

Building One Corner of a New World: Understanding Puerto Rico as a World Leader in Collective Organizing

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I. Introduction

While the extremely powerful forces of capitalism, colonialism, and climate change shape our economic, social, cultural, ecological, and emotional conditions, they can sometimes appear abstract and removed, overwhelming and intractable. Despite the very present impacts, colonialism can seem far in the past, capitalism can seem natural and climate change a doomsday mystery. The Caribbean island of Puerto Rico presents a modern-day, concrete manifestation of the intersection of these systems. As a current colony of the world capitalist hegemon (the United States), long exploited for the enrichment of the U.S. while remaining disenfranchised at the national level and devastated by recent natural disasters intensified by climate change, Puerto Rico has experienced some of the most harmful effects of the colonial capitalist system that rules our world today. Puerto Rico has also long demonstrated a revolutionary impulse, with many Puerto Ricans participating in radical activism related to issues including their debt crisis, their colonial status, and, especially after the devastation of Hurricane María, organizing to support the needs of their communities who were abandoned by local and federal governments.

This paper will address these structures of capitalism, colonialism and climate change as interconnected parts of a whole, an integrated and extractive system in which Puerto Rico is situated as a nexus point. After 500 years of capitalist colonialism, climate change-related disasters like Hurricanes María and Irma as well as recent and continuing earthquakes have made unavoidably explicit the fundamental injustice of the structures shaping Puerto Rico, and have exposed the necessity for a sea-change in the way Puerto Rico is organized. It is clear that the current systems are not intended to support the people of Puerto Rico. In the wake of these clear

and devastating systems failures, Puerto Ricans have had to build grassroots, collective autonomy that emerges from and serves the people themselves. In this paper, I examine Puerto Rico as a frontline for anti-capitalist organizing and collective autonomy, a radical leader for a world in the midst of economic, climate, and social crisis.

Within this framework of positioning Puerto Rico as a world leader in collective organizing, I refer to the Zapatistas as a potential guide for mounting anti-capitalist collective resistance in Latin America. The Zapatistas are an indigenous, socialist political-militant group based in southeastern Mexico who have also experienced over 500 years of imperialist oppression. The Zapatistas' struggle against capitalism, colonialism, and the comprehensive effects of climate change – the same issues facing Puerto Rico – can inform methods of autonomy building, anticapitalist ideology, and collective organizing structures in Puerto Rico. Upon closer examination, I find that many of the conclusions reached by organizers in Puerto Rico echo those of the Zapatistas, pointing to opportunities for further global solidarity as well as mutual learning. The Zapatistas organize with the intention of building a new world, “a world where many worlds fit.”¹ This objective means celebrating the different knowledge, wisdom, practices, and histories of different peoples, honoring the autonomy and dignity of each. The organizing happening in Puerto Rico is one local manifestation of a global anti-capitalist struggle.

I first look at Puerto Rico's colonial history and present, understanding the island's long-standing position as a site of extraction for the enrichment of the United States and experimentation ground for many U.S. policies. I then turn to the underlying structure of capitalism at the center of Puerto Rico's subordination in the world economy, characterized by

¹ “Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona,” *Enlace Zapatista*, EZLN, 2005, enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en/.

exploitation, austerity, dependence and precarity. Capitalism functions by rationalizing, individualizing, and commodifying the world around it, forcing austerity and immiseration of the people through the privatization of social services, dismantling of communities and emphasis on individual responsibility over collective support. I situate these issues of capitalism and colonialism as interconnected systems of domination. I then explore the extensive crisis of climate change and its specific effects on Puerto Rico, highlighting an unequal experience of the crisis and one worsened by the insatiable profit-motive and control-seeking of the U.S. capitalist colonial state and the fossil fuel industries with which it cooperates. Climate change, though devastating – especially for poor communities of color and those in vulnerable geographic areas – can also point to a potential antidote to individualism, since sustainability and transformation in the face of the global climate crisis likely requires autonomous, community-based alternatives premised upon renewable resources and new methods of living.

I then take up the solutions emerging from below in terms of collective organizing in Puerto Rico, in conjunction with the diaspora and organizers abroad. In the wake of the clear-sighted systems failures consolidated by Hurricane María and intensified by succeeding political incompetence, corruption, and unrest and severe earthquakes, Puerto Ricans are, in this moment, constructing the beginnings of a new world based on justice, decolonization, and ecological sustainability. Their struggle affects us all, and to build meaningful solidarity we must understand the ways in which our histories, present realities, and futures are intertwined -- and must be, if we wish to mount effective and revolutionary resistance. As the interconnected crises of capitalism, colonialism and climate change continue to converge and increase in severity and scope, the organization of Puerto Ricans actively building community, autonomy, political

awareness, sustainability, and solidarity can provide an important framework for the rest of the world.

II. Modern-day Colonialism

As Roberto Ramos-Perea states in the bilingual anthology *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María*, “Puerto Rico is one of the last colonies in the Americas, if not the last one.”² As an unincorporated territory of the United States since 1898, Puerto Rico has continually been subjected to the laws and political-economic decisions of the imperial core. The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, commonly known as the Jones Act, requires that any products imported to or exported from Puerto Rico be conveyed by ships built, owned, and operated by the U.S.³ Consequently, goods in Puerto Rico consistently cost 20% more than they would in the U.S. or other Caribbean islands.⁴

In addition to being a captive market for U.S. goods, Puerto Rico has routinely been used as a site of experimentation for U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Beginning in the late 1940s, Puerto Rico embarked on an economic development program known as Operation Bootstrap that prioritized investment from mainland U.S. investors, in industries like pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals, through tax breaks and incentives for U.S. corporations as an engine for economic growth, further integrating Puerto Rico into the U.S. economy.⁵ As James L. Dietz writes in *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development*, even before Operation Bootstrap, “within Puerto Rico’s capitalist and colonial structure, the dominance of private U.S. capital was virtually guaranteed,” despite Puerto Rican policy makers’

² Roberto Ramos-Perea, “A New Dictatorship Has Been Installed in Puerto Rico.” In *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 48.

³ Joel Cintrón Arbasetti, “A Storm More Severe,” *The Independent*, October 17, 2017, <http://indypendent.org/2017/10/a-storm-more-severe/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James Dietz. *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 206-210.

initially purported goal of state-owned production with the aim of less-dependent industrialization.⁶ But with the concerted implementation of Operation Bootstrap, a “program of ‘industrialization by invitation,’” it was “clear that the intent of the new policy was no longer social justice, even narrowly defined. Growth of output, achieved on the basis of orthodox economic principles of behavior, was the new goal.”⁷ Consensus around this policy was built upon a resultant improvement in living and social conditions. But these gains were due not just to the successes of Operation Bootstrap, but rather “the particular interventionist role of the government in Puerto Rico and the nature of the colonial relation, which have permitted an improvement in living standards without a concomitant advance in institutional adaptation that could make such improvement permanent.”⁸ Thus, efforts to promote economic development in Puerto Rico were driven by and served colonial interests, exploiting the resources of the colony for the enrichment of the empire and actively underdeveloping Puerto Rico.

The limited and subjective ‘success’ of policies like Operation Bootstrap was utilized by the U.S. as a promoter for its development model to other developing countries, especially during the Cold War.⁹ As Marisol LeBrón writes, “throughout the mid-twentieth century, Puerto Rico was mobilized as an example of the progress that could be achieved through economic and political alignment with the United States.”¹⁰ But the economic well-being of Puerto Rico itself was never the true objective: when the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed in 1992, new markets and labor sources developed in other parts of the world. Puerto Rico’s further integration into the U.S. economy brought the expansion of national regulations, and U.S. capital

⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁷ Ibid., 210.

⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁹ Marisol LeBrón, “Puerto Rico’s War on Its Poor,” *Boston Review*, December 12, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/marisol-lebron-puerto-rico-war-poor>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

abandoned the island to exploit other, cheaper labor and less-regulated locations.¹¹ The experiment of developing Puerto Rico was never intended to build a sustainable economy, but rather to expand markets and profit potential for the U.S.

Because the trickle-down logic of Operation Bootstrap was directed towards filling the coffers of U.S. investors rather than benefiting the people of Puerto Rico in the long-term, its successes were short-lived. In the 1990s, Governor Pedro Roselló “went on a loan binge, increasing the public debt by over ten billion dollars,” and “privatized state companies, reinforced law-and-order programs and negotiated loans for public works that benefitted major companies linked to his party.”¹² Succeeding administrations continued to rack up debt. By 2000, the tax breaks that had attracted U.S. investors and corporations to the island were reduced, leading to the closure of many factories and decreased employment and tax revenue. In an effort to compensate for this unemployment and economic decline, Puerto Rican governments increased public spending. Puerto Rico found itself in a crippling debt crisis, defaulting on its debt in 2015.¹³

This situation stems directly from Puerto Rico’s colonial status. As Saqib Bhatti and Carrie Sloan of the Action Center on Race and the Economy write in their report on the Puerto Rican Debt Crisis, “Broken Promises,” “Puerto Rico’s inability to determine its own economic policy or access financing from international organizations like the IMF have left it vulnerable to predatory Wall Street schemes.”¹⁴ In June of 2016, the U.S. Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), creating a Fiscal Control Board in charge of Puerto Rico’s finances, known as “la Junta” because of its undemocratic

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Carlos Marichal, “After the Default: A Neoliberal Debt Solution for Puerto Rico,” *NACLA*, August 18, 2015,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Saqib Bhatti and Carrie Sloan, “Broken Promises,” *Action Center on Race and the Economy*, August 2017, pp. 10

nature.¹⁵ PROMESA has implemented extreme and violent austerity measures including cutting pensions, school and university funds, minimum wage, public infrastructure and disaster readiness, and sustainable energy projects, with no elections or input from Puerto Ricans themselves.¹⁶ As a result, Puerto Ricans are experiencing extremely widespread poverty and the end of any illusion of sovereignty, with their fate once again determined by a colonial authority interested in its own profit rather than the well-being of the people.¹⁷ This neoliberal approach to debt crisis is another example of the U.S. using Puerto Rico as a test site, with debt restructuring and PROMESA acting as an experiment for bankruptcy in individual states in the U.S.¹⁸

Another experiment on the colony came in the form of public housing privatization and increased criminalization and militarization of the poor, a policy known as *Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* that acted as a model for the U.S. tough-on-crime laws of the 1990s and the War on Drugs.¹⁹ While the Puerto Rican government privatized public housing and tried to fight drug-related violence and crime, they also utilized the police and National Guard as a form of colonial militia in “one of its longest ‘peacetime’ deployments in U.S. history” to occupy spaces where poor people lived and where drug activity was suspected.²⁰ *Mano Dura* was not the first of this type of militarized, privatized tough-on-crime programs, but as LeBrón writes,

“as much as *Mano Dura* served as a policy model, it was also an expression of larger transformations that we now recognize as key components of the neoliberal common sense of our times, under which poor people of color routinely find themselves gentrified and surveilled

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Catalina de Onís et al., “Puerto Rico’s Seismic Shocks,” *NACLA*, January 15, 2020, nacla.org/news/2020/01/14/puerto-rico-earthquakes-renewable-energy; Angel López Santiago, “Decolonize the Caribbean,” *NACLA*, October 19, 2017.

¹⁷ Mark Weisbrot, “Puerto Rico’s Botched Disaster Relief, Unsustainable Debt, and Economic Failure Linked to its Colonial Status,” *Common Dreams*, June 1, 2019.

¹⁸ Bhatti and Sloane, “Broken Promises,”; Mary Williams Walsh, “Puerto Rico’s Bankruptcy Plan is Almost Done, and It Could Start a Fight,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2019.

¹⁹ LeBrón, “Puerto Rico’s War.”

²⁰ Ibid.

out of their neighborhoods with the help of police who have been trained and equipped as a domestic military.”²¹

Through the unfolding of policies like *Mano Dura* and their impact on the people of both Puerto Rico and the mainland U.S., we can understand the role that Puerto Rico has played as a disposable, second-class colonial laboratory for the imperial core, and how the social, political, economic, and physical infrastructure of the island has been weakened and systematically underdeveloped through its colonial relationship with the U.S.

As José Atilés-Osoria writes for *NACLA*:

“The colonial and neoliberal design of the state provides the conditions for the colonizer and local/global elites to profit from colonial territories, while the racialized, gendered, and impoverished colonized subjects struggle with multiple dimensions of inequality, social harm, and structural violence—including the violence of austerity.”²²

These instances of experimentation, exploitation, and externally-determined decisions about the future of Puerto Rico exemplify the capitalist colonial history and reality of Puerto Rico.

III. Capitalism

As a colony of the world capitalist hegemon, the aforementioned elements of Puerto Rico’s colonial experience are inextricably tied to the underlying structure of capitalism. As Marisol LeBrón writes, “Puerto Ricans are living through a humanitarian crisis created by colonial capitalism.”²³ Capitalism is an inherently unequal system: in order to generate the wealth of a few, there must be exploitation and extraction of the many. Puerto Rico has borne the brunt of the dark side of capitalism. As Naomi Klein writes, “for 500 uninterrupted years, the role of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the world economy has been to make other people rich,

²¹ Ibid.

²² José Atilés-Osoria, “The Anti-Corruption Code for the New Puerto Rico,” *NACLA*, May 7, 2019.

²³ Marisol LeBrón, “Puerto Rico, Colonialism, and the U.S. Carceral State,” *Modern American History*, 2019, 169.

whether by extracting cheap labor or cheap resources or by being a captive market for imported food and fuel.”²⁴

The specific role of Puerto Rico in the world capitalist system as a site of exploitation has long been shaped by its position as a tax haven for wealthy U.S. citizens, with local laws like Act 20 and Act 22 of the federal tax code allowing a 4% corporate tax rate, zero capital gains tax, and zero federal income tax on any income they earn in Puerto Rico -- none of which is available to Puerto Rican residents.²⁵ These laws, which were passed in 2012, lend yet another meaning to Klein’s concept of “disaster capitalism,” or capitalizing on the chaos and desperation of post-disaster/crisis situations to implement neoliberal measures like privatization of public services, austerity, dispossession and other forms of exploitation and deepening of wealth inequality, a “shock doctrine” that hits people when collective trauma is too severe to allow for effective resistance.²⁶ In this sense, the tax breaks created by the Puerto Rican government were a way to rescue the debt-mired Puerto Rican economy, and the wealthy U.S. investors utilizing these selective loopholes to better hoard their money are the disaster capitalists. Post-María, with the island desperate to attract capital and assure investors that business is secure in Puerto Rico, disaster capitalists are fueled both by the hurricane and the economic crisis. As Klein describes in depth in her book *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*, a new wave of colonizers are arriving on the island to indulge in resort-like lifestyles while cashing in on tax breaks and establishing a home-base for cryptocurrency mining, a confusing and energy-intensive industry that essentially allows people to create their own money.²⁷

²⁴ Naomi Klein, “There’s Nothing Natural About Puerto Rico’s Disaster,” *The Intercept*, September 21, 2018.

²⁵ Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 8; Naomi Klein, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 17-19.

²⁶ Klein, “There’s Nothing Natural.”

²⁷ Klein, *The Battle*, 15-21.

This post-disaster, open-for-business Puerto Rico, presented as a resource not yet fully exploited, represents the epitome of modern capitalism. Neoliberalism, the current iteration of the world capitalist economic system, is fully-fledged in Puerto Rico. As Carlos Marichal writes, “responses to Puerto Rico’s debt crisis entail privatizations and the application of neoliberal solutions as if they were elements of a magic recipe for a most complex situation. In this case, neoliberalism and neocolonialism appear to have much in common.”²⁸ This commonality is characterized by the privatization of infrastructure like energy and public housing, austerity in the public sphere to finance private debt, and seeking technocratic solutions – like privatized, militarized housing complexes – to structural problems, ultimately resulting in a concentration of poor people of color into deeper pits of exploitation, poverty, displacement and discrimination.²⁹

The outcome of all this neoliberal logic is an anemic society. When Hurricane María hit, the social, political, and economic infrastructure of Puerto Rico was so systematically dismantled, the island so conscripted into its colonial position that the U.S. government utterly failed to take adequate recovery measures. Thousands of Puerto Ricans were forced to leave the island, as conditions were untenable for many, especially those with medical needs.³⁰ Of these botched recovery plans and drawn-out trauma, Klein asks, “is this all a masterful conspiracy to make sure Puerto Ricans are too desperate, distracted and despairing to resist Wall Street’s bitter economic medicine?” referring to increased austerity and attempts to lure private investors over prioritizing the needs of residents.³¹ Klein answers her own question: “I don’t believe it’s anything that coordinated. Much of this is simply what happens when you bleed the public sphere for decades, laying off competent workers and neglecting basic maintenance.”³² As Klein

²⁸ Marichal, “After the Default.”

²⁹ LeBrón, “Puerto Rico’s War.”

³⁰ Klein, *The Battle*, 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

writes, for Puerto Rican attorney and climate justice activist Elizabeth Yeampierre, the “‘biggest fear’ is that the [post-María] evacuation will be a prelude to a massive land grab. ‘What they want is our land, and they just don’t want our people in it.’”³³ The concrete upshot, whether wholly intentional or not, is a tropical paradise with much fewer people living on it, more amenable to business interests than ever.

Land sovereignty is essential for anti-capitalist resistance and cultural sustainability. For the Zapatistas, land is central to their resistance efforts, not only in protecting their resources but in reclaiming ancestral land as the centerpiece of their anti-capitalist autonomy. The Zapatistas distill the workings of capitalism into “four wheels”: exploitation, dispossession, repression, and devalorization.³⁴ Using this framework, which was developed from a Latin American understanding of capitalist colonialism, we can further understand the current reality of Puerto Rico, both pre- and post-Hurricane María, as an outcome of a violent process of capitalist domination and a nexus of history, current reality, and possibilities of the future. These four wheels are intertwined, but their expression is strikingly evident in Puerto Rico. Exploitation has come in the form of resource and labor extraction; economic, environmental, social, and political experimentation; trade restrictions; and tax breaks for outsiders. Meanwhile Puerto Rican residents pay \$3.5 billion per year in taxes yet still don’t receive adequate services, especially when it comes to disaster relief.³⁵ Dispossession occurs through the privatization of public resources, the resortification and selling-off of the island to host wealthy tourists and businesspeople causing displacement of locals, and the austerity measures that have forced many residents to flee the island for lack of resources and sustainable livelihoods.

³³ qtd. Klein, *The Battle*, 58.

³⁴ Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés and Sup Galeano, “300.” *EZLN*, August 22, 2018.

³⁵ Klein, *The Battle*, 31.

Repression is evident in Puerto Rico's lasting disenfranchisement, the imposition of the Junta, the criminalization of poverty, and the corruption present in the government. Recent issues like the intentional withholding of unused hurricane aid point to both ineptitude and callousness of the colonial Puerto Rican government and its overseer, the American state.³⁶ Exemplified by Trump's paper towel-throwing incident as a symbol of U.S. disaster relief, the devalorization of the Puerto Rican people is extremely evident in the utter absence of U.S. resources, respect, and self-governing capacities directed toward and allowed on the island, both pre- and post-María. The racism experienced by Puerto Ricans, primarily those of indigenous and Afro descent, both on the island and in the mainland U.S., and the continuous experimentation on a people shoved to the margins and deemed disposable, strengthens the neoliberal conviction that wealthy mainland Americans are worth more and have more right to the land and resources of Puerto Ricans than Puerto Ricans themselves. Such is the way of capitalism: dehumanization, individualization, and commodification, a steamroller that uproots everything in its path until there is nothing left to destroy -- unless it encounters a big enough obstacle to spur collective rerouting.

IV. Climate Change

Climate change is just the latest form of disaster to hit Puerto Rico. As Naomi Klein writes, Hurricane María was

“not just a storm, but a storm supercharged by climate change slamming headlong into a society deliberately weakened by a decade of unrelenting austerity layered on top of centuries of colonial extraction, with a relief effort overseen by a government that makes no effort to disguise its white supremacy.”³⁷

³⁶ Vanessa Romo and Adrian Florido, “Political Unrest In Puerto Rico After Discovery Of Unused Hurricane Aid.” *NPR*, January 20, 2020, www.npr.org/2020/01/20/797996503/political-unrest-in-puerto-rico-after-discovery-of-unused-hurricane-aid.

³⁷ Klein, “There's Nothing Natural.”

Again, Puerto Rico puts our world's biggest crises on display. As Klein notes, warmer oceans and higher tides are increasing the severity of so-called "natural" disasters, provoked by the capitalist economy's toxic addiction to fossil fuel extraction.³⁸ Despite Puerto Rico's high potential for renewable energy production in the solar, wind, and tidal industries, the island's energy sources are 62% petroleum, 18% natural gas, 17% coal and only 3% renewables -- adding up to 97% fossil fuel-generated energy.³⁹ These fossil fuels are mostly imported to Puerto Rico, causing high energy prices and high fossil fuel dependency.⁴⁰ Puerto Ricans have long experienced the consequences of climate change, environmental degradation, and mismanaged energy access. Drinking water has long been contaminated and frequent power outages occur on a regular basis, with severe outages lasting nearly a year after María.⁴¹

These dynamics constitute what Catalina de Onís calls "energy colonialism," an "extractivist system and discourse" that "marks certain places and peoples as disposable by importing and exporting logics and materials to dominate various energy forms, ranging from humans to hydrocarbons."⁴² Centering Puerto Rico in the discussion of energy colonialism and climate change is important because, as de Onís writes:

"(1) it makes the unsustainability of our hydrocarbon frenzy feel urgent, and (2) it evinces that energy transitions must consider the role of energy colonialism in shaping contemporary realities and how to grapple with, and ultimately uproot, relationships grounded in extractivism."⁴³

Thus the crisis of climate change lays bare the crippling injustice of Puerto Rico's status and role in the world economy, a reality created by and at the intersection of capitalism and colonialism.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Catalina de Onís, "Energy Colonialism Powers the Ongoing Unnatural Disaster in Puerto Rico." *Frontiers in Communication*, January 29, 2018.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ de Onís, "Energy Colonialism"; Klein, *The Battle*; de Onís et al., "Puerto Rico's Seismic Shocks."

⁴² de Onís, "Energy Colonialism."

⁴³ Ibid.

The crisis of climate change also points to an opportunity for reorganization, for policies and infrastructure to serve the people in a decolonial and just, collective framework.

As a Caribbean island, Puerto Rico was already vulnerable to storms and earthquakes, but the devastation wreaked by María was ultimately due to the island's centralized, privatized and unsustainable energy systems, and drawn-out austerity leaving outdated infrastructure, reduced disaster readiness and few job opportunities for locals to build community resilience.⁴⁴ Energy is transported from large fossil fuel plants (mostly coal and methane/natural gas) in the south of the island across mountains and forests to the north, all along transmission lines that are precarious and unreliable.⁴⁵ These plants, such as the Aguirre Power Complex and Applied Energy Corporation System, “are the primary sources of toxic emissions in Puerto Rico and disproportionately impact some of the poorest communities in the southeastern part of the island.”⁴⁶ This forced dependency on fossil fuels over available cheaper and more sustainable alternatives is not only unreliable and dangerous, in daily life as well as during extreme weather events, but contributes directly to the intensification of these weather events as well as the aftermath. This profit-driven dynamic is intimately tied to Puerto Rico's position as a capitalist colony: as Arturo Massol Deyá writes,

“perpetuating energy dependence is perpetuating the colony as well, keeping the island as captive consumer of a fundamental economic line item, while limiting our capacity to produce our own energy and wealth.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ de Onís et al., “Puerto Rico's Seismic Shocks”; Klein, *The Battle*; Angel López Santiago, “Decolonize the Caribbean.” *NACLA*, October 19, 2017, <https://nacla.org/news/2017/10/19/decolonize-caribbean>.

⁴⁵ Ruth Santiago, “The Necessary Transformation of the Puerto Rico Grid.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 98-101.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Arturo Massol Deyá, “Our Energy Insurrection.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 93-97.

Even when renewable energy development is proposed, it is often in a centralized, top-down colonial approach that continues to deny Puerto Rican communities control and self-determination over their energy sources and futures.⁴⁸ But other proposals are emerging, focusing on community-controlled and decentralized renewable energy grids, especially rooftop solar panels at points of consumption, in conjunction with sustainable and autonomous food and land management systems.

The necessity for these types of alternative energy structures in Puerto Rico has been made even more apparent by the severity of and damage caused by recent earthquakes. Seismic activity is common in the region, but earthquakes have also been linked to methane gas combustion, a rapidly growing industry in Puerto Rico.⁴⁹ Methane gas plants were damaged during the earthquakes and, just like during Hurricanes Irma and María, power outages and crumbling infrastructure were experienced throughout the island.⁵⁰ The precarity of Puerto Rico's centralized and fossil fuel-dependent power grid has been demonstrated over and over again, but meaningful changes have yet to be implemented. This neglect, as well as the lack of recovery resources distributed to the island by both the federal and local governments, illustrates the exacerbated experience of disaster for colonized people. As Puerto Rican scholars de Onís et al. write, "as more individuals and groups express concerns about increased build out of methane gas infrastructure, we hope the language of 'natural' will be avoided."⁵¹ "Natural," here, refers both to efforts on the part of the methane industry to portray methane as a "natural" energy source despite its many harmful effects, and to the underlying oppressive power dynamics in Puerto Rico which have long been presented as the only solution. By moving beyond the label of

⁴⁸ de Onís, "Energy Colonialism."

⁴⁹ de Onís et al., "Puerto Rico's Seismic Shocks."

⁵⁰ Daniel Whittle, "The Federal Government and PREPA Must do Better for Puerto Rico." *Environmental Defense Fund*, January 8, 2020; de Onís et al., "Puerto Rico's Seismic Shocks."

⁵¹ de Onís et al., "Puerto Rico's Seismic Shocks."

“natural” disasters, we refuse to see these events as natural and inevitable, and therefore to absolve these power holders of responsibility for imposing this long history of colonial extraction and oppression. By understanding the human and structural factors behind these crises rather than deeming them simply “natural,” we also acknowledge that moving in a new direction will not just happen naturally, but will require concerted organizing by the people on the ground in Puerto Rico.

V. Collective Organizing, Autonomy, and World-Building

The consensus among organizers and residents of Puerto Rico, as Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón write, seems to be that post-María, people must “demand more than a mere recovery, if by recovery we are to understand a return to a previous state of affairs.”⁵² That is, the injustice of the colonial basis of Puerto Rico that was fully revealed in all its dysfunction during and after Hurricane María must be used as a point of transformation, an opening to build new systems and a new world rather than patch up the old ones. This is exactly what many Puerto Ricans are doing. In the immediate aftermath of the storm and in the absence of official aid, already-established *comedores sociales*, or community cafeterias, that had provided meals for low-income college students began cooking hot meals for residents who couldn’t access food otherwise. Initially spear-headed by the Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural (CDPEC), many of the *comedores sociales* turned into Centers of Mutual Support (CAMs).⁵³ In the words of Giovanni Roberto, the director of CDPEC, the CAMs “used the ‘three donations’ model to invite people to ‘not only receive a meal but to construct something long term,’” with

⁵² Yarima Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón. *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 15.

⁵³ Juan Carlos Dávila, “A People’s Recovery: Radical Organizing in Post-Maria Puerto Rico.” *The Independent*, October 18, 2017.

each individual providing whatever materials, service, or other talents they could.⁵⁴ CAMs provided food to people in dire need of it, but always held the objective of building community, solidarity, and self-determination.⁵⁵ As such, CAMs “wanted our initiative to have as little governmental intervention as possible,” and therefore operated by volunteer labor and centered the practice of listening to the people and communities at the base.⁵⁶ Ultimately, the CAMs are raising political consciousness, strengthening social ties and establishing centers of resistance and autonomy.

Another need that was absent following Hurricane María was communication. As nearly all phone lines were down, one of the only means of communication on the island was WAPA Radio, the only network still broadcasting. Puerto Ricans from all over used the radio station to communicate with family and loved ones on and off the island, as well as to communicate desperate situations and calls for assistance.⁵⁷ Reporters at WAPA worked around the clock to get everyone’s messages on the air, sleeping at the station, volunteering their time, and constantly traveling throughout the island to check that the stations’ antennas and generators were working.⁵⁸ The reporters said they “had a strong ethical commitment to help people and report the news,” and consistently “asked hard questions that government officials couldn’t or wouldn’t answer.”⁵⁹ In this way, WAPA both provided the needs of the people and answered to them, taking on an autonomous character as another center of resistance and solidarity building.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Roberto, “CAM and Strategies for Change.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 69-72.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Sandra D. Rodríguez Cotto, “WAPA Radio: Voices Amid the Silence and Desperation.” *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, ed. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 21–37.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Journalists from the Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI) organized themselves in the midst of chaos and almost non-existent internet or power to “establish a whole new editorial agenda, which ended up focusing on two issues: the death toll and the hurricane’s impact on Puerto Rico’s colonial debt.”⁶⁰ As a result, the CPI became one of the only credible news sources for what was actually happening in Puerto Rico, especially as official reporting drastically under-reported the death toll.⁶¹ CPI became “a point of reference, providing dozens of US and international news outlets the context to improve their stories and acknowledge Puerto Rico’s systemic problems.”⁶² Other organizations like El Llamado, Brigada de Todxs, and Brigada Solidaria del Oeste organized and continue to coordinate relief efforts with aid from inside and outside of Puerto Rico, as assistance from FEMA and the U.S. government was woefully inadequate.⁶³

All of these organizations operated outside of governmental frameworks and by local residents themselves. They share a long-term goal of building community, autonomy, and localized systems that actually work for them, while raising political consciousness and empowering people to work collectively in a system that has deemed them disposable. In the short-term, they are providing for people’s basic needs in their own communities, apart from exploitative governments or NGOs. Through this process, these collectives are building a social movement, showing residents that they are capable of organizing themselves. Historically, this is how social movements become powerful, effective, and dangerous to the status quo: the Zapatistas provide health, education, and governmental services to marginalized indigenous

⁶⁰ Carla Minet, “María’s Death Toll: On the Crucial Role of Puerto Rico’s Investigative Journalists.” *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, ed. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 73-79.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ María del Mar Rosa-Rodríguez, “The Brigada de Todxs.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 61-67.

communities; the Black Panthers provided free breakfast programs, education, and safety measures to neglected Black neighborhoods.⁶⁴ If a movement can provide for people, the people no longer need their oppressive government.

This strategy continues to grow, with the potential to become even bigger, more transformational, and more revolutionary. This possibility of radical reimagining is the window of opportunity opened by Hurricane María. As Christine Nieves, co-founder of the Proyecto Apoyo Mutuo Mariana in the southeast of the island and co-director of the Asociación Recreativa y Educativa Comunal del Barrio Mariana, writes, “we have been born anew... because when all systems collapse, we have time to think who did we give this power to, and when?”⁶⁵ As CDPEC writes on their website, “the perspective From Below puts the emphasis on the necessity of development from the people ‘from below.’ We believe that the crisis is at the same time a great opportunity to do things in a different way.”⁶⁶ This language echoes that of the Zapatistas, who commit to a politics “from below and to the left” as the necessary path forward, listening to the needs of the most marginalized people and following their lead.⁶⁷ Puerto Ricans are using this moment of disaster and clarity to move towards other, more collective and more just social structures, rather than resuscitate the unjust ones that ruled their lives for centuries. Despite the centuries of violence intended to keep Puerto Ricans from their power, they are now taking it back.

One structure Puerto Ricans are reimagining according to their own needs is the energy system. Arturo Massol Deyá, co-founder of Casa Pueblo de Adjuntas, which focuses on sustainable development, education, and conservation, says of the need to radically transform the

⁶⁴ Darryl Robertson, “The Black Panther Party and the Free Breakfast for Children Program.” *AAIHS*, February 26, 2016.

⁶⁵ Christine Nieves, “Puerto Rico is Birthing a New Heart.” *Medium*, October 8, 2017.

⁶⁶ “Desde Abajo” (Barae Hirsch, Trans.), *Proyectos, CDPECPR*, www.cdpecpr.org/desde-abajo.

⁶⁷ “Sexta Declaración,” EZLN.

fossil fuel-reliant, precarious and rapidly-privatizing centralized power grid, “this re-engineering cannot consist of the substitution of one dependency with another.”⁶⁸ Rather than follow the methane gas-oriented energy transition plan of the Puerto Rican government, Massol Deyá claims that Puerto Rico needs an “energy insurrection.”⁶⁹ By this, he means that a reconfigured energy system must not only be based on renewables, especially rooftop solar panels, but that the grid must be decentralized and community-controlled. Decentralized does not necessarily mean individualized, but rather energy systems that are self-determined and managed by the people whom they serve and who produce the energy. Decentralized energy grids allow communities deciding the future and infrastructure of their own communities versus having their needs and strategies dictated to them.

Along with Casa Pueblo, many organizations are working to outfit homes with rooftop solar panels as a means of energy production at the site of consumption, allowing people to affect what is within their reach: their own homes.⁷⁰ People are doing this collectively, under the organization of groups like Coquí Solar (which led the island-wide effort to draft the community solar-oriented platform *Queremos Sol*), Iniciativa de Ecodesarrollo de Bahía de Jobos, and the National Institute for Energy and Island Sustainability, to name a few. These are all *community solar* projects, meaning they are using solar power for more than just electricity, including economic and decolonial efforts.⁷¹ Rooftop solar has many advantages, including better resilience during hurricanes and earthquakes, as well as using existing infrastructure and leaving

⁶⁸ Arturo Massol Deyá, “Our Energy Insurrection.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 93-97.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Melanie La Rosa, “Step by Powerful Step, Citizens Lead Puerto Rico into its Solar Future.” *NACLA*, September 19 2019.

other land undeveloped.⁷² According to engineering studies, “it would suffice to place solar panels on fewer than 65% of our existing roofs to generate 100% of the energy demand at peak hours where it’s needed.”⁷³ Yet the local and federal government still refuse to invest in the kind of drastic reconstruction needed in this moment of unprecedented climate change.

All of these efforts to install community solar in a decolonial, collective and autonomous fashion are being initiated and implemented by citizens themselves, mobilizing from below. This is one example of Puerto Ricans not only responding to disaster but growing from it, providing an important example of building energy sovereignty even within a colonial reality. By building out these different forms of sovereignty -- food, communication, energy -- Puerto Ricans are actively decolonizing Puerto Rico.⁷⁴ Other forms of sovereignty and solidarity are being constructed as well, such as the difficult but all-important areas of economic and political sovereignty. After 2019’s summer of protests over governmental corruption that led to the ousting of Governor Ricardo Roselló, Puerto Ricans are organizing people’s assemblies to channel the momentum of the summer’s protests into deep, collective reflection, discussion and action for Puerto Rico’s next steps.⁷⁵ The people’s assemblies “have taken different shapes, but all through an organic process where the focus is the collective,” identifying interconnected socioeconomic and political concerns such as the enormous illegal debt burden and la Junta, crumbling infrastructure, privatization of necessary utilities, and the island’s colonial status as priorities.⁷⁶ For many of the people and groups present at the assemblies, “there is a consensus... that the colonial status of Puerto Rico as at the core of the whole situation,” referring to the

⁷² Ruth Santiago, “The Necessary Transformation of the Puerto Rico Grid.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 98-101.

⁷³ Massol Deyá, “Our Energy Insurrection,” 93-97.

⁷⁴ Angel López Santiago, “Decolonize the Caribbean.” *NACLA*, October 19 2017

⁷⁵ Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez, “Puerto Rican People’s Assemblies Shift from Protest to Proposal.” *NACLA*, August 20, 2019.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

island's political and economic difficulties.⁷⁷ These people's assemblies demonstrate Puerto Ricans' agency and vision for their own future, and their willingness and capacity to think creatively and work collectively to create a decolonized reality.

On January 20, 2020, Puerto Ricans staged protests expressing anger at the government's mismanagement of disaster relief after the recent earthquakes, as well as the discovery that unused disaster supplies from Hurricane María were kept hidden from the people.⁷⁸ This demonstration exhibits that the fiery, revolutionary impulse beating in Puerto Ricans has not burned out. People are building rage and capacity, struggling together and reclaiming their homeland. This struggle is articulated in the *Manifiesto of Emergency and Hope* written by JunteGente, a coalition of organizations resisting capitalism and "fighting for a just, solidary and sustainable Puerto Rico."⁷⁹ Other resistance strategies include mobilizing the diaspora and leveraging specific diasporic knowledge, both of Puerto Rico and in solidarity with other diasporas as well.⁸⁰

The fight extends far beyond the borders of the island, both because the issues Puerto Ricans face are global and because, as CDPEC states,

"part of our decolonizing work has to connect us to the best traditions of liberation and critical thinking in the world. Our people should have the opportunity to get in touch with all kinds of training, and return to share their growth with the country."⁸¹

This language of international solidarity resonates deeply with that of the Zapatistas, who declare that they "are going to join together more with the resistance struggles against neoliberalism and for humanity...and we are going to exchange, with mutual respect, experiences, histories, ideas,

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Vanessa Romo and Adrian Florido, "Political Unrest in Puerto Rico After Discovery of Unused Hurricane Aid." *NPR*, January 20, 2020.

⁷⁹ JunteGente, "Manifiesto of Emergency and Hope." *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 112-116.

⁸⁰ López Santiago, "Decolonize the Caribbean."

⁸¹ "Rompe Insularismo" (Barae Hirsch, Trans.), *Proyectos, CDPECPR*

dreams.”⁸² Both of these movements invite global solidarity and mutual support, acknowledging that resistance to capitalism, colonialism, and climate change cannot be achieved alone, but that collectively, we can build a new world.

VI. Conclusion

It is not just that the people of Puerto Rico are extraordinarily resilient and industrious, though they are, and it is not that they *want* to take over the responsibilities of the government. Rather, Puerto Ricans are tired of being neglected and have been forced to take on these projects of collective autonomy-building out of necessity. But they are accepting the unjust burden as an opportunity for radical change in the hopes that in the future, perhaps the people can be properly supported and listened to. Puerto Rican organizers’ framework echoes the Zapatistas’ in many ways, with an emphasis on asking and listening rather than imposing, on “allowing space for the birth of leadership emerging from those at the bottom,” on “political action without excluding the spiritual from the political,” on looking to work as a collective rather than as individuals, and on recognizing that “to speak is to do” -- working in collective to generate revolutionary change requires that we speak intentionally and act accordingly.⁸³

Similar issues and similar resistance strategies are arising in different parts of the world, from Puerto Rico to Mexico and beyond. These converging approaches point to the effectiveness and necessity of mass movements from below, focusing on collective autonomy, decolonial and anti-capitalist organizing arising from global solidarity and a deep respect for the earth and its peoples. The rising up of Puerto Rico, even after centuries of destruction, reminds us that

⁸² “Sexta Declaración,” EZLN.

⁸³ Ismael “Kique” Cubero García, “Listening, The Necessary Politics: How a Social Cafeteria Came into Existence in Yabucoa.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 49-55.

“wherever there is oppression, there is resistance and struggle.”⁸⁴ Battered by the winds of hurricanes, the lash of colonial domination and the shock of earthquakes, Puerto Ricans truly are building a new world. We must all get behind them, work in solidarity to imagine and realize a different future and continue to transform our own realities.

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⁸⁴ Raquela Delgado Valentín, “Blossoming into Freedom: Autoethnography.” *Voices from Puerto Rico: Post-Hurricane María = Voces Desde Puerto Rico: Pos-huracán María*, ed. Iris Morales. (New York: Red Sugarcane Press, 2019), 56-60.

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