

Alternautas

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter



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Alternautas is a peer reviewed academic blog that publishes content related to Latin American Critical Development thinking.

It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

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CAMACHO & PATRIA ROMÁN-VELAZQUEZ

Introduction to the Special Issue: ‘The Making of Caribbean Not-so-Natural Disasters’²

Hurricanes are not a novelty in the Caribbean. However, 2017 left several shocking facts for history books regarding intensity and frequency. Two Category 4 and two Category 5 hurricanes – the strongest category on the Saffir-Simpson scale – hit the Caribbean in a month's-time. For the first time since 1899, the northern Leewards Caribbean Islands (i.e., islands starting to the East of Puerto Rico, with Dominica being the southernmost of the group) experienced three major hurricanes in three weeks: Irma, Jose and Maria (Astor, 2017). A tropical storm or a hurricane made landfall in Bahamas, Barbuda, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Saint Martin, Trinidad, Virgin Gorda, and the Yucatan peninsula. The 2017 hurricane season was also the costliest (US\$320 billion in damages), the ninth-most active (17 storms of which 10 were hurricanes), and with ten consecutive hurricane storms – the highest number since reliable records began in 1851 (Belles, 2017; McAdams et al., 2017).

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/9/7/introduction-to-the-special-issue-the-making-of-caribbean-not-so-natural-disasters> on September 7th, 2018.

Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico as a category four storm (sustained winds of 155mph), leaving the archipelago in a state of emergency. Essential services such as power, potable water and communication services collapsed (Duany, 2017). On Wednesday 20 September the lives of Puerto Ricans on the archipelago and abroad changed forever. The first response from the Puerto Rico and United States federal government was insufficient and slow (Sosa Pascual & Mazzei, 2017). Flooding did not discriminate between marginalised and affluent neighbourhoods. However, like the damage caused by Katrina in New Orleans (Werner 2017; Brand 2018), the archipelago's natural disaster uncovered the soaring levels of inequality, unequal status and commodification of disaster-related recovery for Puerto Rican residents. To varying degrees, this 'Not-So-Natural Disaster' (Lloréns et al. 2018; Seda-Irizarry and Martínez-Otero 2017) has also affected ravished Caribbean neighbours like Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands and Dominica - with their own variable 'sovereign' political arrangements and spatial and socio-economic frontiers of unequal development.

Colonialism and human-induced factors are behind the high levels of inequality, climate change and incomplete recoveries in the Caribbean region, which increase the region's vulnerability to disaster (Gahman & Thongs, 2017). The Caribbean faces tremendous risks from hurricanes due to its geographical location; however research shows how socioeconomic conditions (i.e. poverty levels and social inequality) "play a role in explaining the intensity and consequences of such phenomena. Thus, no event is strictly or exclusively natural." (López-Calva & Ortiz Juárez, 2008, pp. 1). Policy legacies of western powers' occupations still have effects on the islands' governance (Danticat, 2015). For example, Caribbeans on income poverty tend to live in disaster-prone areas. They are exposed to landslides and floods during the hurricane and see their chances reduced of receiving relief after the disaster due to accessibility limitations of relief-efforts brigades. The responses to this and other natural disasters are generally linked to colonial histories and powers that still dominate the psyche and geopolitical relationships of the region. This is evident in the response that both France and Britain had over Hurricane Irma only a couple of weeks before Maria made landfall. The 2017 hurricane season evidence the crucial

role played by grassroots organisations and organised communities providing relief efforts due to the limited or lack of government response.

The government of Puerto Rico recently stated that "the devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria creates an opportunity to redesign" the role of the government and the market (AAFAF, 2018:11). The Caribbean government is following Prince's (1920) centenary idea of portraying a disaster as a chance of permanent social change, without addressing the deep and enduring imperial conditions of colonial capitalism and exploitation (masked as savioursim) that have been wreaking havoc on the archipelago's social, financial, environmental and infrastructural systems. Jones (2009: 318) argues that major disasters "have rarely sparked significant social changes, other than to solidify the power base of elites and further immiserate the poor". This reproduction of inequality can be seen in the wake of hurricane Maria, through the attack on an already weakened and financially beleaguered public infrastructure, including its public energy and education system-- a tactic Naomi Klein (2007, 2018) has critically framed as disaster capitalism and 'the shock doctrine' in cases like post-Katrina New Orleans, post-tsunami Sri Lanka, and more recently in Puerto Rico. Referred to also as a 'doctrine of trauma' (Bonilla 2015), a unique exploitation of distress, buttressed by a selective visual economy of abandonment that heralds US intervention as indispensable (Lebrón and Arbona 2018) appears to be underway in the archipelago; where long-standing crises-- political, economic and environmental-- are being used to justify further acts of negligence and austerity. Given that the future Puerto Rico envisioned in the revised fiscal plan proposes further austerity measures, privatisations, stagnation, liberalisation and flexibilization of the labour market (AAFAF, 2018), we must ask ourselves, what type of significant social change would these post-disaster policies bring to residents? Moreover, how are alternative, citizen-led initiatives dynamically responding to these long terms and emergent scenarios?

Beyond Puerto Rico, what kind of alternative Caribbean futures are being imagined and enacted in the wake of the 2017 hurricane season, and how are these entangled with a sense of greater infrastructural, relief or racial justice-- both local and regional? This special issue addresses the disaster conditions, responses and consequences not

only in Puerto Rico but also in the impacted neighbouring islands of Barbuda, Dominica and Cuba. We expect this to be the beginning of a number of critical social research examining the Dominica, Haïti, Turks & Caicos, Virgin Islands, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, St Kitts & Nevis, St. Martin the Dominican Republic, and the rest of Caribbean countries who encounters natural and not-so-natural disasters.

We open this special issue with an article by Javier A. Arce-Nazario. Javier explores the narratives and experiences of communities without access to the public water system in post-Hurricane María. He collected data between September 2017 and January 2018 through telephone and face-to-face interviews using a combination of structured and open-ended questions. Javier argues that the residents' narratives highlight hidden instruments of agency needed to gain access to water in the aftermath of a natural disaster. These elements go beyond having access to objects, incorporating expertise, cooperation and experience with previous crises. The paper presents narratives that counter official assessments of water use and water systems, showing that people appreciate water for reasons beyond chemical water quality. Community managed groundwater (e.g. wells), and surface water systems (e.g. streams and springs) have demonstrated to be alternative water sources for rural communities without access to the large public water system. Javier ends his essay by arguing that for effective disaster relief, policymakers need to listen more frequently and carefully to Puerto Rico's people, landscapes and history.

The second article by Oscar Webber uncovers the role played by the plantation agriculture in enhancing hurricane vulnerability in the British Caribbean. He argues that historians are suited to examine the historical roots of individuals' vulnerability which are made evident after nature-induced hazards although they are constructed over time. Comparing the 1831 hurricane in Barbados and the 1834 hurricane in Dominica, Oscar exposes the role played by plantations in the aggravation of hurricane vulnerability. The article shows that the more expansive plantation agriculture of Barbados exposed its inhabitants to far greater human, economic and environmental losses than in Dominica. For example, deforestation had serious implications for the cohesion of the Barbadian soils, causing landslides and serious threats to Barbados' inhabitants. While the plantation did not increase the risk of

epiphenomenal hazards in both Caribbean islands, the marginalisation of space and energy directed towards growing subsistence crops prolonged the recovery process and the starvation caused by the natural disasters. Oscar concludes with a reflection and a proposal to further research on the acceptable limits to development and the priorities of governments in the Caribbean.

The third article by César J. Pérez-Lizasuain argues that Puerto Rico's historic territorial-colonial status and the 'degenerative evolution' of this core political arrangement - alongside the introduction of neoliberal rationalities - created the post-Maria environment we are witnessing now, where highly mediated individual neoliberal subjects of resilience are held responsible for overcoming what are, in fact, long-term structural vulnerabilities. This stands in stark contrast to the alternative self-led community initiatives and forms of sociability (*autogestión comunitaria*) that have been emerging throughout the archipelago and which the author frames as an emancipatory politics of radical autonomy, characterised by multiple sovereignties, which challenges the country's dominant neoliberal, colonial context.

In the fourth article, Robert Coates takes Hurricane Irma as a case study to argue that Cuba's relief efforts and strategies to mitigate risk and limit damage deserve attention beyond political polemics. In a provocative article, Coates seeks to recast theories of Cuban exceptionalism to understand strategies of resilience by the Cuban government and people, and thus he offers key insights into Caribbean disasters and vulnerability as a whole. He invites the reader to think about the lessons that could be extracted from a series of successful strategies based around preparedness and trust. Coates argues that trust networks in the context of hazard exposure work best when political resolve and societal trust and resilience nurture each other.

The fifth article by Lily Bui discusses the disagreements and challenges concerning Puerto Rico's rewiring process after Hurricane Maria, now that the country's government has announced its intentions to have PREPA, the public power utility, privatised. In trying to find solutions that go beyond the public-private dichotomy, the author explores the conditions under which Puerto Rico is currently contemplating the alternatives for building a 'sustainable' energy regime. It

accurately introduces these aspects as narratives employed in an economic and political context, and subsequently, the tensions amongst competing forces to spearhead energy transformation. The author notices how renewable energy alternatives are predominately proposed by community-based initiatives, local scientists, and other groups at the grassroots level. However, the lack of democratic capacity and political support, have stopped efforts to materialise these initiatives. For Bui, it is indispensable to develop a clear vision of the archipelago's energy future, one that can be negotiated, designed and implemented by as many stakeholders as possible.

In the sixth article, Fernando Tormos contextualises the Puerto Rican Left in relation to the archipelago's political economy, identifies the forces in the Puerto Rican Left, reviews their differences and recent history, and presents a brief analysis of their political influence in Puerto Rican and US politics. Fernando argues that Hurricane Maria exacerbated the ongoing fiscal and humanitarian crisis, but also made evident the role played by the Puerto Rican left, socialists, environmentalists and youth activists groups in the reconstruction and relief process. Moreover, he argues that while left-wing parties have not been effective in the electoral game, grassroots organisations and left-wing forces are building power from below - in the streets and the traditionally marginalised communities. The article also highlights how the hurricane opened the door for the actual government to privatise public corporations and the education system, and to implement a set of neoliberal policies (e.g., labour reforms). Fernando concludes with a reflection on the path forward of the left in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

Sarah Molinari reviews in the seventh essay the latest book by Naomi Klein entitled 'The Battle for Paradise. Puerto Rico takes on the Disaster Capitalists'. Sarah argues that Puerto Rico is facing an unprecedented conjuncture of an ongoing selective austerity regime and large-scale hurricane recovery. This review discusses Naomi Klein's *The Battle for Paradise* (2018) and how in the wake of a social disaster, different groups struggle over opposing visions for Puerto Rico's future. Klein builds on her "shock doctrine" analysis to discuss Puerto Rico's layered "doses" of shock politics as rooted in the trauma Puerto Ricans experienced pre-Maria throughout the

economic crisis. Using vivid case examples of existing alternatives to disaster capitalism throughout the archipelago, Klein gestures to what a "just recovery" might look-like.

Finally, the special issue ends up with a Poem by Celeste Ramos, a London-based writer of fiction, poetry, short film and essays from New York City. In her poem 'the danger of sighing while looking up', Celeste narrates her personal experience of suffering before and after the Caribbean was being devastated by Hurricane Maria. The emotions described in the poem resemble those felt by a large part of the Caribbean diaspora: lack of news from family members in the islands, the repetition of news on Youtube, and the unanswered messages in social media. Celeste equates 'watching' with feeling guilty; waiting for news and watching the news.

The pieces in this special issue evidence the making of not-so-natural disasters in the Caribbean and propose alternative scenarios for resilient recovery. Alternative community organisations and grassroots movements demonstrated to be complementary actors to the limited and slow state- of market-relief response. The historical prioritization of Caribbean government towards perpetual economic growth in their development agendas, evidence the marginalization of space in the region. A space that could be used to grow subsistence crops, which is not only essential to mitigate starvation after a natural disaster but reduces the dependency on food imports. The hurricanes also demonstrated to be an opportunity for implementing neoliberal policies that previous governments were not able to be put in place due to internal resistance from interest groups or the general population. The Caribbean will continue to be a hurricane-receiving area because of its geographical situation, but as these articles argue, political, economic and social reforms can reduce the human suffering caused by the natural and not-so-natural disasters.

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JAVIER A. ARCE-NAZARIO¹

Resilience and community pride after a hurricane: counter-narratives from rural water systems in Puerto Rico²

Introduction

When Hurricane María stripped Puerto Rico of its characteristic verdant foliage, it revealed complex layers of hidden geographies. The media coverage in the United States presented the destruction through visual and textual references to developing and “third-world” landscapes (Mejil 2017; Whitley 2018; Jarvie 2018; Cedré 2018), while the accompanying headlines reminded us that its residents are “Americans” (Negrón-Muntaner 2018; DiJulio, Muñana, and Brodie 2017; Bernstein 2018; Sutter 2017). This provocative juxtaposition was supported by several photographic themes, such as residents surveying debris or floods engulfing vehicles and neighborhoods.

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/9/7/resilience-and-community-pride-after-a-hurricane-counter-narratives-from-rural-water-systems-in-puerto-rico> on September 7th, 2018.



Excerpt of an article on the “Impact Your World” section of the web site CNN.com (Hines and Dawson 2018). The text has been updated several times since September 2017, while the image was last updated in October.

The photographic narrative is generally consistent with the ways mainland American photographers have come to image Puerto Ricans in the landscape (Lloréns 2014; Cedré 2018), but surprisingly, among the iconic compositions in these photographs were some in which no damage was visible (Domonoske 2017; Gamboa and Silva 2017). These were pictures of people using water from streams and springs “where PVC pipes stick straight out of the hillsides along expressways and little roads” (Domonoske 2017). In many such images the faces photographed appear untouched by the crisis, but nonetheless there is an implicit hardship narrative in this subject that editors found particularly powerful, as illustrated by the use of the photograph in Figure [1]. Three weeks after the hurricane’s landfall, the news site CNN.com used it to replace the lead photograph of a frequently-revised article encouraging donations to relief organizations, and left it in place for the following eight months (Hines and Dawson 2018). The picture accompanies the headline “Puerto Rico still needs our

help.” The implied reason for this need is that when *Americans* are forced to resort to using potentially unsafe water collected by the methods depicted, the crisis is truly dire.

The visual narrative of an underdeveloped and hazardous waterscape has been reinforced by reports of contamination and the alarming fraction of Puerto Ricans “without access to safe water” in the months after the hurricane (Sutter 2017). In the dominant discourse, María caused a catastrophic transformation of residents’ modes of access to drinking water, so it is no surprise that budget-constrained recovery efforts focus on restoring the pre-María conditions by repairing damaged infrastructure and normalizing operations. However, the Puerto Rican waterscape and its transformation by the hurricane are both complex, and the efforts to mitigate disrupted water access and increased contamination risk should be part of water security planning that takes this complexity into account.

Most of the population in Puerto Rico receives water from systems operated by a state authority called the Puerto Rico Aqueducts and Sewers Authority, or PRASA, while a minority (2-3%) uses water from small, community-managed water systems. Updates about the status of the state water authority were reported in brief bulletins showing the fraction of PRASA customers with water service alongside other metrics of progress, such as the fraction of the total power generation capacity being distributed by the electrical power grid. The first bulletin after the hurricane reported that the water system was 44% operational, rising to over 99% in July 2018 (Government of Puerto Rico 2017). This water system statistic was widely interpreted as the fraction of residents with access to safe water (Sutter 2017).

Such interpretations by journalists understandably overlook the small fraction of residents that were not served by PRASA water systems before the hurricane. These residents consume water collected from stream, spring, or groundwater sources treated and distributed with community-managed infrastructure, so not only is the status of their water systems statistically insignificant, it is also often not seen as part of the central government’s responsibility. However, these non-PRASA communities receive disproportionate attention in spheres such as academic literature (Guerrero-

Preston et al. 2008; Jain et al. 2014; J. Arce-Nazario 2018; Alicea-Martínez and Rios 2016), environmental and rural development advocacy groups (Fedinick, Wu, and Panditharatne 2017), and reports by regulatory agencies — attention which is motivated by several factors. Non-PRASA communities are typically rural and poor, so the water service they receive is scrutinized from the perspective of social equity and environmental justice. It is assumed that non-PRASA communities exist because the Puerto Rican government lacks the resources to connect the remote communities to PRASA-managed systems. Agencies such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Puerto Rican Department of Health are especially attentive to these communities because they so frequently violate the legal standards for safe water as proscribed by the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) and other EPA regulations. Thus, academics, regulators, and advocacy groups pay attention to non-PRASA water consumers because they are seen as under-served and unnecessarily exposed to risk. Like the bottles collecting surface and spring water after the hurricane, non-PRASA systems are deemed primitive, ineffective, and unsafe (Massey 2014), and would be best repaired by replacing them with PRASA connectivity. Access to the large-scale, PRASA-managed systems has been suggested for non-PRASA consumers in order to restore environmental justice for the poorest Puerto Ricans, reduce the risks of contamination and improve the territory's EPA compliance record, and establish more technologically advanced water management infrastructure for a vulnerable population exposed to increasingly frequent extremes of precipitation.

Recently, more attention has also focused on the positive aspects of non-PRASA communities, stemming from the hidden geography of Puerto Rican waterscapes that are not captured by analyses of demographics or risks. Non-PRASA water is safer than the level of compliance with EPA regulations would suggest, because required laboratory tests to detect risky water that were designed on the mainland are poorly correlated with risk in Puerto Rico (Santiago-Rodriguez, Toranzos, and Arce-Nazario 2016). Residents served by non-PRASA water systems have been powerful agents of environmental stewardship (Arce-Nazario in press) and their communities have created unique models of natural resource governance (Arce-Nazario 2018).

Narratives of thriving non-PRASA communities and water infrastructure beckon us to understand how they work and why they persist alongside large-scale, highly technical solutions. Their experiences during Hurricane María represent important clues, and a closer look at the experiences of non-PRASA communities during the disaster could show how their diverse approaches to water management are affected during extreme climate events.

This article explores narratives of post-María experiences from non-PRASA communities. It is based on mixed-method interviews with non-PRASA community residents about conditions after the hurricane, in phone interviews conducted between September 2017 and January 2018, and in in-person interviews carried out in December 2017. The interviews, which combined both structured and open-ended questions that allowed respondents to reflect on their experiences, were collected as part of ongoing work on community water management in Puerto Rico which is equally inspired by participatory methods in geography and oral history as a tool for environmental research (O’Keeffe et al. 2016; Arce-Nazario 2007). Patterns are evident in these narratives that highlight the different experiences of consumers depending on their water source and access technology, and also highlight the contrasts that these residents drew with neighboring, PRASA-served communities. The experiences related below reveal how non-PRASA communities contribute to the overall Puerto Rican waterscape. They also illuminate issues around the discourses of sustainability and agency, development, society and technology, and colonialism.



Spaces defined by non-PRASA water systems serve multiple functions in the community, such as this gathering place in the foreground of a non-PRASA surface water collection site.

Counternarratives of community water

We have applied for help from too many different agencies and no one responds...we feel like have been forgotten.

— Phone interview with the leader of a community water system in the eastern part of Puerto Rico

Our community feels blessed because we are the only community in the area that has water...don't you see, our water comes from a spring in a cliff.

— Phone interview with the leader of a community water system in central Puerto Rico

Hardship associated with the hurricane was most strongly expressed in interviews in groundwater-served communities, such as the first of the two excerpts above, while the most optimistic perspectives were offered by those, like the second narrator, served by surface water systems, particularly springs. Surface (stream and spring) water systems usually do not require energy to distribute the water, because the water

source and the storage tank are located at a higher elevation than the community, while groundwater-served communities must pump the water from underground. When blackouts affected the entire population after the hurricane, this distinction was significant. As is evidenced in the contrast between these excerpts, the tone of the interview is clearly correlated to the kind of water system serving the respondent's community. This pattern was the same in all of the twenty-eight interviews collected.

This difference in tone, which is also notable in the narratives that follow, suggests a difference in experience that calls out for our attention especially because surface water systems are assumed to be the riskiest type of system for non-PRASA communities, and are targets for conversion to groundwater systems where PRASA service would be unfeasible. Interviews conducted before the hurricane relate that the conversion of surface water to groundwater is even encouraged by threatened lawsuits against non-PRASA community water managers. The motivation for these actions is that groundwater is more frequently in compliance with SDWA guidelines, and ground water also has a significantly lower probability of yielding positive test results in traditional tests for fecal contamination. Guerrero-Preston et al. (2008) has argued that communities that use underground water necessarily become more compliant with the law. Pressure to dismantle surface water systems might also be the result of political pressure from groups that benefit from the economic stimulus associated with the installation, maintenance, and training required to create new underground water systems. Against all this reasoning, the voices of surface water system managers and leaders are nearly unanimous in constructing a counter-narrative:

Now the community feels prouder of their system, seeing how other people had to carry water, and we had water during the event. We even set up an oasis for the surrounding PRASA communities.

— *In-person interview with a community leader in the eastern part of Puerto Rico*

The interview quoted above was conducted in a community that is notable because, as described in oral histories collected before the hurricane, it was once a PRASA-served community that elected to manage their own water system when the PRASA

service was deemed insufficient (Arce-Nazario 2018). Thus, the very existence of this non-PRASA system disrupts the idea that non-PRASA communities are the groups that are abandoned when there is not enough available technology or enough political will for the state-managed system to reach them.

The narratives of this community after the hurricane demonstrate two linked factors that make non-PRASA communities important models to consider in planning for future extreme climate scenarios. The first is resilience, even under the effects of extreme precipitation. The ecological characterization of resilience as the basic ability to withstand and recover from disaster has been expanded to incorporate a framework intimately connected to social and environmental justice, in which resilience is predicated on the human rights to the ability to learn and self-organize (Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, and McCarthy 2016). The presence of this non-PRASA community enhanced the overall resilience of the region to the hurricane's effects, as it both provided water and transferred knowledge about water management to neighboring PRASA communities that did not have water access. The second factor is agency, a closely linked concept that is also foundational in environmental justice (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991). The narrative fragment above shows that the water system's role in hurricane response imbues the community with agency and pride, a picture far removed from the common representation of non-PRASA communities as rural, isolated, and desperate for help. As another example of a system in which resilience was achieved with surface water and electricity-independent water treatment methods, the pride expressed here should be read as a powerful statement of what could be lost, beyond the actual and obvious value of water availability in a crisis, if surface water systems are routinely converted to groundwater systems when they cannot be connected to the PRASA infrastructure. The metrics used to identify risk and to assess water quality cannot ignore extremes such as the ones experienced during and after hurricane María. In these conditions, systems dependent on electricity were simply at a higher risk of not having access to potable water.

The statement that "we have been forgotten" quoted above was expressed by the leader of a community that did not have an electric generator for the groundwater

system. In the cases where an electric generator was available, the narratives were somewhat more positive. However, they document the complications and trials required to maintain the water systems, such as the difficulty in accessing diesel after the hurricane, and the fact that the most common kinds of generator found in these communities were not designed to be operated for an extensive time. The water in these types of communities often had to be rationed. Nevertheless the sense of pride and agency is still present, and the effectiveness of the human networks required to successfully manage the generators and the residents' water usage under these conditions also reveals the extent of the social capital present in these communities.

During the first days we had no water as a result of pipe ruptures and lack of diesel...now we turn on the electric plant for 4 hours which is enough to fill the tank...the fact that the community has water makes them feel very good, even though we don't have electricity, have lost the main road, and do not have communications.

— *Phone interview with the leader of a community water system in the eastern part of Puerto Rico*

We are very happy with how the community has worked together, considering that other neighboring communities don't have water...We have been providing water in gallons to neighboring communities, we never denied water to anyone...the generator is turned on from 6am-6pm and we have divided the community in two sectors, one sector gets one day and another sector another day, because the generator would get exhausted if everyone gets water the same day. But the people are very happy with my work, since I have been moving to establish the water service quickly after the hurricane. At the beginning people did not understand the magnitude of the problem and their patience was exhausted and I even got frustrated, but people finally understood the situation and we all got together to work and collect money to succeed.

— *Phone interview with the leader of a community water system in the western part of Puerto Rico*

It's been our blessing after the hurricane. It's been the greatest blessing, because now I look at other sectors, where I go to work, at how people carry water, and they carry it in a way that makes you say 'wow, we're so blessed in my community, we don't have electricity, but we have the most valuable thing.' Even if it's off one day and on the next, we have water that when you turn on the tap of the faucet in your house, it gets to you.

— *In-person interview with a community leader in central Puerto Rico*

When interviewees explain that their communities feel good, or proud, to have water in the midst of the crisis, it demonstrates a value beyond the simple necessary resource of water. There is a value to agency, which looks nothing like the helplessness reflected in headlines. Most interviews provided this sense of community pride in their resilience and in the fact that the water system is not just a system to distribute a particular chemical compound, but one that serves multiple social functions in the community (Fig [2]). For example, interviewees explained how the individuals and families involved in the management of community water systems developed the networks to reach governmental and nongovernmental agencies for help and supplies during the crisis. Non-PRASA infrastructure could also be adapted to hurricane relief: for example, the space used as a community center for issues related to the water system became the center for receiving and distributing the goods in several communities (Fig [3]). In this way, the non-PRASA waster systems were seeds of resilience that facilitated the effective distribution of resources.



Emergency relief supplies being organized by a non-PRASA system operator.

Discussion

The narratives of leaders of community water systems reveal that these can become hidden instruments of agency and structures for remembering. The systems comprise not only tanks, generators, and chemicals, but also managers' expertise, residents' habits of cooperation and coordination, physical infrastructure, and relationships with neighboring communities established in previous crises. All this allows these communities to quickly identify resilient methods for water access and quality during hurricane events.

The community choices and their experiences described here counter official

narratives which promoted technological solutions with the nominal purpose of lowering health risks and fostering development. The non-PRASA communities' apparent resistance to connecting to the larger water distribution system fits into a pattern observed by authors that deconstruct concepts of development as tool for colonialism (Escobar 2011), and also echo the field studies by Kropotkin, which noted that certain communities keep local traditions instead of accepting new models offered as if they were based on science, "but are no science at all" (Kropotkin 2012).

Of course, the generally positive experiences of the surface non-PRASA water systems should not be read as a solution for water access throughout Puerto Rico, but as a reminder that the various lenses through which we usually view this catastrophe in academic and non-academic contexts are tinted by colonial histories, hierarchies of power, modernist economies, and other biases. Individual narratives provide another view. While they seem to echo the crisis response model described by Solnit (2010), in which survivors of a crisis do not tend towards an "elite panic" which tries to preserve inequalities, but rather towards altruism and new social bonds, it is crucial not to interpret the evidence of non-PRASA communities sharing water in these terms alone. The origin for the Puerto Rican term "becoming people again," which describes this kind of humanization, is a short story about Puerto Ricans facing a power outage in New York City, "The night we became people again" (González 1972). In a very real sense, non-PRASA communities were already "people" before María struck. A new sense of solidarity was undoubtedly one part of the post-María experience across all of Puerto Rico, but the non-PRASA experience better illustrates Aldrich's (2012) observation that existing social capital has tremendous positive impact on how communities behave and adapt to crisis. The non-PRASA communities did not necessarily have to transform to create new social structures, since these communities already have a key structure that enforces interactions and collaboration, even during difficult times. Their narrated experiences of the crisis are likely to already affect decision-making at a local level, and if we do not discount or distort their stories as they filter into social and ecological research, they will also contest the prevailing policies of colonial water regulation.

More broadly, the narratives presented here and their subversion of official narratives

encourage us to look more deeply at the images and the ideas that were dominant after the hurricane event. The interactions captured on camera at the rivers and makeshift spring water distribution systems include people carrying water for neighbors, bathing each other, and reminiscing, reminding us that people appreciate water for multiple reasons that extend beyond the biophysical and engineered definitions of water quality. These images and narratives also show how accessible these alternative water sources were for families because of the geography and land tenure system of Puerto Rico. Water management policy may be one of many colonial constructions that has mischaracterized both the needs and the inherent strengths in Puerto Rican rural communities. Recovery from Puerto Rico's crises requires us to listen more carefully to its people, its landscapes, and its history.

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OSCAR WEBBER¹

The Plantation's role in enhancing hurricane vulnerability in the nineteenth-century British Caribbean²

Hurricanes are the hazard most synonymous with the Caribbean. Reflecting that, they have received the most attention from historians.³ Yet, they have tended to consider them like historians have traditionally treated disaster; as a mostly exogenous phenomena. There has been little attention paid to the role endogenous factors have played in exacerbating the potential for loss from hurricane impacts.⁴ Disasters arise when people are made vulnerable to the impacts of natural phenomena; this vulnerability is constructed over time and because of this, historians, with their

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/9/20/the-plantations-role-in-enhancing-hurricane-vulnerability-in-the-nineteenth-century-british-caribbean> on September 20th, 2018.

³ Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴ S. D. Smith, 'Storm Hazard and Slavery: The Impact of the 1831 Great Caribbean Hurricane on St Vincent', *Environment and History*, 18.1 (2012), p. 100; the United Nation's strategy for disaster reduction defines vulnerability as 'as the potential for loss (human, physical, economic, natural, or social) due to a hazardous event'. United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, *UNISDR terminology on disaster risk reduction* (Geneva, 2009).

temporal expertise, are uniquely suited to uncover its historic roots.⁵ Through a comparison of the impacts of the Barbadian hurricane of 1831 and the Dominican hurricane of 1834 this article seeks to advance the existing literature by examining the role the plantation played in exacerbating hurricane vulnerability. In revealing the significantly contrasting amount of damage these islands sustained, this article shows that, at least in this case, the more expansive plantation agriculture of Barbados exposed its habitants to far greater human, economic and environmental losses.

Through the system of slavery that built and worked the plantations, stark racial bifurcation became the fundamental pillar on which British Caribbean society was built. Historians of the British Caribbean have repeatedly shown that this system created severe material inequalities that made the African-Caribbean population vulnerable in other ways.⁶ However, because an examination of the role played by the plantation agriculture in enhancing hurricane vulnerability has remained unexamined it is the central focus of this article. Historical geographers such as Bonham Richardson have examined the environmental devastation that plantation agriculture wrought upon the Caribbean environment.⁷ However, it is the implications of that devastation (in the form of deforestation, soil erosion and the marginalisation of subsistence crops) in the context of nature-induced hazards has been little examined.⁸

Hurricanes are always accompanied by rain and strong winds which present obvious dangers to human life, but they can also trigger epiphenomenal hazards such as landslips and soil liquefaction that increase the potential for loss. The occurrence of

⁵ Greg Bankoff, 'Time is of the Essence: Disasters, Vulnerability and History', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 22:3 (2004), pp.23-42.

⁶ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1995).

⁷ Bonham C. Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992: A Regional Geography* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁸ B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*, p. 214.

such epiphenomenal hazards in the wake of hurricanes was common throughout the Caribbean. In his history of Barbados, Robert Schomburgk relates that enormously destructive landslides always followed hurricane rains.⁹ What is particularly interesting is that throughout the region, the most severe landslides appear to have occurred following hurricane impacts on islands or parts of islands where plantation agriculture was most extensive. On Jamaica in 1815 for example, severe landslides took place directly on the sugar plantations.¹⁰ Witnesses describe effects that appear representative of severe soil liquefaction; the ground on plantations ‘broke’ and swallowed buildings so quickly that they ‘threatened to bury’ their inhabitants.¹¹

The answer to why such epiphenomenal hazards were particularly common in the Caribbean lies in understanding how sugar plantations expanded in the region. Sugar requires open, level land and consequently, the creation of plantations throughout the British Caribbean began a process of land clearance and deforestation. Trees and their roots however play a key role in soil cohesion. On islands such as Barbados which was almost entirely deforested by the 1660s, contemporary observers soon saw a link emerging between the plantation and the prevalence of landslips. Naturalist Griffith Hughes observed that especially where large amounts of sugar cane were planted, the soil ‘often [ran] away’ and moved with ‘violence’ often ‘tumbling down’ in the face of the first period of extended rain it faced.¹²

The frequency of landslips meant planters built walls and weirs around their plantation to limit soil runoff. They did not however, attempt to limit the expansion

⁹ Sir Robert Hermann Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados: Comprising a Geographical and Statistical Description of the Island, a Sketch of the Historical Events Since the Settlement, and an Account of Its Geology and Natural Productions* (Frank Cass, 1848), p. 67-68.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.106.

¹¹ ‘The Late Hurricane in Jamaica: with reflections’, *Baptist Magazine*, October 31, 1815, p.106.

¹² Griffith Hughes, *The Natural History of Barbados In Ten Books*. (London: Printed for the author, 1750), pp.20-22.

of plantations nor the intensity with which they were farmed.¹³ There were individuals who not only saw the damage created by the plantation but even went as far as to link it directly to the actions of the planters. Alexander Anderson in his 1799 book *Geography and History of St. Vincent* expressed frustration about deforestation and sought to highlight the role it played screening the land (one assumes from storms).¹⁴ On St. Vincent laws were passed to prevent the clearing away of woods at the sources of the island's rivers that fed estates and ports, presumably so that their flow was not interrupted.¹⁵ These changes appear as exceptions however; by the nineteenth century, plantation agriculture had intensified to the extent that on islands such as Barbados Richard Madden observed that were it not for the application of seaweed to the island's soils, nothing would grow at all.¹⁶

It is in an anonymous eyewitness' account of the Barbadian hurricane of 1831 titled the *Account of the Fatal Hurricane* that provides the first indication that the hurricane triggered the aforementioned epiphenomenal hazards such as soil liquefaction and landslides.¹⁷ In 1831 one day after the hurricane, the author of *Account* described the state of Barbados: 'no sign of vegetation was apparent...the surface of the ground appeared as if fire had ran through the land'.¹⁸ Other eye witnesses reported seeing the hurricane-borne deluge of rain opening huge chasms in the ground which swallowed their livestock whole.¹⁹ The phenomenon of landslips that these accounts all note are not simply a natural part of the Caribbean environment, at least not on

¹³ David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change Since 1492* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 397.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁵ London. The National Archives, CO 263/4 (St. Vincent) Legislative Council; Privy Council, 'An Act to Prevent the clearing away of wood at the fountainheads of rivers running to any town or shipping place in this island or that supply estates with water', December 3, 1811.

¹⁶ Richard Robert Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies, during the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship; with Incidental Notice of the State of Society, Prospects, and Natural Resources of Jamaica and Other Islands* (Philadelphia, Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1835), p. 35.

¹⁷ Editor of the 'West Indian', *Account of the Fatal Hurricane by Which Barbados Suffered in August 1831* (Barbados: Printed for Samuel Hyde, 1831), p. 1-28.

¹⁸ Editor of the 'West Indian', p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the scale noted in these sources. Indeed, Hughes discusses the phenomena of landslips on Barbados because he felt it would surprise those unacquainted with the island, the inference being that he knew that for his European readers there was little they could compare them to. Here what we are seeing is one of a number of the disastrous side effects of plantation agriculture that became evident after the hurricane.

The evidence provided by eyewitness accounts of the Barbadian hurricane of 1831 shows a level of epiphenomenal catastrophe not experienced on other islands. The hurricane that struck Dominica in 1834 gives us a case that works, albeit not perfectly, as a nonetheless useful analogue by which to illustrate to some degree the effects that sugar plantations and the mass deforestation they occasioned had on exacerbating vulnerability to hurricanes. Of the ways in which Dominica differed from Barbados in the 1830s, what is most crucial for the purposes of this article is their differing agricultural configurations. Where Barbados very obviously focused on the cultivation of sugar, Dominica differentiated and instead focused on coffee. In his visit to Dominica, Joseph Sturge found that cane on Dominica was actually regarded as growing too 'rank and luxuriantly for the full secretion and maturation of its saccharine juices, so that it is less productive than in the dry, exhausted soils of Antigua and Barbados'.²⁰

Though the growth of coffee production on Dominica was accompanied by some level of deforestation, some of the crucial problems of soil cohesion were mitigated by the focus on coffee. Unlike sugar, coffee trees have roots that can extend up to three metres into the soil, to some degree binding the soil in place of the trees that previously occupied the area.²¹ Such is the strength of coffee roots that the tree is considerably hardier in the face of hurricane winds. On a tour of Jamaica in 1837, James Thome and Joseph Kimball noted with surprise that following the hurricane

²⁰ Joseph Sturge, *The West Indies in 1837*, p.96.

²¹ Bruce Schaffer and Peter C. Andersen, *Handbook of Environmental Physiology of Fruit Crops* (CRC Press, 1994), p. 103.

that hit the island in 1812, coffee production increased whilst sugar production decreased as the former did not suffer from the 'effects of a storm'.²²

Arguably, it is in this context that we can understand the absence of landslips in the aftermath of the 1834 Dominican hurricane. For lack of scientific records, it is true that there is no empirical measure by which to compare the relative strengths of the Barbadian and Dominican hurricanes. However, a comparative similarity between the two events is the level of destruction wrought on the plantation and public buildings. In both cases eyewitness accounts relate that public buildings, private property and the plantations were completely destroyed. On Dominica a reverend called George Clarke relayed to London that there had been near total destruction of 'dwellings, negro huts [and] buildings' (the distinction between these three is testament to the power of the hurricane as it shows that stone buildings, both single level and multilevel, along with simple huts were all knocked down).²³ It was also said that the hurricane that hit Dominica was strong enough to drive entire villages into the sea.²⁴

The other great danger brought by a hurricane besides the building-flattening winds was the level of rainfall. Again, it is impossible to make an empirical comparison between levels in 1831 and 1834, but eyewitness accounts in 1834 show that there was certainly no shortage of rain. A Mr L.A. Loubiure relates that the estate of a Mr Courche was entirely washed away by a river swollen by rains.²⁵ Indeed, the September 27th issue of the *Dominica Colonist* reflected on the fact that in the weeks prior to the hurricane the island had been subject to frequent bouts of heavy rain.

²² James Armstrong, Joseph Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A six months' tour in Antigua, Barbadoes, and Jamaica in the year 1837* (Philadelphia: the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), pp.119-120.

²³ London, The National Archives, T1/4397, Extract of a letter sent by Rev George Clarke to (recipient not given), September 20, 1834.

²⁴ London, The National Archives, CO 71/78 (Dominica) Correspondence, Original-Secretary of State: Despatches; Offices and Individuals, J. Colquhoun to Spring Rice, November 12, 1834.

²⁵ TNA, T1/4397, L.A. Loubiure to M.L. Welch, Dominica, October 1, 1834.

Even if the hurricane itself brought little rain (though the aforementioned swelling of rivers would suggest otherwise), it is clear that the ground of the island was far from dry.²⁶ Where we are therefore able to see some similarities in the strengths of the hurricanes in 1831 and 1834, there are also some important differences that strengthen the argument for sugar plantations as a factor both exacerbating vulnerability to hurricanes and generating epiphenomenal hazards.

Though as mentioned Dominica's central cash crop was coffee, the island did still have sugar plantations. The question is then why is there no record of significant landslips or otherwise significant movements in the soil surface? The answer arguably lies in the level of forest still present in Dominica in this period. In an important contrast to Barbados and the scale of its sugar plantations, J. Colquhoun makes mention of the fact that on Dominica to some degree it is the plantations themselves that are marginalised on the land. Coffee plantations were found in rocky ravines where importantly they also survived the hurricane.²⁷ Colquhoun mentions that throughout Dominica there are many patches of 'uncultivable woodland', something which stands in direct contrast to Barbados.²⁸ Barbados effectively resembled one single 'vast sugar plantation'.²⁹ Dominica was always the most forested of the islands under British Caribbean control and those visiting it often commented on the density of its tree cover and vegetation.³⁰ In *A Winter in the West Indies* Joseph Gurney describes Dominica as a 'moist island...of luxuriant fertility; and nine tenths

²⁶ The Dominica Colonist, September 27, 1834.

²⁷ TNA, T1/4397, Colquhoun letter addressed to St. James's Place, April 7, 1835.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1995), p. 52.

³⁰ Andreas Malm, 'The Final Conquest: Hurricane Maria as the latest battle in a 500 year war', *Jacobin*, <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/hurricane-maria-dominica-climate-change>>, [01/04/18].

of the soil, productive as it is by nature, are wholly unoccupied – in a state of absolute wilderness'.³¹

Consequently, unlike in Barbados in 1831 where the evidence of severe changes in the soil are clear from *The Account*, it is notable that nothing of a comparable nature appears in the reports coming from Dominica in 1834. What makes this more striking is that unlike in 1831 where there is only one single detailed eyewitness record, *The Account*, in the case of 1834 there are multiple assessments of the damage from different planters that were sent to London as evidence to attempt to boost the chance of securing Parliamentary assistance for the island.³²

It is clear that to some degree the heavy deforestation wrought on the Caribbean by plantation agriculture exacerbated the potential of hurricanes to cause epiphenomenal hazards such as landslips that, particularly in the case of Barbados in 1831, lead to greater economic, environmental and human losses. Planters on Dominica did not put forward an estimate of the damage done by the hurricane for not wanting to intrude upon the valuable time of His Majesty's ministers.³³ This is notable because planters submitted estimates of losses with regularity after nearly every nature-induced disaster. Often they tried to overestimate their losses so much so that grants of Parliamentary money had been refused to colonies previously when it was felt they had purposely inflated their losses.³⁴ In this context, one could argue then because they did not submit estimates, losses on Dominica had not been that great and they were in fact waiting to see if Parliament offered them any money.

³¹ Joseph John Gurney, *A winter in the West Indies, described in familiar letters to Henry Clay of Kentucky* (London: J. Murray, 1840), p.72.

³² TNA, T1/4397, Letter written by Colquhoun sent to Rice compiles evidence of losses given by Dominican planters, November 13, 1834.

³³ TNA, T1/4397, Extract of letter from Rosalie Estate contained within Laidlaw to Gregg, October 2, 1834.

³⁴ *Parliamentary Papers* (1831), House of Commons [197], West Indies. Copies of despatches from Barbados, St Vincent and St Lucia, relating to the late hurricane in the West Indies, p.18, (Boson to Goderich, August 18. 1831)

Indeed, on Dominica only 29 people died, nearly all of them enslaved peoples, exposed as they were to even greater vulnerability through lack of shelter.³⁵ By contrast, planters on Barbados estimated they had sustained losses amounting to £2,311,729 and that 1787 people died as a result of the hurricane, the highest proportion of which were enslaved peoples.³⁶ Colonial records do not provide the detail by which to establish a cause of death in many of these cases but the author of *The Account* makes it clear that without the natural shelter provided by forest cover many Barbadians had no recourse but to run to open ground and suffer through the night. In consequence of this many were killed by flying debris.³⁷

As well as playing a role in increasing casualties, the plantation also played a role in increasing the time it took to rebuild from hurricane impacts. On Barbados and Dominica timber was the primary construction material. Yet, despite the expense and the 'precarious footing' on which it put them, the plantation made them both entirely reliant on imports.³⁸ The scale of deforestation on Barbados in particular had made it acutely reliant on imports. However, even on Dominica where deforestation was not as an endemic as it was on Barbados the plantation still prefigured the need to import timber. Visiting the island in 1837 Henry Sturge noted that 'the island imports great quantities of timber, and numbers of cattle and horses, though valuable trees grow on every estate...if it be asked, why man does not put forth his hand and gather the good things which nature provides with such spontaneous bounty, the reply is, that there is no surplus labor to devote to such minor matters; the sugar and

³⁵ London, The National Archives, CO 71/78 (Dominica) Correspondence, Original-Secretary of State: Despatches; Offices and Individuals, J. Colquhoun, colonial agent to Earl of Aberdeen, October 1, 1834.

³⁶ London, The National Archives, CO 31/51 (Barbados) Sessional Papers. Assembly, December 20, 1831.

³⁷ Editor of the 'West Indian', p. 51-52.

³⁸ Richard Grove, 'The British Empire and the Origins of Forest Conservation in the Eastern Caribbean 1700-1800', p.164.

coffee cultivation absorb all the resources of the island'.³⁹ Even when the resources were there, the requirements of generating profit re-directed energies. In effect, development of any kind was held back by plantation agriculture.

The plantation also marginalised the space and energy directed towards growing subsistence crops, while the long-range effects of deforestation also played a role in the need to import food. In the case of Barbados, the planters were largely reliant on rations of guinea corn to feed the enslaved peoples.⁴⁰ Sourcing the majority of the food for such a large proportion of the island's population from a single source was a precarious arrangement in itself, but guinea corn brought its own issues that only compounded this vulnerability. Guinea corn was, in comparison to root vegetables, easily swept away during hurricanes. Indeed, in the wake of the 1831 hurricane, nearly all the fields of guinea corn were entirely destroyed.⁴¹ Starvation was only averted in 1831 through the import of American provisions.⁴²

On all British colonies the enslaved population were given small allotments, and in a desire for economic agency most of what was grown on this land was sold as a cash crop for the export market.⁴³ These plots became the site of frequent conflicts between planters and the enslaved over what they should plant. Enslaved peoples preferred to plant crops that would fetch higher prices at market such as plantains and other above-ground crops at risk of wind damage instead of deep root tubers such as yams.⁴⁴ The scarcity of food in the aftermath of hurricanes certainly had a corrosive effect on the relations between planters and the enslaved. In 1831, enslaved

³⁹ Joseph Sturge, *The West Indies in 1837*, p.98.

⁴⁰ Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 69.

⁴¹ Editor of the 'West Indian', p. 103.

⁴² TNA, T1/4397, Lyon to Goderich, April 17, 1832

⁴³ B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*, p. 207; Sylvia Winter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou*, 5 (1970), pp.95-102

⁴⁴ Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History*, p. 67-68.

peoples were punished and two shot when they were found by colonial authorities to be stockpiling the remnants of the guinea corn. Though it was not the site of violence after the hurricane of 1834, a similar lack of subsistence crops forced planters on Dominica to have to import food to avert starvation.⁴⁵

Through this comparison of these hurricane impacts there can be little doubt that the plantation played a significant role in increasing the vulnerability of the British Caribbean colonies in the early nineteenth century. In the case of Barbados in 1831 we can see that deforestation had serious implications for the cohesion of the island's soils. Landslips and exposure posed serious threats to the island's inhabitants where they did not to Dominica's in 1834. That said, even when the plantation did not increase the risk of epiphenomenal hazards the fact that Dominica, like Barbados, was reliant on importing food to avert starvation and timber to begin rebuilding shows the role it had in prolonging the recovery process.

Despite all of its attendant vulnerabilities, the plantation remained the centre of British Caribbean society into the late nineteenth century. The fact that the British vision for the region developed so little meant that the plantation continually exposed the region's inhabitants to increased risk. A hurricane in 1898 that hit Barbados and St. Vincent caused landslips that rendered many homeless and necessitated the rapid importation of provisions and timber.⁴⁶ This system, as unsustainable and ill-suited to the region's environment as it was, remained because it primarily benefitted a select group of people who were far removed from its consequences. Such a conclusion should cause us to reflect on present day developments in the Caribbean. The majority of the islands previously colonised by the British source the majority of their

⁴⁵ TNA, T1/4397, Extract of a letter sent by Rev George Clarke to (recipient not given), September 20, 1834.

⁴⁶ *Parliamentary Papers* (1898), House of Commons [C.9205], West Indies. Correspondence relating to the hurricane on 10th-12th, 1898, and the relief of the distress caused thereby, p.2, (Governor Moloney to Secretary of State, September 15, 1898).

revenues from tourism.⁴⁷ This is an industry that has been primarily built by investors and other actors of global capital, who are removed from the deleterious effects it is continuing to have on the region's natural environments. Furthermore, a desire to meet debt obligations through the continued expansion of this industry is deprioritising designing policies to make these islands more resilient to natural hazards.⁴⁸ Historical research on the disastrous effects the relentless drive for profit has had on the region should encourage those making contemporary policy decisions to consider what the acceptable limits to development are.⁴⁹

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⁴⁷ Matthew Louis Bishop and Anthony Payne, 'Climate Change and the Future of Caribbean Development', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 48.10 (2012), 1536-53 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2012.693166>>.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 1549.

⁴⁹ Professor Robin Mahon, "'These Fields and Hills beyond recall": Barbados and Environmental Sustainability', 11/10/2016, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_KPo2jhtTY>, [22/05/2018].

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CÉSAR J. PÉREZ-LIZASUAIN¹

Entering the Contact Zone? Between Colonialism, Neoliberal Resilience and the Possibility of Emancipatory Politics in Puerto Rico's Post-Maria²

This is not a the-Island-in-a-day bus tour. This is not a tropical utopia. This is not yoga by the beach. This is not sunbathing and cabana boy service. This is not made-in-china sarongs and beaded braids. This is not an ocean clean of history. These are not fields free from memory. This is not a land unscarred by time. This is not a people of sunshine and amnesia. This is not paradise.

Manufacturing Paradise (fragment), Ana Portnoy-Brimmer (2017)

For Boaventura de Sousa (2009) a *contact zone* is a social field in which different “*normative life worlds* meet and collide with each other.” For this author, contact zones are those areas in which ideas, knowledge, forms of power, symbolic universes

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/9/28/entering-the-contact-zone-between-colonialism-neoliberal-resilience-and-the-possibility-of-emancipatory-politics-in-puerto-ricos-post-maria>, on September 28th, 2018.

and rival social forces are in unequal conditions and, therefore, they mutually resist. In this paper, I conceptualize *contact zone*, in the context of post Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico, as a space and temporality of possible conflict and/or negotiation between social forces “in unequal power relations [...] (Sternfeld, 2017:260).” Specifically, I will argue that the linear *responses*³ to Hurricane Maria in the form of official policies, media and government discourses and social resistance conform a space and temporality specific to a *contact zone* that makes the emergence of normative sociabilities of power and resistance possible.

In what follows, I will first describe the normative life world of the colonial and neoliberal rationality. Secondly, the *contact zone* is completed through a response from below: the establishment of a sustainable alternative sociability based on what, drawing on the Zapatistas experience in Mexico (See Dussell, 2012) I call *radical autonomy* and the *paradigm of the common* (See also: Rivera Lugo, 2017; Laval & Dardot, 2015; Hardt & Negri, 2009). The interaction of those *normative life worlds* is a constitutive one, meaning that the antagonistic interaction between them challenges dominant political and cultural identities of the *puertorriqueño*.

The Normative World of Colonial and Neoliberal Rationality

Undoubtedly, the colonial and neoliberal regime in Puerto Rico precedes the scourge of Hurricane Maria on September 20, 2017. Therefore, when evaluating the “responses” that followed this atmospheric disaster, it is important to consider that the political, legal and economic base for such “answers” have been articulated from

³ The idea of response has to do with a notion of linear or progressive temporality whose logical succession of events are presented as the “natural” causes of certain social conditions. This reasoning makes use of the following narrative: “A disaster has been generated as a result of the hurricane event.” This linear temporality obviates the political, economic and biopolitical conditions existing at the moment in which the atmospheric event occurs. To be more precise, the imposition of neoliberal policies of austerity during the past 15 years, before the hurricane, have made great part of the Puerto Rican population vulnerable (See Green & Ward, 2004). The sustained winds of 150 miles per hour and the effects of Hurricane Maria have aggravated, in a decisive manner, this pre-existing condition.

a long-standing colonial-neoliberal complex in the island. I'd like to identify this complex with what I call the *degenerative evolution* of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, established in 1952.

Degenerative evolution is the biological idea that states that some species can change, over time, into more “primitive” forms. By applying the analogy of *degenerative evolution* to ELA, I mean that the material conditions that led to the creation of this regime in 1952, along with it the populist reign of the Partido Popular Democrático, have disappeared.⁴

The degeneration of ELA has led the island to reconnect with its violent and openly colonial reality that remind us the early colonial period dating from the military invasion in 1898 until the establishment of ELA in 1952 in which government officials were appointed by the Congress and President of the United States. The jurisprudence of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Sánchez Valle vs. ELA* (579 U.S. ____ 2016),⁵ and the subsequent approval of The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) by the US Congress, which has imposed a Fiscal Control Board and a Bankruptcy Court overriding the 1952 constitution, Highlight the path of this colonial degeneration. Not in vain, in *Sánchez Valle*, supra, the court, by not recognizing the fundamental right to self-determination and the validity of Puerto Rico's Constitution, has had to take hold of the Treaty of Paris, the treaty that ended the Spanish-American war in 1898, to find the original legal source of the colonial regime.

⁴ The 1930s rise of the PPD, and the 1952 Constitution was the result of previous social, legal, economic and political processes related to the implementation of the U.S. federal New Deal and its regulatory market economy policies in the island. The hope, driven by Muñoz Marín, was that the welfare state project in Puerto Rico would bring a space of greater sovereignty based on its economic promises (Ayala and Bernabe, 2007, 102).

⁵ In *Sánchez Valle* the US Supreme Court ruled that the territory of Puerto Rico is under the absolute authority of Congress so it is not recognized as a separate and autonomous sovereignty with respect to the United States.

At the same time, we have seen a kind of evolution that has taken the form of neoliberal rationality (See Brown, 2015). In 1982, in a written article published in *Foreign Affairs*, the former governor of Puerto Rico Rafael Hernández Colón expressed his opposition to the Reagan's administration proposal to create the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI).⁶ The former governor complained about the lack of competitiveness that Puerto Rico would have against other independent states because "Puerto Rico must apply U.S. economic regulations and consequently does not enjoy any of the [...] freedoms" (Hernández Colón, 1982) of free nations. But Hernández Colón closes by stating that: "The commonwealth relationship possesses sufficient constitutional flexibility to allow adjustments to be made, thus allowing Puerto Rico to become a source of stability in the region (Hernández Colón, 1982)." Hernández Colón's comments were not critiques of the CBI itself, but of his rival PNP party that supported the project proposed by the Reagan administration. This marks a decisive point: from the perspective of Hernández Colón, what ELA lacks is not necessarily legal sovereignty. Instead, what was missing within the structure of ELA was its ability to adhere to the *Washington Consensus*. He identified, very skillfully, that the *Washington Consensus* represented, as Saskia Sassen (2008) has since argued, a new form of sovereignty that is no longer to be found in the nation-state but is rather found within the market forces. For him, ELA possesses sufficient *constitutional flexibility* to adapt neoliberalism to the local conditions. And this has, in fact, become the case, as exemplified by a series of neoliberal legal reforms, the advancement of the privatization of public assets and the imposition of austerity policies; the recent (previously mentioned) jurisprudence of both the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico and the Supreme Court of the United States; and 3 the approval of PROMESA by the U.S. Congress.

This *degenerative evolution* of the island's colonial regime has deepened what Wendy Brown (2006) calls a process of *de-democratization*, which is proper to the neoliberal and neoconservative rationality. In the case of Puerto Rico, and its post-hurricane

⁶ CBI was a kind of prototype of a free trade agreement launched in 1984. CBI provided trade benefits to some Caribbean nations.

context, we can see this happening in three principal ways: through the privatization of public schools, public higher education, energy production (PREPA) and public lands; the establishment of new legal and Anti-labour regimes such as “Labor Transformation and Flexibility Act” of 2017⁷ and the well knowns Acts 20 and 22;⁸ and the conformation of authoritarian practices through the approval of “The Act for the New Government of Puerto Rico” in 2017 that was intended to amplified discretionary powers to the governor of Puerto Rico (See Atilas, 2017). These legal reforms have come to promote the emergence of the so called corporate-state (Whyte, 2014) while at the same time it has legalized practices of corruption. That has been the case of hiring schemes after the hurricane. Proof of this are the questions raised by the hiring of the company White Fish Energy, a small company in Montana with just two employees that was supposed to rebuild the electric grid on the island. The amount of the contract amounts to 300 million dollars.⁹ Currently, the contract is subject to an audit. Ultimately, then, the *degenerative evolution* of the colonial regime on the one hand, the advancement and adaption of the neoliberal rationality; and on the other hand, represents an evident regression to the most basic form and definitions of colonialism.

The mediatised neoliberal subject of resilience

My invitation to you is that we take these opportunities; here in Puerto Rico we can do very well, we ask for those resources to help boost the economy, but, above all, they will help to build a stronger, more resilient and more robust Puerto Rico.

⁷ This legislation deregulated the labor scene in Puerto Rico. Mainly, the law facilitates the dismissal of workers without just cause, reduces productivity bonuses, considerably reduces holidays (it is accumulated half a day for a whole month of work), among other provisions.

⁸ The acts established a series of incentives for the investment of foreign capital on the island.

⁹ See “Whitefish energy company halts work to restore Puerto Rico's power over unpaid bill”. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/21/whitefish-energy-company-halts-work-to-restore-puerto-ricos-power-over-unpaid-bill>

Ricardo Rosselló, Governor of Puerto Rico (Nov. 9, 2017)¹⁰

In the island, the state-corporate agenda has introduced a *governmentality* approach to our crisis: it has to do with a production and reproduction of narratives, symbols and meanings that tries to appeal to several cultural emblems of the *puertorriqueño*. In Puerto Rico we have seen the way in which important discourses on resilience and entrepreneurship have been circulating from the private and governmental sectors. This narrative comes from the biopolitical condition of the current economic and political crisis in the Island and appeals to the “common sense” that the solution to our problems resides “...in the all-encompassing framework of meanings and significations (Mavelli, 2017:497)” found in the market. Mediatic campaigns such as “Reinventarse” (reinvent yourself) from El Nuevo Día, the “Echar pa'lante” of Banco Popular, “La Isla Estrella” of the Government of Puerto Rico, among others, are examples of this narrative which seeks to create the notion that the overcoming of adversities comes from individual agencies and by reaching entrepreneurial attributes (See Martínez, 2013; Brown, 2012; Laval and Dardot, 2014).

Many of those discourses has come from mainstream media outlets in Puerto Rico and the United States. Locally, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the neoliberal discourse of resilience has been best led by the mediatic propaganda of *Puerto Rico se Levanta* (Puerto Rico Rises Up) and *Unidos por Puerto Rico* (United for Puerto Rico). The latter, more than a mere narrative for ‘unity’, has been institutionalized as a public-private partnership created for the supply of food and basic needs promoted by Puerto Rico’s first lady, Beatriz Rosselló, that has been subjected to important criticism due to inefficient management and distribution of the funds donated from abroad.

¹⁰ Gobernador Rosselló Nevares invita a reconstruir a Puerto Rico más resiliente tras el paso del huracán María. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.fortaleza.pr.gov/content/gobernador-rossell-nevares-invita-reconstruir-puerto-rico-m-s-resiliente-tras-el-paso-del>

In term of discourses, for example, last December the newspaper *El Nuevo Día* apparently wanted to show the economic “opportunity” that Hurricane Maria had represented for this entrepreneur man to “reinvent” his laundry business by applying resilience. Despite the government denial of more than a thousand deaths¹¹ related to the hurricane and the lack of power for over more than six months, it seems that for *El Nuevo Día*, “the lack of power grid and water became an opportunity for the laundry ...”.¹² In another recently published piece by *El Nuevo Día*, entitled *El duelo y el ingenio al vivir seis meses sin luz tras el huracán María*¹³ [The duel and the ingenuity to live six months without energy after Hurricane Maria], an elderly couple in the Municipality of Naranjito was presented as an example of resilience and ingenuity in the face of poverty and lack of public services in the aftermath of the disaster.

<p>Narrator: Por costumbre, despierta a las 4:00 de la mañana, abandona su cama y se ilumina con otro de sus inventos: una mecha en un frasco de aceitunas lleno gas que le sirve de lámpara. Escucha las noticias en un viejo radio que solo opera con baterías y a veces se apaga. Todavía a oscuras, calienta café en el fogón que montó utilizando cuarterones y cuatro bloques de hormigón.</p> <p>Man: “Esto me lo inventé yo. Aquí lavo los pantaloncillos; los tengo ahí colgando. Hago de todo</p>	<p>Narrator: By habit, he wakes up at 4:00 in the morning, leaves his bed and is enlightened by another of his inventions: a wick in a jar of olives full of gas that serves as a lamp. [I]n the dark, he heats coffee in the stove that he built using paddocks and four concrete blocks.</p> <p>Man: “This I invented it myself. Here I wash my underwear; I have them hanging there. I do everything here. I cook here. Today, we are going to eat sardines.”</p>
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¹¹ Since December 2017 to August 2018 the formal death toll remained at 64. Leading investigations by the New York Times and the Puerto Rican based journalist organization Centro de Periodismo Investigativo have warned of a possible scheme of concealment by the local government. , During the month of May 2018, the New England Journal of Medicine published a study stating that the total number of deaths after the passage of Hurricane Maria amounts to roughly 4,600. As recently as August 9, 2018, the Government of Puerto Rico formally raised the death toll to over 1,400.

¹² In Santiago, L. (2018). Transforma sus negocios luego del paso del huracán María. Retrieved from *El Nuevo Día*: <http://www.magacin.com/moda/1085/transforma-sus-negocios-luego-del-paso-del-huracan-maria/>

¹³ In Guzmán, B. (2018) *El duelo y el ingenio al vivir seis meses sin luz tras el huracán María*. Retrieved from *El Nuevo Día*: <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/eldueloyel ingenioalvivirseseismesesessinluztras elhuracanmaria-2408784/>

<p>aquí. Cocino aquí. Hoy lo que hay [de comer] son sardinas de lata”.</p> <p>Woman: “Nos sentimos olvidados. Pero qué vamos a hacer. Que sea lo que Dios quiera [...]. Ya uno se va acostumbrando.”</p> <p>Man: “Quizás no es tan malo.”</p>	<p>Women: “We feel forgotten. But what are we going to do. Let it be what God wants. ” “One is getting used to it.”</p> <p>Man: “Maybe it's not so bad.”</p>
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This image, that resembles Agamben’s (2003) notion of *naked life*, proposes a narrative of resilience in which this new type of citizenship must assume the conditions of vulnerability as constitutive elements of normality. The neoliberal subject of resilience is supposed to prove his “...capacity to withstand the shocks of a socio-economic order (Mavelli, 2017:491)” whether the elements of vulnerability are either caused by austerity policies or by the violent scourge of a hurricane. Moreover, this subjectivity seeks to make life, under precarious conditions, a self-sustaining one in which government assistance is not necessary or even unwanted. In their analysis of Hurricane Katrina, scholars Geoffrey Whitehall and Cedric Johnson (2011:63) assert the following:

“The vulnerability created by neoliberalism is, ironically, to be solved by the very same form of citizenship it champions. Instead of citizenship taking the form of collective well-being, neoliberal citizenship is rooted in individualizing responsibility.”

In this sense, neoliberal governmentality champions the emotion and practice of resilience through the production and reproduction of three main narratives: (1) By promoting that life without the government and public institutions is possible even in the face of an emergency (See Whitehall & Johnson, 2011); (2) By highlighting individualistic agency, and thereby maintaining unaltered and unquestioned, the historical factors and power relations that caused the state of vulnerability; and (3) These narratives tend to legitimize, as Wendy Brown (2015) reminds us in her

"Undoing the Demos", a violent process of *de-democratization*: that is, the incipient separation between demos and kratos.

The Normative Life World from Below: Community Self-Government as Resistance to Neoliberal Resilience

How, then, do we explore, question and supersede the neoliberal narrative of resilience after Hurricane Maria? For many of us the answer to this question resides in the so-called experiences of community-self government or, in the words of Mariolga Reyes-Cruz (2018), the proliferation of *múltiples soberanías* like Casa Pueblo in the Municipality of Adjuntas.

We create political sovereignty when we meet in assemblies and invent horizontal processes for decision-making, when we call ourselves to occupy the public sphere and fight for the common good, when we demand that those who aspire to represent us send with ear on the ground, obeying the people's best aspirations, to whom they are obliged to serve, because we only cede our sovereign power to promote the common good and not for the particular benefit of those with a direct line to their hearts or their pockets (Reyes-Cruz, 2018).

But, in many cases, the lense of neoliberal resilience also filters responses from below like community self-government or *autogestión comunitaria*. Chantal Mouffe (2014) argues that it is important not to lose the critical point of view in relation to the social movements that practice and proclaim autonomy; that we should not lose sight of the fact that the discourse on self-management was appropriated by post-Fordist capitalism in the 1960's, thus developing new networks of power and control over labor. For her (2014:84), it is important that these strategies of self-management do not fall into a kind of "hegemony by neutralization". That is, the way in which many of the demands raised by these movements can be appropriated and neutralized by the predominant colonial-neoliberal complex.

How then, to understand the political elements of *autogestión* in the *contact zone*? How can we spark the radical and political dimension of *autogestión comunitaria* in neoliberal Puerto Rico? Below, I introduce the Zapatistas' concept of radical autonomy to explore possible answers to these questions.

Community Self-government and Politics: A Contrast Between *Autogestión Comunitaria* and the Zapatistas' Concept of Autonomy

Autonomy for Zapatistas is the empirical institutionalization of the sociabilities performed in their *conviviality* (See Illich, 2011) and communal life. For them, the autonomous institutions of self-government, like the *Caracoles* and *Juntas de Buen Gobierno*, are only the outcome of previously established sociabilities. From a socio-legal perspective, Zapatista's autonomy is a *normative fact* (See Gurvitch, 2005) that creates a space (territory) and temporality (radical democracy) from which the "community appropriates the means of production and exchange, including land and resources, and how [they] determine the accumulation and distribution of social wealth (Rivera Lugo, 2017:124)." However, it is important to point out that radical autonomy for Zapatistas has not meant an isolation from the rest of the Mexican economic and political conflicts (Mentinis, 2006). As their name suggests, Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the Zapatistas do not abandon the national and political component in their struggle. Furthermore, in 2017 the *Congreso Nacional Indígena* (National Indigenous Congress) and the EZLN announced their decision to participate in the 2018 presidential elections having an indigenous woman, María de Jesús "Marichuy" Patricia Martínez, as their independent candidate (See Concheiro, 2017). On the contrary, the "project of autonomy [...] is not one of closure but of openness. It implies that a society calls into question its own institutions, its representation of the world, [and] its social imaginary (Mentinis, 2006:68)." Let's not forget that the EZLN struggle it is also the outcome of a *contact zone* that emerged on January 1, 1994 when two *normative life worlds* collided. One side of the zone represented by the rebellion and the *struggle for the common*; and the

other side represented by the rationality of free enterprise promoted by the entering into effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Taking Alain Badiou's (2013) concept of *affirmative-dialectics*, we could say that radical autonomy for Zapatistas have a dual quality: First, a negative one. That is, a rejection of those conditions of vulnerability that have been imposed on them for more than 500 years. This *Basta!* or rejection carries a dialectical charge that identify the antagonist agents in the *contact zone*: colonialism and neoliberalism embodied in the Mexican state or what they call *el Mal Gobierno*. On the other hand, the second dimension is rather an affirmative one. For Badiou, as for Holloway (2005), Dussel (2011) and Negri (2008), the logic of negativity is not enough. The affirmative dimension consists in the internal *nomos* or *ethos* of the social movement based on the paradigm of *the common*. Where is the common in the community? Where is the common in *radical autonomy*? Where is the common in *autogestión*?

For the Puerto Rican thinker Carlos Rivera Lugo (2017:153) the *nomos* of the common is characterized, on the one hand, by its denial of private property. On the other hand the *nomos* of the common is the empowerment of communal forms of ownership or possession, as well as of exchange and the distribution of social production. The common is inscribed as something inherent to popular sovereignty and is rooted in radical democracy or grassroots democracy (Rivera Lugo, 2017:153). The Possibility of Emancipatory Politics in Puerto Rico's Post-Maria will only occur through an antagonistic encounter between the social forces described before; that is, the colonial-neoliberal complex and the *normative life world* of the common. *Radical autonomy* comes from communities and social movements that, through *political performativities* (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013), promote alternative sociabilities capable of exceeding the normative worlds of colonialism and private property.

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ROBERT COATES¹

Cuba, Irma, and ongoing exceptionalism in the Caribbean²

Discuss the subject of Cuba, outside of its shores and with non-specialists at least, and in my experience you nearly always invite strangely emotional responses that regurgitate the intractable politics of the Cold War. For almost 60 years the US Right, fuelled by a Cuban-American lobby long identifying as exiles in the free world, sought to reinforce the embargo as well as to undermine any potentially positive achievements to which the Revolution might be found guilty. Conversely, the more traditional Left has been too eager to view any happening in Cuba through the prism of resistance to capitalist imperialism: detention or exile of the Revolution's detractors are subordinated to geopolitics, and the embargo used to excuse any deviation from upholding human rights. On both sides, considerations of Cuban people and society are almost always reduced to the surrounding regime and the problematic relationship with its nearest neighbour. When last year I delivered a lecture on Cuban disaster preparedness and response—which unpacked why the United Nations calls Cuba the world leader in risk reduction—a student called out “that’s because it’s a communist regime!” The subtext was that it should not even be on the menu for discussion, and that the lecturer was potentially a petty propagandist. Given that the Cold War ended three decades ago and that security quandaries in the Caribbean (as elsewhere) are now remarkably different—the spectre of sea level rise and climate-

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related disaster risk comes to mind—the obstinacy of traditional framings is peculiar. Thankfully, other students were more ready to grasp the topic's relevance and importance in a world characterised by increasing losses in the wake of natural hazards. Cuba proves that hurricane impact can indeed be reduced, and that hazards don't immediately have to turn into disasters. Cuba's extraordinary efforts to mitigate risk and limit damage deserve to be explored without recourse to political polemics.

In this article I review disaster risk/reduction in Cuba, particularly in light of the devastating 2017 hurricane season. The period after Irma is, for a number of reasons, an appropriate time to revisit the practices, meanings, and politics of disaster risk in this most interesting of cases. While Puerto Rico is negotiating temporary housing, an insufficient budget for critical services, and a disruptive political dispute over the post-disaster privatisation of education, the signs from Cuba are of significant recovery and business-as-usual as it enters the next hurricane season. Further intrigue is added by the fact that Raúl Castro stepped down as Cuban leader in April 2018, ending 59 years of Castro rule. The recent thaw in relations with the US under the Obama administration—and only partially refrozen by Trump—leads us to think through what the future might hold for disaster risk in a state widely considered to be in a process of opening to global influences and markets. I should add that I have as my primary target here an understanding of disaster risk rather than political ideology. Yet, as I will show, viewing the two separately proves impossible, given the clear links between societal form and top-down planning. Viewing them in tandem helps us to consider the mutually reinforcing connections between ideology, political-institutional legitimacy, and the triumph of societal organisation over not-so-natural disasters. As Cuba moves into the post-Castro era, its approach to hurricane exposure remains emphatically exceptional to what's become a sad Caribbean norm of destitution, debt, blame shifting, and global political ineptness. Clues in dealing with the presence of natural hazards going forward must surely be found in independent analysis, as far as is possible free from twentieth century ideological conjecture.

Disaster exceptionalism

In an influential article, Centeno (2004) argued that Cuba had re-joined the “misery” of a poor, unequal and dependent Latin America. “[T]he great Cuban exceptionalism in health and education may be wearing thin”, he reported, with institutional weakness giving rise to a burgeoning informal economy, and remittances accompanied by fiscal adjustments and growing racial stratification (2004: 404). This “end of exceptionalism” thesis drew on Cuba’s self-defined “special period”—the decade post-1989 that saw the island negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet support and special market access for its sugar crop. For Morris (2007) however, the low of 1993-4, when poverty hit its peak, was followed by cautious recovery and expansion based on a limited liberalisation that maintained employment, nutrition and healthcare, and which “[shielded] the most disadvantaged from the worst effects of economic crisis and transformation” (2007: 45).

Regardless of the actual reality for Cuban people on the ground, the idea of an impending end to the country’s status as regional outsider nonetheless took hold—especially when considering the steps taken towards normalization of relations with the US after December 2014 (Pérez-Stable, 2016). The missing link here, of course, was the tendency among many outside observers to view Cuban exceptionalism solely through a political lens—and in fact, entirely through its political relationship with the USA. Cuban society was at once reduced to the formal games of geopolitics, and in turn, the organisational and institutional practices that mark it out as exceptional on the ground were washed over. Centeno’s societal “misery” (2004) rested on an assumption that the fallout from Soviet collapse was a quasi-permanent condition based on political-ideological miscalculation, and which had aligned Cuba with the rest of the region. For Pérez-Stable, moves towards normalization with the US meant “ordinary Cubans may well start taking baby steps away from exceptionalism” (2016: 102). Considering hurricane risk here forcefully disrupts these narratives. How could alleged misery coexist with a bewildering lack of casualties in comparison to all Cuba’s surrounding neighbours? If Cuban society is no longer exceptional does this mean it will now experience disasters in the mode of Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico—or, dare I say it, the US mainland itself? A global era of expanding vulnerability and climatic uncertainty requires the subversion of narratives privileging formal politics.

Why not learn from the Cuban approach and implement some of its successful strategies—based around preparedness and trust—elsewhere? Could it be that denying the relevance of Cuba’s ability to limit the human and economic costs of hurricanes is also to reinforce the externalisation of nature, such that the inevitability of “natural” disaster is left to play second fiddle to the high and mighty game of political competition and liberal democratic consolidation?

Truly exceptional is that from 1996 to 2005, as Cuba was mired in economic woes, a total of only seventeen people died across eight major hurricanes (Simms and Reid, 2006). In 2005 itself—until today the most intense hurricane season ever recorded—Hurricane Dennis had the same intensity at landfall as Katrina, which it preceded, and resulted in just fifteen fatalities. Hurricane Wilma, following some six weeks after Katrina, resulted in floods extending inland for more than a kilometre along swathes of Cuba’s western coastline, and yet the country managed to evacuate 640,000 people, with only one death (Ibid.; Nimitz, 2006). And the pattern goes on: 2010’s Hurricane Sandy caused 11 deaths in Cuba, while 157 perished from the same (by then downgraded) storm in New York; and during Hurricane Matthew in 2016—which hit Cuba more forcefully than anywhere else—just four died in comparison to 47 in the US and 550 in Haiti. We must no doubt treat statistics with caution given political tendencies to massage damage according to prevalent imagery and resources, but regardless of possible deviations the message remains unequivocally the same.

For the Caribbean disasters scholar Mark Schuller (2016), the extent of the carnage during and after Hurricane Matthew in Haiti—where the southwest peninsula city of Jérémie was all but destroyed—can be attributed to three principle factors. First by a limited evacuation in advance, which was aggravated by residents doubting warnings and refusing to vacate their homes. Second because emergency aid couldn’t access the city after the hurricane hit, dependent as it was on a ruined bridge originally built to transport sugar out of the peninsula. Finally, for Schuller, the widespread destruction stemmed from the squeeze on local livelihoods and access to health and education following economic restructuring, which led to increased pressure on local forests for charcoal production and consequently vastly augmented incidence of fatal landslides at urban fringes. While people were buried alive by the hundred in Jérémie,

in contrast, 200km across the water in Santiago, Guantanamo, Baracoa and elsewhere, a million had already been evacuated from danger.

Yet it was not always that way. Pérez (2007) reports that in hurricanes in 1884 and 1866, 500 and 600 people respectively lost their lives in Havana. In 1944 this was repeated with 330 deaths and 269 collapsed buildings. Hurricane Flora, four years after the 1959 Revolution, proved to be the turning point. Some 1157 fatalities wounded both the Cuban people and their new leader. Adamant to prove—not only to himself and the Cuban people but also to the wider world at the height of the Cold War—that ideological change could bring forth security and prosperity, Castro responded with the phrase “Never again... a Revolution is a force more powerful than Nature!” (Ibid.). The significance here is that the politics of hurricane risk became integrally tied to the politics of the nation, in the sense that societal coherence and resilience grew in conjunction with the experience of hazard and the symbolic value it held for political and territorial purpose. As Pérez notes,

The hurricane insinuated itself into the larger circumstances of the Cuban condition as a variable in the formation of nation... The idea of national community in Cuba did not originate wholly out of abstract notions and sentimental attachments. Much was forged out of actual experiences, these occasions in which common experiences passed into elements of a familiar shared history (2007: 10).

The theoretical lesson for other states and regions grappling with disaster risk is not so much that you must have a revolution in the Cuban image to deal with extreme hazard exposure, but that political resolve can work in tandem with societal trust and resilience—a snowball effect of risk reduction. And as one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere, at least in economic terms, the Cuban experience demonstrates that it can also be done on a shoestring budget. As each hurricane passes, socio-environmental memory is retold and relearnt, and solidarity and organisational development practiced and experienced.

Sceptics will of course point to a specific model of governance where a machine-like one-party state enforces civil defence, early-warning systems, regimented rescue and

emergency stockpiling of resources, with a subservient population acting collectively only in the context of authority (see e.g. Aguirre, 2002, 2005). Evacuations are legally mandatory in Cuba—yet as a number of commentators note, authorities don't actually force people to vacate their homes (Nimitz, 2006; Pichler and Striessnig, 2013; Thompson and Gaviria, 2004). Given the numbers of people involved, it is in any case doubtful that government alone could coerce such major mobilisations without significant collective buy in and trust in the process. In an in-depth study—based on significant field research—Pichler and Striessnig note:

Institutions were generally valued for enabling coordinated behavior and what individuals viewed as effective practice based on a transparent repository of knowledge. Education comes into play as relationships of trust are established in long-term learning settings, in schools, training camps, and neighborhood participation over generations... government [marshaling of] material and discursive power...is rewarded with even higher levels of popular response to emergencies and postdisaster legitimacy (2013: 31).

While disaster preparedness and response in Cuba is underpinned by overall high literacy and education levels alongside universal access to healthcare—neither of which should be underestimated—specific education programmes in disaster preparedness, particularly for school children but also through community groups and annual simulation exercises, create a sense of everyone knowing the best way to prepare for a hurricane and exactly what to do when it hits. Government information campaigns are disseminated to a population that can read and understand them, and from school age upwards people learn the phases of disaster response. Dedicated community personnel, in effect community civil defence, visit residents and keep lists of more vulnerable occupants including the elderly and disabled. Unlike in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, trust at the moment the disaster occurs is augmented by the widespread perception of shelters as “safe places”, and the knowledge that looting of abandoned houses would not take place due to military patrols (Ibid.). Mass participation in clean up operations enables people to examine the damage and thus mitigate it more effectively next time around (Simms and Reid, 2006).

In this way, warning systems become the less important partner in a wider strategy to build trust in a coherent societal system for dealing with hazards. As the World Disasters Report (2005) identifies, organisation from community level upwards becomes critically important to social capacity overall, and yet must develop together with more “top down” technical and managerial solutions. Cuba is of course not immune to hurricane damage, and although efforts are made to gear agriculture towards planting and harvesting with the hurricane season in mind, infrastructure, housing and power facilities have frequently been disabled for significant periods. This is the Cuban system’s one weakness: while trust in the rules keeps you safe, after the fact there are more limited guarantees on what you may endure materially or in food and energy supply.

To Irma and beyond

The 2017 storm season brought a reported twelve deaths across the island—the most for seven years—and yet we can easily argue that there could have been many more. Irma came at a time when Cuba, and particularly the north of the island, had been suffering from a four year drought that had led to reduced water storage and also more complicated mosquito borne disease vectors post hazard impact (OCHA, 2017b). The storm passed directly over the island of Barbuda, to the north of the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, before skirting along half of Cuba’s 1000 kilometre-long northern coastline. Where many Caribbean islands were practically decimated and not fit to live on immediately after, Cuba nonetheless unleashed its preparedness routine, mobilised a mass evacuation, and weathered the storm. A week after the hurricane the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs reported that, despite water supply, power, housing, and agriculture being badly affected, 92 per cent of schools had resumed classes, albeit in disrupted conditions (OCHA, 2017a). Estimates for reconstruction ran to around US\$56m, serving some three million inhabitants (of total population 11.5 million) (Ibid.). Three months later, tourist infrastructure at Varadero was on course for reopening, and much of the agricultural damage was forecast for recovery by mid-2018 (OCHA, 2017b). Housing of course

remains the critical issue, with an ongoing chronic housing shortage exacerbated by repeated storm damage, such as significant flooding during sub-tropical storm Alberto in May 2018. Longer-term purpose built shelters remain available for the homeless, and although safe, they are basic and lack privacy, with the result that those that can do often move temporarily to family and friends elsewhere until they can repair their own homes or gain a better solution from the state. Where imported building materials are scarce and expensive, undertaking repairs to your own home can last months or years.

Post-hazard impact, the entirety of Old Havana flooded, but evacuation there had not been mandatory and this was where the majority of fatalities occurred. Rather than directly from wind, rain, landslide or flood, seven died from falling stones and collapsing construction in an area well known for poorly maintained and dangerous housing (Francis, 2017). In a crooked twist, as Francis (*ibid.*) notes, it was just hours before Irma struck that Trump signed off the embargo for another year. Economic and political isolation has left Cuba unable to purchase the supplies it needs at agreeable rates, and construction has been one of the key sectors to suffer. The unusually high death toll of twelve during Irma—significantly less than the ninety-two killed in the storm in the US—might well be reduced significantly in a more open trading regime.

This remains a key point to consider from the discussions I have outlined above. Cuba's exceptionalism, rather than being a political status maintained in the absence of a standard relationship with its closest neighbour, is in fact a societal status. This is not to say that it acts and exists independently of the political regime and international geopolitics in which it finds itself, but that it has morphed and developed according to rules and trust existing between its members. The weakening of the embargo, rather than signifying the end of exceptionalism, may have non-linear effects that are difficult to qualify in the abstract; but better access to infrastructural and building materials and technologies can surely only serve to enlarge the country's already astonishing hurricane resilience, and ensure it remains exceptional when climate adaptations elsewhere fall significantly short. After Irma and Maria, the clear contrast with the series of ruined island protectorates nearby,

with billion-dollar shell companies galore but without provision of basic needs, is a stark reminder of the relevance of history, geopolitics, government, and trust in provision of a disaster resilient future.

Cuba is certainly no political paradise, but in a region of seemingly unassailable issues with all kinds of insecurities—from environmental to economic, political and corporeal—where would you choose to live on a low or barely existent income? Risk management systems, if they're to be successful, must take education and training seriously, first and foremost, both for the technical knowledge that can be imparted but more importantly for the trust within state and society that can be generated as a result. There is no magic or autonomous social capital to inform resilience in the abstract, but there is ample evidence that trust networks function in the knowledge that wider society and its institutions will genuinely work in your best interest at a time of crisis.

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LILY BUI¹

Rewiring Puerto Rico: Power and Empowerment after Hurricane Maria²

Disasters unravel--infrastructures, institutions, societies, and assumptions. The 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season brought forth multiple storms that not only stripped trees bare and dismantled roofs, but it also caught the Caribbean and Gulf Coast unprepared for the magnitude of destruction that such storms could bring, despite the best efforts of the messengers. Nearly half a year after the last hurricane season and half a year away from the onset of the next one, stories about the damage that Hurricane Irma and Maria caused have become hauntingly familiar. The stories less often told, though, are those about the long-term recovery efforts that have inevitably followed since the seas have calmed and the winds have died down.

In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria decimated the electrical grid, leading to subsequent failure of telecommunications systems, water filtration plants, emergency services, and economic activity. Millions of people lived without power--some for days, others for weeks, and the majority for months--and were left to rewire, arms outstretched in the dark. But Puerto Rico's rewiring encompasses more than just restoring its generators, and it extends beyond the reach of transmission and distribution lines. Hurricane Maria's sobering effects on its energy sector have demanded serious reflection on behalf of policymakers, communities, NGOs, universities, and the private companies to challenge pre-hurricane energy systems, regulatory frameworks,

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ownership models, and financing mechanisms. While there is consensus that the grid infrastructure was aging and in disrepair before Hurricane Maria even hit (Koerth-Baker, 2017), and that it should be made more resilient for the future (Heister & Echenique, 2017; New York Power Authority, 2017), there is far less agreement around *how* to do it, amongst competing motivations and value systems imbricating actors within the energy stakeholder pool. The impulse to rebuild infrastructure has come in tandem with the need to attract new capital to the island, motivating the current state government to pursue a strategy to privatize the electric utility over the next year and a half (Letter to FOMB, 2018). In no simple terms, this strategy has been met with frenetic reactions, ranging from rejection to rapport.

However, in order to understand Puerto Rico's process of rewiring, one must also understand its complex (and rather circuitous) history of privatized utilities (Ayala, 2007). Further, in order to understand the restoration of the islands' power in the *electrical* sense, one must also understand the islands' constitutions of power in the *political* sense--namely, the ways in which the very processes meant to direct recovery and healing can *disempower* individuals and groups. As a doctoral researcher who studies disaster risk reduction planning on urbanized islands, I have found myself in Puerto Rico multiples times both before and after the storm, over the course of the past three years. The following article is motivated by the watershed moment that Hurricane Maria has brought across all sectors in Puerto Rico, but most visibly, energy. Here, I attempt to make sense of the dynamic and as-yet evolving social processes behind the configuration of the future of Puerto Rico's grid. Embedded within these processes is a narrative that is as much about electrons as it is about elections, charged with myriad intentions from all fronts. *Who stands to gain* and *who stands to lose* from the decisions surrounding the grid's reconstruction remains the primary, paralysing set of questions.

Privatisation: now and then

In January 2018, Governor of Puerto Rico Ricardo Rosselló proposed a privatization model for the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA):

The Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority will cease to exist as it deficiently operates today. Over the next few days the process will start, through which PREPA assets will be sold to companies who will transform the generation system into a modern, efficient, and less expensive one for the people (El Nuevo Dia, 2017).

On June 21, 2018, the governor signed a bill to officially privatize PREPA and its assets (Coto, 2018). As it stands, PREPA holds \$9 billion (USD) in debt to its bondholders (Williams-Walsh, 2017). Rosselló's plan is a direct reaction to a pre-hurricane effort to restructure the utility's debt as well as the need to repair the grid after Hurricane Maria with otherwise unavailable capital. It includes a two-pronged approach: (i) selling generation assets to private investors and offering a concession for a single private operator for transmission and distribution; and (ii) combining the three commissions that currently make up Puerto Rico's regulatory board: Puerto Rico Energy Commission (PREC), the Public Service Commission for fuel and transportation, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Board (Williams-Walsh, 2017). This means that PREPA's currently vertically integrated electric utility would be broken up, sold to, and eventually managed by various actors. In addition, instead of having a dedicated energy regulator to oversee the operations and management of the electric utility, these responsibilities would fall on a single regulator for multiple utilities. The Puerto Rico Oversight and Management Board (PROMESA)³ supports this move, indicating that privatization presents opportunities to modernize the grid, reform pensions, and renegotiate labor and contracts. PROMESA was established by a U.S. federal law to begin a process for restructuring Puerto Rico's national debt. Through PROMESA, the U.S. Congress established an appointed Fiscal Control Board to oversee the debt restructuring (Biggs et al., 2017). As I will discuss later in this article, the idea and ideology of privatization of utilities in Puerto Rico is not novel in the slightest sense. However, the pain point is this: the announcement for

³ PROMESA was established by a U.S. federal law to begin a process for restructuring Puerto Rico's national debt. Through PROMESA, the U.S. Congress established an appointed Fiscal Control Board to oversee the debt restructuring. See DeBonis, Mike (2016). "House passes Puerto Rico fiscal rescue bill ahead of July cliff". The Washington Post.

privatization seemingly came about without public hearing, participation, or much transparency beforehand (Marxuach, 2018). Not only does lack of a public process leave out key stakeholders such as PREPA's labor unions and the electric utility's customers, it also reserves the visioning for a select group of actors behind closed doors, straining attempts at cooperation (Merchant, 2018).

Being too quick to take a normative stance for or against the governor's strategy solely on the premise of privatization does not afford the space that the idea requires to take history and context into account. Looking at the wider context of the relationship between utilities and regulators elsewhere, as well as Puerto Rico's past experiments with privatization of other utilities, further enriches the story. First, regarding the relationship between the utility and its regulator, PREPA was founded in 1941 as a government-owned utility with a monopoly on electricity transmission and a near monopoly on electricity generation (PREPA, n.d.; The Economist, 2017). As a result of New Deal policies, state-managed utilities were commonplace at the time (Tugwell, 1980). However, PREPA has essentially continued to regulate itself, without an external regulating body, until 2014 when PREC was established by U.S. Congressional Act No. 57, which stated the need to adopt "a regulatory and legal framework through the creation of a robust independent entity that will ensure the transformation of the electric power system of our Island for the benefit of present and future generations" (S. No. 57-2014). Typically, public utilities commissions on the United States mainland go hand in hand with the utilities themselves (Perez-Arriaga, 2014). For example, in the State of Massachusetts, the Department of Public Utilities oversees privately-owned utilities and makes critical regulatory decisions such as long-term planning, changes in rates, and net metering. While the relationship between utilities and their regulators is not always perfect, the fundamental existence of regulators is rarely questioned. However, PREC's very recent establishment in Puerto Rico has undoubtedly introduced a player that was not previously part of the ecosystem, inevitably resulting in tension. In addition, the energy commission does not exist in a political vacuum: the president of PREC is appointed by the governor, so perception of PREC is also shaped by partisan politics (Puerto Rico Energy Commission, 2018).

There is also a precedence for the privatization of public utilities on the islands. The Puerto Rico Sewer & Aqueduct Authority (PRASA) faced financial crisis and water quality issues in the 1990s. Declaring a state of emergency, Governor Pedro Rosselló (the current governor's father) created a strategy to privatize the water utility in order to reduce the debt and deficit and increase efficiency (Cortina de Cardenas, 2011). Consecutively, two private companies purchased and managed PRASA -- French company Veolia, then Ondeo -- resulting in increased debt, deteriorating relationships between PRASA and labor unions due to mismanagement of contracts, and incidents of water pollution. The utility once again became publicly owned and managed by PRASA in 2004, offering private contracts only for construction. Similarly, in 1998, the Puerto Rican government privatized the Puerto Rico Telephone Company (PRTC), the telecommunications utility, by selling it with twin goals of reducing the debt and increasing efficiency in the growing wireless market (Navarra, 1998).

Seemingly, the privatization of PRTC diversified the market for telecommunications in Puerto Rico, and led to improved service quality (Brown & Respaut, 2017). Claro, one of the wireless networks that emerged after the privatization of PRTC, and which also has 26% of the market share, was one of the only companies with backup power after Hurricane Maria made landfall and overall had faster recovery as a network than other wireless networks. Looking at these two conflicting cases (i.e. PRASA and PRTC), one can debunk the ideology of privatization as a panacea for debt reduction and efficiency. The PRASA case demonstrates how privatization can be executed and managed poorly. At the same time, the PRTC case indicates that immediate resistance against privatization does not necessarily correlate with long-term problems, either.

The question of renewables and alternative energy futures

The push for renewable energy alternatives has been both anticipatory of and reactionary to an event like Hurricane Maria, a watershed moment for transition. While public discourse about privatization privileges debate about ownership and

regulatory models, the question of renewables (or not renewables) competes for attention in the same vein. Currently, the majority of energy generation in Puerto Rico comes from fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas, and coal), with only 4.2% of its energy generation coming from renewable sources like solar, wind, and hydroelectric energy (Energy Transition Initiative, 2018). Researchers and professors within the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system have been lobbying for “distributed rooftop photovoltaic systems, solar communities, and microgrids, combined with effective demand response programs and energy storage” to push Puerto Rico toward renewable energy alternatives since before Hurricane Maria (PaRes, 2018). To be sure, renewables do not preclude privatization but the same group of researchers and professors from the UPR hold firmly that replacement of fossil fuel-based generation, if possible, would be successful if done so in sites that are “environmentally impacted and where Puerto Rico has leverage to negotiate better agreements with private investors.” As it stands, with a mainly fossil fuel-based grid, electricity rates in Puerto Rico hover around an average of \$0.24(USD)/kWh, below the Caribbean average of \$0.33(USD)/kWh but well above the U.S. mainland average of \$0.13(USD)/kWh (Energy Transition Initiative, 2018). Those pushing for renewables believe that less dependence on fossil fuels can potentially be more cost-effective (Toussie & Dyson, 2018).

Several authors from the Professors Self-Assembled in Solidarity Resistance (PaRes) at the University of Puerto Rico, in a public written testimony to PROMESA in February 2018, proposed key ideas that might provide a path toward “sustainable and resilient electric energy infrastructure,” among them, “no penalty to grid defection” to prevent penalties that might be imposed to those who choose not to consume energy through traditional means; transition to distributed energy” through solar photovoltaic systems; and “transition to citizen-owned generation” in the form of fairly regulated policy frameworks that allow for new ways to manage, operate, and control the grid (Kantrow, 2017). Most importantly, the letter calls for the transition toward sustainable energy to be a social process that includes public acceptance, public participation, and public engagement. Given the existing anxieties about lack of transparency in the process of privatization, stakeholders in the energy sector have

created a space for dialogue. One such group that has organized opportunities to engage diverse actors around the future of energy planning in Puerto Rico is the National Institute of Island Energy and Sustainability (INESI), a “multidisciplinary and multi-directional institute of the University of Puerto Rico that seeks to insert the university community more effectively in the country’s public energy policy and in the resolution of energy and sustainability problems” (INESI, 2018). INESI has organized various fora in which university actors and policymakers discuss past and existing energy policies, as well as possible futures for the island’s grid reconstruction. The forum invites participation from actors outside of Puerto Rico as well, including researchers from universities on the U.S. mainland who specialize in energy and planning.

Off-grid energy on the island, particularly for harder-to-reach, isolated communities in the mountainous regions of Puerto Rico, has received attention after Hurricane Maria. Casa Pueblo, a community-based organization that operates as a self-supporting community center, has spearheaded solar energy initiatives both for its own facilities and for small businesses where it is located in Adjuntas. The solar panels played a significant role in post-Maria Puerto Rico, as they survived the wind and falling debris from the hurricane. Because of this, Adjuntas was one of the first places to restore power after the storm, meaning it was also able to restore critical services like health care, radio communication, and charging stations (Klein, 2018). IDEBAJO, a community-based environmental justice organization in Salinas, promotes a similar vision of solar energy futures for Puerto Rico through Coqui Solar, a project that seeks to turn Salinas into a solar-powered community by installing photovoltaic panels on the Coqui Community Center (Llorens, 2018; IDEBAJO, 2018). Casa Pueblo and Coqui Solar have been active since before the hurricane, but the storm provided a window of opportunity for raising awareness about the resilience of renewable energy sources. They are also both exemplars of community models of ownership in which the energy assets are owned and regulated by the customers and members (O’Neill-Carrillo et al., 2017). Elsewhere, proposals for community microgrid projects abound, surrounded by the rhetoric of resiliency (Wernick, 2018; Roussie & Dyson, 2018). While reflective of the ideals of public

participation and public engagement and progressive in their operationalization, these models challenge the more top-down, centralized vision of the reconstruction of the energy grid from players like PREC, PROMESA, and even PREPA. A wider discussion about how (or whether) to integrate community solar and microgrid technologies like those displayed by Casa Pueblo and Coqui Solar has not reached *crescendo*. For certain, the road ahead toward a landscape in which renewables and a privately owned electric utility can co-exist depends heavily on the ability of groups like INESI continuing to push for dialogue and critical mass both on and off-island.

Privatization is *not* necessary to achieve sustainable energy goals, but given that PREPA will inevitably become privatized by decree, Puerto Rico's energy sector must consider futures in which many renewable energy alternatives, like solar microgrids, must operate alongside a privately owned electric utility – at least for now. What must happen in tandem with planning for alternative energy resources – which initiatives like Casa Pueblo and Coqui Solar are already doing -- is the development of financing mechanisms, advocacy strategies, and diverse leadership for communities to sustain potential alternative energy resources.

Electrification of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean

In summary, Puerto Rico has had a long relationship with privatization of its utilities. This article seeks to contextualize the current discourse about privatization of PREPA and its assets within a larger history. There are cases of privatization's pitfalls as well as its successes on the island. Second, it is worth noting that there is interest in renewable energy on the island, most especially at the grassroots level. However, challenges in capacity and political support have stalled efforts to move toward more of the island's energy production being from renewable sources, despite the knowledge that renewables can be more resilient. Third, the uncertain fate of Puerto Rico's regulatory board for the island's utilities impacts how the island and its people can make decisions about its energy future.

Puerto Rico's most recent disasters have daylighted problems that long existed before the storms ever hit. However, in this critical period of recovery, the most important

thing for Puerto Rico to do is to organize – at the top and bottom – to develop a clear vision of the island’s energy future, one that can be negotiated by as many stakeholders as possible. These should include government entities, NGOs, grassroots organizations, community leadership, PREPA, private energy companies, local scientists, labor unions, universities, and more. The current state of the energy sector is highly volatile and leads to short-term decision making, reduced consensus, and high uncertainty in the market (Attar et al., 2018). It is also predicated upon key principles of the neoliberal agenda, which offer few alternatives to the inevitable privatization or capitalization of utilities. This agenda is currently being challenged by smaller communities in Puerto Rico seeking alternatives to privatization with more equitable ownership and distribution of energy resources in mind.

Beyond Puerto Rico, the future of energy in the Caribbean after the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season is entangled in similar challenges regarding infrastructure, reconstruction, and governance at local, regional, and national scales. The next hurricane season could all too easily impact the energy systems in Antigua & Barbuda, Cuba, Dominica, Haiti, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Montserrat, Turks & Caicos, the Bahamas, Guadeloupe, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Martin, the Dominican Republic, and more. Caribbean utilities are heavily reliant on diesel and have likewise struggled to create a regulatory and utility structure that will enable a transition to cleaner energy. The reliance on diesel also creates a disincentive for utilities to invest in renewables, since it would disrupt a pricing system based on fossil fuels. Many vertically-integrated Caribbean utilities do not allow for independent power producers to bid into the system (some of which include private companies), a key mechanism for integrating renewable energy resources. Community solar initiatives like the ones that have emerged in Puerto Rico point toward an energy future that deviates from older models that rely on centralized grids and perhaps offer an alternative to the Caribbean’s status quo.

Understanding what happened in Puerto Rico paints a picture of what could happen again elsewhere in the region. It is important to acknowledge, too, that more than its electrical grid is in disrepair. Similar problems of governance, financing, and equity are reproduced across various sectors as the island rebuilds, among them: housing,

forestry, tourism, healthcare, education, water, coastal management, and more. Yet, the enduring spirit of Puerto Ricans is captured by a slogan that began to circulate not long after the storm subsided: *Puerto Rico se levanta*. Puerto Rico will rise. In this critical moment of rewiring comes an opportunity to bring ideas about innovative approaches for resilience into light.

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FERNANDO TORMOS¹

The Politics of Survival in Puerto Rico: The Balance of Forces in the Wake of Hurricane María²

Puerto Rico's left-wing forces have long tried to unify, a goal that has proven difficult to reach and even harder to sustain.³ At its strongest, the Left has faced intense repression from both the United States and the island's colonial government. Yet, activists and left-wing intellectuals agree that deeper differences account for the collective inability to build unity.⁴ Historically, left-wing forces in Puerto Rico have

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/11/16/the-politics-of-survival-in-puerto-rico-the-balance-of-forces-in-the-wake-of-hurricane-mara> on November 16th, 2018.

³ This article adopts an expansive notion of the Left/Right ideological spectrum. Rather than limiting the definition of "Left" to social movement organizations engaged in activism over economic matters, this article refers to the Left as an ample network of organizations that have a history of collaborating on a range of issues, including anti-militarism, independence, labor rights, privatization of public services and institutions, civil rights, health, gender, and sexuality. The tensions among these groups do not preclude their collaboration and tendency to join in opposition to conservative policies. In the context of Puerto Rico, as in other contexts, people tend to use the concept of the Left in remarkably similar ways (see Bakker et al 2014 and Cochrane 2015).

⁴ See, for example, Noel Colón Martínez, cited in José "Ché" Paralitici's (2017, 220) *Historia de la Lucha de la Independencia de Puerto Rico*, and Carlos Pabón's essay "Después de las Elecciones: ¿Alianzas para qué? ¿Entre quiénes?" In *Polémicas: Política, Intellectuales, violencia*.

split over the national question. Pro-independence groups, arguably the largest sector, have prioritized decolonization while socialists, feminists, and environmentalists have proposed a broader anti-oppressive praxis centered on social and economic issues. Other groups, such as the *Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores*, do not see these struggles as mutually exclusive, calling for the formation of a socialist republic in Puerto Rico.⁵

Today a new wave of Leftist organizing is emerging, one free from traditional Marxist or nationalist dogmas. This new Puerto Rican Left is organizing for economic justice and against colonialism while putting a greater emphasis on gender, sexuality, and race. It aims to foster young leadership, articulate new solidarities, and revive the practice of community organizing. It is learning from the errors of the past while picking up the sediments of previous struggles.⁶ Yet, if the Left wants to remain relevant, it must collaborate with the youth, student, community, feminist, farmer, and environmental justice groups that are bringing new energy to the island. This essay contextualizes the Puerto Rican Left in relation to the island's political economy, identifies the forces in the Puerto Rican Left, reviews their differences and recent history, and presents a brief analysis of their political influence in Puerto Rican and US politics.

The Struggle Against Neoliberalism

In 2010, Luis Fortuño's conservative administration attacked the Puerto Rican public sector. The economy was in crisis, and Fortuño and his advisory council were

⁵ See the following link for more information on the aims of the *Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores*: <http://www.bandera.org/que-es-y-porque-lucha-el-mst/>

⁶ The reference to sediments from previous struggles is drawn from Colin Barker's 1995 article "'The Muck of Ages': Reflections on Proletarian Self-emancipation," in which Barker argued: "Movements do rise, peak and fall back, moving through internal crises on the way. But as they decline, and 'normality' reasserts itself, they leave 'sediments' behind." Barker's article is available at: <https://goo.gl/LkU4N1>

confident that the problem had a familiar solution — economic austerity.⁷ His government went after unions, social policies, and most violently, higher education. In response, a popular front came together in order to defeat a common enemy: Fortuño and the private interests he so faithfully represented. The island had seldom been so polarized, with neoliberal forces preparing to strike a fatal blow and opposition groups looking for ways to resist. The Puerto Rican Left aimed to build an emancipatory struggle connected to the global wave of resistance that included Occupiers, Indignados, Pingüinos, and Arab Spring activists.

Labor leaders, scholar-activists, pro-independence leaders, feminists, the Christian Left, environmentalists, lawyers, and other sectors seized the opportunity, forming a coalition of thirty-five organizations called *Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico*. They aimed to ride the momentum built by University of Puerto Rico (UPR) students while preparing for the widely anticipated neoliberal attack on public higher education.⁸ Veteran organizers saw the student movement as a model to imitate as they expanded, sustained, and escalated the *Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico* Coalition. Calls for a general strike reverberated within Coalition meetings, union halls, and intellectual circles throughout the island. The coalition demanded an end to the privatization of public goods, an end to the weakening of institutions that provide essential public services, and the preservation of cultural institutions.

⁷ Republican Puerto Rico Governor Luis Fortuño appointed an economic advisory council (CAREF) that, unsurprisingly, prescribed a cocktail of neoliberal policies within 6 days of the governor's inauguration in January of 2009. Their policy prescriptions are detailed in a report that they issued on January 8th, 2009. The report is available at: <<http://reformagubernamental.uprrp.edu/CAREF-Informe%20Fiscal.pdf>>.

⁸ See Alessandra Rosa's (2015) "Resistance Performances: (Re)constructing Spaces of Resistance and Contention in the 2010-2011 University of Puerto Rico Student Movement," José A. Laguarda Ramírez's (2016) "Struggling to Learn, Learning to Struggle: Strategy and Structure in the 2010-11 University of Puerto Rico Student Strike," and José E. García Oquendo's 2010 "Huelga Estudiantil de Abril 2010: Una Huelga en Defensa de la Educación Pública Superior" for rich accounts of the 2010-2011 UPR strikes. These are available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2956&context=etd>; https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1359/; <https://www.facebook.com/notes/garc%C3%ADa-enrique-jos%C3%A9/huelga-estudiantil-de-abril-2010-una-huelga-en-defensa-de-la-educaci%C3%B3n-p%C3%BAblica-s/424789132025/>.

The student movement showcased democratic decision-making and deliberative practices to plan direct actions, set the terms of negotiations with university administrators and government officials, and ratify the agreements made at the table. They also devoted significant efforts to recruiting new organizers for youth groups, including the Unión de Juventudes Socialistas, J-23, Juventud Hostosiana, Juventud del Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, Organización Socialista Internacional, Federación Universitaria Pro Independencia, and MASFALDA. These practices of democratic and inclusive debate — coupled with a strong organizational structure — allowed the students to occupy the UPR’s main campus for sixty-two days.

Thanks to this wave of activism, the Puerto Rican Left scored important victories during the Fortuño administration (2009–2013). Not only did students stop a system-wide tuition hike and save tuition waivers for athletes, student workers, and honor students (Tormos N.d.), but environmentalists also blocked the construction of a natural gas pipeline and the development of the North Ecological Corridor, which would have sacrificed the area’s unique biodiversity in order to build luxury resorts. Civil rights lawyers united to defeat a referendum in which the Fortuño administration tried to curtail the right to bail.

These victories were hard fought victories and left the groups that fought them experiencing exhaustion (Coalición Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico).⁹ These groups challenged policymakers that were reluctant to engage in negotiations and eager to flex their repressive capacities. During this period, the only politician from governor Fortuño’s New Progressive Party that met with students during the 2010–2011 wave of contention was the District 8 representative Antonio “Toñito” Silva, who presided the Budget Committee in the Puerto Rico House of Representatives. Despite having identified funds that could be mobilized to avoid tuition fee increases, the Fortuño administration continued to push for policies that reduced the budget for higher education and placed the burden of addressing the fiscal crisis on students. The Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate both rejected meeting with

⁹ An internal movement analysis document of the Coalition recounted the Left’s victories in 2009–2010 while recognizing the exhaustion that most coalition partners experienced.

students and decided to close off both chambers to the public so as to avoid protests inside the Capitol building. This decision drew widespread criticism from various sectors of the Puerto Rican civil society and produced one of the most violently repressive days in recent Puerto Rican history. The Puerto Rico police force used riot police to assault students and supporters, carried out illegal arrests, and lost multiple lawsuits for their aggression against activists. Students, parents, elders, women of color, and labor union leaders were shown bloodied in national and international media outlets after violent confrontations with riot police while marching at the premises of the Capitol building and while trying to deliver food and supplies to activists occupying the university. These instances of repression were part of a pattern of sustained repressive practices (Bonilla and Boglio 2010; Brusi 2011; Lebrón 2015; Lebrón 2017). The Federal Department of Justice Civil Rights Division began an investigation of the Puerto Rico Police, which found a pattern of rights violations and mandated a series of changes to the police force.¹⁰

These sectors eventually came together at a massive People's Assembly, where they organized an island-wide work stoppage and mobilized tens of thousands at marches. The movement began to resemble the campaigns that eventually drove the US military out of Vieques Island in 2003. It seemed like the stage was set for a broader emancipatory struggle, one that could transition from resistance to revolution. Unfortunately, the forces committed to continuing the colonial and neoliberal order in Puerto Rico proved to be stronger than those that fought to subvert it.

The Todo Puerto Rico for Puerto Rico Coalition only managed to coordinate actions with more radical groups like the Frente Amplio de Solidaridad y Lucha around the student struggle. Unions belonging to the Coalición Sindical, which participated in the Todo Puerto Rico for Puerto Rico Coalition, were at odds with more radical unions belonging to the Coordinadora Sindical and the umbrella group Frente Amplio de Solidaridad y Lucha. Coalición Sindical unions rejected the calls for a general strike that dominated the Left, including the Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto

¹⁰ The US Department of Justice Report on its Investigation of Puerto Rico Police Department is available at: https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2011/09/08/prpd_letter.pdf

Rico Coalition. Public sector unions feared losing their certification as sole representatives of their union members in their workplaces, given that PR Law 45 of 1998 allowed central government employees to unionize but prohibited strikes (Bonilla and Boglio 2010). The Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico Coalition's insistence on a general strike that did not have the support of a majority of union members nor massive public support, their inability to broker alliances between quarreling sectors of the labor movement, and their failure to appeal to a broader base of Leftist groups led to the eventual demise of the Coalition.

Assessing the Balance of Forces

The Puerto Rican Left has resisted a number of neoliberal attacks in the past, but the fiscal and humanitarian crisis exacerbated by Hurricane María is testing this ability. In the wake of the storm, both veteran and new activists have had to migrate or accept jobs with entities complicit in neoliberal policy making. But left-wing activism is still taking place and, in some instances, deepening its practices.

Hurricane María brought a renewed awareness of what it would take for the Left to remain relevant and impactful in Puerto Rican politics and society. In the wake of Hurricane María, socialist, environmentalist, and youth activist groups set up a network of mutual assistance centers (Centros de Apoyo Mutuo).¹¹ Beyond the urgency of first aid, food, water, and other basic supplies, solidarity brigades that ventured into the island's devastated mountainous regions quickly learned that the needs of these communities far exceeded what the government planned to deliver. In the community of Bucarabones in the municipality of Las Marías, solidarity brigades were the first groups to reach the community, two weeks after the passage of the hurricane.¹² They discovered that, after decades of government neglect, most residents in Bucarabones expected getting cut off from the rest of the island in the aftermath of Hurricane María. They found community residents sourcing water from

¹¹ Some of these groups, like the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo de Caguas, existed prior to the storm and were important brokers of relationships among the emerging groups.

¹² Interview with organizer of a Centro de Apoyo Mutuo on 1/4/18.

wells and consuming the food that they had stored to last for weeks. Solidarity brigade organizers quickly recognized that the community's needs entailed more than just basic goods. The relevance and survival of the Puerto Rican Left in the midst of this disaster, they realized, would depend on their ability to listen to and learn from these communities and address deep-rooted inequalities. While autonomous recovery efforts emerged, local and federal government officials divided their time between media appearances and scrambling to manage the disaster relief effort. Activists in the island highlighted the irony of having a governor who ran for his position as an erudite technocrat with a sophisticated plan for everything but failed to prepare for a natural disaster and follow emergency protocols already in place.

Since the storm, the farmers' and food sovereignty movements have drawn support from *Vía Campesina* and the climate justice movement to provide rapid response to frontline communities affected by the disaster. Mutual aid groups from the Puerto Rican diaspora and the Climate Justice Alliance joined local activists to get supplies to local farmers, rebuild ecosystems, and coordinate relief efforts with local and US labor unions. These groups resisted the nonprofit, corporate, and government-led network, *Unidos for Puerto Rico*, which raised millions of dollars in donations since the disaster. These groups raised questions about the allocation of the funds collected in the name of relief and argued that they had yet to reach the Puerto Rican population. They denounced government efforts to implement false solutions, such as privatizing public utilities and education, and raised public awareness about the Federally imposed Fiscal Control Board's plans to mandate fiscal austerity policies that would further strangle the already precarious living conditions of working class Puerto Ricans. Moreover, they politicized the recovery process, which produced widespread frustration, manifesting as roadblocks, picket lines, and occupations of government buildings.

On the other hand, right-wing groups have developed strong relationships with the Republican-led government in Washington and have become a powerful force within the island's major political parties: the New Progressive Party (NPP) and the Popular Democratic Party (PDP). The NPP's base includes religious fundamentalists, and its ample campaign funding comes from local capitalists. Sheltered by the darkness that

swept the island after the hurricane, the NPP exploited the crisis to side step legislative hearings, silence the opposition, introduce a religious freedom bill, grant no-bid contracts to dubious providers, and push conservative criminal justice reforms.

In January of 2018, Governor Ricardo Rosselló confirmed his intentions to continue the legacy of his father, former governor Pedro Rosselló, by selling the island's besieged power authority. A week later, he announced the privatization of the primary and secondary public school system. In April, he announced a sweeping labor reform and the closure and consolidation of a number of government agencies.

His father had tried to win public support for similar schemes by claiming that the revenue gained from privatizing public goods would fund social spending, including public employee pensions and universal health care. Instead, his administration took on expensive mega-projects, which handed lucrative contracts over to campaign donors but failed to raise the money necessary to sustain welfare programs. The government's efforts to privatize Puerto Rico's Public Power Authority (PREPA) and public education are an indicator's of the Right's current strength. The NPP has long wanted to enact these policies, but previous administrations deemed public sector unions — and the Left more generally — too strong to undertake such an attack.

The crisis that followed Hurricane María opened the door for the Rosselló administration to consolidate their plans for implementing neoliberal policies.¹³ The members of some of the island's strongest unions were caught fatigued. Power line workers, for example, experienced exhaustion, toiling around the clock to restore power while facing attacks from citizens who blame them for the government's inability to restore power. Meanwhile, many teachers worked in schools without electricity while facing the threat of school closures. Government workers had to fight

¹³ Naomi Klein's involvement in analyses of disasters and, specifically the policies that followed Hurricane María, have sparked an intense and divisive debate within the Puerto Rican intellectual and activist community. Some have recognized the value of Klein's (2018) attention to the neoliberal policymaking in the wake of disasters in the context of Puerto Rico while others argue that these observations are not new. Rather, Puerto Rican intellectuals have produced important analyses that tend to be ignored both locally and internationally.

neoliberal labor policy reforms on multiple fronts: against the Fiscal Control Board and against the local government of Ricardo Rosselló.

The privatization announcement was carefully timed. Vulture funds had been looking over the governor's shoulder, pressuring him to include the privatization of PREPA's assets, including energy generation plants, in their fiscal recovery proposal. Selling off public assets was always part of his vision — even if he never revealed it on the campaign trail. A week after the announcement, UTIER, the PREPA workers' union, issued a call for solidarity across all sectors of the Puerto Rican Left to renew their resistance to privatization. Many answered this call.

Resisting privatization efforts in Puerto Rico will require tactical diversity and innovation, transversal cooperation across different sectors of the Left, and embracing the energy of emerging groups aiming to build popular mobilizations, such as the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* and the network of mutual assistance centers. Younger generations of Leftist organizers have shed some of the old Left's baggage, but continue to grapple with the sediments of longstanding tactical divides. Recent examples of these divides were observed in the internal divisions of the *Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico* Coalition in relation to deploying the tactic of a general strike, and more recently, with the divisions between more radical blocs (e.g. *Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas*) and labor unions during the May 1st demonstrations in 2017 and 2018. While disagreements about tactics persist, younger generations of activists have not had to take sides on the extremely divisive issue of armed struggle, as those groups have mostly disbanded. Now debate centers on electoral participation, collaboration with the PDP, on mutual assistance projects, and on diversification.

The Puerto Rican Electoral Question

Pedro Albizu Campos once referred to ballot boxes as coffins designed for the burial of the Puerto Rican nation. Under his leadership, the nationalist party militarized, rejecting the electoral process. The Puerto Rico Independence Party (PIP) stepped in to provide an electoral alternative for left-wing voters. Though these two sectors have come together to resist militarism, right-wing influences on public education, the

displacement of marginalized communities, repression, and environmentally hazardous projects, the disagreement over electoral participation has persisted.

In 2016, the Obama administration worked in collaboration with a GOP-led Congress to create an unelected Fiscal Control Board with the power to impose fiscal policies in order to ensure the payment of Puerto Rico's ballooning debt. That year's elections revealed a growing discontent with the island's three main parties and with the electoral process more generally. Between 2012 and 2016, Puerto Rico experienced a remarkable 22 percent drop in electoral turnout (from 77 to 55 percent). While these numbers are still higher than turnout in the United States, Puerto Rico has historically experienced voter turnout nearing 80 percent.

The Left has yet to find ways of harnessing voters' obvious frustration. Leftists who reject the electoral process argue that participating in elections legitimizes the colonial order, while others argue that boycotting will limit the Left's ability to curtail government corruption and hold elected officials accountable. This group is further divided between those who support the PDP in order to defeat right-wing candidates and those that who support the more left-wing parties, the PIP and the Working People's Party (PPT). The first tactic handed the PDP slim victories against two recent NPP reelection bids: both Rosselló and Fortuño lost by a margin of less than .6 percent. Without the Left's support, Puerto Rico would have had uninterrupted NPP rule since 2000.

In recent elections, neither the PIP nor the PPT has passed the 3 percent threshold necessary to remain in the ballot for future elections. The pro-independence party has failed to do so since 2004, but have been able to win at large seats in the House and Senate. The PPT, which participated in elections for the first time in 2012, has never had legislative representation. Given this landscape, the Left's ability to claim electoral victory seems significantly limited.

Various voices within the Left have suggested forming a party combining the PIP and the PPT, but party leaders have yet to agree. Some argue that the Left must address its internal differences and define the purpose of these alliances before uniting (Pabón Ortega 2014). These critics only feel compelled to join a coalition focused on

building radical democracy, as opposed to one that prioritizes the question of status (Pabón Ortega 2014).

Building Power in the Streets

Despite these electoral failures, left-wing forces have shown their strength in the streets and in communities. Umbrella organizations like *Jornada Se Acabaron las Promesas* and the short-lived *Concertación Puertorriqueña en Contra de la Junta* joined culture workers like *Papel Machete* and *AgitArte* to mount a sustained campaign against the Fiscal Control Board. Feminists from growing organizations like the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* have built popular resistance to patriarchy, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism. They disrupted two of the island's main highways on two separate occasions, mobilized hundreds for a feminist assembly, formed a mutual assistance center, and forced the resignation and prosecution of Guaynabo mayor Hector O'Neill for sexual assault against a municipal employee.

An amalgam of Leftist organizations led work stoppages while thousands flooded Puerto Rico's financial district in Hato Rey during the May Day demonstrations in 2017 and 2018. The farmer's movement has grown dramatically in the past decade, with a growing number of independent and sustainable farming projects underway. Activist leaders have joined the Climate Justice movement at the United Nations climate change negotiations and have strengthened their ties with the anti-capitalist farmer's movement *Vía Campesina*. The environmental justice movement has successfully mobilized against pipeline projects and used the media attention following Hurricane María to call for a just energy transition.

The network of mutual assistance centers throughout the island has breathed new life into the Left. They are working to meet the needs of isolated communities that the state, local, federal governments have ignored, moving the people from resilience to resistance. While some have warned that the Left should also pressure the state to meet its responsibilities to the population (Pérez Soler 2017), mutual assistance center organizers have criticized the false dichotomy of bottom-up and top-down

approaches to organizing (Roberto 2017). The vitality of the Puerto Rican Left must come from a synthesis of these approaches.

Towards an Emancipatory Diversity

Puerto Rican feminists argue that the Left's vitality will also depend on its ability to build more inclusive leadership groups. While left-wing groups have long fought to diversify government, schools, and other societal institutions, some have resisted internal diversification. Historically, the Puerto Rican Left has been at its strongest when it has identity, ideological, and tactical diversity. The upsurge that it experienced in the 1960s came when leaders focused on organizing marginalized groups and workers, fostering unity in diversity, strengthening youth and student groups, opening dialogue across different sectors of the Left, and developing international relationships of solidarity.¹⁴ These approaches encouraged collaboration despite disagreements about tactics, electoral participation, and organizing priorities. It also allowed the Left to deploy new tactical repertoires, mounting massive campaigns, organizing strikes, and supporting cultural work.

Some have dismissed these calls to diversify, expressing a desire to avoid what they consider a postmodern or neoliberal concern for identity politics.¹⁵ But others see diversity as a form of strength (Page 2008; Tormos 2017a; Young 1990; Weldon 2006). Adopting this second approach entails building opportunities for dialogue despite differences, amplifying marginalized group's voices and perspectives, and prioritizing the issues of oppressed groups while fighting against shared grievances. Most importantly, it involves building leadership from the bottom up and trusting those without prestigious educations who possess the knowledge that comes from the pedagogy of the oppressed.

New groups have taken important steps in this direction. Members of the *Juventud Hostosiana*, which took a prominent role in the most recent student strike, have

¹⁴ Ángel Pérez Soler (2014) and José Ché Paralitici (2017) chronicle this history.

¹⁵ See for example Pabón Ortega (2014).

embraced diversity and declared themselves intersectional feminists, anti-colonialists, and ecologists (Juventud Hostosiana 2017). The leaders of the feminist organization *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* also played active roles in the student movement. The *Colectiva*, now a powerful force within the Puerto Rican Left and in Puerto Rican politics more generally, has adopted an intersectional feminist organizing praxis and pushed the Left to fulfill its commitment to ending oppression by aiming to defeat capitalism and patriarchy simultaneously.¹⁶

The Path Forward

Moving forward, the American and international Left will debate whether to use Puerto Ricans as a pawn in their battles against the Trump administration or to afford them a substantive role in these efforts. Affording Puerto Ricans a substantive role in achieving Leftist victories would entail refraining from framing the urgency of supporting Puerto Ricans in terms of their US citizenship, and grounding solidarity in relation to values of radical democracy and emancipation. It entails adopting an intersectional solidarity approach to organizing that recognizes the multiple dimensions of oppression of Puerto Ricans, represents their claims and leaders, and allocates resources to address their issues (Tormos 2017b). This orientation runs counter to how mainstream American politicians have treated Puerto Ricans. Democrats have launched voter registration campaigns in hopes of using recent migrants as cannon fodder for the war against the Republicans — a cause that few Puerto Ricans seem eager to join.¹⁷ Liberals hope to enlist the Puerto Rican diaspora in the 2018 midterm elections, forgetting that Puerto Ricans, and Latinxs more generally, have often failed to reap the promised benefits of Democratic electoral victories.

¹⁶ <https://www.scribd.com/document/263057948/La-Manifiesta-Colectiva-Feminista-en-Construccion>

¹⁷ For an early report on these voter registration efforts in Florida and the Puerto Rican response see: <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/politics/political-pulse/os-puerto-rican-voter-registration-20180126-story.html>

In the days that followed Hurricane María, Puerto Ricans took matters into their own hands. Groups of retired line workers and electricians restored power in isolated sectors. Communities came together to rebuild their own bridges, literally and metaphorically. Collectively, they dispelled the myths that portray them as lazy and dependent on the government. Hurricane María did not only bring devastation to the island. It also opened opportunities for both the Left and the Right. In the coming years, the Left can increase its organizing capacity by embracing the energy that stems from the alliances of unions, environmentalists, farmers, students, and scholar-activists that have formed on the ground, in the Puerto Rican diaspora, and internationally. The Left's adoption of an inclusive and popular resistance organizing approach will help determine its ability to defeat the neoliberal attacks on its public services and institutions.

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A BOOK REVIEW BY SARAH MOLINARI¹

The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists²

The one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria calls into question the temporality of disaster, both in terms of lived experience and analysis. It was difficult for Puerto Ricans to mark the first anniversary while so many still live Maria's daily effects physically, emotionally, and financially. Failing institutions and disaster recovery initiatives have too often deepened vulnerability in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, thus augmenting the confused sense of pre- and post-disaster. During a September Rutgers University symposium on the "Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico a Year after Maria" anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla suggested that perhaps Hurricane Maria was *the "aftershock"* itself, the culmination of over a century of colonial-capitalist exploitation and layered traumas. If Hurricane Maria was the aftershock, how can we think about disaster and disaster capitalism? Naomi Klein's

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/11/28/book-review-the-battle-for-paradise-puerto-rico-takes-on-the-disaster-capitalists-by-naomi-klein-haymarket-books-2018> on November 28th, 2018.

The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists (2018) is a helpful starting point.

Klein's analysis is based on her week-long visit to Puerto Rico in early 2018, organized by the university professors' collective PAREs and other coalitions in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Written accessibly for a wide audience and published in both Spanish and English, Klein highlights grassroots resistance efforts and new political formations across the archipelago. Some of the "post-Maria shock-resistance" (p. 63) she documents emerged in the wake of Hurricane Maria to organize around survival and basic needs like the Mutual Aid Centers (*Centros de Apoyo Mutuo*), while others come from longer activist trajectories like Casa Pueblo's work on energy transformation and democratization, the agro-ecology movement's work on food sovereignty, and the movement to audit Puerto Rico's public debt³. Klein grounds her analysis in conversations and observations among her interlocutors, including activists, intellectuals, teachers, politicians, and real estate and crypto-currency investors. In the post-Maria landscape during the particular moment Klein observes, she defines the central struggle as a "battle of utopias" (p. 78) between visions of collective sovereignties⁴ for the many versus visions of profit and privatization for the few. In other words, how recovery is defined and by whom.

The book extends Klein's classic analysis of the "shock doctrine"—the political strategy defined by "the deliberate exploitation of states of emergency to push through a radical pro-corporate agenda" (p. 45)⁵. Klein argues that Puerto Rico has experienced the "shock-after-shock doctrine" (p. 53). From this perspective, Hurricane Maria is not a singular event, but rather a catastrophic not-so-natural disaster that exposes and deepens the already-existing layered shocks and traumas—from the racist colonial history of "unending experiment" (p. 28) to the economic,

³ See the campaign Auditoría Ya, led by the Citizens' Front for the Debt Audit (Frente Ciudadano por al Auditoría de la Deuda)

⁴ Collective sovereignties refer to the practices and possibilities of self-determination and deepening democracy in which the people, rather than capital, define their own goals and visions for a collective future.

⁵ See also Klein, Naomi. (2007). *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

debt, and migration crises of today. The “shock” exploited particularly in Puerto Rico, she argues, is fueled by desperation (the inept recovery efforts provoke a feeling that nothing could be worse than the status quo, making privatization more attractive to some); distraction (“the mechanics of survival take up every waking hour” (p. 55) such that political engagement becomes more challenging); despair (created by the cumulative effects of trauma); and disappearance (exodus and stateside evacuation fuel a government narrative of Puerto Rico as a “blank canvas” to welcome new investors while residents leave and conditions are not provided for their return). Klein argues that the storms’ impact “disassembled life” (p. 54) for millions, complicating the reactivation of anti-austerity coalitions, many of which were met with state repression like the University of Puerto Rico student movement and the mass coalitions that came out in protest on May Day 2017.

Klein examines the vision of Puerto Rico as a “for-profit utopia” (p. 15) through the “invasion” of “Puertopians,” crypto-currency investors and Blockchain enthusiasts taking advantage of tax incentives called Acts 20 and 22. After Hurricane Maria, these incentives were made even more attractive for U.S. “high net-worth individuals” (p. 19) moving mobile and financial industries to Puerto Rico with the government’s warm welcome to be part of the economic recovery plan. Particularly troubling, as Klein notes, are the crypto investors’ benevolent philanthropic promises for disaster recovery and visions to build a “Crypto Land” facilitated by post-Maria land grab opportunities. Capitalists’ plunder of paradise is not new. It would be helpful to historicize these latest (crypto) capitalists taking advantage of the colonial arrangement’s tax and labor incentives within a longer trajectory going back to U.S. sugar corporations. In this sense, Hurricane Maria marks a shift in, rather than the emergence of, the “blank canvas” narrative (p. 25) because throughout its history Puerto Rico has figured as a blank canvas for U.S. capitalist, imperialist, and white supremacist projects.

The book leaves a number of issues open to debate and further analysis. First, how to contend with disaster capitalism as an analytical tool in relation to complex temporalities of disaster. This requires specificity and historicization to avoid the theoretical limitations of labeling *everything* as disaster capitalism or addressing only

the recent past or the aftermath rather than the historical process (Schuller and Maldonado, 2016). Second, the question of the state and how grassroots organizing and discourses around *autogestión*⁶ may be co-opted by the state—in its various colonial manifestations—or even by “(non)profiteering,” another pillar of disaster capitalism (Schuller and Maldonado, 2016). Klein documents extraordinary organizing efforts and alternative future imaginaries before and after Maria. However, the narrative tends to homogenize these efforts, treating them as a coherent whole positioned within a binary of two opposing visions. Further analysis and insight from protagonists in people’s movements over time could bring out the nuances and complexities among the “islands of sovereignty” and the fields of power in which they struggle.

The Battle for Paradise does important political work in supporting activist initiatives and internationalizing a critical narrative accessible for wide publics about post-Maria Puerto Rico and the colonial legacies that shape it. All proceeds from the book go to JunteGente (The People Together), a collective that brings together organizations struggling against neoliberal capitalism and for a more just future for Puerto Rico. Groups comprising JunteGente converged at a January summit in Barrio Mariana, Humacao to discuss forms of collective response to both the disaster and its underlying causes. Klein observes this summit as marking a shift from despair to possibility—the initial coalescence among “islands of sovereignty” to expand definitions of freedom and work towards a decentralized “parallel political archipelago” (p. 77). But as Klein notes in the final chapter, defining Puerto Rico’s future is a “race against time” between the interests and the speed of capital versus people’s movements. Within the complex temporalities of disaster and disaster capitalism, we cannot lose the sense of radical hope and possibility that Klein elaborates in the book.

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⁶ Self-organization, or bottom-up organization

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A POEM BY CELESTE RAMOS¹

The danger of sighing while looking up²

Storms
are born of sighs and
old curses
launched from the heel of a flat hand
pressed to a chin, chalky white
or serpent red

blowing spiteful powders

I hope whoever's broken heart
somewhere around the Lesser Antilles
was healed
eventually
'cuz I can see
whoever it was
standing where a strong drink and wind could find them

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² This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/12/7/the-danger-of-sighing-while-looking-up> on December 7th, 2018.

Oh...

mind your sighs

they become storms

By the time those terrible storms reach us in England
they're the soggy wet blankets over our long longed-for weekends
and it's easy to forget how the rain is really tears
and that the breeze that can now barely lift a leaf
was once a freight train only a week ago

Churning hatred with a name

The dim pane of grey we know so well was
once a mass of cloud choked with story
and when Maria got to Europe as rain I found myself listening to the sky
for news
asking what those clouds had seen
because where they'd been was the same trek of my ancestry
delivered to me 4,193 miles too late for me to do anything
but if I spin myself back
follow Maria's skyward steps
I go back-first toward New York
past where I was born
confused angry and alone

and if I were her
my breath would still taste of
wood
blood
and bone
breaking apart over the mid-Atlantic

and if I spin myself back even more
I'm a fresh-raw-wound on September 19, 2017
just like I was that day in London
having a shit day in a short skyscraper watching
YouTube, stacked beneath a Microsoft Word window
watching Weather Channel live
watching video after video of kids and viejitos
red-faced gringos who couldn't get home
wishing for bread
knowing there's prayers to be said, knowing
there's nothing
to be done
but watch...

If there's ever been another word for feeling guilty,
it's "watch".

The next day I'm still at work

in a short skyscraper
watching YouTube stacked under Microsoft Word
my eyes as agape as my mind
a lovelorn sigh that became a
land-dwarfing scream
called Maria
engulfed little Borinquen
WHOLE

And I watched.

I couldn't call my uncles
cousins
and see if – and see if –

I watched WhatsApp
I watched my half-sister's status go
unchanged day after day
“last seen
September 18”
I watched YouTube
stacked under Microsoft Word

I watched news under lunchtime chitchat
I watched video after water-logged video

I watched video after tragedia video
I watched beautiful David fucking Begnaud for hours,
David Begnaud of CBS News
the honorary Puerto Rican who seemed to be the only one telling us
what the fuck was going on

I watched video after video to see if – in fear, if –
I recognized
somebody

Oh the waist-deep lines of tired faces
and water-wrinkled feet
looking for survivors

for two weeks,
I watched.

I called my mom in Brooklyn
the little old lady that I look like
who told me
how annoying it was to wait in line
at the post office
but thank God she wasn't
waiting for water
to send water

batteries

a handwritten card of

Palante

and

Si se puede

Keep pushing forward and yesyoucan

I wish the broken heart somewhere
near the Lesser Antilles believed that:
that you keep going
that you believe you can

you don't
sigh into the wind
on tropics so used to witchcraft

Mind your sighs –
they catch momentum on your discontent
and become storms.