of embarrassment for continental officials and a constant reminder of U.S. policy failures. Tugwell admitted that from the first time he traveled to Puerto Rico in 1934, he began to feel self-conscious about his own privilege and embarrassed by the injustices perpetrated in Puerto Rico under the American flag—injustices that could be seen in island shantytowns. It was a sense of guilt that, in part, inspired him to partake in New Deal relief efforts and later to accept his appointment to the island’s governorship in 1941.⁶⁸ As he noted,

⁶⁶ For more on the progressivism, particularly the racial progressivism, of federal officials who believed that the New Deal could offer an egalitarian vision and racial justice for marginalized American citizens please see: Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

over the course of the 1930s, he had “acquired a sense of shame which, if I could convey it to my fellow citizens, would, I think, result in ending a long-standing injustice, perpetrated unthinkingly, against all conscience and principle.”⁶⁹

Tugwell’s assertion that continental assumptions and attitudes could be transformed by witnessing Puerto Rican poverty was well-illustrated by Eleanor Roosevelt’s reaction to the San Juan shantytowns she visited in 1934. After her trip to the island, she subsequently issued critiques of the absentee U.S. corporations that fostered island class disparity and poverty. Beyond placating the restive island masses, her high-profile visit and reportage to the continental audiences also signaled the desire of the Roosevelt administration to draw the public’s attention to the fact that Puerto Rico, a part or “possession” of the United States, was in dire need of federal intervention.

Newspaper accounts of Roosevelt’s trip emphasized her popularity among the Puerto Rican people while also highlighting her renowned capacity for empathy. On March 9, as the First Lady toured San Juan, a contingent of Puerto Rican housewives lined the streets waving pieces of pork that had been distributed by the PRERA. According to a reporter from the *Baltimore Sun*, the women “wished to show their appreciation” for government supplied food rations. Surrounded by adoring islanders, Roosevelt then marveled over an experimental PRERA house that had been constructed out of “castoff oil tins, barrels, sugar cane, cocoanut shells [sic], gourds, and mango palms.” But, running contrary to reports of Eleanor Roosevelt’s kindness, reporters also documented a particular incident that revealed a more calloused side of the First Lady’s personality that emerged as she came face-to-face with the most desperate of the island’s poor. The *Sun* reporter recounted that at one point during the day, Roosevelt was approached by

⁶⁹ Ibid., 45.

a beggar who “tried to tell her his life story, but she refused to listen, saying later that if she started giving money to wayside beggars the thing would never end.” Later that day, Mrs. Roosevelt remarked to reporters that so far she had “seen the best and the worst” Puerto Rico had to offer including “urban homes” that would rival any New York tenement. She continued by saying that during her quick tour she had “found children as a whole less undernourished” than she had anticipated.⁷⁰ The fact that Mrs. Roosevelt anticipated seeing malnourished Puerto Rican children indicated that she had received information about the dire conditions on the island prior to her trip and that at least some high ranking policy makers in D.C. were well aware of the dismal socioeconomic circumstances plaguing Puerto Rico.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s initial belief in the relative prosperity of Puerto Ricans would be challenged on the second day of her trip when she visited the El Fanguito and La Perla shantytowns of San Juan. According to reporter Ruby Black, Mrs. Roosevelt was so outraged by the deplorable conditions she witnessed in the working-class neighborhoods that she made a point to drag members of the American press “across rickety catwalks over a dank swamp to little houses built out of the debris” created by the San Felipe and San Ciprián hurricanes. As she toured the area, she was trailed by a group of sickly, naked children, wild dogs, and pigs as her guide informed her that at least 82 percent of the island’s population of 1.6 million had applied for government assistance but that only one-third of the applicants had received some minor form of relief by the time of her visit.⁷¹ By comparison, in 1934, the continental U.S. population was 126 million people, an estimated 25 percent of which (or 31.5 million people) applied for federal relief funds. Of this number of applicants roughly 53 to 63 percent (between 17 and 20

⁷⁰ “Women Wave Pork at Mrs. Roosevelt: Puerto Rican Housewives Use Meat Given By Government to Show Appreciation,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1934, 3.

⁷¹ “Mrs. Roosevelt Walks Through San Juan Slums: Followed by Naked Children,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 11, 1934, 12.

million people) received government relief, primarily through direct relief under the FERA and employment programs.⁷² At one point, according to a reporter from the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, she ordered photographers to take pictures of the dilapidated homes and a festering pool of water that was covered with flies, asking them to “show really what it was like.” She was taken to the shack of a tuberculosis victim who had not eaten for a week due to “a change in the relief reporting forms in Washington.” Soon after, the First Lady left the shantytown in an indignant mood, noting that what she had witnessed was “about the most unhealthy conditions one possibly could find on the outskirts of a city.” She went on to demand that Governor Winship come up with a plan to clean up the squatters’ settlements “promptly.”⁷³

With a note of paternalism, the First Lady also remarked that she was “deeply touched” by the cleanliness of settlement shacks as well as the “amazing self-respect” of residents and the hospitality she received on her visit. Ruby Black concurred that Mrs. Roosevelt was “astounded” by the “cleanliness of the people...because of the enormous difficulties with which it was maintained” amidst all of the mud.⁷⁴ As the two women witnessed firsthand, such difficulties included Puerto Rican women lugging five-gallon buckets of fetid water up a steep hill in order to mop the floors of their homes. According to Black, these hygienic practices were assumed by Mrs. Roosevelt to be uncommon among Caribbean shantytown dwellers based on what she had seen during her stay in the Virgin Islands where, in her opinion, citizens had displayed no such

⁷² By comparison, in 1934, the continental U.S. population was 126 million people, an estimated 25 percent of which (or 31.5 million people) applied for federal relief funds. Of this number of applicants roughly 53 to 63 percent (between 17 and 20 million people) received government relief, primarily through direct relief under the FERA and employment programs. U.S. Social Security Administration, Committee on Economic Security, “The Need for Economic Security in the United States, 1934,” <https://www.ssa.gov/history/reports/ces/cesvol9theneed.html>; The National Archives, “Family Experiences and New Deal Relief, The Correspondence Files of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 1933-1936,” <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2012/fall/fera.html>.

⁷³ “Mrs. Roosevelt Walks Through San Juan Slums: Followed by Naked Children,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 11, 1934, 12.

⁷⁴ Ruby Black, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 296-297.

penchant for cleanliness.⁷⁵ Black concluded by saying that working-class Puerto Ricans won the First Lady's favor due to their ability to stay clean in spite of "overwhelming unemployment, far too many people" and the "absentee ownership, which took the island's wealth to the American continent."⁷⁶

In the immediate aftermath of her visit, Eleanor Roosevelt's participation in reforming Puerto Rico's socioeconomic situation seemed to stall. Nevertheless, Mrs. Roosevelt was for a very brief time insistent on drawing official attention to Puerto Rican living conditions and including the island in the depression-era national recovery project. As historian Thomas Mathews notes, upon returning to Washington, the First Lady presented her husband with a series of reports on Puerto Rico she hoped would influence his policy making in subsequent months—particularly within the realms of "slum eradication" and low-income housing.⁷⁷ She achieved a minor success in this regard when her advocacy led to the establishment of two low-income housing projects in Puerto Rico. The first of these projects, which will be discussed in a later chapter, was built in San Juan in 1936 and was named in her honor. The second project, located in Ponce, was named for the composer and *danza* pioneer Juan Morell Campos.⁷⁸ In the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Mathews, 163.

⁷⁸ In terms of architecture, the projects might best be described as being built in a design that incorporated both Spanish Colonial and Art Deco elements—an aesthetic choice that reflected the cultural hybridity of Puerto Rico's colonial environment during the 1930s. Taking this a step further, the choice to incorporate Spanish Colonial design elements might be seen as a deliberate attempt to placate a growing Nationalist movement which valorized Puerto Rico's Spanish colonial past. As Gwendolyn Wright has argued, public architecture projects have long provided a means for metropolitan social control over colonial subjects. Combining modern and traditional design elements was a means for metropolises to both signal progress and power as well as demonstrating a "responsiveness to local history and culture" intended to foster allegiance among colonial subjects. Luz Marie Rodríguez, "New Deal communities for Puerto Rico: The urban housing projects of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," (MA thesis, Department of Architecture, Mississippi State University, 1994), 155; Gwendolyn Wright, "Tradition in the Service of Modernity: Architecture and Urbanism in French Colonial Policy, 1900-1930," in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds. *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 325.

aftermath of her visit, however, the First Lady's advocacy did little to feed and house the hundreds and thousands of displaced poor people in Puerto Rico.⁷⁹

Lack of meaningful accomplishments aside, according to Black, the First Lady had spent enough time in Puerto Rico to become aware of why the New Deal programs weren't having the desired effect on the island and why Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements were growing. In an October 1934 article titled "Our Island Possessions," which she wrote for the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine, Mrs. Roosevelt noted that Puerto Rico's increasing population could not be sustained with island-grown crops despite the agricultural advances implemented on the island.⁸⁰ The First Lady also highlighted the fact that Puerto Rico's coffee, citrus, and coconut production had never been able to fully recover from the damage incurred by the San Felipe and San Ciprián hurricanes. As a result, she said, unemployed and hungry Puerto Ricans "have gone from the rural districts into the outskirts of the cities where dangerous slums have been formed."⁸¹ In conclusion, she called on her female readership to take "a more intelligent interest in our beautiful possession" and its people who "have been buffeted by nature and exploited by man."⁸² As Ruby Black noted, during her short stay, Mrs. Roosevelt became acquainted with the hold U.S. sugar corporations had over Puerto Rico. While there, the First Lady observed the poverty brought on by the "machinations of powerful financial interests" that had made it exceedingly difficult to remedy the island's class disparity.⁸³ Such awareness was not enough to spur the further involvement of the First Lady on behalf of Puerto Rico, however. In apologetic tones, Ruby Black explained that insular political gridlock, domestic congressional opposition to

⁷⁹ The Living New Deal, "Hurricane-Proof Housing—San Juan, PR," <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/hurricane-proof-housing-san-juan-pr/>

⁸⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Our Island Possessions," in *Woman's Home Companion*, October 1934. <https://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/d/154/wwh.html>

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Black, Eleanor Roosevelt, 297; Mathews, 156.

a Puerto Rican New Deal, and the 1,800 miles separating Washington from the island prohibited Roosevelt from making any meaningful efforts beyond her visit in March of 1934.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the *New York Times* reported that the First Lady's visit to Puerto Rico was a resounding success at least in terms of its diplomatic impact. According to reporter Harwood Hull, this was in part due to Mrs. Roosevelt's innate charm and frankness, which served to win over the citizens of Puerto Rico, "which frequently suffers a kind of 'suburban' sensitiveness because of its distance from the continental United States." Like other continental observers, Hull also drew attention to contemporary debates over Puerto Rico's "overpopulation" problem, citing local island elites who also contributed to such conversations. He went on to quote a Puerto Rican reformer named Juana Clavell de Cintron who believed that the island's socioeconomic problems were caused by the robust fertility of the island's working classes. Clavell de Cintron implored the First Lady to make a "deep and thorough study of prevailing conditions" on the island "with the ultimate purpose of eradicating the evils of our overpopulation and consequent curse of sexual promiscuity among the ignorant and unfortunate of our island population."⁸⁵ Clavell de Cintron's views on the purported promiscuity of poor Puerto Ricans echoed those of other middle class island reformers, U.S. officials, business interests, and social workers who alternately viewed the island's booming population as an asset or a liability.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the large number of people living in Puerto Rico provided a ready-made, exploitable workforce for U.S. corporations, while on the other, it also posed a problem in terms of its draw on resources. As the crises of San Felipe, San Ciprián, and the Great

⁸⁴ Black, 297.

⁸⁵ Harwood Hull, "Island is Inspired by Mrs. Roosevelt," *The New York Times*, Sunday March 18, 1934, 8E.

⁸⁶ For more on the role of middle-class Puerto Rican reformers in combatting the purported promiscuity of working-class islanders, particularly people of color in the early twentieth century, see Eileen J. Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Depression revealed, if colonial economic and political policies failed to change, there would continue to be a lack of jobs, housing, and food to adequately take care of Puerto Rico's struggling population.

By 1935, after two years on the island, it became apparent that PRERA Director James Bourne was also undergoing a transformation in terms of his beliefs about Puerto Ricans and what they endured under colonialism. A testament to this transformation was the graphic report he wrote that year about the state of island "slums." Moved by the poverty he witnessed, he sent his findings to his superiors back in the states with the hopes of winning support for low-cost housing programs and "slum eradication" projects. Bourne's report contained a barbed critique of the colonial system that fostered such conditions, and it speaks to his belief that the horrible situation working-class islanders found themselves in was not of their own making. In the middle of his "slum" analysis, he concludes that since 90 percent of the population of 1,600,000 was living below poverty level, "the entire blame for the existence of slums cannot be laid at [their] door." The majority of the island's working class was struggling and living in wretched conditions, according to Bourne, because they existed and operated within a colonial system that fostered class disparity that became more apparent during times of economic crisis.

Bourne's report reads like a journalistic exposé of how colonialism impacted the day to day living conditions of the Puerto Rican poor. At the report's start it is clear that Bourne felt daunted by the assignment at hand as he noted the pervasiveness of Puerto Rico's shantytowns. In an attempt to provide a baseline for comparison between the "slums" and regular low-income neighborhoods he defined the former as an area marked by "overcrowding, disrepair, lack of modern facilities and sanitation, and the poverty of the inhabitants." He provided gradations in his definition stating that, although some areas may have had certain amenities such as water and

power, due to the lack of sanitation they still might be considered to be “among the worst of slums.” He was forced to admit, however, that these conditions were so widespread on the island that it was difficult to determine the difference between “slums” and regular working-class neighborhoods. And, he noted, since every one of the island’s 77 municipalities had one or more shantytowns, the scope of his investigation had become too overwhelming for him to provide local statistics.

In order to ascertain which areas would be considered high priority locations for “slum eradication” and housing projects Bourne devised a classification system that ranked Puerto Rico’s “slums” from what he considered to be the most to the “least objectionable.” The worst or most “virulent slums,” categorized by Bourne as Class I, were built on “low, muddy land” with no drainage and “constant standing water.” Because the land underneath Class II “slums” proved drier due to natural drainage, they were considered “less objectionable” in spite of overflowing latrines and high population density. Class III “slums” were viewed by Bourne as the least objectionable type as they were marked by better building construction, less overcrowding, and more sanitary latrines. He goes on to say, however, that categorizing squatters’ settlements proved somewhat elusive as some of the criteria he used were not, in his opinion, the same as those used by the Puerto Rican poor to define the areas in which they lived.⁸⁷ It is not entirely clear what Bourne meant by this last statement, but it is possible that he was asking his readers to consider the possibility that, as a U.S. official, his system for defining “slums” might not correspond with how Puerto Ricans experienced their own living conditions.

⁸⁷ “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator of the PRERA,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Surveys Section, Slum Clearance, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC.

San Juan's El Fanguito (which translates as "the little mud") was one of the largest and more "virulent" Class I "slums" on the island according to Bourne's criteria. Built over the Martín Peña Channel—a tidal channel which is to this day, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, still clogged with the "refuse and debris" and "raw sewage" of El Fanguito residents—the shantytown contained tens of thousands of "precariously constructed" workers' shacks housing displaced residents in the 1930s.⁸⁸ Like the majority of Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements, El Fanguito's inhabitants lived on plots owned by the municipality or large land holders. By Bourne's estimate, approximately 43 of Puerto Rico's 77 municipalities owned land dedicated to these so-called "workmen's wards" and it was extremely rare that occupants owned the house and the land they lived on.⁸⁹

Bourne was intent on highlighting the fact that those who did not settle on municipal land rented from large landowners who profited from the plight of the migrant poor who often had no choice but to settle on their property. Landowners charged an average of \$1-4 per month for renting or constructing shacks on their property, which sometimes proved to be a cost prohibitive option for those residents who were living at or below poverty level.⁹⁰ Slumlords often provided no amenities and frequently raised rents without warning. Those unable to pay were promptly evicted and forced to remove their shack if they happened to own it. If a tenant could not remove their home, landlords would purchase the structure at a fraction of its worth and rent it to the next desperate person.⁹¹ This land-rent system, which is to some extent still in use today, also benefitted municipal governments who collected taxes on "slumlords'" land and occupants'

⁸⁸ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Urban Waters and the Caño Martín Peña (Martín Peña Channel, Puerto Rico)," <https://www.epa.gov/urbanwaterspartners/urban-waters-and-cano-martin-pena-martin-pena-channel-puerto-rico>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

homes. Undoubtedly, urban “slumlords” and municipal officials' ability to exploit working-class housing needs to their own financial advantage left little incentive for reforming the system.⁹²

Bourne observed that in San Juan’s El Fanguito and other “slums,” plumbing and running water were scarce. As a result, residents were forced to use public latrines, which Bourne describes as “ramshackle backhouses” shared by up to forty men, women, and children who were forced to do their business within plain view of each other. Overcrowding and lack of proper drainage was a constant danger to public health in urban “slum” areas. Further compromising the already precarious health of El Fanguito’s residents was the fact that the outhouses were built over open cesspools through which the users have to pass to get to the latrine itself.⁹³ As a result, compromised health and mortality were common issues in the day to day lives of shantytown dwellers.⁹⁴

⁹² “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC; The American National Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster, September, 1928: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Florida” (Washington, D.C., 1929), 32, 37; The U.S. War Office, *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1929* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929), 13, 15, 20, 35; “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator,” Records of the PRRA, NARA NYC; Florian Urban, “La Perla—100 Years of Informal Architecture in San Juan, Puerto Rico,” *Planning Perspectives*, 2015, Vol. 30, no. 4: 495-536.

⁹³ “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator,” Records of the PRRA, RG 323, NARA NYC; The American Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 7, 32, 37; “Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1929,” 13, 15, 20, 35.

⁹⁴ Statistics reveal that Puerto Ricans encountered disease and death at alarming rates during the depression years. According to the U.S. Census, in 1932 alone there were over 35,000 deaths caused by malnutrition and tuberculosis with thousands of other fatalities brought on by whooping cough, typhoid, influenza, diphtheria, malaria, diarrhea, and gastroenteritis. By the start of the 1930s, over all death rates in Puerto Rico, figured in proportion to its population, were estimated to be roughly four and a half times more than those seen in the United States. The relationship between overcrowding, lack of sanitary services, and the poor health of Puerto Rican shantytown dwellers was not a new phenomenon. For instance, during the decades that were bookmarked by the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico and the Great Depression, the poverty-stricken residents of San Juan’s Puerta de Tierra and Santurce neighborhoods endured a prolonged outbreak of the bubonic plague. Ann Zulawski, “Environment, Urbanization, and Public Health: The Bubonic Plague Epidemic of 1912 in San Juan, Puerto Rico,” *Latin American Research Review*, 53, no. 3 (September 2018): 512; Diffie, 5; The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “Mortality Statistics, 1932: Thirty-Third Annual Report” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1932), 470-473, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsushistorical/mortstatsh_1932.pdf.

In February of 1935, as his position as head of the PRERA was drawing to a close, James Bourne offered a solution for the “slum” and housing crisis plaguing Puerto Rico. Although he had been critical of the systemic socioeconomic issues that led to Puerto Rico’s swelling squatters’ settlements, his proposed remedy was one that would directly impact shantytown dwellers rather than create long-term solutions for island poverty. First, he called for condemning “slum” dwellings and neighborhoods in urban areas on the grounds of poor sanitation. After this first step, he recommended that the federal government take the land by eminent domain and relocate shantytown dwellers off-site. Shantytown land would then be drained and filled, and low-cost housing would be constructed to house the poor. He estimated that in order to house the majority of shantytown dwellers, the government would need to construct 30,000 low-cost units to meet the housing needs of roughly 165,000 persons at a cost of \$750 per unit (resulting in an estimated cost of \$22.5 million). However, because the cost of draining and filling land and constructing housing might not be cost effective, he also proposed an alternate plan to relocate shantytown dwellers to unspecified locations and abandon the land altogether.⁹⁵ Considering the fact that about 225,000 people remained unhoused on the island in 1935, Bourne’s calculations fell far short of what was needed to provide adequate housing for over 60,000 islanders.

The assessments of the role U.S. colonial policy played in generating Puerto Rican poverty made by Bourne, Tugwell, and the First Lady were echoed by the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. After a visit to the island in 1936 when Ickes also toured the island shantytowns, he admitted publicly that the insular and federal governments who fell under the

⁹⁵ “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator of the PRERA,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, RG 323, NARA NYC.

sway of U.S. sugar corporations were to blame for Puerto Rican poverty. Ickes called for the immediate enforcement of the 500-acre Law and the insular government's even-handed implementation of New Deal policies such as housing initiatives. According to the *New York Times*, after making his way through the “slime-sloshed streets” of San Juan’s squatters’ settlements, Ickes became adamant in his belief that “breaking up of large land holdings” was “fundamental to the island’s economic betterment” and would be carried out “regardless of any and all opposition.”⁹⁶ Ickes also believed that by opening up the possibility of land and home ownership to the Puerto Rican laborers—95% of whom were landless at this time—the steady sprawl of Puerto Rico's shantytowns might be stopped.⁹⁷

The changing attitudes of these continental observers mirrored those of anti-imperialists who had criticized U.S. policy in Puerto Rico since the start of the depression. For instance, in their 1931 work *A Broken Pledge*, historians Bailey and Justine Diffie, offered assessments intended to draw attention to U.S. imperialism’s effect the lives of average Puerto Ricans. Before the full impacts of the depression had even taken hold, they concluded that in addition to the matter of island lands being held by absentee sugar corporations and island “political rights resting in the hands of the United States Government,” Puerto Rico’s problems were the result of a type of uneven cultural enmeshment produced by the colonial system.⁹⁸ After interviewing average Puerto Ricans for their study, the Diffies came to believe that islanders were experiencing a type of cultural identity transformation as Puerto Rico sat at a crossroads between its Spanish colonial heritage and that of its most recent colonizer. According to the Diffies, it was nearly impossible for Puerto Ricans to avoid assimilation into the mainland U.S. cultural and

⁹⁶ “Ickes to Enforce Puerto Rican Law,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 1936, 3; “Ickes Tours Puerto Rico: Secretary of Interior Says He Expects Roosevelt’s Re-election,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1936, 11.

⁹⁷ Harold Ickes quoted in Mathew, *Puerto Rican Politics*, 263.

⁹⁸ Diffie, 220.

economic realms since Puerto Rican society began operating under the U.S. colonial system three decades prior. In the Diffie's opinion, in a cultural and economic sense, Puerto Rico could "hope for no relief under the existing system" until the system experienced a massive overhaul and Puerto Ricans ceased to be dominated by the United States.⁹⁹

The Diffies observed that such dominance manifested itself in the facts of Puerto Ricans' daily lives. Puerto Rican workers were hired or fired by metropolitan sugar corporations and were required to eat food imported from the U.S. The beds Puerto Ricans slept on, needle workers' sewing machines, cane workers' machetes, radios, radio stations and programs, the rum they drank, the land they lived on, cash registers, tires, petroleum, railroads, fabric, bus lines, ships, telegraphs, telephones, building supplies, farm machinery, newspapers, photography equipment and motion pictures—all of these necessities, entertainments, and amenities, were controlled or tied to American corporations or their proxies in some way, shape, or form.¹⁰⁰ Along the same lines, Farm Security Administration photographer Jack Delano remarked to his boss Roy Stryker, that "no sooner do you land" in Puerto Rico "than you become immediately aware of the fact that this is an American colony." On his first trip there in 1941, he marveled at the ubiquity of American cars, department stores, Coca Cola, and "Palm Beach-suited American businessmen walking the streets" along with young men in U.S. military uniforms. He reported that "almost every day a native orchestra, in curious Latin-American rhythm, blares forth over the radio the romantic strains of God Bless America."¹⁰¹ By the 1930s, Puerto Ricans had been overwhelmed by mainland culture while being denied the full benefits of American citizenship.

⁹⁹ Diffie, 220, 128.

¹⁰⁰ By law, under the 1917 Jones Act, it was also stipulated that any imports and exports be carried on U.S. registered ships. Diffie, 128-129.

¹⁰¹ "Jack Delano to Roy Stryker, December 7, 1941," Farm Security Administration microfilm, roll 25, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The accounts of the Diffies and Delano convey the fact that, despite the fact that islanders were able to maintain many aspects of their own culture, it took only three decades of U.S. occupation for Puerto Ricans to find themselves at the mercy of a U.S. colonial apparatus that had a vested interest in maintaining cultural, economic, and political dominance. While American culture had permeated island society, its democratic and economic rights had not.

A failure to extend these rights led to unrest among the island's agricultural and industrial workers by mid-decade of the 1930s. Rexford Tugwell took note of this unrest. In addition to his indictment of the "system," his motivation for federal intervention was also informed by his concerns over a potential revolution and its economic effects on the imperial order. From 1933 through 1935, acts of violence, riots and massive strikes became commonplace on the island.¹⁰² In October of 1933, Governor Robert Gore reported that a bomb had exploded at his summer home in Jajome, Puerto Rico and another bomb was found outside of his office window at the Fortaleza Mansion.¹⁰³ The governor also received an unsigned letter threatening to poison him and his family. Workers in the textile, stevedore, needlework, machine operator, tobacco, taxi, and sugar industries were constantly on strike and boycotts were called against American corporations and utility companies. Governor Blanton Winship reported that in 1934 alone there were 123 labor strikes and "controversies" involving 72,675 workers. On New Year's Eve of that year, protestors seeking lower utility costs cut the transmission wires at the Mayagüez power

¹⁰² The widespread labor unrest in Puerto Rico during this period mirrored that on the mainland. In particular, 1934 proved to be one of the biggest years for strikes and lockouts in U.S. history. Nearly 1.5 million U.S. continental workers in the textile, mining, food and transportation, longshoremen, and other industries took part in roughly 2,000 labor actions in 1934, or double the amount of strikes for the year of 1929 (which saw the next highest amount of strikes in U.S. History). U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics., "Analysis of Strikes and Lockouts in 1934 and Analysis for September 1935," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 2.

¹⁰³"Bomb Damages Gore's Home: Puerto Rico Governor Also Reveals Poison Plot Letter," *The Washington Post*, October 26, 1933, 12. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Analysis of Strikes and Lockouts in 1934 and Analysis for September 1935" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 2

company, leaving the entire western half of the island in darkness for several days.¹⁰⁴ Many of these collective actions were the product of a collaboration between wildcat labor organizations and the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party under Pedro Albizu Campos, who had been calling for independence from the United States for over a decade.¹⁰⁵

The sometimes-violent rise of the 1930s Puerto Rican labor movement alarmed officials like Tugwell who had concrete reason to believe that there was potential for a working-class insurrection or a hasty land-grab that might overturn or destabilize the status quo. Further government intervention in Puerto Rico would be optimal, Tugwell argued, because in his view uprisings against land holders, such as those seen in Russia and Mexico, had resulted in a spoils system that benefitted elite revolutionaries rather than the population at large. Ever the economist, he was also concerned that should rapid land redistribution or a revolution happen on the island, it might lead to a lack of "productivity" in the agrarian sectors, which in turn would affect sugar exports and profits.¹⁰⁶ Tugwell observed that "there had never been a case in the long history of seizure and division in which efficiency had been maintained under the new system." The end result, according to Tugwell, was usually a dramatic increase in production costs that diminished profits.¹⁰⁷ So, as much as he criticized the colonial system in Puerto Rico, Tugwell's rhetoric exposed his desire to keep some aspects of it in place so as to not upset the status quo too quickly. Tugwell's solution was to implement slower-paced, rather than immediate or radical, government-sponsored rural housing and land reform policies that would

¹⁰⁴ "Puerto Rico Partly Dark As Strikers Cut Wires: Transmission Lines Torn Down As Aftermath of Consumers' Boycott," *The Baltimore Sun*, January 1, 1934, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 102–103; Department of the Interior, *Thirty-fifth Governor's Report*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Rexford G. Tugwell, "Report on the Five Hundred-Acre Law, 1940," in *Puerto Rican Public Papers of R.G. Tugwell*, Governor (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 310-311.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

shrink island shantytowns, subdue the island masses, and foster their allegiance to the United States.

On his first trip to Puerto Rico, in 1934, Rexford Tugwell had witnessed a part of the process that led to the exodus of rural Puerto Ricans into urban squatters' settlements. It was a sight that inspired him to call for the aforementioned reforms. On a decrepit plantation in the mountain region, he grew incredulous at the sight of farm workers deforesting the countryside. It was an event that prompted him to ask his guide Puerto Rico's Commissioner of Agriculture, Rafael Menendez Ramos, why they saw fit to cut down the shade trees so necessary for coffee cultivation. Menendez explained that after coffee markets collapsed in the wake of San Felipe and agricultural workers lost their jobs, the desperate laborers had turned to using the trees to make cooking charcoal for their own use or to sell for cash. In doing so, they prevented the very crop on which their livelihoods depended from growing in the future. And so, according to Tugwell, the plantation had been turned into a barren wasteland of "mere brush" which would soon be abandoned as unemployed laborers made their way to cities.¹⁰⁸

On the same trip Tugwell also witnessed scores of homeless agricultural workers wandering the countryside, a sight that prompted him to ask Menendez where the people were going. The commissioner replied, "You saw El Fanguito, La Perla, and the other slums"—they had nowhere to turn except for the working-class neighborhoods growing on the outskirts of San Juan, Mayaguez, Ponce, and other cities. Tugwell would soon come to understand that "this was an island," where "migrations were short enough to be seen. The people had washed down out of the hills along with their soil and come to rest in the slums."¹⁰⁹ And yes, Tugwell had seen the island's notorious "slums." The wretched conditions he witnessed, along with his fears of

¹⁰⁸ Tugwell, *The Stricken Land*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

revolution, prompted him to call on FDR for the immediate creation of a resettlement agency in Puerto Rico and the construction of 5,000 homes in the countryside to house displaced rural families.¹¹⁰

San Juan's El Fanguito, the shantytown rated as a Class I "slum" by James Bourne and where Eleanor Roosevelt visited with a line of reporters in tow, was described by many continental observers as one of the worst the island had to offer. The FSA photographer Jack Delano recalled El Fanguito as an area where more than "20,000 people had built flimsy homes of scrap lumber on an enormous stretch of swampland" with no electricity or sewage services.¹¹¹ After visiting El Fanguito, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes confided to his diary that it was "...the worst [he] had ever seen. Open sewage runs through the streets and around the buildings...the children play in the sewage, which in many cases is covered with a thick green scum."¹¹² Rexford Tugwell observed that El Fanguito always seemed to be expanding "...in a seemingly endless spread of squalor...the tide lifted the piles of garbage and deposited them again, in the same place, twice daily."¹¹³ This was due to the fact that, like other coastal squatters' settlements, El Fanguito was built on top of a tidal plain forcing residents to build their shacks on stilts in order to avoid the daily influx of dirty water. Homes hovered two to three feet above the high tide mark, connected by crude plank bridges that snaked their way through the ward above trash-filled water. The rising tide and the debris it carried with it frequently

¹¹⁰ Tugwell's suggestion fell in line with other New Dealers including Roosevelt himself who hoped to foster political coalition building and support for social welfare policies. In turn, the results of social welfare projects, such as home construction and natural conservation efforts, offered tangible evidence of the efficacy of Roosevelt's policies in the quotidian lives of the American people, thus fostering allegiance to Roosevelt and to the U.S. state in general during the depression. For more on coalition building see: Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mathews, 159.

¹¹¹ Jack Delano, *Photographic Memories* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 81.

¹¹² Harold Ickes quoted in Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics*, 263.

¹¹³ Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land*, 55, 73.

prevented many residents from going to and from their homes. It was not uncommon to witness inhabitants wading through waist-high, dirty water in order to get from one place to another.¹¹⁴ Numerous photographs taken in El Fanguito by Jack Delano show a plethora of discarded tires, produce boxes, and boards which were used as makeshift steppingstones to help residents avoid contact with lingering puddles of raw sewage at low tide. In this case, what may have seemed like “garbage” to outside observers like Tugwell was in actuality a testament to shantytown dwellers’ resourcefulness in the face of challenging day to day living conditions.

Delano recalled how barefoot residents of El Fanguito greeted him as they made their way across the settlement’s precarious foot bridges during their morning commute. The people Delano and his wife Irene encountered smelled of rubbing alcohol, likely applied to their bodies in efforts to ward off the diseases and illness emanating from the settlement’s fetid water. Almost everywhere the Delanos looked residents were suited up in pristine, white clothing in spite of the filth that surrounded them. Such sights prompted Jack Delano to remark that he “could not but admire the spirit of such people, who would not allow their poverty to affect their self-esteem.”¹¹⁵ As Delano’s FSA image file demonstrates, he was insistent on capturing both the abject poverty and the pride of Puerto Ricans on film so that his superiors in Washington might bear witness to the humanity of islanders and the failures of U.S. colonialism. He was compelled to highlight the contrast between this sense of *dignidad* and the conditions working-class, poor Puerto Ricans were forced to endure on a daily basis.

¹¹⁴ Diffie, 5.

¹¹⁵ Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 82; “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. dated Feb. 13, 1935 from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator of the PRERA,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, RG 323, NARA NYC; The American Red Cross, “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 32.

The firsthand accounts of mainlanders such as Jack Delano, James Bourne, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell, and Harold Ickes' are particularly illuminating because of their roles as New Deal operatives who did not shy away from drawing attention to the negative aspects the federal government's relationship with Puerto Rico. They had been sent to Puerto Rico to aid in the federal government's response to the Great Depression, but each, in their own way, was critical of the government for doing little in the way of remedying the socioeconomic problems on the island. Their critical stances about the policy failures they had witnessed on the island, informed by their firsthand experiences with Puerto Rican poverty and fears of revolution, speak to a shift in how federal officials viewed Puerto Rico. While not entirely missing from debates over the fate of Puerto Ricans during the depression, racialized assumptions about islanders' culpability for their own living conditions had grown to include expressions of compassion and calls for policy change from those who witnessed island poverty firsthand. Each of the colonial agents mentioned here had felt the need to convey to a continental audience how, thus far, the federal and insular governments had failed to either enforce or implement policies that would positively impact the day to day lives of poor islanders who were, after all, American citizens. Calls for change from continental New Dealers may sometimes have been issued from a place of concern that the state of island affairs threatened the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, as was the case with Rexford Tugwell, but nevertheless they served to influence policy change. One such change came with the implementation of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA).

Like the PRERA, the federal government established the PRRA with the mission of providing relief to Puerto Rico. But, a major part of its mission was directed at long-term reform to the socioeconomic system via housing programs and a more diversified economy that would

increase employment prospects for the Puerto Rican poor.¹¹⁶ As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, however, neither the PRRA's goals to reconfigure the Puerto Rican economy nor its efforts to house poor Puerto Ricans were met and the socioeconomic crisis plaguing the island continued through the remainder of the 1930s.

Nevertheless, as this chapter has highlighted, notions of Puerto Rico's inclusion in the national welfare project were put forth by colonial officials once they arrived in Puerto Rico and witnessed the class disparities brought on by years of a societal dynamic that favored island elites. As official reports attest, continental New Deal agents increasingly viewed Puerto Rico as part of the United States, rather than as an entity separated from the continent by both geographical distance and colonialism. As such, it was their belief that what was due from the federal government was, with regard with what was being offered to the continental states, Puerto Rico's fair share of funding and attention to the structural problems that brought the island to a socioeconomic breaking point.

¹¹⁶ The American Presidency Project, "Executive Order 7057 Establishing the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-7057-establishing-the-puerto-rico-reconstruction-administration>; Mathews, 227; James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 156.

Chapter Four

Minimal At Best: Urban Housing and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration: 1935-1941

*A previous letter writer had pointed out that federal housing projects in Puerto Rico have not cleared a single slum and it is doubtful if more than a single slum family has been removed to any of these structures. They are attractive buildings and pleasing suburbs but erected at a cost and of materials that places them beyond the range of the people in a low-income field who need them most. While declaiming about rising living standards and improving housing conditions PRRA officials have neglected to recognize the fact that such adjustments are not made overnight. By the time living and wage standards raise the slum dwellers to appreciation of the refinements and beauties of PRRA housing, the buildings and settlements will be out of date. The people who occupy these buildings are very fortunate and it is true that their living scale is much improved. But they are not slum dwellers.*¹- Camilo Crosas, San Juan, Puerto Rico, to *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1938.

On the advice of New Dealers who had witnessed the depths of Puerto Rican poverty, on May 28, 1935, President Roosevelt established the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA) under executive order 7057. The PRRA's goal was to reform the Puerto Rican economy, clear island shantytowns, provide jobs and housing for the poor, and ease social unrest. Its operations would be overseen by the Secretary of Interior, Harold Ickes and two U.S. colonial administrators, Dr. Ernest Gruening, based in Washington D.C., and Miles Fairbank who was based in Puerto Rico. A contingent of high-profile Puerto Ricans such as Carlos Chardón advised the PRRA. Based on the Chardón Plan, a series of economic reforms proposed by University of Puerto Rico chancellor Carlos Chardón the prior year, the PRRA's mission was to institute programs that would have long-range effects on the Puerto Rican socioeconomic infrastructure. Its budget would be made possible by a grant of \$35 million, which would arrive later that year.

¹ Camilo Crosas, San Juan Puerto Rico, "Housing in Puerto Rico," *The Washington Post*, letters to the editor, November 15, 1938, X10.

But in actuality, for the same reasons that plagued its predecessor agency, the PRERA, the PRRA was unsuccessful in its efforts to make long lasting changes to the Puerto Rican socioeconomic landscape.² For one, the PRRA failed to make any substantial moves to restructure Puerto Rico's economy or to redistribute land in a more equitable fashion. Instead, it fostered further reliance on plantation agriculture as a primary means of income for the average Puerto Rican laborer. Nevertheless, according to an article in *El Mundo* written in 1939 to celebrate four years of the PRRA's presence on the island, the relief administration had—via its construction of dozens of school houses and a scattering of municipal buildings, bridges and public roads— a tangible “influence on the environment” which in turn positively impacted the “collective psychology” of Puerto Ricans.³ The PRRA's main efforts in the area of industrialization came with the creation of a cement factory that provided hurricane-proof housing materials for the construction of the experimental homes it intended to build in the wake of pending “slum eradication” programs.⁴ One of the PRRA's most successful projects was the so-called “Little TVA” (Tennessee Valley Authority). The program oversaw the construction of a series of hydroelectric dams in the island's central mountain range and provided rural electrification, flood control, crop irrigation along with much-needed clean drinking water that was necessary to combat pervasive diseases.⁵ However, while the PRRA also granted a degree of financial autonomy to small coffee, sugar, and fruit growers by establishing and subsidizing a Producer's Association cooperative, the working and middle classes remained tied to an

² Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 227; James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 156.

³ “Cuatro años de rehabilitación económica en Puerto Rico,” *El Mundo*, May 28, 1939, 2.

⁴ Dietz, 156.

⁵ Geoff G. Burrows, “Rural Hydro-Electrification and the Colonial New Deal: Modernization, Experts, and Rural Life in Puerto Rico, 1935-1942,” *Agricultural History*, 91, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 293.

agricultural monocrop export economy that was beholden to the United States and big sugar producers.⁶

The PRRA's efforts to rectify the homelessness problem in Puerto Rico would be severely impeded as federal and insular officials found themselves unable to enforce the 500-acre limit on landholding, thus allowing sugar companies a continued near-monopoly on ownership of available rural land. As part of FDR's new reform agenda for the island, however, for the first time efforts were made to bring the 500-acre law's enforcement into effect. In 1935, after receiving complaints from PRRA officials and Liberal Party leader Luis Muñoz Marín, FDR fired Governor Robert Gore and the insular attorney general Benjamin Horton. Muñoz described both men as "advocates" for Big Sugar who had frequently sought counsel from corporate sugar lawyers. Horton was replaced by the pro-New Deal Benigno Fernández García, a Georgetown Law School alumnus who would be the first native born Puerto Rican to hold the office of attorney general.⁷ Almost immediately upon taking office, Fernández set up a task force whose sole intention was to see to the enforcement of the 500-acre Law. The division was headed by two island lawyers, Miguel Guerra-Mondragón and Rafael Rivera Zayas, both of whom had devoted their careers thus far to the enforcement of the land limitation law.⁸ As we shall see in the next chapter, the new task force would be instrumental in finally enforcing the 500-acre provision beginning in the early 1940s. For the remainder of the 1930s, however, their efforts were tied up in a series of court battles that rendered them unable to enforce land limitations, which would have freed up available acreage for experimental housing in the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁸ S.L. Descartes, "Land Reform in Puerto Rico," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics*, 19, no.4 (November 1943), 399.

countryside. Consequently, in the meantime, PRRA officials focused on the possibility of building affordable housing in urban areas where shantytown populations were steadily growing.

The PRRA's reform agenda included the creation of "slum eradication" and low-cost urban housing programs that were largely unable to provide adequate shelter for the island's poor and homeless. Historian Geoff G. Burrows has observed that the arrival of the PRRA marked a dramatic shift in the federal government's colonial policy as it "sought to relieve the most critical daily hardships of the Great Depression while attempting to make permanent democratic changes to social and economic life in Puerto Rico." He also argues that the PRRA "made a lasting contribution to the physical security of millions of Puerto Ricans during the Great Depression through the construction of hurricane-proof houses" and other projects that improved the "social mobility of Puerto Rican citizens."⁹ This chapter will demonstrate, however, that the upward mobility and the living conditions of the majority of Puerto Ricans were not vastly improved by the PRRA's housing and "slum eradication" programs. When compared to the minimal efforts of the PRERA, the PRRA's housing programs did achieve a degree of success in that they managed to create some experimental urban homes to house the island's homeless poor. Nevertheless, the new agency, like the PRERA, was plagued with budget issues, political infighting and opposition, as well as corruption. These factors hindered PRRA officials' efforts to clear the island's squatters' settlements and build an adequate amount of affordable housing in urban areas. Additionally, due to a lack of viable New Deal employment programs that would have enabled the island's poorer classes a degree of upward mobility, many of those who were eligible for government housing simply could not afford it. As a result, the majority of those who lived in

⁹ Geoff G. Burrows, "The New Deal in Puerto Rico: Public Works, Public Health, and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1935-1955," (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2014).

poverty in the island's shantytowns remained where they were and many of the new housing units ended up being occupied by those who needed less assistance, namely the middle class.¹⁰

In spite of PRRA housing and “slum eradication” initiatives, the Puerto Rican housing crisis continued throughout the 1930s. On April 21, 1936, in one of his last acts as the PRERA's director, James Bourne sent a letter to Franklin Roosevelt in which he informed the president of what he believed were the ongoing social, economic and political issues on the island. Also included in the letter was an assessment of what he considered to be the shortcomings of the new PRRA thus far.¹¹ The PRRA, Bourne said, was already a “failure” because it was placing too much focus on rural resettlement, a goal that benefited a “minority” of the island's population considering the swelling size of Puerto Rico's cities due to migration. And yet, Bourne claimed, there had “not yet” been “a single completed purchase of agricultural land for redistribution” because no tangible moves had been made to enforce the 500-acre Law. According to Bourne, the new organization also lacked a much-needed relief department to address the short-term relief goals that had yet to be fulfilled. Additionally, it lacked a viable works projects program along the lines of what the Works Progress Administration was doing stateside. According to Bourne, proof rested in the fact that the PRRA had only employed 30,000 people at a time when 84 percent of the population was still qualified to be on relief. Much more was to be done to help

¹⁰ From the time of the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898 through the late 1920s, the Puerto Rican middle class saw considerable growth. The island middle class consisted mostly of merchants, professionals, and white-collar administrators, many of whom identified as “white “and worked adjacent to U.S. agricultural industries; Centro: The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, “Middle Class of Empire: A (Mostly White) Middle Class of Empire, 1900-1929,” <https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/puerto-rican-labor/middle-class-empire>. The utilization of public housing by the middle class was also a continental phenomenon born out of what historian Frank Ruechel describes as the New Deal's racialized “middle-class emphasis.” “Slum clearance” and low-income public housing projects in continental U.S. cities during the 1930s were frequently cost prohibitive to the poor, particularly poor people of color and even more particularly to those living in the cities of the U.S. South. Frank Ruechel, “New Deal Public Housing, Urban Poverty, and Jim Crow: Techwood and University Homes in Atlanta,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 81, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 919.

¹¹ Mathews, 248.

a society that was still suffering from socioeconomic strife. Evidence of such strife could be seen in the continuing high unemployment, labor strikes, and in the fact that the Nationalists were posing a threat to the political stability of the island. Crime was also on the rise, according to Bourne, with the island homicide rate reaching “four times that of Chicago.” Bourne told the President that he feared that “a hundred thousand families will be dumped in the street with no provision for their care or employment” should the PRRA fail to prioritize housing, social services, continued relief funding, and the addition of works programs that would employ islanders and improve island infrastructure. Without these provisions, Bourne warned that the island might face an “unbearable and chaotic situation in the near future.”¹² Bourne’s critique exposed the ramifications of policy failures that had rendered his own agency, the PRERA, ineffective. Such failures, he believed, set the stage for the continued impoverishment of the Puerto Rican working classes, the expansion of city squatters’ settlements, and the continued entrenchment of the island’s pro-sugar elite.

On June 20, 1936, Bourne published a statement in *El Mundo* offering a bitter critique of the PRRA and its proposed housing programs. In the article, Bourne claimed that the PRRA’s intended “slum eradication” and low-income housing projects were doomed to fail due to the fact that they made “no provision for cleaning up existing slums” and the houses the PRRA was planning on constructing would be “too expensive for slum dwellers.” Bourne predicted that the “houses will be very good for the middle class, but the slums will still be standing.” The newspaper remarked that although the tone of Bourne’s statement sounded as though it might have been written by an “opponent of the New Deal” it was actually written by “one of its strong

¹² “James R. Bourne to the Honorable President of the United States, April 21, 1936,” Records of the Work Projects Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, 1933-36, State Series, March 1933-1936, Puerto Rico 400, “Puerto Rico Official FERA, January-June, 1936,” RG69, Box 260, PC 37, Entry 10, NARA II, College Park, MD.

defenders.” The paper stood behind Bourne’s assertions, noting that Bourne, as an experienced colonial agent, was in a good position to “point out from within some of its [the PRRA’s] defects so that the public” might “fully appreciate the situation and, by helping to remedy it, also help to carry out the true goals of the New Deal.”¹³

Bourne’s assertions about the crises plaguing the island are evidenced in the fact that over the course of the Great Depression the total population of island squatters’ settlements steadily increased—a trend that started in the previous decade.¹⁴ One study shows that between 1920 and 1930 several Puerto Rican cities experienced between 61% and 165% population growth with the majority of this growth taking place in either established or new “slum” areas.¹⁵ This pattern continued in the 1930s when Puerto Rico’s total shantytown population, which had been at an estimated 225,000 people at the beginning of the depression, had increased by as much as fifty percent by the end of the 1930s, bringing the tally to roughly 337,500 people, or approximately nineteen percent of the island’s population.¹⁶ In spite of programs instituted to stem the flow of rural Puerto Ricans into urban areas and to house those already in the island’s city shantytowns, the federal government under both the PRERA and the PRRA was unable to complete its mission and that island squatter settlements actually grew during the depression.

Among the first efforts made by Congress and the Roosevelt Administration to create housing programs for the poor on the mainland and in Puerto Rico was a provision included in

¹³ “Que La ‘PRRA’ Esta ‘Entregada da al Partido Liberal: Dice el Director de la ‘FERA’, Señor James Bourne,” *El Mundo*, June 20, 1936, 1,19.

¹⁴ "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

¹⁵ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses: The Political Economy of Squatters in Puerto Rico, 1900-1992" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993), 140.

¹⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses," 140; "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, which allowed for the government to fund so-called “subsistence homesteads.” NIRA Title II, Section 208 stated that in order to “provide for aiding the redistribution of the overbalance of population in industrial centers, \$25,000,000 is hereby made available to the President” to create subsistence homes for the poor. In turn, the repayment of government loans by homestead owners would create a revolving fund which would continue to fund future housing projects.¹⁷ While the NIRA also stipulated that funds be set aside for public works projects in Puerto Rico, the wording of the Act left the allotment of housing funds up to the discretion of the President who would wait two years after the passage of the NIRA before extending any meaningful housing aid to the island.¹⁸ As discussed in previous chapters, the ensuing years were marked by increased social and political unrest in Puerto Rico, which prompted federal officials to take note of the island and intervene with additional, albeit limited, New Deal programs such as those implemented under the PRRA.

Continental New Dealers concurrently grappled with some of these same issues in many urban areas and sought federal funds to assist with the facilitation of housing and relocation projects. In 1935, New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia spoke of a “slum eradication” and a “large-scale housing program” in Manhattan as he testified before a congressional committee set up to investigate “slum eradication” and housing programs across the country. He argued that programs like the one he had spearheaded in New York should be extended to other major U.S. cities where the federal government might exercise its legal right to condemn dilapidated properties, eliminate “slums,” and/or construct low-rent dwellings for the urban poor.¹⁹ The New

¹⁷ The National Archives, “National Industrial Recovery Act (1933),” June 16, 1933, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/national-industrial-recovery-act>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ U.S. Senate, “Statement of Hon. Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Mayor of New York City during Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor: A Bill to promote the public Health, Safety and Welfare by providing for the elimination of Insanitary and dangerous housing conditions, to relieve congested areas, to aid in the construction and

York housing and “slum clearance” program LaGuardia spoke of was the city’s First Houses (1935) project, which was the first federally-funded public housing to be built in the United States on Manhattan’s crowded Lower East Side. First Houses was made possible through funds specifically earmarked for “slum clearance” and low-income housing when the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration were established in 1933.²⁰ In 1934, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) was created to apply for and distribute federal housing aid and “slum clearance” funds.²¹

At the end of committee hearings, in 1936, Senator Robert Wagner (D., NY) and Representative Henry Ellenbogen (D., PA) introduced a bill that would have established a low-income housing and a “slum clearance” program in the continental US and the territories. The bill, which proposed to grant \$976 million over the course of four years for the eradication of shantytowns and the construction of low-cost housing, would have proven to be a windfall to local politicians and administrators hoping to find a solution to the matter of squatters’ settlements growing in and around their cities. The ambitious bill, which was opposed by FDR because he was reluctant to fund its programs due to budgetary concerns, ultimately stalled as it failed to reach a vote in the House.²² The following year, in 1937, Senator Wagner coauthored another bill with Representative Henry B. Steagall (D., Ala) which downsized the housing and

supervision of low-rental dwelling accommodations, June 4-7, 1935” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 96-97.

²⁰ Roosevelt House, Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, “The New Deal in New York City, 1933-1943,” <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/exhibits/new-deal-new-york-city/>; Ryan Allen and David Van Riper, “The New Deal, the Deserving Poor, and the First Public Housing Residents in New York City,” *Social Science History*, 44 (2020), 93.

²¹ Roosevelt House, Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, “The New Deal in New York City, 1933-1943,” <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/exhibits/new-deal-new-york-city/>; Ryan Allen and David Van Riper, “The New Deal, the Deserving Poor, and the First Public Housing Residents in New York City,” *Social Science History*, 44 (2020), 93.

²² CQ Press, “Record of the 74th Congress, Second Session: Rural Electrification and Housing Bills,” https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1936062200#H2_6

“slum eradication” budget considerably. The Wagner-Steagall Act called for \$523 million and the establishment of the United States Housing Authority (USHA), which was partly modeled on the NYCHA.²³ The USHA would work under the authority of the Department of Interior and its director, Harold Ickes. Roosevelt signed the bill into law on September 1, 1937.²⁴ USHA funds would be made available as long as cities, territories, and states established local housing authorities and applied for aid, as was done earlier in New York City. Between 1937 and 1939, the USHA distributed half a billion dollars in building funds and had overseen the construction of over 151 housing projects around the country, including in Puerto Rico.²⁵ In this way, LaGuardia’s 1935 vision of a system of federally-funded housing projects stretching across the nation’s urban landscape eventually became a reality. Nonetheless, the housing needs of the continental working classes during the mid to late depression years remained a concern. By the end of 1938, housing authorities had constructed 20,000 low-income units in the continental United States, which was enough to house roughly 82,000 people (based on an average family size of 4.11 people in 1935).²⁶ The number of units constructed was far short of what was required to house the continental American homeless which numbered around 2 million people by the time the Wagner-Steagall Act was passed.²⁷

U.S. low income housing policies were also marked by racial discrimination, particularly as it pertained to the exclusion and the “ghettoization” of people of color. As early as 1955,

²³ “Review of Principal Legislation Enacted by the 75th Congress in First Session,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1937, 32; “Sees Housing Shift to U.S. Authority: Ickes Expects New Body Will Handle Projects,” *The New York Times* October 1, 1937.

²⁴ “Review of Principal Legislation Enacted by the 75th Congress in First Session,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1937, 32; “Sees Housing Shift to U.S. Authority: Ickes Expects New Body Will Handle Projects,” *The New York Times* October 1, 1937.

²⁵ Roosevelt House, Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, “The New Deal in New York City, 1933-1943”; Ryan Allen and David Van Riper.

²⁶ U.S. Housing Authority, *Annual Report of the United States Housing Authority for the Fiscal Year, 1938* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 2, 42.

²⁷ Ibid.

historian Charles Abrams noted that the USHA-sponsored housing projects frequently favored white tenants over people of color and that its vague guidelines for local administration “actively” encouraged “private bias” and “social and racial discrimination.”²⁸ For instance, under the guidance of Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes the USHA’s low-income housing projects were to operate largely under the discretion of state or municipal administrators and policy makers who utilized the agency’s nebulous guidelines to reinforce racial hierarchies in America’s cities.²⁹ As part of the agency’s racial policy, the USHA implemented a rule stipulating that local housing authorities retain so-called “neighborhood composition.” This ensured that those who originally lived in the “blighted” areas of American cities should remain in the same areas. Housing would be built in existing neighborhoods that were, in fact, already segregated, thus reinforcing the discriminatory spatial relations of the U.S. urban landscape.³⁰

The use of the “neighborhood composition” rule would be employed in Puerto Rico in some cases, but it was not adhered to consistently. For instance, two housing developments, The Eleanor Roosevelt Development (which will be discussed in detail in this chapter) and the Juan Morell Campos project were built several miles from the center of Puerto Rico’s two largest cities, San Juan and Ponce, respectively. Historian Marygrace Tyrell argues that New Deal administrators’ choice to relocate residents of squatters’ settlements was informed by “hope for the houses to have a reforming influence on the lives of Puerto Rican workers” by distancing them from their former neighborhoods, “slum” areas which were thought by colonial officials to

²⁸ Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1955), 7.

²⁹ Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 163.

³⁰ Glotzer, 163; Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liverlight Publishing Company, 2017), 23.

have a corrupting influence.³¹ It is also likely, however, that officials were practicing another type of class-based spatial segregation which would ensure that Puerto Rico's two largest cities would be rid of what they considered to be embarrassing eyesores and the poorer populations that resided within them. Locating these Puerto Rican housing projects far from urban centers also enforced a type of economic repression for those who lived there. As Tyrell notes, the suburban locations of these housing projects distanced residents from their blue-collar jobs. With no public transportation in place, many were forced to give up their previous means of employment, which perpetuated their poverty and made it difficult for them to pay rents on their new homes. As a result, many residents demanded that the PRRA create jobs within their new neighborhoods.³²

In Puerto Rico, four housing authorities were set up in 1938 in the aftermath of the Wagner-Steagall Bill. The first was the Puerto Rico Housing Authority which oversaw housing operations on the entire island, and which would receive a total of \$7 million over the course of four years. The Mayaguez and Ponce housing authorities would receive \$1 million each. According to a 1938 report commissioned by the Puerto Rico Housing Authority, San Juan did not fall under the PRHA's jurisdiction, but operated under its own municipal housing authority, which did not apply for federal funds.³³ So, as a result, San Juan did not qualify for a portion of the \$12 million in federal housing appropriations made to the PRHA. Total USHA

³¹ Marygrace Tyrell, "Colonizing Citizens: Housing Puerto Ricans, 1917-1952." PhD diss. in the Field of History, Northwestern University, 2009, 190.

³² The unaffordability of New Deal housing due to employment shortages was a phenomenon that also impacted many stateside cities. For instance, according to Karen Miller, in the 1930s, black Detroiters organized campaigns protesting a disproportionate lack of jobs for African American laborers and high eviction rates. Karen Miller, *Managing Inequality: Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 166, 181, 182; Tyrell, 209.

³³ As of this writing, it is unclear from archival evidence as to why the San Juan Housing Authority did not apply for federal funds.

appropriations for the island would total \$12 million from 1938 through 1941.³⁴ As we shall see throughout this chapter, even when combined with other federal funding directly appropriated to the PRRA for “slum eradication” and housing projects, USHA funds allocated to the island were inadequate to properly house homeless Puerto Ricans during the late depression. This point is particularly salient when one considers the \$5 million in funding officials stated was needed to construct an adequate amount of experimental housing in the capital city alone.³⁵

Two years prior to the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill, the PRRA’s efforts to eradicate shantytowns and construct low-income housing had already been kickstarted by the island’s inclusion in a federal grants program provided by the FERA and NIRA. On August 13, 1935, under the advisement of James Bourne, Harold Ickes, Undersecretary of Agriculture, Rexford Tugwell, the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, and the First Lady, Franklin Roosevelt authorized the transfer of \$2.2 million of FERA and NIRA funds for the purpose of “Slum Clearance and Low-Income Housing” projects for the entirety of Puerto Rico.³⁶ Both Puerto Rico and the continental “slum clearance” programs came under the purview of the Department of Interior and Secretary Ickes. Rural and urban relocation programs were also set to be implemented under the PRRA. According to the agency, part of the \$2.2 million was to be expended on over \$783,840 for wages as part of a PWA jobs program created to hire some of the vast number of unemployed islanders who would construct experimental homes. The bulk of the allocation was to be spent on supplies which totaled over \$1 million. Tellingly, the PRRA was only allotted \$358,640 for the purchase of land upon which it would construct model homes—a

³⁴ U.S. Housing Authority, “Release no. 476-550-1940-41,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 4.

³⁵ Puerto Rico Housing Authority, “Housing Progress in Puerto Rico: 1938-1948,” (San Juan, P.R.: Puerto Rico Housing Authority, 1948), 3; Model Puerto Rican City Named Eleanor Roosevelt,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 1936, 1; “Puerto Rico to Name City for Mrs. Roosevelt,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 1936, 9.

³⁶ Untitled file, Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323.Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

low amount that was in part due to the lack of available acreage in Puerto Rico as the majority of land was held by sugar companies.³⁷

In the weeks prior to the August 1935 budget allocation, PRRA officials such as Carlos Chardón decided that after the island's squatters' settlements were cleared, model homes would be constructed and sold to resettlers on a long-term 25-year basis. Chardón made no mention as to where poor islanders would live while the homes were being constructed. Prices for the homes would be based on the cost of land as paid for by the PRRA plus 50% of the cost of construction. One official noted that it was "only upon this basis can resettlers meet payments."³⁸ The formula was determined based on Chardón's estimate that the total cost of land purchase and home construction would be approximately \$750 per unit, which he described as an "excessive" amount.³⁹ At first glance, the home purchase price proposed by Chardón was on par with if not cheaper than continental home values, which averaged around \$1,000 to construct.⁴⁰ It is important to keep in mind, however, the disparities in wages and employment between Puerto Rico and the continental U.S. when considering what was affordable to islanders. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the average income for an employed working-class Puerto Rican at the beginning of the depression was roughly \$230 per year as opposed to wages in the states which ranged between \$1,200 and \$5,000 per year.⁴¹ Chardón's initial shock over the cost of home construction was likely exacerbated as housing projects commenced in earnest and costs turned

³⁷ The Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, "The need for federal aid in Puerto Rico: The purposes of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 5.

³⁸ "Housing and Land Acquisition Memorandum, July 25, 1936," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing," RG 323, Box 55 Entry 1, NARA NYC.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ U.S. Government, Fifteenth census of the United States, "1930: Population" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 38.

⁴¹ Bailey W. and Justine W. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 163, 213.

out to be greater than original estimates. Even with the PRRA's sales terms in place, home prices ultimately proved to be cost prohibitive to the Puerto Rican working class.

By late 1935, as PRRA officials began planning experimental home construction in both rural and urban areas on the outskirts of San Juan, they discussed the relative merits of "isolated" homesteads versus village-style communities. In December of that year, the Chief of the PRRA's Planning Division, Rafael A. Gonzalez, wrote to Miles Fairbank, the acting administrator of the PRRA, to suggest that isolated homesteads would be the preferred design layout for government housing. Gonzalez reasoned that isolated homes would allow residents to "maintain a close watch of the farm" or urban homestead "to avoid theft or other damages" to their property—an idea one might interpret as being infused by Gonzalez's potential assumptions about poor Puerto Ricans' propensity for criminality. Gonzalez also noted that additional space between both urban and rural dwellings would limit the "propagation of infectious diseases from house to house," a consideration that was born out of the realities of the contagion so prevalent in Puerto Rico's congested shantytowns. Gonzalez argued further that isolated homes in rural areas would afford residents more time for the cultivation of crops as they would be prevented from partaking in what he saw as time-wasting social interactions. So, by his reasoning, alienating citizens from their peers and neighbors through spatial isolation would ensure the reinforcement of a productive agricultural workforce in the countryside. When weighing the pros and cons of isolated homes, Gonzalez did not fully take into account the kinship ties and sense of community gained from living in close proximity to one's neighbors in Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements. Although Gonzalez heavily favored the construction of isolated homesteads, he ultimately conceded that communal living quarters would be the more economically viable option. The construction of villages, he admitted, would consolidate "water supplies, sewage systems, roads,

electricity, social and educational activities, and medical services” and would “improve the condition of the jibaro.”⁴²

In urban areas, PRRA planners and officials ultimately opted for the village model for the Eleanor Roosevelt Housing Development (ER Development), plans for which were officially implemented beginning in 1935. Located in the Hato Rey barrio of the Río Piedras section of San Juan, the ER Development was completed in 1938. It contained 794 building lots, 293 of which were used to build hurricane-proof experimental houses ostensibly for low-income families. As PRRA administrator Miles Fairbank recalled, the remainder of the lots were sold to middle class “professional groups” at reduced prices after small business owners entered their names into a lottery.⁴³ Like other housing projects constructed during this period in Puerto Rico, the ER Development was hailed by colonial policymakers and the media as a model city that included schools, a social center, a day nursery, a dispensary, churches, theaters, parks, as well as a police and fire department.⁴⁴ However, the ER Development also became an emblem of the PRRA’s largely ineffective policies and the types of problems facing the agency as it tried to fulfill its mission of clearing shantytowns and implementing housing programs. Underfunded and plagued by high construction and administrative costs, PRRA officials’ dreams of housing a substantial portion of San Juan’s shantytown dwellers would require far more housing than the ER Development provided.

As soon as plans for the ER Development were announced, rumors began to swirl among the island’s working-class population. News about the forthcoming housing development led to a

⁴²Rafael A. Gonzalez to Miles H. Fairbank, December 23, 1935,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, “Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing,” RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁴³ Miles H. Fairbank, *The Chardón Plan and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1934-1954* (New York: Liverlight, 1973), 48.

⁴⁴ Also constructed during this time were a total of 581 experimental houses in developments in Puerta de Tierra, Mira-Palmeras, Caguas, and in Ponce. Fairbank, 48.

burst of migratory activity from the countryside into San Juan's squatters' settlements.

According to the chief of the PRRA's Slum Clearance division, Manuel Egozcue, there was, in the wake of press reports, a "general impression in Puerto Rico" that the model homes would be distributed free of charge to shantytown dwellers selected by government officials.

Consequently, San Juan's already overflowing shantytowns began to swell with new residents who arrived from other parts of the island with the hopes of obtaining free government housing. The PRRA countered such hearsay through a public relations campaign that alerted potential housing applicants to the fact that the model homes were to be sold or rented, rather than given away.⁴⁵

There were also segments of the island population that viewed the model housing project with suspicion. Almost as soon as the PRRA announced plans for the construction of the ER Development in San Juan, it came under fire from members of the Puerto Rican Labor Federation. The organization's secretary, Rafael Alonzo, described the government's plans as "socially unsound" in that the design of the housing project would concentrate large segments of the population in one area not unlike local squatters' settlements. Consequently, according to Alonzo, that would make residents more vulnerable to the political influence of government officials who oversaw the communities. According to Alonzo, such an arrangement would "perpetuate the island's economic feudalism" by "enabling bosses to control the politics of the occupants of the apartments." At stake, Alonzo argued, was the ability of the Puerto Rican people to exercise the type of free political will that would sway their allegiance away from organized labor and toward the colonial establishment that had enabled island class disparity.⁴⁶ It

⁴⁵ "Lafayette Sugar-Slum Clearance-Engineering Division to Lafayette Sugar-Sugar (1939)," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, RG 323, Box 28, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁴⁶ "Puerto Rican Unions Attack Housing Plan: Federation Opposes Apartments as Solution of Slum Problems—Fears Control Over Tenants," *The New York Times*, December 19, 1935, 16.

is difficult to determine Alonzo's political affiliation, but it is possible that he was expressing similar sentiments to those issued earlier in the depression by Puerto Rican critics of the New Deal who feared that the local administration of policies was disproportionately in the hands of Liberal, rather than Coalición, operatives. In Alonzo's case, however, he was highlighting the prospect that New Deal housing administrators might not be liberal or radical enough to support the demands of working-class labor activists and prospective tenants who were suspicious of or lacked faith in the colonial state and its administrators.

Newspaper articles from June of 1936 that announced plans for the "Model Puerto Rican City Named Eleanor Roosevelt" demonstrate that the federal government and the PRRA had high aspirations for the efficacy of the development in rectifying the number of people residing in San Juan's squatters' settlements. Basing their statistics on government press releases, the *New York Times*, *El Mundo*, and the *Baltimore Sun* reported that the Eleanor Roosevelt "complex" was slated to include between 2,000 and 5,000 "model concrete, stormproof houses," built to house at least 20,000 poor people on 200 acres located three miles from San Juan. Both papers quoted Manuel Egozque as saying that the cost of the project would total at least \$5 million—a figure far exceeding FDR's appropriation of \$2.2 million for the island's "slum clearance" projects. Egozque's construction estimate indicated that he believed more money would be needed and that the president's initial allocation for "slum clearance" programs fell far below what was required to rectify the housing problems in San Juan, let alone on the island as a whole.⁴⁷ Egozque's concerns, along with those expressed by other colonial New Deal agents, indicate that officials were aware that there was a gap between housing and "slum eradication"

⁴⁷ "Model Puerto Rican City Named Eleanor Roosevelt," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1936, 1; "Dos millones y medio de dólares ha gastado ya la PRRA," *El Mundo*, Monday August 22, 1936, 4; "Puerto Rico to Name City for Mrs. Roosevelt," *The Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 1936, 9.

program goals and the realities of inadequate federal funding. Ultimately, the ER development would cost roughly \$550,000 to construct—an amount that ate up a substantial portion of the total federal budget for “slum clearance,” but one that was far less than what Egozque called for.⁴⁸

When one considers the amount of federal funding allocated to Puerto Rico versus that which was allotted to various stateside housing projects, the inequities sometimes inherent in the New Deal—particularly the colonial New Deal—are illuminated. A year before plans were laid for the ER development and “slum clearance” projects on the island, the government initiated its first ever low-cost housing complex in Georgia. The whites-only Techwood Homes project, which was built in 1935 and housed roughly 600 families in Atlanta (or roughly 2,400 people), was constructed with federal funds totaling over \$2.8 million—which was nearly a million dollars over the \$2.2 million allocated to the PRRA by the FERA and NIRA for the entirety of Puerto Rico’s “slum clearance” and housing initiatives.⁴⁹ Similarly, in 1935, the Public Works Administration began construction on the Brewster-Douglass Housing Project in Detroit. The complex would contain 791 units, primarily occupied by African American residents, with building costs of \$5.5 million once it was completed in 1938.⁵⁰ Such figures suggest a level of disparity between funding for continental “slum clearance” and housing projects and those unfolding in the colony around the same time. These disparities are highlighted when the ratio of

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, “Work Relief for Fiscal Year, 1941,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 148.

⁴⁹ “Relief Administrator Receives \$500,000 Fund for State Housing Project, Contract Signed,” *The Atlanta Daily World*, April 19, 1935, 1; “Great Techwood Housing Project to be Dedicated by Roosevelt,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 24, 1935, 2A; “Average Size of Household in U.S. Declines to Lowest Ever Recorded,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/15/us/average-size-of-household-in-us-declines-to-lowest-everrecorded.html#:~:text=The%20average%20number%20of%20people%20per%20household%20was%205.55%20in,2000%2C%20from%20the%20current%202.67.>

⁵⁰ Karen Miller, *Managing Inequality*, 238,239; The Living New Deal, “Brewster Homes-Detroit, Michigan,” <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/brewster-homes-detroit-mi/>

low-income houses to population is examined. For instance, at the time, the population of Atlanta was 270,366 and the number of low-income houses built at Techwood was enough to meet the needs of roughly 0.88 percent of the city's population.⁵¹ By contrast, the 293 units built at the Eleanor Roosevelt complex in Puerto Rico, which for a brief time was the only low-income housing being built on the island, met the housing needs of roughly 1,475 people, or a mere .086 percent of Puerto Rico's population of 1.7 million.⁵² According to historian Karen Miller, the African American residents of Detroit's Brewster Homes fared much better than their counterparts in Atlanta and Puerto Rico, and even their white neighbors. Miller notes that low-income housing in that city was enough to supply roughly 7 percent of the city's population, primarily working-class black Detroiters, with adequate shelter. Indeed, Black Detroiters, she notes, "were receiving proportionately more federal assistance in low-income housing than whites."⁵³ Nevertheless, such statistics point to the fact that New Deal housing programs did not meet the needs of poor American urban populations, particularly poor populations of color. They also indicate that the federal government provided Puerto Rico with the least amount of resources in terms of the relationship between population, allocated housing funds, and the number of public housing units constructed.

According to the PRRA's own documentation the actual number of units planned for the Eleanor Roosevelt Development was less than the 2,000 to 5,000 units mentioned by colonial officials in press reports.⁵⁴ The amount of units ultimately fell short of what was required to house the city's impoverished shantytown dwellers due to budget shortfalls. On July 16, 1936,

⁵¹ U.S. Census, "Population of Georgia, 1790 to 1940," 240, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1940/population-volume-1/33973538v1ch04.pdf>

⁵² U.S. Census, "Puerto Rico: Area and Population of Municipalities, Urban and Rural, 1930-1950," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 53-8.

⁵³ Karen Miller, *Managing Inequality*, 239.

⁵⁴ "Dos millones y medio de dólares ha gastado ya la PRRA," *El Mundo*, Monday August 22, 1936, 4.

Carlos Chardón noted in a letter to PRRA Director Ernest Gruening that the combined number of people living in the shantytowns of San Juan was 15,747 persons occupying approximately 1,423 makeshift homes. So, the construction of 293 low-income houses actually built at the Eleanor Roosevelt Development was ultimately 1,130 units less than what was needed to achieve the minimum number of structures required to house the city's poor and homeless.⁵⁵ Such evidence indicates that policymakers were aware of a gap between their goals of "slum eradication" and building affordable housing and that they would be unable to provide enough shelter to meet demand on the island due to a lack of federal funds. Nevertheless, colonial officials' efforts were viewed as an underfunded stopgap measure to be put in place before a more permanent solution could be found for housing shortages.

The primary reason for the PRRA's inability to provide enough low-income units for the poor of San Juan and the rest of the island was a lack of federal funding—an issue that was compounded by excessive building costs that hindered the project from its inception. For one, administrative costs ate up a considerable portion of the ER Development's budget, which was an issue that also plagued many stateside housing projects. For instance, in 1938, economist Morton Bodfish compiled a study of 51 continental New Deal housing projects and determined that between one-third and two-thirds of every dollar spent went to covering administrative expenses.⁵⁶ Evidence from the PRRA archives points to a similar trend in Puerto Rico. A list compiled by the PRRA shows that the ER project's administrative staff numbered 103 persons earning a combined salary of \$135,260 annually. Over the course of two years these costs would

⁵⁵ "Carlos Chardón to Dr. Ernest Gruening, July 16, 1936," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing," RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁵⁶ Morton Bodfish, "A Note on Rents and Costs in PWA Housing Projects," *The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, 14, no. 1 (February 1938), 82.

total \$270,520, about half of the ER development's total construction costs of \$550,000. In fact, in June of 1937, Acting Regional Administrator for the PRRA, Guillermo Esteves, called upon his superior, Miles Fairbank, to make a recommendation for "all possible reductions" to the project's office staff to reduce administrative costs. Soon after, Esteves was authorized to cut nearly forty positions, which were mostly held by islanders.⁵⁷

According to another colonial official, Egozque was contributing to some of the financial problems plaguing the ER Development project. On July 29, 1936, a PRRA official in Puerto Rico named Harry A. Sellery, Jr. wrote to the PRRA Washington office, reporting that Manuel Egozque accepted excessively high bids for the construction of the sewage systems and streets at the ER site. He complained that "at the rate Mr. Egozque is going he will spend all his money" on the ER development's infrastructure, leaving little left over for the construction of buildings. He also complained that little would remain for the clearing of other urban "slums" and much-needed experimental housing on other sites in the San Juan vicinity.⁵⁸ Egozque defended himself by reporting that subcontractors and property owners charged "exorbitant" prices for work and access to land needed by the PRRA to drive pilings and to install sewer lines.⁵⁹

On August 7, 1936, an official from the Slum Clearance division of the PRRA sent a memo to the office of the General Counsel of the PRRA complaining about the lack of funds required to clear poor neighborhoods and to purchase land for the construction of housing

⁵⁷ Untitled folder, Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, 1935-1946, "Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section," RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC; U.S. Congress, Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, "Work Relief for the Fiscal Year, 1941," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 148.

⁵⁸ "Harry A. Sellery Jr. to David R. Kreeger, July 29, 1936," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing," RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁵⁹ "June 20, 1936, Slum Clearance Division of the PRRA to the General Counsel of the PRRA," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing," RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

projects on the outskirts of San Juan, namely the ER Development. According to the official, the PRRA needed between \$500,000 and \$700,000 specifically for the purchase of acreage from shantytown landowners and the municipal government. According to the memo, an additional \$600,000 would be required to finish the construction of the experimental homes. He went on to say that such lands, eroded and wasted, would prove “useless” and that it would be better to utilize the funds to build much-needed “model low-cost housing” for the poor in more suitable locations outside of the city. The official also expressed concerns over rewarding both the municipalities and the private land holders who owned the land upon which San Juan’s shantytowns were built. Possible reasons for colonial officials’ choice to build homes outside of the city may have included their desire to locate shantytown residents closer to the countryside where the unemployed might find jobs in the sugar industry *or* just as likely is the possibility that officials believed that densely populated, low-income urban neighborhoods might continue to be “breeding grounds” for both disease and political dissent.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, roughly 43 of Puerto Rico’s 77 municipal governments owned the land underneath many of the island’s pervasive shantytowns. The remainder of the island land upon which urban squatters’ settlements were built was owned by large land holders or “slum lords.” This arrangement made for an exploitative relationship. Landowners and municipalities charged exorbitant rents to residents and municipal governments profited from taxing both the land holders and tenants for use of their homes.⁶⁰ In light of this arrangement, the “slum clearance” official suggested that the federal government abandon plans

⁶⁰ “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC; The American Red Cross. 32, 37; The U.S. War Office, *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1929* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1929), 13, 15, 20, 35; “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator, PRRA, Feb. 13, 1935,” Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC.

to purchase “slum” lands altogether as it essentially amounted to paying shantytown landowners a “bounty” for their exploitative practices. Similar suggestions were made by another PRRA advisor who accused urban land owners of permitting swamp lands to turn into “dangerous and unsanitary slums” and that the owners “should not receive a windfall from the PRRA by way of the purchase of their lands.”⁶¹ The official then warned his superiors that the “slum clearance” and housing projects were going over budget and therefore it would be necessary to pass on the cost to low-income families via their rents and mortgages, making their endeavors to better their living conditions cost prohibitive.⁶² The increasing visibility made possible by such reportage, the lobbying of PRRA officials, as well as the political and social unrest plaguing the island seemed to prompt Puerto Rico’s political old guard into taking a more collaborative approach with U.S. colonial officials than they had done during the early depression. In late August 1936, the Puerto Rico Legislature donated 11,778 square meters of San Juan land for the construction of the ER Development—a surprising turn of events considering the widespread opposition to the New Deal’s presence in Puerto Rico.⁶³ The donation was also surprising in that, as one PRRA official noted, the Insular Legislature had “tacitly” allowed for the establishment of squatters’ settlements as they failed to enforce laws which mandated that any houses constructed in Puerto Rico required a permit as well as proper sewage and water facilities.⁶⁴

⁶¹ “To Mr. Harry A. Sellery, PRRA, July 28, 1936,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, “Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing,” RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶² “Slum Clearance Division of the PRRA to the General Counsel of the PRRA, August 7, 1936,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, “Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing,” RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA, NYC; “Lafayette Sugar-Slum Clearance-Engineering Division to Lafayette-Sugar (1939),” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records 1935-1945, RG 323, Box 28, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶³ Untitled file, Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, “Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing,” RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶⁴ “To Mr. Harry A. Sellery, PRRA, July 28, 1936,” Records of the PRRA.

Adding to the excessive building costs of the ER Development was the fact that the federal government placed preference on materials and supplies imported from the continental U.S. Although the PRRA did allow the use of building materials manufactured on the island, it was stipulated that such provisions be “recognized and approved” by an “agency in the United States.” So, any materials originating in Puerto Rico had to be exported to the continent for inspection and then shipped back to Puerto Rico if approved—an arrangement that made Puerto Rican materials far more expensive than those manufactured and imported directly from the United States. This practice was a byproduct of the existing mercantilist arrangement between the island and the United States under which Puerto Ricans were required to import upwards of ninety percent of its food and goods from the mainland at inflated prices.⁶⁵

A Puerto Rican PRRA contractor, Fernando Caso, argued that Puerto Rican manufactured materials be made exempt from this legal caveat, noting that “it would be preposterous even to presume that an agency like the PRRA, created with the sole purpose of fostering the permanent economic recovery of Puerto Rico, could have intended to bar the use of Puerto Rican-manufactured goods in the performance of its contracts.”⁶⁶ During the same week Caso made his opinion known, he was asked to report to the PRRA offices in San Juan for a hearing concerning purported labor violations. Assistant Regional Administrator for the PRRA, Guillermo Esteves, charged Caso with forcing his employees to work forced overtime rather than obey the PRRA mandated 40-hour work week/8-hour workday.⁶⁷ Facing a fine of \$6.00 per day

⁶⁵ By law, under the 1917 Jones Act, it was also stipulated that any imports and exports be carried on U.S. registered ships. Bailey W. and Justine W. Diffie, *Porto Rico: A Broken Pledge* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931), 128-129; Tugwell, Stricken, 45.

⁶⁶ “Fernando Caso to Miles H. Fairbank, February 10, 1937,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records 1935-1945, “Lafayette Sugar-Slum Clearance-Engineering Division to Lafayette-Sugar (1939),” RG 323, Box 28, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶⁷ By 1937, the time of this incident, the 40-hour work week stipulated under the National Industrial Recovery Act, which had been extended to Puerto Rico, had been deemed unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court (1935, *Schechter Poultry v. United States*). Additionally, the maximum work week potentially provided under the

for every day each employee worked over eight hours, Caso demanded that he be supplied with evidence, which he claimed was not forthcoming, to support the charges so that he might properly defend himself at the hearing.⁶⁸ Considering the timing of Caso's investigation, one might infer that officials working for the PRRA were attempting to silence opposition to federal procedures. Caso's dispute with PRRA officials highlights the type of tensions that pervaded the agency due to funding issues which did not allow for colonial New Deal agents to meet their housing construction goals.

Other PRRA officials logged further concerns about the amount of funding available needed to realize their vision for the construction of affordable housing for the island's poor. In September of 1936, an unnamed source from the PRRA reported to his superiors in Washington that the total costs of building the ER housing project were reaching over \$431,000 and that the budget for the construction might exceed \$550,000. It became apparent that climbing construction costs prohibited the construction of an adequate number of units to house the city's poor. As a result of the mounting costs, the official noted that "the rent which tenants thereof will be required to pay will be more than the persons for whom it was intended can afford to pay." Indeed, considering the low incomes and rampant unemployment on the island, the cost of either renting or purchasing one of these model hurricane-proof homes was out of range for the majority of the working classes.⁶⁹

1935 Wagner Act did not extend to Puerto Rico, nor had the 40-hour work week granted under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 been enacted yet. Therefore, Caso's purported violation of the 40-hour work week indicates that the PRRA had the authority to set maximum work week standards for its employees and contractors.

⁶⁸ "Fernando Caso to Guillermo Esteves, February 13, 1937," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records 1935-1945, "Lafayette Sugar-Slum Clearance-Engineering Division to Lafayette-Sugar (1939)," RG 323, Box 28, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶⁹ Marygrace Tyrell, "Colonizing Citizens: Housing Puerto Ricans, 1917-1952" (PhD diss. in the Field of History, Northwestern University, 2009), 149.

In 1935, “slum clearance” chief Manuel Egozque estimated that monthly rentals or the optional twenty-five-year mortgage on one of these homes plus monthly maintenance and administrative fees would total \$2,250 per unit per year, or roughly \$187 per month. In reality, average rents or mortgages were set to cost around \$12 per month—an amount that was still cost prohibitive for many in the island’s working class.⁷⁰ The average net income for a working-class Puerto Rican was roughly \$230 per year (or between \$16 to \$19 per month) during the depression years. Thus, ownership of a model home proved out of reach for much of the population. This is especially the case when considering another statistic from the era which reveals that annual incomes for the Puerto Rican working class may actually have been substantially lower. According to a U.S. Treasury report, the average working-class family's mean income in the first half of the 1930s in Puerto Rico was roughly \$6 per month or approximately \$72/year.⁷¹ Throughout the depression, Puerto Rican wages either remained stagnant or sometimes decreased below levels seen in the 1920s.⁷² With these figures in mind, it is safe to assume that paying twelve dollars per month for shelter was not a viable option for those members of the Puerto Rican working class who were unemployed, underemployed, and earning subsistence wages during the depression era.

The affordability of low-income housing was an issue that was also evident in the continental U.S. as can be seen in debates over the cost of rents at the Techwood Housing Project in Georgia. According to one PWA document from 1936, stateside “slum clearance” officials

⁷⁰ “Manuel Egozque, Chief of Slum Clearance Division, September 12, 1936,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, “Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing,” RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁷¹ U.S. Treasury Department, *The Internal Revenue Service: Statistics of Income for 1931* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 59; “Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator, PRRA, Feb. 13, 1935,” Records of the PRRA.

⁷² Centro, Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, “The Depression Hits Puerto Rican Workers,” <https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/digital-humanities/puerto-rican-labor/depression-hits-puerto-rican-workers>; IRS, “Statistics of Income, 1930-1940,” <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/30soirepar.pdf>;

expressed concerns over the cost of rents at Techwood, which were promising to exceed \$9 per month—a figure that, according to the PWA, “was far too high to enable persons of low income to become tenants of the property.”⁷³ Ultimately, the cost of renting a unit in the Techwood project would be subsidized by the government, bringing the cost of rent down to \$6 per month. It is unclear how extensive such federal subsidies were, but considering the cost of rents in other continental housing projects, one might assume that they would have been welcomed as average rents for federal projects hovered around \$15 (some were as high as \$19 per month) by 1938.⁷⁴ When examining mainland incomes for “common laborers” it is clear that low-income housing rents might have been a stretch for average workers, particularly if they were African American. Average blue collar wages by race in 1937 were as follows: white working-class laborers earned \$.45 per hour or \$72 per month, black laborers earned \$.35 per hour or roughly \$56 per month. To pay the minimal average rent of \$15 per month for low income housing would have eaten up 21% of a white laborers’ monthly paycheck and approximately 26% of African Americans’ monthly wages. While not an impossibility, paying such rents might have been cost prohibitive for many, particularly people of color.⁷⁵

Many from the Puerto Rican working classes complained about the high cost of rents charged at the ER Development. Those who were lucky enough to obtain low-income housing constructed by the PRRA sometimes found themselves unable to afford monthly rents and mortgages and faced eviction. It was a reality that forced many to move back to squatters’

⁷³ “A.B. Hawes to Francis M. Shea, February 4, 1936,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records 1935-1945, “Lafayette Sugar-Shannahan Appraisal of Lafayette Value to Lafayette Sugar-Slum Clearance-Eleanor Roosevelt Development,” RG 323, Box 27, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁷⁴ U.S. Housing Authority, *Annual Report of the United States Housing Authority for the Fiscal Year, 1938*.

⁷⁵ For more on how discriminatory New Deal policies excluded women see: Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review, April 1937* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 940.

settlements.⁷⁶ In 1939, writing on behalf of the 200 families of the ER Development, resident Samuel S. Maduro complained to New York Congressman Vito Marcantonio that the cost of rents and mortgages combined with low wages and the lingering unemployment problem resulted in tenants' delinquent rents and evictions.⁷⁷ Many were forced to move out under court order with as little as fifteen days' notice for owing as little as \$12 in back payments.⁷⁸ Many chose to relocate back to their former neighborhoods due to financial necessity as the average monthly rents of \$1-\$4 in Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements was a relatively affordable option as opposed to paying \$12 per month to rent or own a unit in a new urban housing project.⁷⁹

It is also worth noting that when considering the average size of a working-class Puerto Rican family, the scale of the experimental homes seemed too small to meet the needs of those who could afford to live in them. On August 4, 1937, J.E. Hines, a housing engineer from Kensington, Maryland submitted building plans for houses that would become the standard for the PRRA's slum relocation projects. Made of precast concrete, the average footprint for one of these experimental houses measured only 21 by 17 feet or roughly 357 square feet. The floor plan consisted of two 8 by 6 bedrooms, a 7 by 7-foot kitchen and a 10 foot by 6-foot living room area. Seeing as the average size of a Puerto Rican working class family was approximately 5.5 people, but usually consisted of more family members, one can assume that sleeping arrangements would be crowded. The new, well-ventilated homes complete with indoor

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938 by the United States. Dept. of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 293; "Samuel S. Maduro to Hon. Vito Marcantonio, September 7, 1939," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records: 1935-1945, Correspondence, RG 323, Box 8, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁷⁷ Congressman Marcantonio was a member of the American Labor Party and represented the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City—a district that was largely populated by a migrant Puerto Rican population. The New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts, "Vito Marcantonio papers: 1935-1953," <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/1871>

⁷⁸ "Samuel S. Maduro to Hon. Vito Marcantonio, September 7, 1939," Records of the PRRA.

⁷⁹ "Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator, PRRA, Feb. 13, 1935," Records of the PRRA.

plumbing and electricity were more spacious than the tiny shacks found in Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements (which measured somewhere between 54 and 250 square feet) and were undoubtedly an improvement over what residents endured in Puerto Rico's shantytowns.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the amount of space the PRRA provided still proved to be inadequate to comfortably house the large families expected to live in them.⁸¹ By contrast, the average size of a low income housing unit on the mainland would cap out at roughly 500 square feet with an average family size of 4.11 people. While mainland units were still relatively small, they were larger in size and expected to accommodate fewer people than those constructed in Puerto Rico where there was a greater need for adequate shelter.⁸²

Shoddy construction was another problem plaguing new housing projects, particularly on the mainland. Poor workmanship was directly tied to financial constraints mandated by the federal government. For example, according to historian Edward Goetz, continental public housing programs instituted after the Wagner-Steagall Bill was passed in 1937 were impacted by "absolute limits" on construction costs that capped out at \$5000 per unit. It was a measure that was intended to decrease government spending, but it had deleterious effects on the day to day living conditions of the black and white American working classes who lived in federal housing. As Goetz notes, budget restraints led to cost cutting measures such as "shortcuts, the use of

⁸⁰ The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster, September, 1928: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Florida" (Washington, D.C., 1929), 32, 37.

⁸¹ "Proposed Regulations and Payment Plan Under Which the Houses to be Built Under the PRRA Slum Clearance Housing Projects," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing," RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC; Untitled file, Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, "General Records, 1935-1945, "Projects-Conscientious Objectors to Projects-Housing (1938)," RG 323, Box 55, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁸² The ratio of homelessness percentages to over all population in the U.S. and Puerto Rico highlight disparities that placed Puerto Rico in a position of greater need for new housing. For instance, by mid-decade of the 1930s, about 33% of Puerto Ricans were without adequate shelter as opposed to the 1.5 percent of the U.S. mainland population that was homeless. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Population Change Data (1910-2020), <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>; U.S. Housing Authority, *Annual Report of the United States Housing Authority for the Fiscal Year, 1938*, 2.

inferior materials, and regrettable design decisions” that manifested in broken elevators, doorless closets, cinder-block walls, and cement floors that created a prisonlike or institutional atmosphere. Still, housing projects which had been intended to ameliorate the living conditions of those who lived in what were then described as “slums” sometimes ended up providing, at the very least, a mild improvement over what residents experienced in their former neighborhoods.⁸³

Beyond financial requirements, in order to qualify for occupancy in the ER housing project, potential residents first had to meet the strict criteria set up by the PRRA. These criteria intended to set heteronormative social and moral standards for the experimental city and were modeled on those employed by continental housing authorities who, as historian Edward Goetz observes, were concerned with the “suitability” and “moral character” of potential tenants.⁸⁴ As it was on the mainland, in Puerto Rico, the unemployed, certain welfare recipients, and single mothers were excluded from applying.⁸⁵ If a Puerto Rican “slum dweller” was the male head of household, an American citizen, drug and alcohol free with no criminal record, and promised not to house any livestock or pets other than “cagebirds and goldfishes,” then he stood a better chance of passing the first part of the screening process that would qualify him for the purchase or rent of a model home.⁸⁶ As one official noted, “the rehousing of families living in the slum areas of Puerto Rico has to go hand in hand with the educational, social, physical, and emotional rehabilitation of each individual so as to ensure the success of the slum clearance program and hence the permanent happiness and welfare of all.”⁸⁷ These criteria were a part of a broader

⁸³ Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 33.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ “Proposed Regulations and Payment Plan Under Which the Houses to be Built Under the PRRA Slum Clearance Housing Projects,” Records of the PRRA.

⁸⁷ “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico, with special reference to the San Juan area,” Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, 1935-46, “Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section,” RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC.

PRRA policy that promoted the holistic socioeconomic, moral reformation of Puerto Rico's working class, which in turn, policymakers believed, would benefit society as a whole.

Ultimately, as historian Marygrace Tyrell has noted, because many from the poorer classes were unable to afford homes in the ER Development, most of the project's residents would ultimately hail from what "could be considered [the] lower-middle class."⁸⁸ Outside of affordability, this was in part due to the fact that, as it was in the continental United States, colonial housing programs were implemented locally.⁸⁹ Throughout the 1930s, about 98 percent of the PRRA's staff consisted of Puerto Ricans.⁹⁰ It was a design that in one sense granted islanders autonomy over the direction of rehabilitation programs, but one that also fostered what critics described as favoritism and corruption among the privileged few in charge of daily operations. The PRRA was ultimately the primary organization overseeing all relief and reconstruction efforts on the island, so local administrators wielded considerable power when deciding who would benefit from the limited funds at their disposal. In some cases, these beneficiaries were friends, family members, or colleagues from the same social class as PRRA administrators, namely the middle class. By failing to oversee the PRRA's daily operations and

⁸⁸ Tyrell, *Colonizing Citizens*, 36.

⁸⁹ Public planning expert Peter Marcuse notes that after the USHA passed in 1937, the New York City Housing Authority was mired in local controversy and political battles between Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Langdon Post, the head of the NYCHA who was appointed by the mayor. Political infighting and depression-era budgetary concerns brought on by a Congress that was reluctant to fund national housing programs led to a stalling of the NYCHA's slum eradication and public housing initiatives in the 1930s and 1940s. The post-World War II era saw, however, an unprecedented boom in New York public housing construction brought on by the demands of those returning veterans who did not partake in the so-called "white flight" to the suburbs. Many white, male veterans, armed with housing loans supplied under the G.I. Bill (along with other government benefits) created a demand that sparked an inner city housing boom that catered to this newly emergent segment of the American middle class. And so, similar to the phenomenon that took place in Puerto Rico during the depression era, it was the middle class who largely benefitted from public housing programs in post-war New York City, rather than the lower income families for whom such programs had originally been designed under the New Deal. Peter Marcuse, "Interpreting 'Public Housing' History," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1995), 250.

⁹⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Insular Affairs, Seventy-Eighth Congress, Second Session, *Investigation of Political, Economic, and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 1760.

placing the majority of its budget and decisions in the hands of local power brokers, the federal government essentially enabled insular class dynamics which generally did not favor the poor, but rather, favored the middle class. PRRA complaint files contain charges from poor residents who were being priced out of their homes and who claimed that systemic corruption plagued the administration from its earliest days. In part, such corruption was closely associated with the local implementation of the PRRA's programs, which fostered a type of cronyism among the program's middle class insular administrators.⁹¹

Indeed, Samuel S. Maduro noted in his complaint to Vito Marcantonio that evicted families' homes in the ER Development were subsequently filled by those he described as having large salaries that exceeded the required income cap for housing eligibility. People such as "merchants with going concerns who could well afford to reside in the aristocratic suburbs," Maduro wrote and "politicians with lucrative jobs in the insular government" were ending up in the units originally meant for low-income residents. He also claimed that he witnessed childless, professional couples occupying low-income housing units, using them as a second home or as a weekend pied de terre. Despite the relatively small size of low-income housing units, according to historians Marygrace Tyrell and Zaire Dinzey-Flores, many middle class couples also coveted these apartments due to their relative affordability, which would enable them to save for larger single-family homes.⁹² While the poorer residents of the project were constantly investigated to ensure they were not breaking the morality codes of their contracts, Maduro reported that the project's more prosperous residents frequently violated these stipulations with impunity. His suggestion for rectifying the situation was to "eliminate...the nepotism, privilege, and patronage"

⁹¹ "Maduro to Marcantonio," Records of the PRRA.

⁹² Marygrace Tyrell, *Colonizing Citizens*, 224; Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, "Temporary Housing, Permanent Communities: Public Housing Policy and Design in Puerto Rico." *Journal of Urban History*, 33, no. 3 (March 2007): 472.

that permeated the PRRA at the expense of the working classes.⁹³ Historian Edward G. Goetz notes that the same type of localized cronyism was evident on the continent. In terms of housing placement, it was not uncommon for local administrators to give preferential treatment and extend political patronage to friends, colleagues, and potential voters in places like New York City and Boston.⁹⁴

Maduro was not alone in making such accusations about favoritism and corruption. In 1939, though he did not provide proof, a resident of the city of Bayamon, Felix de Valois Soto wrote to President Roosevelt to complain that local officials were using PRRA funds to partake in "riotous living." De Valois claimed that in addition to throwing lavish parties with government money, the same local elites denied jobs to worthy applicants because of cronyism and patronage. It was because of such misconduct, de Valois noted, that the socioeconomic situation of the poor was worse than before the PRRA came into existence, so bad in fact that "the common people...may not endure much longer such slavery and oppression."⁹⁵

PRRA construction projects underway in other cities also suffered from the same type of problems that plagued the ER Development. For instance, citizens of the city of Mayaguez wrote repeatedly to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes about a sewer project that had grossly exceeded its budget and, as a result had been left unfinished. When residents complained, instead of being fired, the engineer in charge, a man named Molini, was given a position as the chief engineer of the PRRA under the auspices of his friend and colleague, Guillermo Esteves.⁹⁶ As a result of the project's abandonment, residents noted that the sanitary conditions were far worse

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 35.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ "Complaints," Records of the PRRA, Washington Office: General Records 1935-1945, "Correspondence," RG 323, Box 8, Entry 1, NARA NYC.

than before it had been initiated. The city's drainage ditches, which once contained dirty, but freely flowing waters, now had become stagnant, pestilence-breeding cess pools prone to flooding. And flooding occurred regularly, bringing with it the spread of deadly illnesses and the erosion of house foundations. Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Oscar L. Chapman, responded that the funds allotted to this project by the PRRA had been limited.⁹⁷ No other explanation was provided. Furthermore, Chapman said, it was the responsibility of the Insular Health Department and municipal officials to ensure the sanitary conditions for Mayaguez including taking care of its rainwater discharge—neither of which they had succeeded in doing according to Chapman. The federal government, Chapman noted, had "no jurisdiction" to fix the problem.⁹⁸ Chapman's response illustrates how federal officials in Washington often took a hands-off approach regarding the day-to-day operation of PRRA programs. In a sense, the federal government's hands were tied due to the fact that in Puerto Rico, as in the continental United States, once federal funding was distributed, the administration of New Deal programs occurred locally and were prone to such problems as over-inflated budgets and cronyism. It was primarily the responsibility of insular and local PRRA officials to see to the details of how New Deal projects were implemented on the island. Consequently, in addition to the general inadequacy of federal funding, the absence of federal regulation contributed to a situation that was sometimes prone to local favoritism and corruption, issues that impacted the effectiveness of PRRA projects.

Tension between New Deal operatives working on and off the island also contributed to the inability of the PRRA to effectively implement its housing program goals. This was particularly the case during the early years of the PRRA's existence. For example, Carlos

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Chardón was required to answer to Ernest Gruening, the program's Administrator in Washington, D.C., who was an accomplished physician but who had no experience in public administration. PRRA administrator Miles Fairbank claimed that Carlos Chardón was frequently left out of policy making decisions, which factored into his resignation from his advising position in 1936. Gruening also was in "continuous disagreement" with Harold Ickes, who was resentful of the fact that the president had given orders for the Administrator to bypass Ickes and answer directly to him. Ickes also blamed Gruening for a series of highly publicized resignations in the agency's first year and petitioned the president to give him direct control over the agency. FDR complied, and in 1936 Gruening stepped down from his position. Ickes placed his close friend Leona Graham in an advisory position to help him combine all of the island New Deal programs under the control of the PRRA. Fairbank noted, that it was under the umbrella of the new, streamlined PRRA that the government made its first attempts "toward urban renewal," but according to his account these attempts were "minimal at best."⁹⁹

By 1939, the administration's low-income housing programs had been underway in Puerto Rico for four years. By the end of the decade, the PRRA had constructed three major urban housing developments across the island designed to relocate city shantytown dwellers: The *Falansterio* and The Eleanor Roosevelt Developments outside of San Juan, and the Juan Morell Campos project on the outskirts of Puerto Rico's second largest city, Ponce.¹⁰⁰ These three, in addition to a few minor housing developments, would ultimately contain 3,004 units, which

⁹⁹ Fairbank, *Chardón Plan*, 28, 37, 39, 48.

¹⁰⁰ The Living New Deal, "El Falansterio, Puerta de Tierra, San Juan, PR," <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/el-falansterio-puerta-de-tierra-san-juan-pr/>; Luz Marie Rodríguez, "New Deal Communities for Puerto Rico: The Urban Housing Projects of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration," (MA thesis, Mississippi State University, 1994), 35.

would house roughly 16,522 people in Puerto Rico's cities and rural areas.¹⁰¹ While the quantity of units built was not an insignificant amount, it fell short of what was needed to adequately house Puerto Rico's squatters' settlement population which numbered in the hundreds of thousands.¹⁰² The shortfalls of the PRRA's urban housing programs are especially apparent when considering the number of units constructed in San Juan versus its estimated shantytown population of 15,747. By 1939, the number of units constructed in the city by the PRRA was 725, which had the capacity to house approximately 3,987 people.¹⁰³ A 1939 report from the PRRA noted that the poor families of San Juan were still finding it difficult to afford low-income housing because they were unable to make a living wage. At least twenty-five percent of San Juan's shantytown dwelling families earned a combined income of less than \$16 per month in 1939, making the \$12 monthly rents charged by the PRRA unaffordable. In order for the thousands of San Juan's shantytown residents to be properly housed and to afford the basic necessities of life, the author recommended federal funding for additional units where rents would not exceed \$2 per month per family with water, electricity, and gas provided free of charge. Also recommended was the construction of more low-cost houses with a sale price of no more than \$700 (fifty dollars less than the original PRRA recommended price) to make homeownership more feasible for low-income islanders.¹⁰⁴ According to the Department of the Interior between 1936 and 1944 only a little over 7,000 federally-funded low-income houses

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938*; The Living New Deal, "Hurricane-Proof Housing," <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/hurricane-proof-housing-san-juan-pr/>

¹⁰² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses," 140; "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

¹⁰³ The Living New Deal, "Hurricane-Proof Housing."

¹⁰⁴ The Living New Deal, "Hurricane-Proof Housing"; The Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, "Annual Report of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Miles H. Fairbank, Assistant Administrator, Year Ended June 30, 1939," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939).

were constructed island-wide to house roughly 35,000 people.¹⁰⁵ Keeping in mind the previously stated estimates of shantytown populations during the late depression in Puerto Rico, which hovered between 225,000 and 337,500 people, and especially considering that an estimated 750,000 people were left homeless in the wake of two major hurricanes, the number of houses actually provided to Puerto Rico's poorer classes in both urban and rural areas by the PRRA fell far short of what was needed.¹⁰⁶

The PRRA was also unsuccessful in its efforts to clear the island's shantytowns. In fact, according to a PRRA report written in 1939, many of the island's urban poor settlements still existed and even expanded despite government efforts. For instance, in that year, a PRRA report counted 13 extant squatters' settlements on the outskirts of San Juan in which there were living an estimated 62,810 people—a twenty-five percent increase over 1936 estimates for the same area.¹⁰⁷ The official writing the report cited several reasons for this phenomenon including the ever-growing island population which was about to exceed 2 million people, exorbitant rents in the San Juan vicinity, as well as the ongoing economic depression. The author went on to place part of the responsibility for San Juan's expanding "slums" on the city's poor, who, he noted demonstrated an "acceptance of low social standards" that prompted them to "seek improvised shelter."¹⁰⁸ According to this line of reasoning, because San Juan's shantytown residents had grown used to a life of squalor, it seemingly rendered them unable to hope for a higher standard

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938*, 291-292; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1944*, by the United States Department of the Interior, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 273.

¹⁰⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses," 140; "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Rural Engineering Section to Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2 Entry 37, NARA NYC.

¹⁰⁷ "Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico," Records of the PRRA.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

of living. Assumptions such as these fell in line with those expressed earlier in the depression by officials like PRERA director James Bourne and Rexford Tugwell. Rather than blame the colonial political economy, many U.S. operatives had a tendency to, at least in part, blame Puerto Ricans for their assumed willingness to accept substandard living conditions. In this way, islanders were fashioned by U.S. officials and other observers as being partly responsible for their own plight. It was a line of thinking that reinscribed notions of metropolitan superiority which provided rationale for U.S. dominance over its Puerto Rican colonial subjects. It also served to shift the locus of culpability away from broader systemic issues that created the class disparity so prevalent under the U.S.-Puerto Rican colonial dynamic.

The PRRA official who wrote the 1939 report noted that there was an existing sentiment among government officials that the solution for “clearing Puerto Rico’s slums” was the relocation of shantytown dwellers to rural regions. “There is a prevailing school of thought,” he said, “that inasmuch as many of the present slum dwellers were originally forced into the cities from the mountains because of the agricultural depression, a large percentage could be resettled by moving them back into the mountains from whence they came.” It was the opinion of many PRRA officials, however, that resettlement efforts should be limited to areas within the vicinity of cities where shantytown dwellers currently resided. This approach would keep shantytown dwellers close to their places of employment where they worked as “peddlers, servants, dock and factory workers.” The official went on to suggest that these populations not be relocated at all as they have “adjusted themselves to the conditions of their neighborhood.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, according to the PRRA, the chief complaints about the low-cost housing projects that had been developed so

¹⁰⁹ “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico,” Records of the PRRA.

far, including the ER development, was that not only were they too expensive, but they had also been built too far away from urban areas such as San Juan.¹¹⁰

PRRA officials also cited budget problems as a reason for the failures of its “slum clearance” projects. For instance, the agency had taken measures in 1937 to “clear out” the San Juan’s La Perla shantytown, but “because of lack of funds, this project was never carried out.” According to colonial PRRA officials, the land on which La Perla was built was owned by a combination of private landholders, as well as the federal, municipal, and insular governments who, if willing to sell, would only do so at inflated prices. The portion of La Perla owned by a private landholder named Sucesión Riera, for example, was going for the asking price of \$65,000, an amount, when combined with the cost of the remaining land in the “slum,” exceeded the PRRA’s total original land purchasing budget.¹¹¹ The report noted that PRRA officials had called for the release of more funds to purchase the La Perla land as well as an additional \$1 million for the construction of low-income housing along the lines of what was built at the ER development. Officials also noted that to clear all of San Juan’s shantytowns, an additional \$9 million in federal funds was requested by the PRRA. The \$10 million, they noted, did not include the necessary funds to purchase the land required to build new model communities.¹¹² However, such funds would not be forthcoming from the federal government. Total federal aid for all New Deal projects in Puerto Rico in 1937 had amounted to around \$14.5 million, most of which came from the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1938.¹¹³ As it had been thus far

¹¹⁰ For more on colonial officials’ reasoning and debates over urban vs. rural relocation of shantytown residents, particularly in the post-World War II era, see Eileen J. Findlay, *We Are Left Without a Father Here: Masculinity, Domesticity, and Migration in Postwar Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico,” Records of the PRRA.

¹¹¹ “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico,” Records of the PRRA.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ The PRRA, “Annual Report of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1939.”

under the colonial New Deal, PRRA officials' goals of building enough units to house the island's displaced population were hindered once again by a lack of federal funding.

Also contributing to the island's growing shantytowns, according to the PRRA, was the Insular Government's "legalization" of new "slum" areas. As they had done in the past, insular authorities bypassed laws that mandated the destruction of buildings and neighborhoods where existing sanitary regulations were not being met. According to a PRRA report, in 1939, the insular government was "giving legal sanction to people to live under slum conditions" by financing the construction of unstable wooden houses in existing squatters' settlements and in new neighborhoods. Not only was the insular government circumventing its own regulations, but it was building new, flimsy homes that were subject to destruction by termites and hurricanes. PRRA officials called such measures a "transitory improvement" to lives of the island's urban poor who would, they asserted, ultimately be re-relegated to the same living conditions they had already found themselves enduring.¹¹⁴ The PRRA's accusations reveal a point of tension between U.S. colonial and insular officials as the latter party's efforts to build affordable housing in existing squatters' settlements became a terrain of struggle for political legitimacy between local and federal officials.¹¹⁵

The PRRA report contained a word of caution to federal authorities about Puerto Rico's underlying economic issues, which PRRA officials claimed could thwart the ultimate effectiveness of "slum clearance" and low-income housing projects should federal funds not be

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Eileen Findlay notes that similar political debates emerged between Afro-Puerto Ricans, working-class activists, Puerto Rican elites, and U.S. officials during the World War I era over campaigns designed by the latter two groups who sought to "morally rehabilitate" prostitutes. Laura Briggs argues that "battles over birth control and eugenics" during the 1920s and 1930s "became staging grounds for struggles over class and nationalism" between islanders and U.S. officials in Puerto Rico. Eileen J. Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 17; Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17.

forthcoming. “No amount of resettlement of families,” the author noted, “will compensate for the necessity of providing employment and an opportunity for each family to gain a livelihood. That, however, is a problem in itself.” In sum, without jobs that would enable them to earn a substantial living, the island’s poor would continue to be unable to benefit from New Deal housing programs.¹¹⁶ The dislocation and relocation of the Puerto Rican poor would not rectify the structural causes of island poverty.

That being said, the next section explores the realities behind the claim that jobs were needed in Puerto Rico in order to facilitate the improvement of living conditions of the working classes. In particular, it will explore some of the federal policies implemented during the second half of the 1930s. Federal officials designed policies to improve labor conditions, which in turn would ostensibly have the hoped-for effect of bettering the lives of the American working classes during a continued time of economic crisis—particularly their ability to earn a living wage and afford housing. Yet, policies extended to the continental working classes were not necessarily extended to the colonial citizens of Puerto Rico. And those that were extended sometimes did not have the desired effect of positively impacting the earning capacity of islanders in any substantial way. These factors, along with the effects of a newly implemented sugar quota and the continued reluctance on the part of the federal government to provide Puerto Rico with a fair share of relief and reconstruction dollars, adversely affected the ability of the PRRA to fulfill its mission of providing an adequate amount of housing and general relief to the island’s poor in the latter half of the depression.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Although many in the Roosevelt administration had the intention of providing housing and employment relief for poor Puerto Ricans, their ability to do so was diminished by islanders' exclusion from federal policies during the second New Deal—policies which actually prevented the creation of jobs, social insurance, and necessary income to access housing in Puerto Rico. For instance, some of the most significant congressional legislation passed during the Second New Deal excluded Puerto Rico. The Wagner and Social Security Acts of 1935, for example, may have offered unprecedented gains for the continental industrial working class in terms of guaranteeing the right to form unions, the right to collective bargaining, and unemployment insurance, but these protections did not extend to the colony.¹¹⁷ Historian Miles Galvin notes that the Wagner Act did not apply to Puerto Rico because it was a colony rather than a state. As the act stipulated that its provisions would only apply to businesses conducting interstate commerce, Puerto Rico did not benefit from its protections.¹¹⁸ According to historian Marietta Morrisey, Puerto Rico's exclusion from the Social Security Act was in part due to U.S. legislators who took issue with the fact that islanders did not pay federal taxes, and therefore were deemed unworthy of receiving benefits.¹¹⁹

The absence of these federal protections was a blow to the island, which had been plagued by rampant unemployment and a weak organized labor movement. Galvin has noted that since the time of the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898, the island's labor movement had been constantly at "a terrible disadvantage economically" and organizationally, "because of the

¹¹⁷ Social Security would finally be extended to Puerto Rico in 1951 and Puerto Rico would adopt its own labor standards law in 1945 with the Puerto Rico Labor Relations Act, which unlike the Wagner Act included protections for agricultural workers. Author Unknown, "Experience and Experiment in Labor Legislation: Puerto Rico Labor Relations Act," *Harvard Law Review* 59, no. 6 (Jul. 1946), 982.

¹¹⁸ Miles Galvin, "The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, *Puerto Rico: Class Struggle and National Liberation* 3, No. 3 (Summer, 1976), 91.

¹¹⁹ Marietta Morrisey, "The Making of a Colonial Welfare State: U.S. Social Insurance and Public Assistance in Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, 33, no. 1 (January 2006), 30.

unlimited supply of unskilled, easily replaceable labor.”¹²⁰ Even if the mid-1930s labor protections had been in place, however, they would only have been extended to Puerto Rico’s tiny industrial sector as they had been in the continental U.S., a point of significance when considering Puerto Rico’s continued reliance on an agricultural economy. Historian Linda Gordon notes that the Social Security Act also excluded agricultural and domestic workers on the mainland and that its exclusionary character was “deliberate and mainly racially motivated.” This was due to the fact that Congress was dominated by “wealthy Southern Democrats who were determined to block the possibility of a welfare system allowing blacks freedom to reject extremely low-wage and exploitative jobs as agricultural laborers and domestic servants.”¹²¹ The same rationale was applied to the colony of Puerto Rico, where the socioeconomy and the political realm were dominated by the sugar industry, and the exploited working population was largely non-white, as it was in the U.S. South.¹²² In fact, as Puerto Rico’s exclusion from the Social Security Act illustrates, Congress treated Puerto Rico in a manner that was quite similar to workers in the continental agricultural sector, particularly people of color living in the Jim Crow South.

This latter phenomenon was also seen with the enactment in Puerto Rico of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The law, which promised laborers a forty-four hour work week (which dropped to forty three hours after it was enacted), overtime pay, and a 25-cent minimum wage, only applied to 100,000 island workers due to its exclusion of agricultural jobs—a

¹²⁰ Galvin, “The Early Development of the Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico,” 30.

¹²¹ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 5.

¹²² For more on the exclusionary nature of New Deal social welfare, particularly as it pertained to women and people of color, see also: Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

provision that also impacted agricultural and domestic workers on the mainland. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris has observed, the FLSA “captured the gendered and racialized sensibilities that underlay the political battles” waged by business leaders and employers leading up to its enactment. In the end, on the mainland it failed to cover 80 percent of the labor force due to the exclusion of domestic, service, and agricultural workers. Kessler-Harris notes that when the bill was passed over a third of African American women were employed as domestic workers and African American men comprised 80 percent of the agricultural workforce. In Puerto Rico, roughly 90 percent of workers, both men and women, worked in agricultural industries and the same exclusions would apply. On both the island and the mainland, the FLSA’s reach was, as PRRA official Miles Fairbank observed, “minimal at best.”¹²³

Along with conservative members of the insular legislature, the pro-business Governor Blanton Winship voiced concerns about the FLSA that echoed those on the mainland and those expressed earlier in debates about the NIRA labor protections.¹²⁴ According to Winship, rather than improve the overall quality of life for workers by providing them with a living wage, he argued that the FLSA would be detrimental in that it would result in increased costs for industries that he assumed would be rectified through eventual layoffs. “The pending application of the Federal Wages and Hours Law to the needlework and other industries,” he said “will inevitably close many establishments and cause the total or partial unemployment of more than

¹²³ Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.

¹²⁴ Blanton Winship was appointed Governor of Puerto Rico by Franklin Roosevelt in February of 1934 and would serve in the position until June of 1939. The former U.S. Army general and veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I was a Georgia native. Upon his appointment to the governorship of Puerto Rico, the *Nation* expressed concerns that he would approach his new position with “an inbred sense of superiority of the United States and its institutions, and a kindly contempt for ‘backward’ and underprivileged peoples”; quoted in Frank Otto Gatell, “Independence Rejected: Puerto Rico and the Tydings Bill of 1936,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 38, no. 1 (February 1958), 27.

100,000 workers, with dependents of not less than 500,000 people."¹²⁵ Winship's rationale for opposing the FLSA highlights his allegiance to big capital, whose fears of an inability to profit from workers who were already underpaid—an expendable work force upon which the industries had come to depend for cheap labor and which would ostensibly be greatly diminished should the legislation apply to Puerto Rico.

Winship's complaints mirrored those of continental businessmen who opposed the labor regulations stipulated by both the FLSA and the Wagner Act of 1935. For instance, in May 1938, as the FLSA was poised to pass in Congress, 2,500 members of the United States Chamber of Commerce (representing over a million members nationwide) met at a Washington, D.C. convention to call for a repeal of the Wagner Act.¹²⁶ At the same convention, chamber members voted unanimously to oppose the upcoming wage and hour legislation contained in the FLSA. Using states' rights rhetoric, delegates argued that "such matters should be left to the States" and that Congress should forsake federal labor legislation as it would hinder the "free initiative" of businesses to promote employment.¹²⁷

Although wages did increase in Puerto Rico under the FLSA, they did not meet the government mandated twenty-five cents per hour. Between 1937 and 1938, average wages for the Puerto Rican industrial work, of which there was little to be found, increased from 17.65 to 20 cents per hour. By contrast, in the continental U.S. industrial wages had reached an average of 57.55 cents per hour by the end of 1938. Furthermore, in the years immediately following its creation, there were hundreds of complaints to the PRRA concerning violations of the FLSA,

¹²⁵ Anne S. Macpherson, "The Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage: The Struggle over the Fair Labor Standards Act in Puerto Rico, 1938-1941," *The Journal of American History* (December 2017), 656; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report, 1938*, 28, 62, 64.

¹²⁶ Edward Fenton, "Congress Urged to Let Businesses Act with 'Free Initiative,'" *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1938, X1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

with very few cases being prosecuted.¹²⁸ In 1940, under pressure from Winship, the Puerto Rican Coalición Party, and the FLT, the Special Industry Committee of the U.S. Congress amended the FLSA to *decrease* the mandatory minimum wage in Puerto Rico to 12.5 cents per hour—a clear example of how Puerto Rico was, in the eyes of the U.S. Congress, not equal to the continental states. The lack of labor protection for Puerto Ricans was reflected in their wages, which ultimately hindered their ability to afford the basic necessities of life, including low-income housing.¹²⁹

As has been discussed previously in this chapter, PRRA projects such as its housing programs continually suffered from a lack of funding. This was in no small part due to the federal government's financial neglect of the island during the middle depression years. For instance, for the fiscal years of 1935 and 1936, Puerto Rico ranked last on the list of states and territories in terms of per capita regular and emergency federal aid. In those years, the island received an average of \$26.51 per person, per year in overall aid as opposed to states at the top of the list such as Nevada and North Dakota which received \$185.53 and \$157.88 respectively for the same time period.¹³⁰ The amount of federal aid offered to Puerto Rico had increased by nearly ten dollars over the previous fiscal year, but the increase was not substantial enough to improve the island's rankings in terms of overall assistance to states and territories. Nor was it enough to provide for the programs PRRA officials attempted to implement.

¹²⁸ Macpherson, "Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage," 656; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report, 1938*, 28, 62, 64.

¹²⁹ Macpherson, "Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage," 656; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report, 1938*, 28, 62, 64.

¹³⁰ Just above Puerto Rico on the list of federal aid for that year was the state of Virginia which received roughly \$28.45/person, the Virgin Islands which received \$33.50/person, and Rhode Island which received \$35.50/person. *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico* (San Juan, PR.: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, & Transportation, 1937), 188.

One possible reason for Puerto Rico's low ranking in terms of federal appropriations during this period was that it coincided with events that further placed the island in a position of disfavor among those in the United States who held the purse strings for distribution of aid. On Sunday February 23, 1936, two Puerto Rican Nationalists assassinated the insular Chief of Police, Colonel E. Francis Riggs as he was leaving church services in San Juan. Riggs, who had been appointed by Roosevelt, was also a close friend of the Chairman of the Territories and Insular Affairs Committee, Senator Millard E. Tydings, a Democrat of Maryland. Two months after Riggs' death, Tydings introduced a bill that would grant Puerto Rico almost immediate independence. The bill, rather than merely freeing Puerto Rico from its dependence on U.S. colonialism, was punitive.¹³¹ If passed, it called for a 1937 referendum on the island based on the question "Should the people of Puerto Rico be sovereign and independent?" If the majority of islanders voted for independence, they would have been granted an incremental release from continental political control while also having to pay a 25% annual increase on U.S. tariffs that would have a disastrous effect on the already-struggling Puerto Rican economy. PRRA head, Ernest Gruening, feared that independence would create further economic crisis and political instability that "would spell alternating periods of chaos and dictatorship" on the island.¹³² While the Tydings Bill did not pass, the sentiments of its author were indicative of negative views of

¹³¹ Tydings was also a proponent of Philippine independence from the United States, basing his rationale for independence along racialized lines. During congressional debates over the matter in the early 1930s, Tydings remarked that the country "already has race questions" and worried that the continued immigration of Filipinos to the mainland would "make the problem more difficult while the freedom of the islands is postponed." Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 413.

¹³² Ernest Gruening quoted in Frank Otto Gatell, "Independence Rejected: Puerto Rico and the Tydings Bill of 1936," 31.

the island circulating among those in positions of power in the continental U.S. in the wake of Riggs' assassination.¹³³

News reports from the African American press about the assassination and subsequent conviction of Puerto Rican Nationalists accused of trying to overthrow the U.S. government in 1936 indicated that at least some African Americans in the U.S. saw racial motives behind the punitive nature of responses of Tydings and other officials. The *Baltimore African-American* reported that eight Puerto Rican Nationalists, including leader Pedro Albizu Campos, were serving time in Atlanta where they were all placed in the segregated, blacks only section of the prison in spite of the fact that some of the prisoners were white. The *African American* quoted friends of the prisoners who stated that “Jim Crow has not only affected them since they arrived in the Atlanta prison, but it is now reaching down into the island.” It was noted that although there was purportedly no *de jure* segregation in Puerto Rico as there was in the United States, “American race prejudice” was creeping into island society and could be seen in the fact that “colored people are not called for jury duty despite the fact that a third of the whole population is colored.”¹³⁴ The paper believed that this was due to a contingent of racist U.S. southerners overseeing the legal procedures who viewed all Puerto Ricans, regardless of their skin tone, as “colored” and therefore subject to the parameters of the Jim Crow order. The *African American* provided a list of the officials who had overseen the arrests, trial, and conviction of the Nationalists, their skin color and their place of origin—“Blanton Winship, white, of Georgia;” Judge Robert A. Cooper “white, former governor of South Carolina;” Prosecutor Cecil Snyder

¹³³ Riggs' assassination came in the wake of other acts of violence perpetrated by Puerto Rican Nationalists. In July and August of 1935, Nationalists had set off bombs in the San Juan offices of the PRRA, various court houses, police stations, and utilities buildings; A.W. Maldonado, *Luis Muñoz Marín: Puerto Rico's Democratic Revolution* (San Juan, P.R.: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2006), 137; Frank Otto Gatell, “Independence Rejected: Puerto Rico and the Tydings Bill of 1936,” 29, 30, 33.

¹³⁴ “Puerto Ricans Sore at Atlanta Pen: No Color Line in Island, but Uncle Sam Kicks Them Around in Dixie,” *The Baltimore African American*, April 13, 1940, 2.

“white, of Baltimore” and U.S. Marshal M. Draughon “white, of Louisiana.” And finally, there was Millard Tydings “white, of Maryland” who had overseen the appointments of majority of those listed by the paper. Such evidence was used by the Nationalist’s attorneys and allies to bring charges of racial discrimination against the federal government. The contingent also asked for the transfer of the prisoners to a northern facility where they would ostensibly be out of the reach of segregation.¹³⁵

As noted previously, PRRA officials had been petitioning the federal government for more relief funds in order to implement its housing and “slum eradication” programs more effectively. But a substantial increase in federal dollars would not be forthcoming by the end of the 1930s. As stated earlier in this chapter, federal appropriations to the PRRA totaled around \$14.5 million in 1939. In spite of PRRA officials’ calls for a dramatic increase in appropriations for the next fiscal year, per the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1939, the federal government extended even less money to the PRRA. For the fiscal year of 1940, the PRRA was expected to operate on an allocated budget of just \$8.9 million.¹³⁶

Beset by budgetary shortfalls, the PRRA’s original intentions of increasing employment, “slum clearance,” and providing housing in Puerto Rico would not be realized. The administration did make some important contributions toward rehabilitating the island, such as the creation of fruit and coffee cooperatives, a TVA-style electrification program, health care initiatives, the creation of cement, bottle, and cardboard manufacturing facilities, as well as reforestation efforts to prevent soil erosion.¹³⁷ Also, according to James Dietz, by 1936, a small

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ The PRRA, “Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Annual Report Year Ended June 30, 1940, Admiral William Leahy, Administrator,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940).

¹³⁷ Geoff G. Burrows, “Rural Hydro-Electrification and the Colonial New Deal.”

PRRA's sugar collectivization project had been responsible for employing upwards of 60,000 people. Nevertheless, the federal government via the PRRA had failed to diversify Puerto Rico's agricultural economy through industrialization, thus denying unemployed and underemployed workers potential jobs and labor protections outside of the sugar industry.¹³⁸

This continued reliance on a sugar economy would have economic consequences that would impact the upward mobility of Puerto Rico's working classes as the 1930s progressed. For one, during the second half of the 1930s unemployment in the island's agricultural sectors steadily increased due to events originating on the mainland. In 1932, 66 percent of employable Puerto Rico's agricultural workers were without work. By 1935, in spite of the federal government's efforts to create jobs, roughly 80 percent of the half a million eligible workers were unemployed.¹³⁹ Later in the decade, employment prospects decreased further due to the impacts of the so-called "Roosevelt Recession" that lasted from 1937-38 as well as the new sugar quotas that went into effect on the island in 1934. In 1939, Governor Blanton Winship complained that sugar quotas and tariff reductions, which had previously protected some Puerto Rican agricultural products on the continental market, had diminished agricultural productivity.¹⁴⁰ The quotas had been mandated under the Jones-Costigan Law, which Congress had passed in 1934 in order to adjust declining prices due to an overabundance of sugar on global markets. A negative feature of the law was that it based Puerto Rico's output on continental imports of sugar for the years 1925 through 1933—a period that encompassed a substantial decrease in Puerto Rican sugar exports due to both the San Felipe and San Ciprián

¹³⁸ Dietz, 155, 156.

¹³⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, "Seventy-seventh Congress. House Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens Report on Interstate Migration," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941) 699.

¹⁴⁰ *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico* (San Juan, PR.: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, & Transportation, 1939), 59 (480).

hurricanes. As a result, from 1934-1936, Puerto Rican sugar exports to the United States dropped in value from approximately \$55.5 million down to \$50 million which amounted to a ten percent decrease in revenue for the island since the quotas were imposed. While export revenues would increase slightly in the following year (\$63 million), they would not rebound to the 1920s' average high of \$86 million for the remainder of the depression.¹⁴¹ By the end of the decade agricultural exports from Puerto Rico, 65 percent of which consisted of sugar crops, dropped substantially. From 1937 to 1939, export values of all agricultural crops decreased from \$101,000,000 down to \$83,000,000.¹⁴² Consequently, to maximize profits, island sugar producers would scale down their workforce to the effect of creating widespread unemployment. Over the course of the decade, the number of agricultural jobs declined by 12.5 percent.¹⁴³ Although in previous decades, economic downturns on the island had been a push factor in emigration to the mainland, the continued effects of the depression prevented the absorption of Puerto Rican workers into the U.S. job market.¹⁴⁴ As a result, this led to a continued exodus of out-of-work agricultural workers from the countryside to Puerto Rico's urban squatters' settlements.¹⁴⁵ Conditions in Puerto Rico's poor urban neighborhoods remained "so low," as one official from the U.S. Bureau of Labor noted in 1939, "that they can be described only as 'human misery'" which was "intensified many times over by growth in population and unemployment."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Association of Sugar Producers of Puerto Rico, *Puerto Rico's Trade with the Continental United States* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Sugar Producers of Puerto Rico, 1936), 8; Dietz, 171.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 176

¹⁴⁴ César J. Ayala, "The Decline of the Plantation Economy and the Puerto Rican Migration of the 1950s," *Latino Studies*, 7, no. 1 (Winter 1996), 66.

¹⁴⁵ Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico, 59 (480).

¹⁴⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, "Seventy-seventh Congress. House Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens Report on Interstate Migration," 699.

As they had throughout the depression, members of the Puerto Rican working class pushed back against such exclusions from federal policies. Many possessed an awareness that what was being offered to them under the New Deal-colonial order was not in line with what they were entitled to as American citizens. For instance, when island elites failed to enforce the FLSA, workers took to the streets. In 1938, 20,000 sugar workers, 30,982 industrial workers (many of whom were women in the tobacco and needlework sectors), and 75,000 longshoremen staged 45 strikes in Puerto Rico.¹⁴⁷ 1939 brought more collective action including a strike staged by 8,000 women in the FITIA (The Insular Federation of Needle workers). Workers marched on the Governor's mansion in San Juan demanding jobs, FLSA enforcement, land reform, Social Security benefits, and the extension of the Wagner Act to Puerto Rico. The situation was summed up by Puerto Rican economic adviser Vincente Geigel-Polanco, who stated before Congress that:

An unavoidable state of profound collective restlessness and discontent arises from these conditions. It is that our people cannot willingly accept [their] own destruction. We firmly believe that we also have a right to the enjoyment of life, liberty, justice, and happiness. Puerto Rico longs for the power to promote its production, raise the standards of living and the working conditions of the laboring classes, introduce policies of true social justice, insure the well-being of all its citizens.¹⁴⁸

While the federal government did little in the way of ameliorating the intolerable conditions on the island by the end of the decade, widespread working-class unrest led to tangible changes in the Puerto Rican labor movement. In 1940, forty-two unions along with the Puerto Rico Communist Party joined together to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations-affiliated

¹⁴⁷ *Thirty-eighth Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico* (San Juan, PR.: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, & Transportation, 1938), 64; "Puerto Rico Strike Makes 75,000 Idle," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1938, 2.

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, Hearings Before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-sixth Congress, A Bill Creating the Puerto Rico Water Resources Authority "Vincente Geigel-Polanco, Member of the Economic Delegation of Puerto Rico: Memorial to the Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 172.

Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT). The CGT provided a more inclusive alternative to the Federación Libre de Trabajadores, which had since its inception, aligned itself with the conservative stateside AFL union— an organization that primarily represented industrial workers and did little to serve the interests of the majority of island agricultural laborers.¹⁴⁹ In a 1940 radio broadcast, Juan Sáez Corales, a leader of the CGT, summed up the struggles encountered by workers in their efforts to organize into a viable labor union in the preceding months, if not years. Corales proclaimed, “These have been months of constant workers' struggle, of growth, development and ideological strengthening for the organized labor movement.” With the arrival of the CGT, Puerto Rico gained what historian Tania M. Ríos Marrero describes as “one of the largest, most democratic union federations in Puerto Rico’s history.”¹⁵⁰

Also instrumental in working class efforts to resist the status quo was the fact that in 1935 the Puerto Rican Legislature amended voting requirements. The new laws granted universal suffrage to all citizens previously excluded by gender and literacy qualifications.¹⁵¹ This signaled an end to the Coalición's dominance over Puerto Rican politics as in subsequent elections women and the Puerto Rican working class voted in record numbers. In 1938, the Partido Populares Democratico (PPD) was formed under the leadership of former Liberal party leader Luis Muñoz Marín. In 1940, campaigning under the slogan, “Pan, Tierra, y Libertad” (Bread, Land, and Liberty), Muñoz and the PPD would win enough support from the voting working class to give the party a strong presence the insular legislature. Winning by a narrow majority, the pro-New Deal Muñoz would take over the presidency of the Puerto Rican Senate to become the highest

¹⁴⁹ Macpherson, 666.

¹⁵⁰ Tania M. Ríos Marrero, “a la huelga todos!”

<https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=e2a6acfb2a7c401cb49de5a0d913084a>

¹⁵¹ Anne S. Macpherson, “The 19th Amendment didn’t grant Puerto Rican women suffrage,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/26/19th-amendment-didnt-grant-puerto-rican-women-suffrage/>

elected official in the insular government.¹⁵² With this victory Muñoz and the PPD obtained considerable power in terms of policy making and would be instrumental in land distribution efforts in the following years.¹⁵³ In part, the new land distribution efforts were facilitated by Rexford Tugwell's appointment as the island's new governor in 1941, promising in his inaugural speech to bring an end to the supremacy of "absentee capitalists."¹⁵⁴ Also, contributing to these initiatives was the establishment of the Farm Security Administration in Puerto Rico that same year. Empowered by the Supreme Court's ruling on the enforcement of the 500-acre law, the FSA, via its Tenant Purchase Program, established thousands of rural homesteads in order to stop the flow of migrants from the Puerto Rican countryside into urban squatters' settlements.

¹⁵² Dietz, 179.

¹⁵³ *Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico* (San Juan, PR.: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, & Transportation, 1935), 54; Henry Wells, "Ideology and Leadership in Puerto Rican Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 49, no. 1 (March 1945), 1; Burrows, 272, 127; Dietz, 179.

¹⁵⁴ A.W. Maldonado, *Luis Muñoz Marín*, 209.

Chapter Five

Puerto Rican Land Reform Under the Farm Security Administration and the *Parcelas* Program

In 1940, a pro-New Deal liberal faction known as the Partido Populares Democratico (PPD) finally broke the chokehold of the pro-sugar political bloc that had thus far opposed previous efforts at distributing land and providing housing for poor Puerto Ricans. Led by the poet, politician, and former Liberal Party leader, Luis Muñoz Marín, the PPD and its continental allies would oversee the enforcement of the 500-acre Law, thus freeing up land for rural housing and resettlement. They also would implement resettlement initiatives and housing reforms under the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the newly formed Puerto Rican Land Authority. Like their predecessor agencies, the FSA and the Land Authority were beset by financial problems. But nevertheless, bolstered by the enforcement of the 500-acre Law, by the end of World War II, both agencies made gains in the areas of housing reform that exceeded previous efforts.

The following chapter provides a brief history of the U.S. government's efforts to resettle the landless and homeless rural poor in the depression-era continental U.S. and in Puerto Rico beginning in the early 1940s. In doing so, federal officials hoped to stem the tide of migrants moving from rural areas to the island's swelling urban shantytowns. It also provides contextual background on federal efforts to resettle tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the southern, western, and midwestern U.S. during the depression era. All of these geographical regions, including Puerto Rico, shared similar catastrophic effects brought on by natural disasters such as dust storms and hurricanes as well as the economic downturn of the Great Depression—impacts which would spur mass displacement of farming communities and a demand for federal

intervention, which ultimately came in the form of the FSA and its predecessor agencies. While the U.S. government did intervene both stateside and in the colony, its efforts to do so were thwarted by localized racism and classism as well as congressional opposition that dramatically decreased federal financial assistance in the latter years of the FSA's existence. Although the FSA's resettlement efforts in the continental U.S. provided tens of thousands of Tenant Purchase (TP) loans to stateside farmers, its achievements were initially not as tangible in Puerto Rico due to insular political opposition to land distribution efforts, lack of federal funding, and the onset of World War II.

Nevertheless, in the wake of Puerto Rican land reform, the FSA did make quantifiable gains in its island resettlement programs, especially when one considers the number of TP loans distributed after the passage of the Puerto Rican Land Law of 1941, which finally saw to the enforcement of the 500-acre limit on land ownership. More successful, however, were the subsequent urban housing and *parcelas* programs, which were created immediately in the wake of the passage of the Land Law and administered and financed locally under the guidance of the PPD. Ironically, in spite of long-running issues with localism that plagued the New Deal from its inception, it was the local nature of the PPD's programs, rather than a dependence of federal funding and oversight, that provided far more success in the realms of land distribution and housing than the initiatives that preceded them. Yet, while the resettlement and housing initiatives offered by FSA and PPD officials in the wake of the 500-acre law's enforcement provided much needed land to resettle poor Puerto Ricans, they did little to stop the existence and continued expansion of island shantytowns. Changes in this regard would not arrive until the postwar era, when long-called-for industrialization efforts and well-funded "slum eradication"

programs would finally stop the growth, but not the existence, of Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements.

Resettlement Efforts in the Continental U.S.

By 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, it was estimated that roughly five million people whose livelihoods were related to farming in the continental U.S. were receiving local, state, or federal relief funds.¹ Government reports point to a number of reasons why this was the case. Throughout the South, the West, and the Mid-West during the 1930s, the land had been left unsuitable for crop growth due to soil erosion brought on by the increased mechanization of farming and overgrazing, as well as the toll taken by dust storms. According to New Deal administrator Monroe Oppenheimer, as a result of the drought, over 1,831,000 farm families in the U.S. South had "exhausted their resources of capital and credit" in the early years of the depression.² With no crops to sell, poor farmers, whose yearly incomes hovered between \$100 and \$250 per year, fell behind on debts owed to landlords, banks, machinery companies, and private lenders.³ As a result, foreclosures skyrocketed.⁴ And, according to officials, with no expendable income, U.S. farmers were incapable of consuming the "products of American business and industry," which negatively impacted the overall health of the national economy.⁵

¹ Farm Security Administration (FSA), *History of the Farm Security Administration* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 1.

² Monroe Oppenheimer, "The Development of the Rural Rehabilitation Loan Program," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, no. 4 (1937), 473.

³ The Resettlement Administration, *The Resettlement Administration* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, September 1935), 2.

⁴ The Resettlement Administration, *The Resettlement Administration*, 2; FSA, *History*, 1. For more on the environmental, social, economic, U.S. political and geopolitical impacts of the 1930s Dust Bowl, see: Hannah Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of "Green" Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); David Worster, *Dustbowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009); Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ The Resettlement Administration, 2.

According to government literature from the depression era, in similar times of crisis in the past stateside farmers usually moved westward in search of new, fertile lands to till or they migrated to cities where they hoped to find work in the industrial sector—migrations that were not unlike those seen in Puerto Rico during the depression era. But, with the arrival of the Great Depression, the former option was largely unavailable. As one observer wrote, “the country had no new frontiers, no more free land; the factories were closed down and millions of experienced city workers were out of a job.”⁶ With city job markets unable to absorb the thousands of unemployed farm workers, the only available option for most was to move westward and hope for jobs in the agricultural industry. Although thousands did indeed migrate westward due to the effects of the infamous dust storms that ravaged parts of the South and the Great Plains in the 1930s, many devastated farmers remained behind on their barren homesteads. Those who did were frequently relegated to what federal officials described as “rural slums”—poverty-stricken areas marked by over-crowded, ramshackle houses built on the dusty waste lands of overworked former farms. In the words of one Resettlement Administration official, living conditions in these areas rivaled “the worst forms of improper housing, sanitation, and undernourishment that can be found in the slums of the cities.”⁷

Initial efforts to rectify the continental farming crisis came in the form of a collaboration between the federal and state governments. Under the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, the federal government called for the establishment of state administrations which would be responsible for distributing federal relief appropriations first in the form of direct cash relief then through small loans to help farmers get out of debt.⁸ In April of 1934, the federal government

⁶ FSA, *History*, 1.

⁷ Resettlement Administration, 2.

⁸ Oppenheimer, 476.

allocated \$70,000,000 to these so-called Rural Rehabilitation Corporations whose resources soon became strapped due to the high demand for small farm loans in the states. One state official described the situation as “pouring money down a rat-hole” as loans were made to farmers who attempted to work non-arable, unproductive lands and therefore were unable to pay back what they had borrowed from state RRCs.⁹

The federal government’s solution was to take the burden off of states by distributing farm relief via the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in conjunction with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Together, the two agencies began resettling farmers on fertile lands in the West and Midwest and distributing small loans for homebuilding and for the purchase of the equipment and supplies needed for crop growth. The submarginal lands the migrants left behind were intended to be purchased by the federal government and turned into parks, nature preserves, and Indian reservations.¹⁰ At the same time, a Division of Subsistence Homesteads was created in the Department of Interior (funded by the National Industrial Recovery Act). The division created a handful of communities close to urban industrial centers with the idea that relocated farmers would be able to divide their time between factory work and raising their own food on small, fertile suburban plots of land.¹¹ Added to this mix of programs was the Farm Credit Administration’s 1933 Farm Debt Adjustment initiative which was designed to assist farmers with paying down their debts. Although it varied from state to state, the latter programs were often administered by the Emergency Relief Administration.¹²

⁹ FSA, *History*, 3.

¹⁰ FSA, *History*, 3; Resettlement Administration, 6; The Living New Deal, “Resettlement Administration (RA) (1935),” <https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/resettlement-administration-ra-1935/>

¹¹ FSA, *History*, 3.

¹² FSA, *History*, 3; For more on the AAA and other early New Deal farm programs see: James C. Cobb, “‘Somebody Done Nailed Us on the Cross’: Federal Farm and Welfare Policy and the Civil Rights Movement in the Mississippi Delta,” *The Journal of American History*, 77, no. 3 (December 1990): 912-936; Wayne D. Rasmussen, “The New Deal Farm Programs: What They Were and Why They Survived,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 65, no. 5 (December 1983): 1158-1162; Jim F. Couch, Keith E. Atkinson, and William H. Wells, “New

With such a confusing array of agencies involved in tackling the farm and migration crisis, it became clear to Franklin Roosevelt and his advisors that a degree of organization was needed. And so, on April 30, 1935, FDR signed executive order 7027 creating the Resettlement Administration (RA), which fell under the authority of the Undersecretary of Agriculture, Rexford G. Tugwell. The RA centralized the initiatives of the previously mentioned administrations under a single independent agency.¹³ In addition to the efforts already underway, the RA built fourteen camps in the West to shelter Dust Bowl migrants and made plans for the creation of several experimental suburban resettlement communities, known as Greenbelt New Towns, which would be scattered around the country.¹⁴ As noted in the previous chapter, similar experimental housing communities were also implemented in Puerto Rico around the same time under the auspices of the PRRA.

In 1937, the RA would lose its independent status when it was absorbed by the Department of Agriculture. On September 1 of that year the RA was rebranded by Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. From that day forward it would be known as the Farm Security Administration. Along with the previous efforts of the RA, the FSA added what was known as a Tenant Purchase program (TP) which provided loans to sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm workers for the purchase of small farms to be paid back over the course of forty years at 3% interest. The TP programs were made possible by Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Act of 1937, which allocated \$35,000,000 for domestic programs during the first two years of the project's existence. From 1940 until 1943, federal allocations amounted to around \$50,000,000 per annum

Deal Agricultural Appropriations: A Political Influence,” *Eastern Economic Journal*, 24, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 137-148; Van L. Perkins, *Crisis in Agriculture: The Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the New Deal, 1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); David M. Cambron, “Rural Hoosiers, the Farm Problem, and Agents of Change” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2023).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ FSA, *History*, 6-7; Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1989), 63.

and steadily decreased until the agency was dissolved in 1946. The appropriation allowed for the extension of 12,234 small farm loans in the states from 1937 to 1940 with amounts borrowed averaging \$5,721.¹⁵ Between 1940 and 1945, one year before the agency's demise, the number of overall TP loans granted to continental farm families by the FSA ballooned to somewhere between 35 and 50 thousand, with the majority of loans distributed in the Midwest and in the U.S. South.¹⁶

As it was with the majority of New Deal programs, the FSA's continental TP programs were administered locally—an arrangement that fostered the reconstitution of state and regional racial and class dynamics.¹⁷ It was an arrangement that was not unlike the class dynamics at play in Puerto Rico as the PRRA attempted to provide urban housing to the poor—where the local nature of program implementation actually served the desires of the middle and elite classes rather than the needs of those to whom the initiatives were directed. In the continental U.S., State Farm Security Advisory Committees dispersed TP loans on the county level. These boards consisted of three, usually prosperous, farmers who determined the eligibility of applicants for loans and inspected the farms clients wished to purchase.¹⁸ As New Deal historian Anthony Badger has argued, the demographics of these elected or chosen county committees sometimes fostered the maintenance of racial and class hierarchies. This was particularly the case in the South where committee members were likely to be white “rural elites” or large-scale farmers

¹⁵ FSA, *History*, 7,8; Charles Kenneth Roberts, “Client Failures and Supervised Credit in the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History*, 87, no. 3 (Summer 2013), 372; The Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, P.L. 75-210, 50 Stat. 522 1937.

¹⁶ U.S. Senate, “Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1945, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, Seventy-eighth Congress, Second Session on H.R. 4443, a bill making appropriations for the Department of Agriculture” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 364; Charles Kenneth Roberts, “Client Failures and Supervised Credit in the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History*, 87, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 368-390, 385.

¹⁷ Badger, 158-159.

¹⁸ FSA, *History*, 7-8.

who had a vested interest in maintaining the socioeconomic status quo under the southern class system and Jim Crow.¹⁹ As Badger notes, FSA programs “threatened the traditional patterns of dependence in rural communities” to the point where white elites “were worried about the existence of alternative sources of credit and advice” offered to poor white and African American sharecroppers or tenant farmers.²⁰ While the county committees often did help streamline the bureaucratic process of administering FSA funds, in many cases they were reluctant to dole out relief to marginalized groups lest government assistance provide a degree of agency to those who received them by reordering the social and racial hierarchies of the South.²¹

A critique of the FSA offered by the Reverend H.H. Humes of Greenville, Mississippi, illustrates one of the many arguments some southern whites used to rationalize the exclusion of black Americans from government farm subsidies. Humes was quoted in the *Chicago Defender* as saying that the average African American in the South would be rendered even more “indolent than he is” should he be faced with “a lifetime of paying for 40 acres” of government subsidized land. Humes, the owner of a Greenville newspaper, wrote that instead of government handouts, the southern African American should instead depend upon “his own initiative, spurred by personal ambition, and a desire to get ahead.”²² Such arguments were reminiscent of racialized, blanket assumptions directed toward Puerto Ricans during the same era as debates were waged over whether islanders were deserving or capable of receiving relief. *The Chicago Defender*, a leading African American newspaper, called out Reverend Humes for receiving money from the “good white folks” of the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation who wished to preserve the local cotton economy. The *Defender* noted that the Farm Bureau regularly placed “cotton picking

¹⁹ Badger, 158-159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Farm Bloc Uses Preacher in Campaign to Kill FSA,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 24, 1943, 5.

advertisements” as well as a “full page warning against” African Americans “moving out of the South” to northern cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York.²³ According to Humes and others, government incentives offered to southern African Americans, along with the potential impacts of northern migration, proved threatening to the Jim Crow agricultural regime of the South. Providing African Americans with homesteads of their own would undermine the deeply entrenched sharecropping system. Families rented small parcels of land in exchange for keeping a portion of the crops they grew—crops that were frequently subject to both the whims of fluctuating markets and to the elements. As a result, the system left many poor families lacking mobility and living in continued poverty as they became indebted to landowners in the South.²⁴

Humes was one of many critics of the continental FSA who sought to dismantle the agency over the course of its nine-year existence. For instance, Charles T. O’Neill, vice president of the Virginia Bankers Association warned Congress in 1943 that the federal government’s extension of farm loans ran “contrary to the principles of democracy” as the “central government [used] taxpayers’ money to engage in business as a direct competitor with free enterprise.”²⁵ Republican Representative Ray P. Chase of Minnesota called the FSA leaders “parlor pinks” who espoused “the doctrine of Communism” and “promoted collectivism” through Soviet-style expansive state spending that exceeded “so many millions of dollars.”²⁶ To these detractors and others, the Roosevelt administration’s land redistribution and resettlement efforts were seen as socialist collectivist schemes that posed a threat to private lenders and free market capitalists.²⁷

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Edward Cary Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 182, 185.

²⁵ U.S. Congress, “Farm Security Administration: Hearings, July 3, 1943-May 3, 1944,” (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 1316.

²⁶ Ibid., 1868.

²⁷ Linda Gordon, *A Life Beyond Limits*, 194-195.

Such beliefs dovetailed with earlier accusations aimed at RA director Rexford Tugwell. Tugwell's promotion of anti-laissez faire agricultural and housing policies combined with a trip to the Soviet Union in 1927 after which he had expressed that he had been moved by that country's "power of the collective will," had earned him the nickname of "Rex the Red." It was a label that would haunt Tugwell, and any agency with which he was affiliated, for the rest of his political career.²⁸

From the time of the Farm Security Administration's establishment until its liquidation in 1946, its leaders constantly searched for ways to justify the agency's existence to skeptical U.S. lawmakers and the general public.²⁹ One of the means by which the FSA's leadership attempted to gain public and congressional support for its initiatives was through the use of photographic evidence. Such evidence was provided by the photographers of what was known as the FSA's Historical Section, Division of Information, which was created by Rexford Tugwell under the RA and then later transferred to the FSA. Established on July 10, 1935, the division was headed by Roy E. Stryker, a former student of Rexford Tugwell's from the Columbia University economics department. According to Stryker, Tugwell created the Historical Section with the purposes of documenting via photography both the history of the FSA's programs and the daily lives of average Americans living through the depression.³⁰

²⁸ "Rexford Tugwell, Roosevelt Aide, Dies," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1979, Section A, 1.

²⁹ Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 401.

³⁰ Farm Security Administration, *Historical Section: A Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1985), 9; For more on the FSA Historical Section see: Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 8 (Spring 1988): 6-25; Stuart S. Kidd, *Farm Security Administration Photography: The Rural South and the Dynamics of Image Making, 1935-1943* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004); Lisa Helene Kaplan, "'Introducing America to Americans': FSA photography and the construction of racialized and gendered citizens" (PhD diss., Graduate College of Bowling Green, December 2015); Gina Lachacz, "Farm Security Administration Photography and the Politics of Sideshow Spectacle," (PhD diss. State University of New York at Buffalo, 2010).

To accomplish these goals, Stryker hired a team of photographers who traveled the United States capturing evidence of FSA programs such as resettlement initiatives and planned communities as well as the poverty endured by those yet to receive government welfare under the New Deal. Beyond their official mission to win financial support for FSA programs, the agency's photographers had a moral and political agenda of their own—an agenda that infused their artistic gaze as they traveled the U.S. capturing on film the stark realities of American poverty. According to historian Linda Gordon, FSA photographers possessed a politically charged, “democratic way of seeing” that infused their images.³¹ Their photographs simultaneously highlighted the valor and the suffering of the 1930s American working classes, demonstrating that while they may have “worked hard, deserved respect, and merited the rights and power of a citizen in a democracy,” these fundamental rights had yet to be delivered.³² FSA photographers produced images as a means to redirect the moral compass of those who engaged with them. As historian Mark Bradley argues, the social realist photos from the FSA “collectively captured moments in the lives of the disadvantaged and oppressed, making their situations legible for those who viewed their work and implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, urging viewers to make these problems their own.”³³ FSA photographers hoped that viewers' internalization of America's bleak socioeconomic landscape would in turn spur them on to political action so that they might help rectify what essentially could be viewed as human rights violations brought on by unchecked capitalism.³⁴

³¹ Linda Gordon, *A Life Beyond Limits*, 219-220.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 20.

³⁴ Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined*, 20.

From various locations around the U.S., the photographers sent their negatives back to Stryker's Washington D.C. office where they were developed and printed.³⁵ The resulting images were then distributed to the general population through newspapers and magazines. The process was a means for Tugwell to "sell back to the people the thing he was doing" by informing the American public about the Roosevelt administration's efforts to help the nation's "lower third."³⁶ As historian Linda Gordon notes, photographic documentation of the plight of the American poor was also intended to "counteract the inevitable conservative attacks" hurled at Tugwell for his leftist farm policies.³⁷

It is difficult to determine how successful Tugwell was in achieving these aims, but nevertheless, the Historical Section generated an unprecedented body of work documenting America's rural citizens and their surroundings. Even today, FSA photographs remain as an indelible part of the visual grammar of the Great Depression. Stryker and his staff worked tirelessly to disseminate the agency's photographs to the general public. For instance, in a single month in 1937, the Historical Section sent out approximately 988 images to magazines and newspapers and developed 5,467 more for further distribution.³⁸ The photographers Stryker hired such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Gordon Parks, Marion Post Wolcott, and Jack Delano would ultimately leave behind over 175,000 images, many of which would become indelible parts of America's visual iconography.³⁹

³⁵ Library of Congress, "Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives: About this Collection," <https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/about-this-collection/>

³⁶ Archives of American Art, "Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker, 1963-1965 conducted by Richard Doud," Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Transcript accessed from <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-roy-emerson-stryker-12480>

³⁷ Linda Gordon, *A Life Beyond Limits*, 196.

³⁸ Farm Security Administration, *Historical Section: A Guide*, 11.

³⁹ "Roy Stryker, 82, Who Directed Photo Study of Depression, Dies," *The New York Times*, Tuesday, September 30, 1975.

In spite of Stryker's efforts to justify and promote the efficacy of the FSA through visual evidence, the agency's programs frequently operated at a deficit. It was a fact that did little to legitimize the FSA's continued existence in the eyes of Washington lawmakers who eventually pulled the agency's funding. For example, a congressional report from 1941 showed that resettlement projects netted mortgage incomes of \$8,454,915 while operating costs ran at \$13,422,567—figures that demonstrate operating losses of \$5,000,000 for that fiscal year. Another statistic from the same year claimed that for every dollar loaned by the FSA to its tenant farmers during the first seven years of its operations, two dollars were spent by the federal government. With their programs consistently operating in the red, it was difficult for the FSA leaders to rationalize the cost effectiveness of their initiatives when grilled by their detractors.⁴⁰

These factors, plus the challenges the FSA presented to Jim Crow led to the agency's dismantling by a coalition of its opponents immediately following World War II.⁴¹ As historian Charles Kenneth Roberts notes, its domestic (and as we shall see shortly, its colonial) TP programs had started to take off in the early war years, but an alliance of conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats financially "gutted the FSA" beginning in 1943, which essentially left the agency unable to continue its resettlement efforts in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. On August 14, 1946, the Farm Security Administration officially came to an end when its activities were taken over by the Farmers Home Administration (FHA). Made possible by the Farmers Home Administration Act of 1946, the FHA continued to extend loans to farmers, but

⁴⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, "Farm Security Administration: Hearings Before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration" (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 803-804.

⁴¹ Charles Kenneth Roberts, 369.

the agency was prone to favoring returning white, male WWII veterans over people of color in its loaning practices.⁴²

Resettlement Efforts and Land Reform in Puerto Rico: 1898-1946

Running concurrent to the 1930s' stateside farming crisis were the land distribution and population displacement problems in Puerto Rico—issues that had long roots, but which came to a head during the depression and persisted throughout the decade. It is estimated that from 1929 through 1932, upwards of 750,000 poor Puerto Ricans had been rendered homeless by a series of crises that included two major hurricanes and the onset of the Great Depression.⁴³ Similar to the migration phenomenon caused by the Dust Bowl in the continental U.S., the island saw mass population displacement which created a dire need for government resettlement plans.⁴⁴

Beginning with lackluster resettlement efforts under the PRRA (which acted as an umbrella organization tasked with overseeing all relief, recovery, and reform efforts on the island), federal officials believed that the steady flow of rural migrants to urban squatters' settlements might be stemmed if housing were provided for the working poor in the countryside. Initial efforts made by the federal government to resettle poor, rural Puerto Rican laborers were complicated,

⁴² This was especially the case when it came to the denial of farm loans to African Americans. Charles Kenneth Roberts, 384; Valerie Grim, "Black Participation in the Farmers Home Administration and Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, 1964-1990," *Agricultural History*, 70, no. 2, "Twentieth Century Farm Policies" (Spring 1996): 321-336, 323.

⁴³ An estimated 500,000 people were made homeless by the 1928 San Felipe Hurricane. Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1929 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 3.

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," *Joint Hearings Before the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions, United States Senate and the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives*, 70th Congress, 2nd sess. (December 10 and 11, 1928), 12; *The Annual Report of the Chief, Bureau of Insular Affairs, 1928* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 15; The American National Red Cross, "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster, September, 1928: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Florida" (Washington, D.C., 1929), 12-13, 16, 19; Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 211-212; Charles L. Mitchell, "The West Indian Hurricane of September 10-20, 1928," *The Monthly Weather Review*, September, 1928), ed. Alfred J. Henry, vol. 56, no. 9, W.B. no. 967 (Washington, D.C.: Weather Bureau, 1928), 15; Ruby Black, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 296.

however, by long-running land distribution problems that had plagued the island since the time of the U.S. takeover in 1898. As the reader will recall, land distribution had already been an issue on the island prior to the depression era. By the time the depression hit Puerto Rico, large U.S. and Puerto Rican sugar corporations were the island's largest employers and land holders, owning nearly 76 percent of cultivable acreage and controlling the island's economy by the 1930s.⁴⁵ This near-monopoly on land ownership worked in direct defiance of a clause contained in the 1900 Foraker Law which made it illegal for anyone to own more than 500 acres of island land. The provision had been included in the act per the prodding of reform-minded U.S. legislators during the Progressive Era who feared that the monopolistic sugar trusts would take possession of all the island's arable land.⁴⁶ Because lawmakers failed to include direction for the enforcement of the so-called 500-acre Law, sugar producers flagrantly violated its limits on land ownership.⁴⁷ As a result, a little over a decade after the U.S. takeover, landlessness rates for the rural poor averaged at around 84 percent.⁴⁸ In short, in spite of plans to resettle rural agricultural workers, throughout the 1930s, the federal government made no provisions to enforce the 500-acre limit and therefore lacked access to a suitable amount of land to sell to poor islanders or build housing.

Puerto Rico's agricultural labor force of 500,000 worked in the sugar industry which left rural workers in a perpetual state of poverty. At the time of the depression, sugar industry workers earned as little as 62 cents per day if employment was available during the harvest

⁴⁵ Pedro A. Caban, *Constructing a Colonial People: Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898-1932* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1999), 2, 91,76, 113; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 171.

⁴⁶ "Puerto Rico Court Upholds Land Curb: High Tribunal Backs 1900 Law Limiting Corporations in the Island," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1938, 14.

⁴⁷ Fernando Pico, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of Its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 240-243.

⁴⁸ Cesar J. Ayala and Laird W. Bergad, "Rural Puerto Rico in the Early Twentieth Century Reconsidered: Land and Society, 1899-1915," *Latin American Research Review*, 37, no. 2 (2002): 65-97, 76.

season or *zafra* which ran from January to June.⁴⁹ During the so-called *tiempo muerto* (dead season), the likelihood of earning wages was often slim.⁵⁰ In addition to wage earners, many sugar workers were *agregados*, a group which James Dietz describes as similar to continental sharecroppers. *Agregados* were an exploited and landless class of worker that labored and squatted on sugar industry land in exchange for tenancy.⁵¹ As mentioned in preceding chapters, the Great Depression added insult to injury for the island working classes as Puerto Rico's economy saw a swift downturn when world demand for the island's agricultural products steadily decreased after 1929. Along with plummeting sugar prices, came a decrease in the number of available jobs. And so, by the middle of the Great Depression about nine-tenths of the Puerto Rican population of 1.6 million was living on subsistence wages.⁵² Faced with minimal prospects in terms of employment and land ownership, Puerto Rican laborers remained dependent upon their employers in the countryside for both housing and employment. As discussed in previous chapters, those without jobs and homes migrated by the tens of thousands into the island's city squatters' settlements. Although migration to the mainland had been an option in past decades for Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens, most islanders, suffering from the effects of the depression,

⁴⁹ By comparison, between the years of 1929 and 1937, continental farm workers earned an average of \$1.62/per day, which was roughly 166 percent more per day than what was being earned by their Puerto Rican counterparts during the same period. The source accessed here did not break down continental agricultural wages demographically, but presumably, due to the racial climate of the Jim Crow era African American agricultural workers were likely paid less than white agricultural workers in the continental U.S. Author Unknown, "Wages and Income of Farm Workers, 1909 to 1938," *Monthly Labor Review*, 49, no.1 (July 1939): 59-71.

⁵⁰ At the start of the depression, Puerto Rico's agricultural labor force made up about 42 percent of its total population of 1.2 million people. S.L. Descartes, "Land Reform in Puerto Rico," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics*, 19, no.4 (November 1943), 27.

⁵¹ James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 200.

⁵² "Report to Joseph Hyde Pratt, Regional Engineer of the FERA in Atlanta, Ga. from James R. Bourne, Relief Administrator, PRRA, Feb. 13, 1935," Records of the PRRA, Assistant Administrator, Records of the Engineering Division, Surveys Section, 1935-46, RG 323, Box 2, Entry 37, NARA NYC.

were unable to find the money for the boat ticket that would take them to the continental U.S.⁵³

Consequently, moving to Puerto Rico's urban areas became one of the only viable options for the island's unemployed workers.

Further cementing the hold of Big Sugar and its land monopoly during the depression was the fact that these corporations were backed by the powerful pro-sugar Coalición political bloc. As historian Anne S. Macpherson notes, the Coalición blocked most efforts made by the Roosevelt Administration that attempted to restructure the Puerto Rican agricultural economy over which absentee sugar corporations and insular elites had almost total control.⁵⁴ And so, the interests of Big Sugar were represented in the Puerto Rican Legislature from the time of the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico through the Great Depression by politicians that had little to no incentive for either enforcing the 500-acre limit on landholding or New Deal initiatives.⁵⁵

The Coalición's efforts to thwart land distribution had long roots dating back to the U.S. takeover of Puerto Rico in 1898. Within a decade and a half of the U.S. occupation of the island efforts had been made by reformers to remedy land distribution problems and to house the homeless or landless working class. In 1915, the Puerto Rican Homestead Commission was created by an act of the insular legislature with the intent of "providing for the sale to laborers of certain lands of the People of Puerto Rico." The commission was to consist of the insular Commissioner of the Interior and two other governor-appointed members who would be

⁵³ The Library of Congress notes that in the thirty years following the Jones Act of 1917, which granted islanders U.S. citizenship, only 42,000 Puerto Ricans moved to the continental U.S. Library of Congress, "Migrating to a New Land," <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/puerto-rican-cuban/migrating-to-a-new-land/>

⁵⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, "Political Parties of Puerto Rico, Founded 1898 through 1945," <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/HAIC/Historical-Data/Political-Parties-of-Puerto-Rico/>; Anne S. Macpherson, "The Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage: The Struggle over the Fair Labor Standards Act in Puerto Rico, 1938-1941," *The Journal of American History* (December 2017), 659; José O. Sola, "Partisanship, Power Contenders, and Colonial Politics in Puerto Rico, 1920s," *Caribbean Studies* 38, no. 1 (January-June 2010), 6.

⁵⁵ Jorell A. Melendez-Badillo, "Imagining Resistance: Organizing the Puerto Rican Southern Agricultural Strike of 1905," *Caribbean Studies*, 43, no. 2 (July-December 2015), 41.

responsible for “securing the harmonious and equitable allotment of the various lots to be assigned to laborers for dwelling and farming purposes.” By 1917, however, commission members complained that the homestead program had never materialized due to an overall appropriation from the legislature totaling a mere \$500 in the first two years of its existence.⁵⁶ That year an amendment was made to the Homestead Commission Act that expanded both its membership and its budget, but these changes did not necessarily equate to an expansion of its power to help the working class. For one, because the majority of arable land was owned by sugar corporations, the commission had little choice but to purchase infertile lands located in the island’s central mountain region that were far removed from the coastal sugar plains where the majority of laborers worked. Overall, the commission’s efforts proved to be inadequate in providing viable land and homesteads for the working poor. By 1930, it had only built 1,052 homes which housed approximately 3,858 Puerto Rican laborers.⁵⁷ The Homestead Commission’s ineffectiveness was in part a result of its inability to purchase lands in the fertile sugar regions of Puerto Rico due to political opposition and the lack of available arable acreage.⁵⁸ As it was in the U.S. South during the depression era, the equitable distribution of land to poor workers proved threatening to those in positions of power in the island socioeconomic hierarchy. Providing the masses with arable land on which they might grow their own crops for survival and for potential profit would have undermined a system that relied upon an expendable labor force tethered to sugar corporations.

⁵⁶ *Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico, 1920*, “Report of the Homestead Commission for the Fiscal Year 1919-1920” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 405.

⁵⁷ *Annual Report of the Governor of Porto Rico, 1920*, 406; Thomas Mathews, *Puerto Rican Politics and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 152; Author Unknown, “Land Settlement,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 35, no. 4 (October 1932): 814-817.

⁵⁸ Mathews, 152.

The high number of landless poor Puerto Ricans and the land monopoly of U.S. sugar interests were issues insular and continental New Dealers sought to combat with reform measures in the early depression. In 1934, the Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, Carlos E. Chardón put forth a plan to seize sugar industry land with the intention of subdividing it into fifty-acre plots. The plots were then to be distributed by the Homestead Commission to homeless and jobless agricultural workers who would work the land to produce their own food for consumption and for sale.⁵⁹ Chardón's proposal was considered too radical by continental officials such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell, and James Bourne for its intent to usurp land from Big Sugar. However, many of the provisions contained in the so-called Chardón Plan were borrowed and modified by continental proponents of land reform. For instance, in the wake of Chardón's plan, James Bourne, director of the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration, suggested that the federal government claim unused tracts of land for the relocation of the insular working-class who would then utilize the acreage for their own food production.⁶⁰ With the majority of arable acreage being held by sugar companies, there was little choice but for Bourne to suggest that Puerto Rican farmers be relocated to marginal or submarginal lands which they were then expected to cultivate in order to feed their families.⁶¹ In 1935, Rexford G. Tugwell proposed a resettlement program similar to the domestic RA be created under which 5,000 low-income Greenbelt-style homes be constructed per year under the guidance of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration on requisitioned sugar lands.⁶² None of these plans would come

⁵⁹ Mathews, 157-58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶¹ James Bourne, quoted in Mathews, 149.

⁶² In the end, the actual number of homes constructed was far from what was needed in depression-era Puerto Rico. Between the years of 1936 and 1944 roughly 7,000 low-income houses were built by the federal government to house 35,000 people in both rural and urban areas, Mathews, 159.

to fruition until the Supreme Court ordered the enforcement of the 500-acre land limitation in 1940, as we shall see later in this chapter.

In the meantime, in an attempt to rectify the problems displaced and homeless Puerto Ricans faced on the island, President Franklin Roosevelt sidestepped Congress and signed Executive Order 7180 on September 6, 1935. Rather than extend the Resettlement Administration to Puerto Rico in any meaningful way, the order instead authorized the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration which had been set up in May of that year, to make 40-year TP loans in rural areas to poor farmers, sharecroppers, and laborers. The loans allowed for the building of rural homesteads and the purchase of farm lands and equipment at 3 percent interest.⁶³ Funding for the TP loans, which averaged around \$4800 each (roughly \$1,000 less than the amount offered to displaced continental farmers), was made available through the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935.⁶⁴

From the start, the PRRA's rural TP programs seemed doomed to fail due to lack of financial support on behalf of the U.S. Congress. Official reports note that under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Acts of 1935 and 1938 "small amounts" of funds were allocated by the U.S. Congress to the PRRA for its rural resettlement initiatives. According to FSA legal counsel James E. Curry, the amount of money allotted to the PRRA's resettlement programs fell far below what was needed to keep up with the demands of the island's population. For instance, in a memorandum to his superiors in Washington, D.C., Curry estimated that in order to purchase land and supply adequate housing during the fiscal year of 1939, the PRRA resettlement program

⁶³ Works Progress Administration, "Report on the Works Program" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 76.

⁶⁴ U.S. Senate, "Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs, S. Res. 26, A Resolution Authorizing an Investigation of the Political, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico" (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs, February 10-19, 1943), 148-149.

needed a total of \$7,080,800 from ERA funds.⁶⁵ According to congressional hearings, however, during the first three years of its existence the PRRA was allotted an average of \$666,000 per annum for “slum clearance” and resettlement efforts or enough to construct about 2,000 homes during that time period.⁶⁶ The PRRA faced a steady decrease of congressional funding over the course of the mid to late 1930s which negatively impacted its ability to resettle rural Puerto Ricans. This was in part due to the influence of powerful continental lobbies who felt threatened by the government’s plans to nationalize certain industries on the island.⁶⁷ For instance, beginning in 1935, U.S. insurance companies repeatedly used their influence to gut Puerto Rican appropriations bills due to the federal government’s plans to take over private hurricane insurance programs.⁶⁸ The success of such lobbies had deleterious effects on the ability of the PRRA to give proper assistance to the Puerto Rican people—and it was a trend that would continue for the remainder of the decade. In 1939 the PRRA requested from Congress amounts totaling \$13 million to fulfill its yearly budget, for which it received less than \$7 million for total operating costs. Under Secretary of Agriculture, M.L. Wilson complained that rural resettlement efforts had been “very limited” as the PRRA “begged for funds sufficient to meet the situation—but with little avail.”⁶⁹ As a result of budgetary shortfalls, many of the PRRA’s programs came to a standstill or slowed down, including its housing and resettlement initiatives.⁷⁰ More budget cuts came to the PRRA under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1939, further

⁶⁵ “James E. Curry to James J. Lansetta, August 11, 1939,” Records of the PRRA, Washington Office, General Records: 1935-1945, RG 323, Box 9 Entry 1, NARA NYC.

⁶⁶ U.S. House of Representatives, “Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives: The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1938” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 108.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Mathews, 229.

⁶⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, “Farm Security Administration: Hearings Before the Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, 1174.

⁷⁰ Mathews, 323.

hindering the administration's efforts to relocate poor farmers.⁷¹ As a result, by 1941, when the FSA officially took over the PRRA's TP program, there were only 2,786 active resettlement loan accounts on the latter agency's ledgers—a far cry from what was needed to house the many thousands of displaced laborers during the 1930s.⁷²

A degree of hope came when, at the height of its continental successes, the FSA took over the PRRA's efforts to distribute TP loans in Puerto Rico. Although the FSA had had a minimal presence on the island since 1938, it officially arrived in Puerto Rico on September 1, 1941, under the directorship of Iowa native, Ralph R. Will, who had previously been the agency's State Director in New Mexico from 1938-1941.⁷³ Once its operations were fully underway, the FSA's resettlement efforts saw a degree of progress not seen under the PRRA's tenure. This was in part due to the FSA's relatively large budget and concurrent legal actions that sought the enforcement of the 500-acre Law.

In part, land distribution efforts in Puerto Rico during World War II were made possible by a political sea change in the previous decade that was instrumental in breaking the sway pro-sugar politicians had held over the island since 1898. For one, in 1934, President Roosevelt authorized the transfer of U.S. jurisdiction over Puerto Rican affairs from what historian A.W. Maldonado describes as the "conservative" War Department to the "liberal" Department of Interior under the leadership of Harold Ickes, a longstanding reformer who had been politically

⁷¹ Budget cuts to the PRRA may have been part of a larger national trend during the latter part of the 1930s. Due to budget deficits and congressional opposition to New Deal programs, overall spending for FDR's programs decreased after 1937. Gary M. Anderson and Robert D. Tollison, "Congressional Influence and Patterns of New Deal Spending, 1933-1939," *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 34, no. 1 (April 1991): 161-175; *The Balance*, "New Deal Summary, Programs, Policies, and Its Success," <https://www.thebalancemoney.com/fdr-and-the-new-deal-programs-timeline-did-it-work-3305598>; National Bureau of Economic Research, "The Impact of New Deal Spending and Lending During the Great Depression," <https://www.nber.org/reporter/2014number3/impact-new-deal-spending-and-lending-during-great-depression>.

⁷² U.S. Senate, "Investigation of Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico," 1803-1804.

⁷³ U.S. Senate, "Investigation of Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico," 1803; Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, "Will, Ralph R. Papers," <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/personal-papers/ralph-r-will-papers>

active since the Progressive Era.⁷⁴ Under Ickes, one of the Interior Department's objectives was the enforcement of the 500-acre law. In 1935, after much prodding from PRRA Director Ernest Gruening and Liberal Party leader Luis Muñoz Marín, FDR encouraged Governor Gore to step down and dismissed insular attorney general Benjamin Horton—two men described by Muñoz as being “advocates” for Big Sugar as they had frequently sought counsel from corporate sugar lawyers. Horton was replaced by the pro-New Deal Benigno Fernández Garcia, a Georgetown Law School alumnus who would be the first native born Puerto Rican to hold the office of attorney general.⁷⁵ Fernández was hand-picked by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and Roosevelt, thus signaling a dramatic change in federal oversight of land distribution problems facing the island. In the aftermath of the new attorney general's appointment, Ickes told the American press that enforcement of the 500-acre Law had become the official policy of the Roosevelt administration. The *New York Times* reported that Ickes made an “emphatic announcement” in 1936 that “the breaking up of large land holdings mostly in sugar is fundamental to the island's economic betterment and that the policy will be enforced regardless of any and all opposition.”⁷⁶ Around the same time, Ickes also alleged that the Puerto Rican Legislature had failed to do its part to enforce the 500-acre limitation because it had had a thirty-five year tradition of being “sugar-controlled and therefore opposed to proper enforcement of the law.”⁷⁷ Ickes' assertions came in the wake of his visit to the island in January 1936, where he had, according to the *New York Times*, “picked his way through the slime-sloshed streets” of San Juan's “slums” and had become “impressed with the apparent riches side by side with extreme

⁷⁴ A.W. Maldonado, *Luis Muñoz Marín: Puerto Rico's Democratic Revolution* (San Juan, P.R.: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2006), 126.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁶ “Ickes to Enforce Puerto Rican Law: Corporate Land Ownership on Island Will Be Limited to 500 Acres,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 1936, 3.

⁷⁷ “Puerto Rico Aroused by Ickes's Criticism,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1936, E10.

poverty.”⁷⁸ Almost immediately upon taking office, Attorney General Fernández set up a task force whose sole intention was to see to the enforcement of the 500-acre law. The division was headed by two island lawyers, Miguel Guerra-Mondragón and Rafael Rivera Zayas, both of whom had devoted their careers thus far to the enforcement of 500-acre land limitation.⁷⁹

In 1935, Liberal Party Senator Muñoz had successfully introduced a bill into the legislature that allowed for expediting land limitation legal cases.⁸⁰ Backed by the new legislation, on January 28, 1936, the Puerto Rican attorney general’s office and members of the Puerto Rican Liberal Party (which would morph into the Partido Populares Democratico two years later under the leadership of the pro-New Dealer Muñoz) brought a successful suit against the Rubert Hermanos Sugar Company to the insular Supreme Court. The eventual ruling held the corporation accountable for its violation of the acreage limit on land ownership. In 1939, a federal appeals court in Boston overturned the ruling. But one year later, on March 5, 1940 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the original decision and for the first time since the Foraker Act was implemented in 1900, the 500-acre Law was to be officially enforced in Puerto Rico.⁸¹ After taking the majority in the insular legislature in the early spring of 1941, the pro-New Deal PPD successfully introduced the Land Law bill, drafted by Senate leader Muñoz, which called for the Puerto Rican Land Authority to oversee enforcement of the Supreme Court ruling as well as the purchase and distribution of sugar company lands in excess of 500 acres.⁸² On April 12, 1941,

⁷⁸ “Ickes Tours Puerto Rico: Secretary of Interior Says He Expects Roosevelt’s Re-election,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1936, 11.

⁷⁹ S.L. Descartes, “Land Reform in Puerto Rico,” 399.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Casetext, *Rubert Hermanos Inc. v. People of Puerto Rico*, <https://casetext.com/case/rubert-hermanos-inc-v-people-of-puerto-rico/>; Descartes, *Land Reform in Puerto Rico*, 409.

⁸² Descartes, 409.

despite worries over what he considered to be the PPD's communist-style collectivist plans for land distribution, the new governor, Guy Swope, signed the land reform into law.⁸³

The passage of the Land Law was a substantial victory for Muñoz as he had been campaigning for land reform since his entrance on the public scene in the 1920s. As early as 1926, when he was the editor of the left-wing *La Democracia* newspaper, the then-socialist Muñoz had been calling for an overhaul to the Puerto Rican socioeconomic system. In an article written in 1929 he described Puerto Rico as a “land of beggars and millionaires” and as “Uncle Sam’s sweatshop.” What was needed, according to the young Muñoz, was independence from the United States and its five major sugar corporations that controlled the island. His vision included usurping acreage from the “less than five entities” who owned the majority of island land and distributing it in five-acre plots to hundreds of thousands of poor, rural workers who would grow their own food and sugar crops which they could sell at a profit.⁸⁴ By the time he had taken control of the Senate in 1940, Muñoz’s rhetoric had grown to include talk of collaboration with, rather than independence from, the United States. It was a change that was indicative of the politician’s realization that a severance of ties with the United States would perhaps have devastating consequences for the already-struggling island economy. In the words of historian Juan Ruiz Toro, for the time being, the PPD’s platform would highlight the party’s belief that “the war on poverty was significantly more important than the status question—or, more broadly, that economic concerns trumped political concerns.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Descartes, 37; Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico* (New York, Praeger, 1946), 74.

⁸⁴ Luis Muñoz Marín quoted in A.W. Maldonado, 78-79.

⁸⁵ Juan Ruiz Toro, “Luis Muñoz Marín: Founding Father of Puerto Rico, for better or for worse,” Brown University Modern Latin America Series, <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-14-the-united-states-and-latin-america/moments-in-u-s-latin-american-relations/luis-munoz-martin-founding-father-of-modern-puerto-rico/>

In May of 1941, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes sent Rexford G. Tugwell, who had pioneered continental rural resettlement efforts, to the island to head hearings pertaining to the Land Law's enforcement. At the end of a series of meetings attended by sugar corporations, sugar workers, independent farmers, and the general public, Tugwell sent a series of recommendations to Harold Ickes which were infused with a note of caution. Tugwell's primary concern was that a quick takeover of corporate lands by insular authorities would result in a "disruption of the sugar industry" upon which the island economy was so dependent. His suggestion was that the acquisition of Big Sugar lands be funded by the U.S. Congress and done gradually over a period of several years, so as not to drastically decrease lucrative sugar production. Direct funding from Congress for land acquisition on the island would not be forthcoming, however. Instead, land purchases would ultimately be funded by island bond initiatives and rum revenues.⁸⁶ While Tugwell may have been concerned with providing land and housing for the island's poor, his gradualist approach revealed a conservative tendency to maintain the colonial status quo at the expense of providing immediate relief to Puerto Rico's vast unhoused population.⁸⁷ It was a stance that was possibly informed by Tugwell's recent stint as the Vice President of the American Molasses Company—a corporation that had lucrative ties to Caribbean sugar interests.⁸⁸ By September of that year, Tugwell would be appointed governor of Puerto Rico and ultimately he would defer to Muñoz in matters of equitably distributing land to the Puerto Rican people.⁸⁹ While the true impacts of this turn of events would not be seen until after World War II, the collaborative relationship between Tugwell and Muñoz was a merger

⁸⁶ Rexford G. Tugwell, *Puerto Rican Public Papers of R.G. Tugwell, Governor*, "Report on the 500 Acre Law, 1941"(San Juan, P.R.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 341.

⁸⁷ Tugwell, "Report on the 500 Acre Law, 1941," 341.

⁸⁸ "W.W. Alexander, An Aide, Is Slated for Tugwell Post: Retiring Resettlement Chief Will Join Former Colleagues in Molasses Company," *The New York Times*, November 19, 1936, 1.

⁸⁹ Maldonado, 210.

between two federal and insular officials who had similar visions for land redistribution. Their shared views and Tugwell's willingness to let Muñoz take the lead would enable more effective housing and relocation projects in the post-war era.⁹⁰

In the early 1940s, however, Tugwell's controversial political reputation created consequences for land redistribution efforts in Puerto Rico. Congressional denials of requests for federal funds for land purchases in Puerto Rico were possibly informed by conservative politicians' views of Tugwell's leftist politics. When appearing before the Senate in order to be confirmed as the island's governor in 1941, he was subjected to a "rather severe examination" by Republicans and Southern Democrats who viewed Tugwell's advocacy for universal land ownership in Puerto Rico as "undesirable" and "socialistic." Tugwell's repeated use of what conservatives considered to be Soviet-style rhetoric used to describe his plans for the island, which included such terms as "cooperative" and "collectivist," fueled his opponents fears.⁹¹ His choice of language raised alarm bells among congressional detractors who already considered the New Deal as a whole to be a foray into a type of socialism that threatened free market capitalism, which they saw as foundational to American democracy.

Similar to efforts made by cotton oligarchs who resisted the FSA and other New Deal Programs in the U.S. South, Puerto Rico's pro-sugar politicians and sugar corporations offered strong opposition to both the PPD and the FSA's land distribution plans. Rexford Tugwell recalled that after the Supreme Court mandated the enforcement of the 500-acre Law, members of the pro-sugar Coalición put up an unsuccessful front to prevent the Land Law from passing by a two-thirds majority in the insular legislature. Resistance from Big Sugar also came in the form

⁹⁰ Dietz, *Economic*, 158.

⁹¹ Tugwell, "Report on the 500 Acre Law, 1941," 348.

of litigation by absentee land holders in the U.S. court system. For instance, on July 21, 1941, Frederick A. Potts, the managing partner of the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company which was based in New Jersey, filed suit against the Puerto Rican government in order to stop the enforcement of the Land Law. Potts described the law as the government's attempt to enforce the "military cultivation" of the company's private, profitable lands, which totaled 21,000 acres and were valued at \$3,000,000 in addition to the value of sugar crops which totaled \$2,000,000 per year.⁹² Law suits such as the one cited here as well as Big Sugar's lobbying efforts delayed the Land Authority's attempts to requisition land and hindered resettlement efforts during the early years of its operation.⁹³

Before the PPD's land reform measures could fully take hold, beginning in 1941 the FSA took over the distribution of the PRRA's Tenant Purchase loans to farmers as the latter agency had essentially run out of federal funding. During the first four years of the FSA's official existence on the island, the agency established enough farms to house approximately 12,000 islanders—a noticeable improvement over the PRRA's efforts to resettle rural workers.⁹⁴ As historian Matthew O. Edel observed, the land upon which many of these TP farms were established was purchased directly from large sugar companies, an arrangement made possible by coordinated efforts between the FSA and the Puerto Rican Land Authority. Edel argues that the impacts of the FSA-Land Authority TP program in Puerto Rico were minimal at best, but statistics do show an increase in loan distribution after the enforcement of the 500-acre Law.⁹⁵ For example, in the fiscal year of 1940, under the PRRA only 166 TP loans were provided to

⁹² "Fights Puerto Rico Land Law," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1941, 9.

⁹³ Tugwell, *Stricken*, 94.

⁹⁴ U.S. Senate, "Investigation of the Political, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico," 148-149.

⁹⁵ Matthew O. Edel, "Land Reform in Puerto Rico, 1940-1959: Part One," *Caribbean Studies*, 2, no. 3 (October 1962), 40.

farm families amounting to \$157,075. By 1943, however, the FSA had granted nearly 9,000 loans to farm families at the cost of \$2,036,706—a sizable difference that coincided with the relative availability of land and funds in Puerto Rico.⁹⁶ The amount of TP loans extended to islanders during this period can also be explained by the larger amount of federal appropriations extended to the FSA (which could not directly purchase land, but had the authority to offer loans for land purchase) under the 1937 Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, which appropriated roughly \$50 million/year to the FSA to be distributed in the form of loans among the states and territories, as opposed to what was offered to the underfunded PRRA (\$666,000/year).⁹⁷ Puerto Rico FSA Director Ralph Will argued, however, that even with this steady increase of TP loans in the early 1940s, there was still the “heavy pressure of the population against the land.” He also noted that socioeconomic conditions on the island remained dire and continued to foster a standard of living for poor Puerto Ricans that was well below what he had seen in agricultural communities in the continental U.S. In March of 1943, Will asked U.S. lawmakers to expand the number of new TP loans in Puerto Rico to 30,000, which he described as a “conservative estimate” of what the FSA program needed in order to be effective.⁹⁸

Prior to Will’s 1943 push for more federal funds, Rexford Tugwell attempted to win public favor and additional congressional financing for island resettlement programs by employing the services of Roy Stryker and the FSA’s Historical Section. On December 1, 1941, three months after the FSA was established on the island, Historical Section photographer Jack

⁹⁶ U.S. Senate, “Investigation of the Political, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico,” 1804.

⁹⁷ The Living New Deal, “Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, 1937,” <https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/bankhead-jones-farm-tenant-act-1937/>

⁹⁸ U.S. Congress, “Hearings before the select committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, to investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration, House of Representatives, Seventy-eighth Congress, First Session” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 1821.

Delano was sent to Puerto Rico per the request of Tugwell. Roy Stryker directed Delano to document the “deplorable conditions” on the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands and to provide visual evidence of the New Deal programs already in existence in the two locales. His photographs were intended to be used by the islands’ governors, Tugwell and Charles Harwood of the Virgin Islands, in reports to Congress which requested additional federal funding for programs they hoped would ameliorate poverty in the region.⁹⁹

Originally slated to stay for a few days, Delano defied Stryker’s orders to return home and extended his time in Puerto Rico by several months in order to document island poverty more thoroughly. Like other continental observers such as Tugwell, James Bourne, and Eleanor Roosevelt who toured the island during the 1930s, Delano and his wife, Irene, were shocked by the poverty they saw as they traveled around Puerto Rico. What they witnessed prompted them to take action, both in a creative and political sense. Later in life Delano recalled that he was both “fascinated and disturbed” by what he witnessed in Puerto Rico, so he wasted no time in capturing on film the “thatch-roof huts of poor farmers roasting under the blazing sun, and the horrendous slums festering in the towns and the cities.”¹⁰⁰ As a result of his experiences, Delano made plans to meet with island officials, including Rexford Tugwell and insular FSA Director Ralph Will, with the hopes of crafting ideas to remedy the dire socioeconomic circumstances of average Puerto Ricans. “Our major concern,” he told Stryker, was “what to do about the low income farm family (and they are all in that class) and the farm laborer who eats when there is cane to be cut and starves when there isn’t.”¹⁰¹ Delano went on to express his hopes that if and

⁹⁹ Jack Delano, *Photographic Memories* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 70.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰¹ "Jack Delano to Roy Stryker, December 7, 1941," Farm Security Administration (FSA), Historical Section, microfilm roll 25, “Correspondence of Roy Stryker: 1935-1943,” Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

when continental politicians viewed his photographs, they might then be persuaded to find a solution to what he referred to as the Puerto Rican "problem."¹⁰²

While in Puerto Rico, Delano shot many images of pristine, new urban housing projects and evidence of other federal social welfare programs, but his gaze was largely diverted in the direction of the island's poverty and shantytowns. His images from his time on the island captured evidence of both the modernizing initiatives launched under the New Deal as well as the administration's inability to remedy high levels of poverty. His photographs are a testament to his own observation that he had indeed seen evidence of New Deal programs "scattered" around the island, but there was still much more to be done to improve the lives of the Puerto Rican poor. Delano remarked later in his autobiography that the living conditions in Puerto Rico's urban shantytowns were nothing short of "inhuman" or barely fit for habitation by animals, let alone people. He also noted that he had witnessed terrible poverty in his travels in the American South during the Great Depression, but nothing prepared him for the destitution he encountered in Puerto Rico.¹⁰³ Through his work, Delano achieved the dual purpose of documenting the "progress" his government superiors believed they had accomplished in Puerto Rico, while simultaneously exposing the shortcomings of federal initiatives and the work that remained to be done. In this sense, his images highlight Delano's dual role as a Popular Front activist-artist and government operative.

As is evidenced by his images, Delano was adept at capturing both the suffering and the dignity of the Puerto Rican people. During his stay on the island, he took over three thousand

¹⁰² "Jack Delano to Roy Stryker, December 1, 1941," FSA, Historical Section, microfilm roll 25, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 72.

¹⁰³ Jack Delano, *Puerto Rico Mio: Four Decades of Change* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 24.

photographs and diligently sent his negatives back to the FSA office in Washington, D.C.

Beyond Roy Stryker, it is hard to determine just who saw all of Delano's images and whether such parties were moved to act on behalf of the Puerto Rican people. Little evidence exists of Delano's Puerto Rican photographs having been published in the same periodicals that printed the work of his stateside colleagues. Nevertheless, the fact that Delano remained so long on the island and took so many photographs demonstrates the depth of his desire to make Puerto Rico and its people—whom he believed deserved the same rights as any American citizen—more visible to those living on the mainland. The same can be said of Roy Stryker, who included Delano's images in the Historical Section's accessible public archive with the hopes of directing the national narrative around U.S. colonialism and poverty.

As it was in the continental U.S., Puerto Rico's TP loan program depended heavily on local labor for its administration, an arrangement that came under the scrutiny of U.S. law makers who would ultimately dismantle the FSA. Echoing the earlier complaints of pro-sugar islanders who accused the PRERA and the PRRA of favoring members of the Liberal Party in its hiring practices, anti-New Deal U.S. Senators expressed concerns that the local nature of the FSA's operations in Puerto Rico was leading to political favoritism. In particular, they claimed that local hiring practices led to a disproportionate number of jobs being handed out to members of the pro-Roosevelt PPD—whom they viewed as an elite sector of island society. They also argued that the administrative costs of the Puerto Rican FSA were excessive and therefore were sapping the resources necessary to help the working classes for whom the resettlement programs were designed in the first place. Indeed, the FSA had grown into a thriving local bureaucracy during the first few years of its existence on the island. Between 1941 and 1943, the FSA's

previous staff of eight ballooned to 329 employees—320 of which were Puerto Ricans who worked in 34 field offices around the island.¹⁰⁴ Many of the FSA's Puerto Rican field representatives were liberal, middle-class graduates of the College of Agriculture in the island city of Mayagüez, which, according to Ralph Will, gave the employees the necessary credentials to offer proper guidance to TP farm owners.¹⁰⁵ In his 1943 testimony before Congress, Will intimated that working relations between tenant farmers and the FSA's Puerto Rican field representatives had thus far been even-handed and amicable.¹⁰⁶ Will's remarks did little to alleviate the concerns of U.S. senators, however, who had suspicions that the local nature of the FSA's administration was leading to the reimplementation of Puerto Rico's sharply delineated class system, albeit one that now favored pro-New Deal liberal operatives rather than the interests of Big Sugar.

When Ralph Will testified before the U.S. Senate on the economic conditions in Puerto Rico in 1943, he was pressed by conservative senators for reassurance that the TP programs were not mired in favoritism. For one, anti-New Dealer and Republican Robert A. Taft had suspicions that “any man that can buy a \$4,000 farm in Puerto Rico is well over the ordinary type of Puerto Rican” who was generally too poor to afford the basic necessities of life let alone pay a monthly mortgage.¹⁰⁷ In another statement, Taft's concern for the Puerto Rican poor belies his defense for Big Sugar in the wake of the 500-acre Law's enforcement when he chastised the FSA for wanting to divide sugar estates into small farms for redistribution. Doing so, Taft said, would upset the island sugar economy and help a minimal amount of people who were “peculiarly

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Senate, “Political, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico,” 152.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

avored” as “the rest of the population goes without assistance.”¹⁰⁸ In response, Will gave his word that the FSA was not catering to middle- or upper-class Puerto Ricans working for the PPD. The agency was simply “setting the farmer up with more land and facilities than he has had in the past but not more than is necessary for him to succeed.” Those who received FSA assistance, according to Will, were “surely in the lower economic group.” Only in cases of extreme need and poor credit, Will reassured the Senator, were TP loans to low-income farmers fully financed by the federal government, which also offered supplemental grants that would enable them to repay their loans.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Will told the committee, the lands mortgaged by the FSA were not the “best sugar land.” The plots available to the agency were those deemed “suitable enough” for farming and would pose little threat to those who held the island’s most valuable acreage—namely Big Sugar, which still held considerable power on the island as well as the most fertile tracts of land in spite of the passage of the Land Law.¹¹⁰

Propelled by their own political interests that stood in opposition to Roosevelt and the New Deal, critics like Taft scrutinized the FSA’s overall effectiveness in Puerto Rico. Some detractors claimed that FSA administrators failed to provide much in the way of evidence in terms of the FSA’s success when it came to improving the lives of the rural poor. When pressed by U.S. senators to assess the impacts FSA field representatives had in terms of “rehabilitating” poor Puerto Rican farmers, Will’s response was that he was unable to gauge the relative success of the program thus far.¹¹¹ Will’s reply was marked by the type of ambiguity that sometimes

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁰ During the same hearings, Will was also asked to justify the cost-effectiveness of the FSA’s loans to poor farmers in terms of loan repayment. At one point Taft asked, “how did those farmers fare in paying whatever the Government required from them each year?” Will responded that “they fared very well. The payment record in Puerto Rico is among the best in all the regions. So far we have a negligible number of delinquencies.”¹¹⁰ When Democratic Senator Dennis Chavez asked Will to compare such delinquencies with those in the continental U.S., the latter responded that Puerto Rico had one of the best track records in terms of repayment.¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹¹ U.S. Senate, “Political, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico,” 152.

landed the agency in trouble when administrators presented their case for funding before federal officials. As historian Charles Kenneth Roberts has argued, FSA officials like Will “thought they could rehabilitate rural America, but they had trouble defining in concrete terms exactly what that meant.”¹¹² As a result, FSA leaders’ inability to present the tangible, qualitative achievements of their programs often delegitimated the agency in the eyes of political opponents who held the program’s purse strings.¹¹³ Ralph Will’s request for an additional 30,000 TP loans for Puerto Rico that year never materialized nor did subsequent efforts by FSA officials to convince Congress to provide additional funding.

Congressional allocations to the FSA for its stateside and colonial programs steadily decreased after 1943 as the operational costs of the Puerto Rican FSA decreased due to American involvement in World War II. According to an article written in 1943 by economist and future Puerto Rican Secretary of the Treasury, S.L. Descartes, both the FSA and the Land Authority’s efforts to purchase sugar lands were temporarily hindered by wartime inflation in the land sector which led to exceedingly high appraisal values on desirable acreage. War mobilization also drained the amount of available personnel to conduct the necessary procedures for the acquisition of land for new farms.¹¹⁴

The federal government’s focus on World War II had other detrimental effects on the general public in Puerto Rico who found themselves still facing increasing poverty and hunger during the war years. While testifying before Congress in 1942, Luis Muñoz Marín noted that shipping issues had prevented the wartime importation of necessities from the United States, causing shortages that left 90 percent of islanders with inadequate amounts of food and goods.

¹¹² Charles Kenneth Roberts, “Client Failures and Supervised Credit in the Farm Security Administration,” 373.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 369. For more on political opposition to the stateside FSA see Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*.

¹¹⁴ Descartes, 416.

Such shortages caused price inflation at a time when the island faced what Muñoz described as “an unusual volume of unemployment.” Prices had been rising while wages and incomes decreased or remained stagnant, thus limiting the purchasing power of poor Puerto Ricans. Additionally, shipping problems led to a decrease in imports of such vital goods as fertilizer and farm equipment that negatively impacted agricultural production and decreased employment opportunities. During the war years, however, a steady surplus of island sugar crops led to the type of overproduction that decreased prices for the crop and impacted profits, phenomena that also adversely affected employment statistics on the island. While the continental United States saw a production boom that rectified stateside unemployment and eventually increased the purchasing power of the American public, the exact opposite was taking place in Puerto Rico.¹¹⁵

Congressional neglect of Puerto Rico during World War II did not go unnoticed by federal officials who sought to come to the assistance of islanders whom they viewed as deserving of allocations due to their status as American citizens. For instance, in 1944, while speaking before a House Insular Affairs subcommittee, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes condemned Congress for ignoring the financial needs of islanders who had been struggling during the war years. “What the island needs,” Ickes said, “is a recognition from Congress that its people are citizens of the United States; that they face many economic problems because of the dense population and the exigencies of war; and that the country should be encouraged to become largely industrial.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs, Hearings, “77th Congress, First and Second Sessions, 1941-1942, Economic and Social Conditions in Puerto Rico” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942) 3; U.S. Department of Agriculture, “A Comprehensive Agricultural Program for Puerto Rico” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1953), 40; Hans Neisser, “General Overproduction: A Study of Say’s Law of Markets,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 42, no.4 (August 1934), 436.

¹¹⁶ “Aid to Puerto Rico Defended by Ickes: He Tells House Group Island Needs Congress Recognition,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 1944, 20.

By 1945, TP loan initiatives under the FSA came to a halt in Puerto Rico due to a lack of federal funding. In the wake of the FSA's demise, Farmers Home Administration loans were extended to Puerto Rico beginning in 1946, but the bulk of island resettlement efforts were continued under the PPD's guidance via the Land Authority. Like housing programs instituted under the PRERA and the PRRA, the Land Authority was plagued by funding issues that curtailed the effectiveness of land distribution programs. In 1948, Muñoz reported that over 2,000 families per year were still migrating from rural areas into city squatters' settlements. Nevertheless, by that same year, about 36 percent of sugar company lands exceeding the 500-acre limit had been purchased by the Puerto Rican government.¹¹⁷ It was not enough, however, to break the land monopoly held by U.S. sugar corporations. Historian James Dietz argues that the Land Authority lacked necessary financing to do so because the island's tax base, weakened by the relative lack of income of island citizens, was not enough to sustain the land purchasing program through bond issues alone, which the PPD had hoped would finance its projects. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the Land Authority was denied access to federal funds during and immediately following the war due to "congressional opposition to reform" in Puerto Rico. During the same time period, however, the Land Authority was able to finance land purchases through a surplus of rum tax revenue, which was averaging upwards of \$65 million per year during the war years.¹¹⁸ This source of income was made possible by a decrease in U.S. alcohol imports to the island as American distilleries had converted production over to the war effort.¹¹⁹ As a result, the demand for Puerto Rican rum skyrocketed and alcohol exports from the

¹¹⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, Eighty-first Congress, First Session, "Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico: Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, July 12, 1949"(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 5.

¹¹⁸ U.S. House of Representatives, "Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico: Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, July 12, 1949," 5.

¹¹⁹ César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 144.

island steadily increased during the war years. Although the PPD was able to finance its reform agenda with a degree of autonomy, the island-generated funding was not enough to provide land and housing for the hundreds of thousands of homeless poor on the island. Nor was it enough to stop the growth of Puerto Rican urban squatters' settlements.¹²⁰

This is not to say, however, that the PPD's resettlement efforts under the Land Authority were not without their successes. In particular, the Land Law provided for a so-called *parcelas* program that was initiated by Muñoz and the PPD to assist the thousands of poor Puerto Ricans known as *agregados*. Under the jurisdiction of the Land Authority, the Puerto Rican government acquired farms not exceeding 500 acres to set up small farming towns where *agregados* would be housed and work the land for the purpose of providing food to the island. While the resettled *agregados* did not own *parcela* land, the program marked the first time many were able to enter the workforce as wage earners as opposed to their previous role as squatters who worked sugar land in exchange for housing. In this way, argues James Dietz, the program "had the effect of destroying the remaining semi servile relations with their landlords while at the same time helping to ameliorate the worst conditions of their existence."¹²¹ According to historian Matthew Edel's calculations, by 1944, these so-called Land Authority Title V towns were "being established at the rate of one village every ten days"—a boom that was expedited by the PPD's recent victory in both legislative houses that same year, which allowed for a swifter allocation of funds. In 1945, 14,000 plots of land had been dedicated to the *parcelas* program. By the late 1950s, roughly ten percent of the island population lived in *agregado* villages with the government having created 304 *parcela* towns housing 52,287 rural families. Empowered by a new liberal order under the PPD, which wielded its legal right to enforce the 500-acre Law, the

¹²⁰ Dietz, *Economic*, 197-198

¹²¹ Dietz 40, 200; Edel "Land Reform, Part One," 29-34.

insular government, rather than the U.S. government, had instituted the most successful housing initiative since the time of the American takeover of the island.¹²²

The shifts in the island socioeconomic order brought on by the enforcement of the 500-acre Law did not provide an immediate panacea for the existence of Puerto Rico's city shantytowns and housing issues in the post-depression era. In 1942, an insular government report stated that nearly 70 percent of Puerto Rican urban residents were still living in "conditions which are below the accepted minimum standards."¹²³ In his 1942 address to the Puerto Rican legislature, Governor Rexford Tugwell noted that Puerto Rican squatters' settlements were still growing at an alarming rate on both public and private lands on the outskirts of the island's cities. He observed that although the federal government had been "generous" in providing funds for urban public housing, much more funding was needed to stop the spread of "these abominable areas." What was needed was more urban public housing, according to Tugwell, but it was necessary to "make each family unit cost less so that more can be built" and be more affordable for the average working-class islander. He proposed that the insular legislature enact a law that stipulated that it was the Puerto Rican government's responsibility to furnish the "necessary facilities" such as water, sewers, and streets, a move that would perhaps incentivize private owners to cooperate with the construction of new housing on their properties should they be reluctant to sell the land underneath the new projects. Tugwell also suggested that urban housing programs would be more cost effective and better for the overall health of *agregados* who might be relocated from rural areas as utilities and sanitation efforts could be consolidated

¹²² Dietz, 201; Michael Lapp, "The Rise and Fall of Puerto Rico as a Social Laboratory, 1945-1965," *Social Science History*, 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 171.

¹²³ *Report of the Puerto Rican Planning Board, 1942*, quoted in Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters," 197.

by government authorities as opposed to being spread out throughout the countryside under the *parcelas* programs.¹²⁴

In the late 1940s, Muñoz, working in conjunction with the U.S. government, began to overhaul the Puerto Rican economy by introducing industrialization and modernization initiatives to the island. In 1949, then-Governor Muñoz noted that the island's shift from an agricultural economy marked a move away from what he described as "operation lament" and toward a new socioeconomic mission that would from that point on be referred to as "operation bootstrap."¹²⁵ The motivation for this dramatic restructuring emerged, in part, from the U.S. role in the Cold War. The persistent eye sore of Puerto Rico's urban shantytowns ran counter to officials' plans to remodel the island as a "showcase for democracy" that would stand as an example of capitalism's potential to successfully foster Third World development and work as an antidote to communism.¹²⁶ Muñoz and the PPD saw Puerto Rico's shantytowns as a blight that threatened to upset their plans to lure American industrial corporations to the island and turn Puerto Rico into a model democratic colony. After Muñoz was elected governor of the island in 1948, he secured \$14 million in federal aid for "slum eradication" efforts and the construction of low-income urban housing units that would ostensibly rid the island of shantytowns once and for all. The funds, which were distributed under the 1949 Federal Housing Act, were used to build twenty-seven urban residential developments accommodating an additional 31,724 people. One year later, in 1950, Muñoz announced an ambitious plan to finally rid Puerto Rico of its "slums"

¹²⁴ Rexford G. Tugwell, *Puerto Rican Public Papers of R.G. Tugwell, Governor*, "Message to the Fifteenth Legislature, Second Regular Session, February 9, 1942" (San Juan, P.R.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 49, 66.

¹²⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, Eighty-first Congress, First Session, "Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico: Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, July 12, 1949," 3.

¹²⁶ Michael Lapp, 171.

and build thirty thousand public housing units over a six-year period.¹²⁷ In 1953, the federal government enabled Muñoz's vision by allocating \$75 million for "slum eradication" and housing programs. In terms of the latter programs, the funds provided were enough for the construction of an additional 11,398 units or enough to house approximately 60,000 people out of a population of 2.3 million. The new federal program placed Puerto Rico at the top of rankings for low-rent housing provided per person in the U.S. states and territories in the mid-1950s.¹²⁸ Although Puerto Rico's squatters' settlements continued to exist in the Cold War era, the federal government, the PPD, and Governor Muñoz eventually slowed their growth for the first time since 1898. In addition to an acceleration of housing programs, the curtailed expansion of Puerto Rico's shantytowns was in part due to a massive off-island migration of nearly 1 million Puerto Ricans to the United States in the post-war era that relieved the pressure on the island's urban centers. The exodus was made possible by the advent of cheap air travel and recruitment efforts of stateside factory owners in search of affordable labor.¹²⁹ However, moving to the continental United States did not necessarily lead to better living conditions for Puerto Rican migrant workers. In 1955, at the height of this migration, historian Charles Abrams noted that migrant Puerto Ricans, particularly those living in New York City, faced grim living conditions that were not unlike those endured by immigrants living in the Lower East Side at the turn of the twentieth century. Abrams noted that as many as 25 Puerto Ricans could be found living together in a two-room "firetrap" with no access to daylight or proper ventilation. He went on to say that while there was "housing bias against" all working-class Puerto Rican migrants,

¹²⁷ Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, "Temporary Housing, Permanent Communities: Public Housing Policy and Design in Puerto Rico," *Journal of Urban History*, 33, no. 3 (March 2007): 467-492. 473,474.

¹²⁸ "Puerto Rico Gains in Slum Clearance: \$75,000,000 Program Provides Homes for 60,000 persons in Low Income Groups," *The New York Times*, August 30, 1951, R1.

¹²⁹ Library of Congress, "Migrating to a New Land," <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/puerto-rican-cuban/migrating-to-a-new-land/>

the situation was far worse for those of color who soon learned that they must “confront the city’s color line” and face the fact that in New York City a “difference of color” meant “a difference in status.”¹³⁰

By 1964, a study of San Juan's shantytowns noted that “slum” populations had finally stopped growing. Throughout the 1960s, their decline remained relatively stagnant, decreasing at “less than one-half of one percent per year.”¹³¹ While Muñoz and the federal government would not achieve the goal of eradicating Puerto Rico’s shantytowns altogether, efforts to do so during the Cold War crisis surpassed all previous attempts.

In the post war years, Muñoz and the PPD made further changes to the Puerto Rican status quo, by finally introducing initiatives that served to diversify the island’s economy. Beginning in the late 1940s, Muñoz began courting American industrial corporations by offering them tax breaks, rent and utility subsidies, and low-interest loans.¹³² While industrialization efforts, working under the moniker of “Operation Bootstrap,” moved the island away from its historical reliance on the monocultural sugar economy and toward manufacturing, ultimately, they simply replaced one version of the imperialist regime with another by reinforcing further dependency on the United States. By 1960, several hundred industries had moved their operations to the island, 90 percent of which were from the continental U.S. And, as it was under decades-long sugar regime, the new industrial order was implemented at the expense of the Puerto Rican working class. This was due to the fact that Operation Bootstrap also incentivized U.S. corporations with the promise of a weak labor movement and an abundant, cheap workforce

¹³⁰ Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1955), 62.

¹³¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Squatters, politics, and state responses: The Political Economy of Squatters in Puerto Rico, 1900-1992" (PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993), 199; Caplow, et al., 228 quoted in Bonilla-Silva, 200.

¹³² U.S. House of Representatives, “Report of the Governor of Puerto Rico: Hearing Before the Committee on Public Lands, July 12, 1949,” 3.

made possible by a low minimum wage that had been codified in Puerto Rico in 1940 by amendments made to the Fair Labor Standards Act.¹³³

In spite of gains made in the realms of Puerto Rico's "slum eradication" and housing programs, industrialization and housing programs did not provide enough of a solution to completely rectify the living conditions of Puerto Rico's working classes. As historian Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, while industrialization had diversified Puerto Rico's economy, the subsequent destruction of its agricultural industries in the post-war era also diminished employment opportunities for Puerto Rico's rural working class, who continued to move to city shantytowns and to the continental U.S.¹³⁴ The continued migration of the rural population was exacerbated by the U.S. military's Cold War-era practice of requisitioning thousands of acres of arable land traditionally used by small farmers who found themselves without a livelihood and forced to move to poor urban neighborhoods.¹³⁵ Case in point came in 1941, when U.S. troops forcibly displaced over ten thousand residents of the island of Vieques at gun point, ordering them to give up their homes and land so the federal government could establish a naval base. In the following six decades, the U.S. Navy used Vieques as a testing ground for live ordinances that often contained napalm, uranium, and lead, which jeopardized the health of the remaining residents.¹³⁶ Such practices, along with lingering poverty, demonstrate that while Operation Bootstrap was hailed as the democratic, free market alternative to Soviet totalitarianism and centralization, unequal (and sometimes tyrannical or coercive) power dynamics persisted

¹³³ Bonilla-Silva, 187; Macpherson, "Birth of the U.S. Colonial Minimum Wage," 656; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1938 by the United States. Dept. of the Interior* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 28, 62, 64.

¹³⁴ Bonilla-Silva, 203.

¹³⁵ Livia Gershon, "What the U.S. Owes Puerto Rico," JSTOR Daily, September 28, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/what-the-u-s-owes-puerto-rico/>

¹³⁶ The Vieques base was eventually shut down in 1999 due to the grassroots activism of Puerto Ricans from the main island and Vieques. The Guardian, "I thought they'd kill us: how the US navy devastated a tiny Puerto Rican island," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/30/vieques-puerto-rico-us-navy-base-training>

between the federal government and Puerto Rico throughout the Cold War era. And in the present day, as it was after the San Felipe hurricane of 1928 and for much of the depression, U.S. policy has remained both neglectful and ungenerous toward Puerto Rico, thus perpetuating the old, familiar colonial relationship that fosters a cycle of poverty on the island. Evidence of this assertion can be found in the fact that some of the same Puerto Rican neighborhoods classified as “slums” during the depression are still in existence today and have recently experienced hardships not unlike those seen in the aftermath of San Felipe in 1928. For instance, the La Perla neighborhood in San Juan, described in disparaging terms as a "seedy barrio" and a "crime-filled slum" by CBS news, was severely impacted by Hurricane Maria in 2017. As will be discussed in detail in this study’s conclusion, it would take the government over a year to restore clean water and power to the majority of Puerto Rico's population, including La Perla's 1,600 residents—a type of official neglect reminiscent of that experienced by islanders after San Felipe.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ CBS Evening News, "'Despacito' made this neighborhood famous, but Hurricane Maria ravaged it," November 23, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/despacito-made-this-neighborhood-famous-but-hurricane-maria-ravaged-it/>; Emily Sullivan for NPR News, "Nearly A Year After Maria, Puerto Rico Officials Claim Power is Totally Restored, August 15, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/15/638739819/nearly-a-year-after-maria-puerto-rico-officials-claim-power-totally-restored>.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, it has been nearly a century since the San Felipe Hurricane and the Great Depression arrived in Puerto Rico and exposed to federal officials in Washington the pre-existing socioeconomic issues plaguing the island. And yet, in the intervening years, many patterns lingered and still linger in the relationship between the island and the U.S. This is particularly the case regarding federal policies that foster continuing poverty and continental assumptions about the general character of Puerto Ricans.

In 1966, more than thirty years after continental New Dealers offered blanket assessments that linked Puerto Ricans' purported inherent shortcomings—such as their inclination toward robust fertility—to the causes of island poverty, American anthropologist Oscar Lewis authored a study that perpetuated continental presumptions about islanders as an ethnic group. Lewis's voluminous study, *La Vida*, told the story of a Puerto Rican family, the Ríos, who were based in the poorest neighborhoods of San Juan and New York. The work was intended by the author to highlight the lingering “conditions of poverty and social pathology” of low-income groups which persisted despite economic strides that had been made under Operation Bootstrap. In doing so, Lewis hoped to cultivate sympathy for poor islanders among his middle-class continental readership, who would then hopefully be spurred on to social action on behalf of Puerto Ricans.¹

Lewis' work emerged as a part of a stateside trend among lawmakers, sociologists, and journalists who were inspired to find the root causes of and to eradicate poverty among minority groups. *La Vida* was released one year after the publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for*

¹ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966), xii.

National Action, the infamous report compiled by the Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The so-called “Moynihan Report” sparked controversy among critics such as sociologist William J. Ryan who claimed that its authors had essentially resorted to “blaming the victim.” This was largely due to Moynihan and his co-authors’ propensity for pathologizing the study’s subjects by placing heavy emphasis on the role of family dysfunction in perpetuating poverty across generations.² It was an approach that was shared by Oscar Lewis in his attempt to uncover the reasons for similar systemic problems affecting Puerto Rico.

Rather than find a solution to the “culture of poverty” still plaguing Puerto Rico, what Lewis’ work essentially accomplished was a continuation of the “problem” rhetoric that had been employed by continentals toward Puerto Ricans since the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898. According to Lewis, the Ríos, a family that largely earned a subsistence living through criminal activities, existed in a world where “progress” had “passed them by.” They were immersed in a “culture of poverty” characterized by “family disruption, violence, brutality, cheapness of life, lack of love, lack of education, lack of medical facilities—in short, a picture of incredible deprivation” that included an “overwhelming preoccupation with sex.”³ The women of the Ríos family were portrayed by Lewis as the primary contributors to the rampant family dysfunction as

² Linda Gordon’s 1994 work, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, focuses on the origins of the stigmatization and exclusion of women and single mothers in the U.S. welfare state from the progressive era to the Social Security Act of 1935. She demonstrates how the creation of a welfare state was once associated with providing a better life for all but ended up being characterized as something undesirable (connoting slums, depressed and dependent mothers, crime, neglected children). She shows how popular welfare values developed over time to make “welfare” a pejorative term and how such values often directly influence federal budgets, which in turn negatively impacted single mothers and poor women. Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris’ work *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) explores how a so-called “gendered imagination” emerged in the U.S. during the Progressive Era and persisted through the twentieth century. It was a mindset that devalued traditional women’s work and unskilled labor and espoused the belief that social welfare, economic citizenship, and full participation in the polity should only be accessible to white, male wage earners. U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965); William J. Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

³ Lewis, xiv, xxvi.

they failed “to accept the traditionally submissive role of women in Puerto Rican society” and turned to prostitution as a vocation.⁴ Echoing depression-era observers who blamed Puerto Rican poverty on the island’s poorer classes, Lewis painted a picture of the Ríos women as oversexed and depraved as they worked alongside “drug addicts, thieves, chronic alcoholics and homosexuals” in the La Perla shantytown of San Juan. Lewis warned his readership that “the data” in his work “should not be generalized to Puerto Rican society as a whole,” only to contradict himself in subsequent pages when he suggested that “studies of the lower class may also reveal something that is distinctive of a people as a whole.”⁵ Additionally, according to Lewis, part of what was “distinctive” about Puerto Ricans “as a whole” was a persistent reliance on federal financial assistance, a point which is underscored by a stream of welfare statistics provided at the opening of the study.

La Vida, which won the National Book Award for a work of science in 1967, offered little analysis of the structural issues that led to Puerto Rican poverty other than in brief interludes in the book’s introduction. Instead, it cemented long-running stereotypes of impoverished islanders as promiscuous, morally debased, and reliant on handouts from the U.S. government. Historian Laura Briggs notes this effect when she argues that Lewis offered a social scientific “‘solution’ to a public policy problem” which “solves that problem by representing Puerto Ricans as hypersexual, as bad mothers, and responsible for their own poverty—in short,

⁴ Such discourse about Puerto Rican women had longer roots that predated the U.S. takeover of the island. Discourses about Puerto Rican women’s bodies, morality and reproduction had longer roots that predated the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898. After U.S. occupation, however, women’s bodies increasingly became contested political sites and topics of debate central to the acquisition and maintenance of colonial power. For more on this see: Eileen J. Suarez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (University of California Press, 2003).

⁵ Lewis, xxvii, xxxi, xii, xv.

as welfare queens.”⁶ Briggs’ observations mirror those issued by Lewis’ Puerto Rican critics upon the release of *La Vida*. For example, in 1966, Insular labor official José Montserrat accused Lewis of portraying Puerto Ricans as being “preoccupied with sex” and “culturally deprived”—assessments couched in “biased science” Montserrat feared would lead readers into believing, or continuing to believe, that such traits were typical of all Puerto Ricans. Anthropologist Helen Safa remarked that both Lewis and Moynihan’s works suffered “from a kind of blaming the victim thesis.”⁷ In response to his detractors, Lewis complained in patronizing tones reminiscent of so many continental observers that had come before him. *La Vida*, Lewis claimed, had been “violently assailed” by Puerto Rican civic leaders who seemed “more concerned about the Puerto Rican image than about a deeper understanding of the lives and problems of the poor.”⁸ In spite of his desire to create a greater understanding of poverty, however, Lewis became one in a line of observers whose assessments of Puerto Rico contributed to a islanders’ degradation in the American imagination. Lewis might be viewed as possessing the same well-meaning but misguided intentions of depression-era continental reformers, whose objectives of transforming Puerto Rican society were born of a mix between feelings of compassion and the making of racialized assumptions. The dangerous part of their legacy resides in the continued practice of

⁶ Laura Briggs, “La Vida, Moynihan, and Other Libels: Migration, Social Science, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Welfare Queen,” *Centro Journal*, XIV, no. 1, 2002: 75-101, 75.

⁷ Helen Safa’s 1974 work, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico*, was pivotal in debunking Lewis’ “culture of poverty” anthropological model. According to Jorge Duany, Safa shifted the blame for Puerto Rican poverty away from islanders and toward long-running structural issues including “uneven” economic patterns that perpetuated racial, gender, and “class segregation.” Safa’s portrayals of Puerto Ricans, according to Duany, were the antithesis of Lewis’ more disparaging ones. Rather than depict islanders as depraved, apathetic, or degenerate, as Lewis did, Safa portrayed Puerto Ricans as “resourceful, self-reliant, and cooperative.” Jorge Duany, “Anthropology in a Postcolonial Colony: Helen I. Safa’s Contribution to Puerto Rican Ethnography,” *Caribbean Studies*, 38, no. 2 (July-December, 2010), 41; Kevin A. Yelvington, “The Making of a Marxist-Feminist-Latin Americanist Anthropologist: An Interview with Helen Safa,” *Caribbean Studies*, 38, no. 2 (July-December 2010), 18; see also: Helen I. Safa, *The Urban Poor in Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974); Helen I. Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁸ “Malamud Asserts Novel Should Stress a Theme,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1967, 42; “New Book Scored by Puerto Ricans: Leaders Fear Tale of Slum Family Spurs Prejudice,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 1966, 43.

latter with the absence of the former. It can be seen today in views held about Puerto Rico by at least one conservative American observer who, in 2015, referred to the island a “parasitic” welfare state.⁹ What conservative critics fail to note, however, is that with each new discriminatory and neglectful economic policy issued (or in some cases, not issued) by the federal government a long-standing dynamic is reproduced. It is a dynamic under which we witness the perpetuation of Puerto Rico’s poverty and its economic reliance on the United States, which in turn fosters a greater need for social welfare.

For instance, in 1976, in the post-Bootstrap era, U.S. lawmakers provided further incentive for continental manufacturers to relocate to the island by offering more corporate tax breaks. The tax break, known as Section 936 of the U.S. tax code, lured a plethora of pharmaceutical and electronics companies to the island, which saw a tenfold increase in its per capita gross national product between 1950 and 1980.¹⁰ Although this tax break, along with others granted by the federal government to Puerto Rico during the Bootstrap era, largely benefitted U.S. corporations, for a time it had certain beneficial effects on the island economy. For instance, it helped create thousands of jobs for working class Puerto Ricans whose per capita income steadily increased over the course of the twenty years that Section 936 was in effect. In this way, it served to partially close the longstanding class gap in Puerto Rican society.¹¹

In 1996, however, President Bill Clinton signed a bill that would slowly repeal Section 936 over the course of ten years, a move that had disastrous results for the island’s economy. No longer incentivized by paying virtually no federal taxes for doing business in Puerto Rico, U.S.

⁹ Jacob G. Hornberger, “Welfare State Parasitism,” The Future of Freedom Foundation, August 4, 2015, <https://www.fff.org/2015/08/04/welfare-state-parasitism/>

¹⁰ “These People Now Hold Puerto Rico’s Purse Strings,” *Mother Jones*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/obama-presents-names-puerto-rico-control-board/>

¹¹ Macrotrends, “Puerto Ric GDP Per Capita, 1960-2023,” <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/PRI/puerto-rico/gdp-per-capita>; Citizens for Tax Justice, “Puerto Rico and Section 936: A Taxing Lesson from History,” <https://ctj.org/puerto-rico-and-section-936-a-taxing-lesson-from-history/>;

businesses moved their operations elsewhere. What resulted were massive layoffs for the Puerto Rican working class (40 percent of manufacturing jobs were lost) and lost revenue that prompted the Puerto Rican government to borrow money. Consequently, the island incurred over \$73 billion in debt, has frequently experienced upwards of 45 percent unemployment (nearly 3 times the average for continental unemployment figures), and has seen dangerously underfunded social services for the poor. All of this was exacerbated by the arrival of the Great Recession of 2008, a continuously shrinking economy, and an exodus of islanders to the mainland in search of jobs. In 2021, the U.S. Census reported that 40.5% to 43% of island-based Puerto Ricans were living below the poverty line. Since then, the island has consistently held the number one slot on the list of the poorest states and territories in the US. By comparison, the second poorest state or territory on the list is Mississippi, with roughly 19% of its residents living below the poverty level.¹² Because Puerto Rico, as a colony, was prevented from using the U.S. bankruptcy courts to restructure its debt, by 2016, the island's government began defaulting on billions of dollars of loans it had taken out to keep its economy afloat.¹³

The Obama Administration and Congress' reaction to the Puerto Rican debt crisis brings to mind Representative Harold Knutson's 1928 assertion that he did not "see anything" about Puerto Ricans that proved they were able "to take care of themselves" during the aftermath of the San Felipe hurricane of 1928.¹⁴ In June of 2016, Congress enacted the Puerto Rico Oversight,

¹² U.S. Census, "Quick Facts: Puerto Rico," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/PR>; Centro, "Pervasive Poverty in Puerto Rico: A Closer Look, 2023," <https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/reports/pervasive-poverty-in-puerto-rico/>. U.S. Census, "Quick Facts: Mississippi," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MS/INC110221>; U.S. Senate, "The Effect of 936," [https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Arthur%20MacEwan%20and%20J.%20Tomas%20Hexner%20\(Sub%20mission%206\).pdf](https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Arthur%20MacEwan%20and%20J.%20Tomas%20Hexner%20(Sub%20mission%206).pdf); CNBC, "Here's How and Obscure Tax Change Sank Puerto Rico's Economy," <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/26/heres-how-an-obscure-tax-change-sank-puerto-ricos-economy.html>

¹³ "These People Now Hold Puerto Rico's Purse Strings," *Mother Jones*, August 31, 2016.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, "Relief of Porto Rico," *Joint Hearings Before the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions, United States Senate and the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives*, 70th Congress, 2nd sess. (December 10 and 11, 1928), 30.

Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) which created a bipartisan review board of seven people, who essentially had the power to exercise control over Puerto Rico's economy. The board, which consists of three Democrats and four Republicans handpicked by President Obama, usurped the authority of the Puerto Rican legislature by assuming the responsibility of approving insular budgets.¹⁵ Democratic Representative Luis Gutiérrez of Illinois likened the board to a "federal *junta*" that had all the qualities of "an occupying force."¹⁶ Similarly, other critics claimed that the board's total control over the island's economy marked a return to a type of old school colonialism under which a diminishment of democratic rights was inevitable.¹⁷ Indeed, the *junta*'s ability to override the decisions of the Puerto Rican legislature is reminiscent the early days of U.S. rule when federal and military officials had almost total control over the island's politics and economy. It also underscores the fact that the U.S. government is continuing to partake in a power dynamic that refuses to consider structural conditions and is marked by a belief that Puerto Ricans are somehow incapable of rectifying their own socioeconomic issues. Therefore, in the minds of many continentals, islanders are still in need of the oversight and tutelage of federal officials who believe they know what is best for Puerto Rico. They do so while ignoring longstanding systemic issues and policies that place islanders in a no-win situation.

One year after PROMESA was enacted, Puerto Rico suffered another major crisis when Hurricane Maria struck the island. Like San Felipe, the category 4 storm wreaked havoc on the island's already suffering infrastructure and economy. Maria, which hit the island on September

¹⁵"These People Now Hold Puerto Rico's Purse Strings," *Mother Jones*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Obama signs PROMESA Bill, Imposing Control Board on Puerto Rico," *Democracy Now*, July 1, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/7/1/headlines/obama_signs_promesa_bill_imposing_control_board_on_puerto_rico

20, 2017, had wind speeds of over 155 mph and sustained, heavy rains which totaled 38 inches over the course of twenty-four hours. The deadly winds, catastrophic flooding, and storm surge that reached over 9 feet above sea level caused \$90 billion in damages. Also incurred was the destruction of 80 percent (or about \$780 million) of the island's crops—a devastating figure considering the fact that Puerto Rico had already been experiencing food shortages prior to the hurricane.¹⁸ Eighty percent of Puerto Rico's utility poles and cell towers were destroyed causing a total loss of power and phone service for the island's 3.4 million people—not to mention the fact that nearly all of the island's water supply was contaminated.¹⁹ One year after Maria, about half of Puerto Rico's residents were still without power.²⁰ An estimated 786,000 homes were destroyed and tens of thousands more were rendered uninhabitable. Three years after the storm, many families were still resorting to using blue tarps as makeshift roofing.²¹ According to a Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health study, over 5,000 Puerto Ricans died because of Hurricane Maria, contradicting the federal government's initial reports of 64 deaths.²²

And, as it was after the 1928 hurricane, the federal government's response to the crisis of Hurricane Maria proved to be deliberately neglectful at best. On October 3, 2017, almost three

¹⁸ Mercy Corps, "The Facts: Hurricane Maria's Effect on Puerto Rico," September 9, 2020, <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/quick-facts-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico>

¹⁹ National Hurricane Center, NOAA and NWS, "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Maria, 16-30 September 2017," January 4, 2023, https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL152017_Maria.pdf; National Weather Service, "Major Hurricane Maria-September 20, 2017," <https://www.weather.gov/sju/maria2017>

²⁰ National Hurricane Center, "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Maria, 16-30 September 2017."

²¹ According to the Low-Income Housing Coalition, prior to the hurricane, Puerto Rico was already facing a housing crisis. Three-quarters of the island's poorest residents had been paying over "30 percent of their income on housing, and the existing housing stock was often in poor condition, with more than 110,000 homes lacking basic kitchens and plumbing." National Low Income Housing Coalition, "Impact of Hurricane Maria," August 21, 2019, <https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Hurricane-Impact-Maria.pdf>; "Thousands remain without proper homes in Puerto Rico 3 years after Hurricane Maria," *Global News*, July 24, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7213028/puerto-rico-maria-homeless/>

²² "Trump delayed \$20 billion in aid to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, report finds," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/22/hurricane-maria-puerto-rico-trump-delayed-aid>; Mercy Corps, "The Facts: Hurricane Maria's Effect on Puerto Rico," September 9, 2020, <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/quick-facts-hurricane-maria-puerto-rico>

weeks after the storm, President Donald Trump infamously visited the island to survey the damage. At a press conference in San Juan, the president tossed rolls of paper towels into an audience of survivors and repeatedly told others he encountered to “have fun” or to “have a good time.”²³ More damaging to Puerto Rico, however, were Trump’s disaster relief policies in the wake of Maria. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, in previous times of crisis, the federal government had provided low-income disaster victims with temporary financial assistance by activating Disaster Housing Assistance Programs (DHAP). Under Trump’s direction, however, FEMA failed to activate DHAP. Furthermore, FEMA also denied 60 percent of individual disaster relief applications filed by Puerto Ricans after Maria, which was two times the denial rate for Texan applicants after Hurricane Harvey.²⁴ In 2022, the *Guardian* reported that the Trump administration purposefully set up roadblocks to prevent housing and direct aid from reaching the island after the hurricane. Interviews with over 50 Housing and Urban Development officials conducted by the U.S. Inspector General’s office in 2020 revealed that the Trump administration set up “extra layers of review” during relief allocation proceedings. As a result, the administration failed to release over \$20 billion in funds due to “denials of access.” The report also noted that the administration repeatedly failed to cooperate with Puerto Rican housing officials requesting aid.²⁵

²³ “Trump Tells Puerto Ricans to ‘have a good time,’” *The Associated Press*, October 9, 2017, <https://youtu.be/emrvykvNvhk>; “Trump Lobs Paper Towels, and Praise, On Island,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2017, A1.

²⁴ The latter point once again highlights disparities inherent in the federal government’s treatment of Puerto Rico in times of crisis as opposed to how disaster relief is allocated to the states—an arrangement that is in part made possible by the island’s lack of political representation in Congress. Council on Foreign Relations, “Puerto Rico: A Territory in Crisis,” <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/puerto-rico-us-territory-crisis>; National Low Income Housing Coalition, “Impact of Hurricane Maria.”

²⁵ “Trump delayed \$20 billion in aid to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, report finds,” *The Guardian*.

In a move that seemed to signal an about face on behalf of the Trump administration, federal block grants were extended to Puerto Rico in 2019 with the intent of providing rebuilding assistance. The grants were to be used to fund an insular program known as R3 (repair, rebuild, and relocate). 27,000 families applied for and received R3 assistance, but the insular government stopped taking applications by the end of that year. In part this was due to the fact that the Puerto Rican Housing Department was underfunded and understaffed. This was largely the result of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under the Trump Administration imposing “an unusually large number of requirements on Puerto Rico’s government” that prevented financial assistance from reaching the island. Consequently, three years after Maria, the homelessness situation on the island was little improved, prompting then-governor Wanda Vázquez to offer criticism of President Trump’s neglectful response to the disaster. “The excuses were plentiful, and they were unacceptable,” Vázquez said, “our people have waited too long and can’t take it anymore.”²⁶

To be sure, Trump’s post-Maria policies fell in line with his persistent marginalization of non-white ethnic and racial groups in the nation and around the world. In 2018, journalist David Leonhardt observed that the president’s “political rise was built on—and there is no other accurate way to say it—racism.”²⁷ Evidence of the president’s bigotry could be heard in disparaging remarks aimed toward U.S. minorities such as referring to African Americans as “lazy.” It could also be heard in his claims that all Haitians “have AIDS” and that Puerto Ricans were “politically motivated ingrates” after island leaders offered criticism over his Maria crisis response. It could be heard in his defense of white nationalists whom he described as “very fine

²⁶ *Global News*, “Thousands remain without proper homes in Puerto Rico 3 years after Hurricane Maria,” July 24, 2020.

²⁷ “A Definitive List of Donald Trump’s Racist Statements,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018, A18.

people.”²⁸ Trump’s chauvinism could be seen in such policies as his Muslim Ban, his plans to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and in his failure to provide humanitarian aid to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. His deliberate and pitiless attempts to prevent Puerto Ricans from receiving their fair share of disaster relief was part of a broader pattern where Trump specifically targeted and discriminated against people of color.

It is important, however, to place Trump’s racial views, particularly his views toward Puerto Rico, in a larger historical context—a context that reveals the long-standing tendency of continental politicians to either ignore the island or to view its inhabitants as ungrateful, inferior or unworthy of the benefits of U.S. citizenship. For instance, Trump’s praise of white supremacists was not unlike statements made by Puerto Rican Governor Horace Towner after the San Felipe hurricane of 1928. As the reader will recall, Towner defended the right of the island’s white planter class to be the sole recipients of disaster relief as they were, in his opinion, far more “dependable” and “meritorious” than the darker skinned members of the working class who needed assistance the most.²⁹ From the time of Towner to that of Trump, stateside politicians on both sides of the aisle have consistently demonstrated a knack for either failing to act on behalf of Puerto Rico or enacting policies that have prohibited the upward mobility and the very survival of its people.

As it was at the start of the 1930s, Congress and successive presidents have continued to prevent Puerto Ricans from gaining access to the full rights granted by U.S. citizenship. This is particularly the case in terms of federal officials’ denial of welfare benefits that would ameliorate skyrocketing poverty rates on the island. Like their exclusion from the Social Security Act of 1935, in 2022, Congress voted to exclude Puerto Ricans from Supplemental Security Income

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, “Relief of Puerto Rico,” 48.

(SSI) programs, which provide monthly payments to those with a disability, blindness, or to those who are elderly and living below the poverty level.³⁰ It was a move that impacted roughly 300,000 eligible islanders. The exclusion was supported by both the Trump and Biden administrations and, as of 2022, by the Supreme Court. In an 8 to 1 decision, the Court determined that Puerto Ricans could be denied a full measure of equality before the law as they do not pay federal income taxes.³¹ Writing for the majority, Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s rhetoric gave credence to historian Sam Erman’s assertion that Puerto Ricans, as colonial subjects, might be viewed as “almost citizens”—a status that is underscored by the persistent economic, political and legal limitations placed on islanders, in spite of birthright citizenship granted to them by the 1917 Jones Act.³² According to Kavanaugh, it was the opinion of the justices that the “question before this Court is, whether, under the Constitution, Congress *must* extend Supplemental Security Income to residents of Puerto Rico to the same extent as to residents of the States—the answer is no.” Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who is the daughter of Puerto Rican migrants and grew up in living in low-income housing in the Bronx, was the sole dissenting justice. “SSI is designed to support the neediest citizens,” Sotomayor wrote:

As a program of last resort, it is aimed at preventing the most severe poverty. In view of that core purpose, denying benefits to hundreds of thousands of eligible Puerto Rico residents because they do not pay enough taxes is utterly irrational. Congress’ decision to deny to the US citizens of Puerto Rico a social safety net that it provides to almost all other US citizens is especially cruel given those citizens’ dire need for aid.³³

³⁰ Social Security Administration, “Supplemental Security Income,” <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/>; “High Court rules Congress can exclude Puerto Ricans from aid program,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2022, online edition.

³¹ “US top court rules Puerto Rico not entitled to welfare programme,” *Al Jazeera*, April 21, 2022

³² Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³³ “US top court rules Puerto Rico not entitled to welfare programme,” *Al Jazeera*, April 21, 2022; “High Court rules Congress can exclude Puerto Ricans from aid program,” *The Washington Post*.

The debates over Puerto Ricans' eligibility for SSI reveal a no-win situation for islanders who are penalized for catch-22 colonial policies that are not of their own making. While on the surface, the lack of federal income taxes in Puerto Rico might appear to be a perk of the island's extrastatal status, it is in fact a policy rooted in exclusionary classism. It was created to lure wealthy, and now defected, corporations to Puerto Rico and has proven punitive for the island's poorer residents who now lack jobs, sufficient income, and a tax base that would render them eligible for much-needed welfare. And, as observers from Hunter College's Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO) noted recently, the Supreme Court's ruling on SSI allowed for Congress to "continue to treat Puerto Rico differently from a state of the union since it is not subject to the Constitution's Uniformity Clause." They went on to argue that "this should not imply that Congress should continue to treat Puerto Rico *worse* than a state." It should, rather, treat Puerto Rico "differently than a state by treating it *better* than a state, in order to address the devastating economic and social conditions its previous actions have wrought."³⁴

A degree of hope has come with the Biden administration's recent efforts to eradicate American homelessness. Biden's "All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness" has thus far proven inclusive in terms of how it views Puerto Rico's homelessness problem in relation to that experienced by the continental states. Biden's goal is to reduce homelessness by at least 25 percent by 2025, with the end goal being to eradicate it altogether, through issuing \$2.8 billion grants via HUD. The grants, known as Continuum of Care Competition Awards, are intended to help the nation's poor, including Puerto Ricans, find more stable and permanent housing. In March 2023, HUD awarded various Puerto Rican homeless assistance programs about \$24.3 million in CCCA funds. That same month,

³⁴ Centro, "Pervasive Poverty in Puerto Rico: A Closer Look, 2023."

Representative Nydia M. Velázquez (D-NY) announced that HUD was releasing an additional \$94 million in federal funds in the form of block grants to Puerto Rico to combat homelessness.³⁵

Many Puerto Ricans believe that a solution to policy conundrums would come in the form of statehood status. Since 1967, the island has held six non-binding referenda, or plebiscites, on the question of Puerto Rico’s political status. The results of the last three plebiscites, the most recent of which was held in 2020, have indicated that the majority of islanders desire statehood—a position that would offer them a better chance at receiving the full benefits of American citizenship, including political representation in Congress.³⁶ The U.S. Congress holds the sole power to vote Puerto Rico into statehood and thus far it has failed to transform the island’s territorial status despite popular opinion on the matter.³⁷

In December 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a symbolic resolution known as the Puerto Rican Status Act, to allow for binding plebiscites which would give Puerto Ricans the right to exercise self-determination over their political status. In the wake of the bill, then-Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was quoted as saying, “With the Puerto Rico Status Act, the Democratic House has proudly voted to tear down the vestiges of colonialism.”

³⁵ “Puerto Rico awarded \$24 million in annual federal funding to address homelessness,” *News is My Business*, March 29, 2023, <https://newsismybusiness.com/puerto-rico-awarded-24m-in-annual-federal-funding-to-address-homelessness/>; Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez, “Velázquez announces grants for affordable housing and community development in New York and Puerto Rico,” March 1, 2023, <https://velazquez.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/vel-zquez-announces-grants-affordable-housing-and-community-development>

³⁶ A 2018 Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation poll determined that roughly ten percent of islanders favor independence. According to *The Atlantic* magazine, however, there is a growing movement among those who seek full autonomy from the United States. This is in part due to the federal government’s neglectful response to Hurricane María and the disproportionate amount of power held by *la junta*. For instance, in 2020, two political parties espousing independence platforms received over one quarter of the popular vote. Jaquira Díaz, “Let Puerto Rico Be Free,” *The Atlantic*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/11/puerto-rico-independence-not-statehood/671482/>

³⁷ In the most recent plebiscite held in November 2020, 52% of islanders voted for statehood while the remaining 48% of the votes were divided between independence and keeping its current status as a Free Associated State, “Puerto Rico’s Plebiscites,” *Puerto Rico Report*, January 28, 2023, <https://www.puertoricoreport.com/puerto-ricos-plebiscites/#.ZD1R0i9Q0Us>; “Puerto Rico Votes in Favor of US Statehood,” *The Hill*, November 5, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/524590-puerto-rico-votes-in-favor-of-us-statehood/>

Despite Pelosi's hopes, observers have predicted that the bill has little chance of becoming law. For one, Washington lawmakers have traditionally opposed statehood for Puerto Rico because, as the *New York Times* recently noted, they believe the island would create a drain on the welfare system due to its consistently high rates of poverty. And so, yet another conundrum emerges in which the dire conditions Puerto Ricans face are the direct result of federal policies which have fostered and still foster the very poverty continental politicians fear would make the island a burden on the state.³⁸ Furthermore, Puerto Ricans' traditional support for continental Democratic Party platforms in the past nine decades has generated concerns among Republican lawmakers in Washington. Many fear that Puerto Rican statehood would tip the political balance in Congress toward a distinct Democratic majority and undermine Republican influence—a fear that has consistently prompted members of the latter party to vote against Puerto Rican statehood.³⁹

A poll taken by U.S.A. Today and Suffolk University after Hurricane Maria in 2017 concluded that less than half of continental Americans polled (47%) were certain that Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens. Thirty percent believed they were citizens of the island itself and the remaining twenty-one percent of the people polled had no idea what citizenship Puerto Ricans held.⁴⁰ Such statistics are emblematic of Laura Briggs' description of Puerto Rico's place in the American consciousness—a mode of thought marked by continental indifference toward Puerto Rico that is reinforced by its conspicuous absence from American cultural production. Briggs has

³⁸ “House passes bill that could pave the way for Puerto Rican statehood,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2022, A15.

³⁹ Joshua Keating, “An Uncertain State: In the debate over whether admit Puerto Rico to the union, which side is Puerto Rico on?” *Slate*, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/puerto-rico-statehood-us-politics-democrats.html>; M.A. Chernykh, “Making Puerto Rico the 51st State: Prospects under the Biden Administration,” National Library of Health, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10052212/#:~:text=Traditionally%20they%20expressed%20support%20for,influence%20of%20Republicans%20would%20decrease.>

⁴⁰ Jack Delano, *Photographic Memories* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 70; Alan Gomez, “Yes, Puerto Rico is a part of the United States,” *USA Today*, September 26, 2017 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/09/26/yes-puerto-rico-part-united-states/703273001/>

argued that Puerto Rico has long been “the site of profound denial and silence,” which is viewed with ambivalence, ignorance, or ambiguity by most Americans. This absence is “...produced and maintained through silences in the media, in popular culture, and in the teaching of U.S. history, which exist alongside a prominent public narrative in which the U.S. is a major anti-imperialist force in the world...”⁴¹ In other words, according to Briggs, there are commonly held national perceptions that the U.S. does not, nor has it ever had an empire. Or if the U.S. did have an empire, which included Puerto Rico, it quickly transformed into an inclusive entity after 1898 due to a series of measures that granted partial democratic rights to those who had been “liberated” from Spanish tyranny.

Puerto Rico’s absence from the American collective consciousness is, I argue, also a product of a colonial relationship where matters of citizenship rights, economic equality, and political status have evolved in an unequal, and frequently neglectful, manner. This evolutionary process has created a sense of uncertainty among some continentals who find themselves rendered into a state of confused apathy about Puerto Rico which is further enabled by more cultural silences. And so, this dissertation was written with these silences in mind. I offer no prescription for solving Puerto Rican poverty, landlessness, and homelessness. Ideally, however, this dissertation will achieve a few fundamental objectives. First, it is an attempt to demonstrate the varying degrees of incorporation and exclusion experienced by Puerto Ricans under U.S. colonialism both before and after the New Deal. In doing so it revives the age-old question posed in debates over imperialism waged in the wake of the Spanish American War: “Does the U.S. Constitution follow the flag?” The answer to this question is indicative of the ambiguous relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. As one constitutional law scholar put it,

⁴¹ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, 2.

the answer is not “a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but rather ‘it depends.’”⁴² As is highlighted in the preceding pages, the extent to which Puerto Ricans have been offered the benefits of citizenship is contingent upon the wants and concerns of a metropolitan state that holds the power and the purse strings. And while those concerns have at times been compelled by humanitarianism, as was seen during the Great Depression, they have been, more often than not, driven by a desire to maintain power over Puerto Rico and win the allegiance of its people via measures that offer the minimal amount of democracy. Second, it is my hope that the research contained within these pages will add to a growing body of transnational historical works that focus on Puerto Rico, its nationhood and its place within U.S. nationhood as subjects of analysis. Such analyses counter Puerto Rico’s exclusion from the national story and thus diminish the more nefarious effects of its perpetual invisibility and “othering” by continental observers, politicians, and cultural producers. In a broad sense, doing so provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of 20th century U.S. history as it disrupts a plotline often mired in the notion that significant processes and events, such as the Great Depression, played out mostly within the geopolitical confines of the continent. In this way, it provides insights into how, as many scholars have noted, the United States perfected the policy making and power dynamics currently being applied to twenty-first century globalization projects.⁴³

⁴² Marybeth Herald, “Does the Constitution Follow the Flag into United States Territories or Can It Be Separately Purchased and Sold,” *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly*, 22, no. 3 (Spring 1995), 708-768, 709.

⁴³ Antoinette M. Burton, *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); Patrick Wolfe, “History and Imperialism: A Century of Theory, from Marx to Postcolonialism,” *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997): 388-420.

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