

THE PROBLEM OF PUERTO RICAN MIGRATIONS TO THE UNITED STATES

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The migrations of the Puerto Rican natives to the United States, and more especially to New York City, have their roots deep in the economic and social development of the two regions. From this Island in the Caribbean with an area of 3,435 square miles and a population of approximately 2,211,000, New York City alone has had a yearly influx of more than 30,000 persons. As this is such a well-defined group of people coming from a compact area and migrating to an easily delineated region, it presents an excellent opportunity for a case study of a migration.

This paper is intended to examine three things: (1) the factors in Puerto Rico which have encouraged migration, (2) the economic and social status of the Puerto Rican in the United States, specifically in New York City, and (3) factors leading to a solution of the problem. Of necessity, some points will be discussed only briefly.

FACTORS IN PUERTO RICO ENCOURAGING MIGRATION

Never enjoying the advantages of statehood, or until recently, complete self-government, Puerto Rico has been all but ignored by the United States. Too valuable to be let go, not important enough to demand equal rights, not desiring to be independent, Puerto Rico suffers under the misunderstandings of American leadership.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Puerto Ricans had suffered under Spanish rule. With the beginnings of the twentieth century they looked to the aggressive American foreign policy sponsored by Theodore Roosevelt to alleviate the Island's distress and to begin an era of enlightenment and advancement.

In reviewing the history of the relationships of the two countries, one important factor, in respect to this paper, stands out—that is, the granting of citizenship by the United States to the mixed Spanish and Negro populations of the Island. For 30 years this act by the United States government had little noticeable effect, but today it is basic in an understanding of the migration problem. As citizens, Puerto Ricans can come to this country to settle. Without this single factor of citizenship, the problem of Puerto Rican migration into the United States would be non-existent.

The United States has made token advances toward developing Puerto Rico. Important advances in health and sanitation have been made; self-government has been encouraged; and social improvements have taken place. Some programs have back-fired. For example, the Insular Government has attempted better land-man ratios by limiting the size of sugar plantations. Unfortunately, as a result of confiscations, the Government now controls approximately six percent of the acreage and is one of the Island's largest cane producers.

There are few incentives to keep the Puerto Rican on his Island. Fifteen percent of the people are unemployed and many of the people are *underemployed*. The average wage is \$350 a year—about \$1.00 a day. The lack of a decent wage has led to slum housing, disease, malnutrition, and filth. Only on the soil can the Puerto Rican hope to obtain a living but even there his efforts are frustrated by infertility and out-moded methods. The Puerto Rican has available weak soils, poor resources, and little power—except the power to reproduce at an incompatible rate.

A major factor in the wretched economic structure of the Island is the dominance of the sugar industry. Sugar is the economy. The industry is United States controlled and operated with huge plantations on the best Puerto Rican soil. Over fifty percent of the people live on these holdings and twenty-five percent are dependent upon the industry for work. With such a one-sided economy is it any wonder that Puerto Rico cannot advance?

The sugar industry is seasonal, and, as a result, for seven to nine months of the year the mass of the workers is unemployed. Only a limited amount of sugar may be refined in Puerto Rico due to trade restrictions, so that when the harvest is over a surplus of labor floods the market. There is no means of alleviating this problem, at present.

Actually, what is needed is some degree of industrialization and/or a re-distribution of the land. Capital is required but is unavailable in Puerto Rico. Is it any wonder that the people seek "new worlds to conquer?"

During the regime of the Spanish, little was done to control deaths or births in the Island population. However, with diseases prevalent and sanitation lacking, the great number of deaths kept down the Island's population. In 1900, for instance, the population of Puerto Rico was 953,243 or 278 persons per square mile. Today, there are 626 persons per square mile.

Once the United States took control of the Island, health and sanitation improvements were undertaken. And a good job was done! So good, in fact, that the death rate was sharply reduced—and the natural factors that had kept the population fairly stable were eliminated. By improving sanitation, food, and health facilities, the U. S. has unintentionally aided the increase of population. Thus, Puerto Rico has one of the world's heaviest birth rates and a rapidly declining death rate. If the present birth rate of approximately 40 per 1,000 continues, the population will double in a quarter of a century.

What opportunity exists? There is about seven-tenths of an acre of arable land for each native. This figure is steadily diminishing with population pressure. The land-holders are big. The native must turn to upland areas or impoverished land to gain a living. Other than in handicraft industries there is little industrial employment. The Puerto Rican must have abandoned hope, for even hope needs feeding.

Educational facilities are lagging far behind population increases. In twenty years time the number of children increased by 120,000—an increase of 33 percent. During the same period, the children actually in school increased by 66 percent, but the number was still only 40 percent of the children. In the past few years more aggressive measures have been enforced so that educational facilities are being made available to greater numbers.

THE PUERTO RICAN IN THE UNITED STATES

We have reviewed briefly some of the important factors present on the Island that encourage migration. Now the question arises as to what the United States can offer these people.

Many of the first Puerto Ricans came to this country as contract workers. Of this group, many returned home but some remained in New York City to form the basis of a permanent colony. Of the contract workers brought to this country, about 96 percent returned to their native homes. With the nucleus formed, new migrants came to the United States in hopes of finding something better than was their lot on the Island. Today the total number of Puerto Ricans in New York City alone is about 350,000, according to Raymond Hilliard, Welfare Director of New York City. But the seriousness of the problem of immigration has diminished considerably since the years following the war. The net migration in 1948 and 1949 combined was 62,000—the same number as for 1947 alone (1947, 62,000; 1948, 34,000; 1949, 28,000). The gross migration is large but approximately

40 percent of all migrants eventually return to Puerto Rico. It is established, then, that two types of migrants are found, contract rural workers and urban dwellers. It is this latter type which has plagued New York City.

Contract agricultural labor has proved very satisfactory to farmers in the north-central states. A report from the New York Times of February 6, 1949, states that New York farmers were so pleased with the 1,400 laborers available in 1948 that double that number was wanted in 1949. Recently, too, Puerto Rican workers were called to Michigan in an emergency to help harvest Michigan's important sugar beet crop. With seasonal work the only type available in Puerto Rico, the contract work offered in the United States is a welcome source of employment. At the present time, Governor Marin has 200,000 Puerto Rican workers available for war-work in the United States when needed.

Many Puerto Ricans arrive in New York City as a result of letters written home from successful friends or relatives. No doubt, compared to the conditions on the Island, New York City's advanced program of social aids is in itself attractive enough to cause migrations. The Puerto Rican can hardly do worse by leaving his Island. The chance—and it is only that—that there is something better awaiting them has brought many of the migrants to the mainland.

What is often said to be the center of the settlement in New York City is so-called Spanish Harlem—an area one mile long and a block wide, bordered on the south by 96th Street, on the west by Central Park and 5th Avenue, on the east by 3rd Avenue and the Italian district, and on the north by 120th Street and Negro Harlem. The district is one of over-crowding, poverty, disease, and crime. This has been the story as it has appeared in our popular magazines—this is Puerto Rico transplanted in New York City. Yet, I wonder how many of the writers realize that both Brooklyn and the Bronx support, according to Manuel Cabranes, the Director of the Puerto Rican Employment Bureau in New York City, larger numbers of Puerto Ricans than does Manhattan, that these people live and work much the same as you and I, that they are respected by their neighbors, and enjoy life honestly? Too often the negative side is seen. The Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem are typical new settlers in New York. They are presenting no more of a problem than did the Italians, Poles, Jews, and Negroes of past years. In fact, if we are to believe labor leaders, the Puerto Rican is more welcome, relatively, as he has not lowered wages nor has he attempted to undermine the New York laborer's position.

A primary evil for the new migrants is the lack of decent housing. High-rent slums are typical of Harlem. Yet to these areas must the Puerto Rican go because he is an out-cast in other areas until he is properly adjusted or because of his dark skin. It is difficult to get "started" as high rents and food costs continue to keep living standards and savings down. New York officials hope to relieve the conditions by housing projects with rents costing \$9.00 per room per month.

The Puerto Rican presents a serious employment problem. Seventy-nine percent of the immigrants reaching New York City have never done anything more skilled than simple hand-work and only nine percent of them have come to the city with either hope or promise of work. To complicate matters further literacy is low and the average schooling is 5.5 years. While the Puerto Ricans have not caused a drop in wage standards, many of them suffer, unknowingly, from below-minimum wages—the average wage is \$28.05 a week. Those workers who complain are threatened with dismissal by their companies. Labor unions, relief organizations, and employment agencies have sought to solve this problem. Schooling has been supplied so that English and various trades may be learned. Such facilities offer the Puerto Rican hope that someday he will do other than his present menial tasks.

The influx of a mass of ignorant, unemployed, and under-fed citizens has caused

a serious relief and health problem to the City. When considering this aspect of Puerto Rican migration, we find estimates ranging from six percent to thirty percent of the population receiving relief from the City. Mr. Hilliard wrote, in a report on this problem to the Mayor of New York City, that ". . . The over-whelming majority of the Puerto Ricans are self-supporting, hard-working citizens of the City . . . contrary to frequent statements . . . only a very small minority of the Puerto Ricans (10 percent as compared to 4.2 percent for the rest of the population) are receiving public assistance in New York City . . ." The average Puerto Rican non-resident (a person living in New York City under one year's time) goes on relief later than the average non-resident. The Puerto Ricans wait 6.4 months whereas the non-resident average is 5.2 months. In this way the Puerto Rican has proved to many that his intentions are good—that public help is not the immediate end to his desires.

No doubt the Puerto Rican places an additional strain on health facilities in the City when he arrives. Rickets, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, and malnutrition are common. The cold weather of this latitude furthers respiratory diseases and increases health problems. However, the charge that Puerto Ricans come to New York City only for free health service is false. The Puerto Rican usually resides in the City longer than other non-residents before taking advantage of available hospital treatment.

SETTLEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

New York City has met the Puerto Rican immigration problem head-on. It is not a new problem but is, rather, a *re-newed* one. The problem is accentuated by the following factors: language handicap, unskilled workers, diseases and malnutrition, inadequate housing facilities, and employment disadvantages. There is, of course, an unwillingness by employers to hire these workers when better equipped workers are available. New York has the cooperation of the Puerto Rican government, the Puerto Ricans themselves, and of schools and civic groups, in the effort to remedy the situation.

One suggestion for limiting the problem in New York City is to reduce the number of immigrants coming into the City. If the immigrants could be channelled to other cities with promises of work, no one city's facilities would be taxed. Farm and industrial work could be opened up in other parts of the country if efficient ground-work were carried out—much of it by the Federal Government. In this way, New York thinks that the immediate problem of increasing population pressure could be relieved.

Other solutions lie in job-training programs, child and adult education, recreation and social programs, free health service, and other city or state aids. All cost money and place a tremendous burden on the City's budget but to solve the over-all problem such activities must be undertaken sooner or later. New York City must be shown to be no promised land. Education will answer this problem both in New York and in Puerto Rico.

In the words of Governor Marin, Puerto Rico is trying to solve its problems by ". . . increased agricultural production and industrialization . . . to keep up with the growing population . . . and to improve the standard of living of the common man to the point where, through education and other factors, the birth rate begins to decrease . . ."

Diversified industries are needed to provide full-year employment. Sugar's strong-hold on the agricultural economy must be broken. To bring new industries to the Island, Puerto Rico has set up a number of lucrative baits. One has been the government sponsorship of industries whereby the government operates new industries to prove their success whence they are turned over to interested private concerns. A second has been a 12-year tax exempt period in which new industries can develop and profit. Puerto Rico enjoys free trade with the United States

so that sale of manufactured goods can be successfully carried on in the United States.

Advantages for various industries are to be found. Industries such as textiles, rubber, glass, and furniture, can take advantage of raw materials, cheap labor, and available markets. New power facilities have been developed by the government to furnish cheap hydro-electric power.

The immediate problem of limiting migration can best be solved by improved living conditions. These should result from greater industrialization. This is what Puerto Rico hopes for. A more depressing note comes to our attention, however, as we realize that industrialization will help for a time but the country cannot benefit until the excessive birth rate can be brought under control. Any future policy of the government must give much consideration to education. For in education lies a hope for the development of a more stable birth rate. Only with a stable population can Puerto Rico attract industries and hold on to its people. Here, perhaps, is the key to Puerto Rico's economic success and a solution to the problem of Puerto Rican migrations.
