Development of Puerto Rican Nationalist Thought in Chicago

José E. López

Efraín Martínez

University of Illinois at Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol9/iss1/10

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.
Development of Puerto Rican Nationalist Thought in Chicago

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This interview is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol9/iss1/10
I briefly met José E. López three years ago at the University of Illinois at Chicago when he was lecturing about the case of Vieques to a group of undergraduate students. Right from the start I thought that he was like a walking-encyclopedia; what I didn't know was that he was one of the most vital leaders of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. For more than 30 years he has been the Executive Director of the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center. We met on several occasions and the topics appear in the order that they were discussed.

PART I

EM: In "Making the Impossible Happen" you mentioned that you went to an old school that had a closet where the teachers put the Puerto Rican students. You also said that there was no attempt from the teachers to make Puerto Rican students be part of the classroom setting and that until they knew English, they were completely segregated; could you please tell me more about that experience? And also, did your brother, Oscar López-Rivera go through a similar experience?

JL: Well, let me just say right off the bat that Oscar did not go through the same experience because when he came here in 1957, he went directly into a high school; when I came here I went into a grammar school. Nevertheless, I am sure that many of the things about discrimination and marginalization existed there.

In terms of my experience, the idea was that we—the Puerto Rican students—were a burden on the school; that in actual fact we were coming in and, you know, why should they really deal with us? There was no concept that in actual fact we needed to be part of the school, it was more like, you are a burden on the school so you should stay outside of it. In other words, you are in here, you are counted as a student, but we really don't have any kind of commitment towards your educational experience.

And so, in this old school they had these classrooms and annexed to them they had these huge coat rooms were the kids would hang out their coats. We were put in there by the teachers because we were taking up the other students' time.
EM: Were they Polish students?
JL: Most of the students at that time where I went to were primarily white-ethnics, Polish and Ukrainians; there were a few of other immigrants, I remember some German students. The bulk of the students were kids that were from foreign backgrounds, but for the most part they already knew English. They were treated differently than we were; the Puerto Rican kids were literally put in together in the coat room. What would happen was that there was a Puerto Rican kid who knew English who was given a book and you will basically spend your time trying to read with him. So, during the whole day you were pretty much left out; I mean, they would let you participate in the art classes or things that didn’t have much to do with any academic work. There was little attention paid to us; it was like they were saying: “the burden of learning English and the burden of education on your family and on ours.”

I think that if you study what we went through later on in the late 1960s, in organizing a school reform process to address the Puerto Rican and Latino students, particularly around the issue of bilingual education, it is that experience what gives rise to trying to deal with the special needs and the special possibilities that Latino students brought into the schools. So by the late 60s and early 70s there was a huge movement for bilingual education, which is the aftermath of the situation in which we were marginalized. Now this didn’t mean that this happened in every school. This happened in the school that I went to, Andersen School, a school that was almost all white and where the teachers didn’t have much patience to deal with all of us who appeared to be different.

EM: What were your thoughts about the Cuban Revolution?
JL: I think that the Cuban Revolution represented, everywhere in the world, an inspiration. I remember when I got here to Chicago, there was a small group of people who were supporters of the July 26th Movement that met in my house; I remember this Cuban man that was involved in this and who would go to my house and discuss these issues with my father. There was a movement in the United States to support the July 26th Movement. The July 26th Movement was not only in Cuba, it was a movement that really had a massive network of support across the US and in Latin America, so it was a movement that crossed many boundaries.

There was sympathy for the Cubans because of the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. I think when the July 26th Movement dissolves and the Communist Party emerges as the sole Party, that was when people that at one point may have supported the Cuban Revolution all of the sudden start changing their minds because of the anti-communism hysteria haunting the US.

At that time, when I am listening to these things, I am not participating in the Democratic Party. In 1963-64 is when I really start getting involved in, but not as a politically and ideologically experienced person, but more as a practice. That is how I start to get involved with the Democratic Party. What I mean as a practice rather than a theoretical framework, is that I liked politics; I remember this one precinct captain, who was Polish, who came to my home and tried to get my mother to vote and help me get into politics.

There was a growing anti-communist movement in the US, but there was still the figure of the heroic Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara. That had an impact in terms on how I saw things initially, and at that point the idea is that the US is the example of democracy. Nonetheless, deep down in my psyche, I always believed that Puerto Rico should be free. I remember that my father—who left us soon after we got here—liked to follow the news which was most unusual since many of the people at that time didn’t, my father wanted to know what was happening in the world. Even though he was a popular, he had this patriotic view of Puerto Rico. Then there was my mother, who never learned how to read or write, but had a deep sense of knowledge; she had memorized poems of José de Diego and Luis Lloréns Torres and she would recite them to us; that of course stayed in our minds. What she recited to us, what I knew of my father, the Cuban Revolution, the fact that we were living in what I had been told was democracy, and the people that were fighting against communism deeply influenced me in my way of thinking. Of course, you can’t conceptualize this in the context that the Cubans were good and the Democrats were bad because they were attacking a revolutionary movement; I didn’t see it that way. But what I was trying to do in my early life, and the effects of all these changes, were also affecting other Puerto Ricans who were first generation immigrants. We were facing discrimination, police violence, the indifference of the hospitals, the churches; it was all a process of marginalization. These dehumanizing experiences helped forge a sense of resistance. There was a need to maintain part of our historical memory. That’s why I believe that the Puerto Ricans in the diaspora were the ones who rescued the Puerto Rican flag from anonymity and from illegality. If you think about it, in the 1950’s the Puerto Rican flag becomes something that you don’t want to get to close to. It was to be hidden. Everywhere in Puerto Rico from the 50s to the early 90s, you would only see the Puerto Rican flag in the house of an independentista, or in the cemetery where an independentista was buried, but it was never seen by itself anywhere; now you see it everywhere, what happened? What happened was that Puerto Ricans in the United States started to show how to use it as an act of defiance and as an act of reaffirmation. It was my generation, influenced with the world anti-colonial movements in Ghana, in Algeria and in Vietnam, who restored our flag to its rightful place. The Young Lords would have a button with a flag shaped as a map of the Island with the insertion “Tengo a Puerto Rico en mi corazón.”

EM: I know you are friends with Congressman Luis Gutiérrez…
JL: Well, Luis Gutiérrez was my student.

EM: He was your student? That’s really interesting, you look younger than him.
JL: Actually, I am much older than he is.

EM: Was Luis Gutiérrez a member of the socialists.
JL: Luis Gutiérrez wasn’t really part of the socialist group—if by that you mean the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP); he was a young man when I met him. He was a student at Northeastern Illinois University where I was teaching. He was a student leader in several organizations on campus including the United Puerto Rican Students (UPRS). Luis, like many of us, was very close to Claridad, which at that time was a daily newspaper that the Puerto Rican Socialist Party published. We were not members of the Socialist Party even though we supported it.

EM: The impression that I get through some writings is that Luis Gutiérrez got into the system to make actual changes; some people have criticized that as like Gutiérrez is a sell-out.
JL: Well, I think that if you look at most people, whether here or in Puerto Rico, have gone through an evolution process; anyone who tells me that they have always had the same ideas and beliefs
without any change is, perhaps, a little crazy. If you speak to Lolita Lebrón about how she sees the issue of violence today, she would probably tell you that it is something that we shouldn’t use. I mean, this is Lolita, the revolutionary who went to Congress armed, never with the intention of killing anybody. I think that many people in the Puerto Rican independence movement have evolved.

Luis went through changes, but I don’t think that he went through the radical changes that some people think. He first started in the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP) and while in Puerto Rico, he faced discrimination as a Puerto Rican born in the diaspora. But then, much later in Chicago, he joined the so-called Harold Washington movement. Harold Washington did not really build a movement; he was a talented political strategist who put together a vision and a form of politics which brought together disparate groups and ideologies. Many people blamed Luis for the breakdown of the Harold Washington movement. The black leadership split; Eugene Sawyer was the first one to break with what some have called the “Harold Washington net.” It is much later that Luis began to steer his own cause, when there was no more hope for the Harold Washington movement, even though in their mind it was Luis the one who betrayed them. That’s why I don’t believe that there was a Harold Washington movement, I don’t believe it. I believe that Harold Washington was a very strategic man, a very smart political figure that comes directly from the democratic machine and knew exactly how to put a vision together; but he was not a creator of a movement like people want to think. A movement is a totally different thing.

EM: How did the Protestant Church influenced you?
JL: What do you mean by Protestant Church?
EM: You know, the Church that was directed by Rev. José “Viejo” Torres.
JL: Again, there is a general misconception about this issue; Rev. Torres’ Church was not the Protestant Church. His Church was a very particular church. If you think about it, the Protestants are the most mainstream conservatives. Rev. Torres’ Church is a very particular one because it is his church; here is where I think that personalities come about because he was able to shape that church to become a radical institution.

EM: How did the Catholic Church influenced you?
JL: The Catholic Church in the 1960s goes through this huge change with the Second Vatican. I remember reading Pope Paul VI encyclical, Populorum Progresso in the mid-1960s; it was basically a denunciation of capitalism and an important influence in the Theology of Liberation in Latin America. And also, when I was growing up, I had a priest who was very progressive and got me interested into many of those issues.

EM: Don Pedro Albizu Campos use to say “el nacionalismo es la patria organizada para el rescate de su soberanía.” Do you think that definition is up to date?
JL: Well, la patria for us is not just within the context of the nation-state, but more so within the context of the problem of Puerto Rico and colonialism. What is colonialism? It is the taking out of one group of people out of history so the other group of people could place itself as historical beings. So, as subjects, the colonizer determines your whole humanity. If you look at capitalism, it emerges with modern colonialism. It is the capitalization of gold and silver from the Americas that gives the sense of having capital; in order for you to continue to make capital, this continent was the one who gave space to the European capitalism to flourish. In that process, what did the Europeans had to do? In order to steal the land, the resources and the labor of the indigenous populations and later on of the African slaves, they had to justify it. If I do you harm, I have to justify what I do to you. What is the explanation for the expropriation of land, labor and resources? Racism. So, modern racism is no more than a justification for modern colonialism. And modern colonialism is the pillar of modern capitalism. This is what Fanon calls the manichacan world of the colonized; meaning that these words are created for the colonized; one that is the subject and one that is the object, and therefore the Other in history.

We can see what Albizu said strictly from nation-state point of view, but it was much deeper than that. It is the idea that Puerto Ricans needed to recover their Puerto Ricaness. As colonized beings, Puerto Ricans had to recover their very natural being from the wound of racism and colonialism. For Albizu, nationalism meant the ability to transcend colonialism.

EM: Do you think that in the diaspora, the patria becomes more a symbol, a soul?
JL: Absolutely, I believe it is more about the Puerto Ricaness rather than Puerto Rico. You must look at Albizu as a modern day anti-colonial figure that is not speaking any differently than Amilcar Cabral in Gine-Bissau or Nelson Mandela in South Africa or Franz Fanon in Algeria; what almost all anti-colonial figures of the modern era are speaking vis-à-vis colonialism.

EM: The first attack of the FALN was in NYC on October 26, 1974. What was your first impression?
JL: Well, actually it is very interesting. We had made a bus stop in Philadelphia en route to New York. About 400 of us were in buses going to a rally with other Puerto Ricans and supporters of Puerto Rico’s self-determination in Madison Square Garden. On October 27th, 20,000 Puerto Ricans gathered in what was the largest mobilization of Puerto Ricans in the United States to demand the release of the Puerto Rican nationalists and to demand the right of Puerto Rico’s self-determination and independence. It is there in the roads of Philadelphia where we heard about the FALN bombings on the news.

EM: Did you have any idea of what was going to happen?
JL: As far as I am concern, no one that I knew, that I could even remotely think about was involved in that bombing. As a matter of fact, some of the people that were later on accused of being part of this organization were with us in this mobilization going to New York. I mean, we knew they were Puerto Ricans, but people generally didn’t look at it as something horrible. It was another way of raising consciousness about Puerto Rico’s status. Across the world, different revolutionary clandestine groups had emerged making demands for independence. As a matter of fact, the United Nations in a 1960 Resolution 1514 XIV recognized the right of colonized people to use armed actions to free themselves.

EM: In 1976 a so called “bomb-factory” was discovered in Chicago and the FBI claimed that they found information about your brother Oscar, Carlos Alberto Torres, and María Haydée Torres.
JL: This is how it happened: Carlos Alberto and María Haydée used to own a building here in Chicago and some gangbanger broke into the house and found a cache of dynamites and sold it to an undercover agent, who was investigating gang activity; it
had nothing to do with political matters. The police comes in 1976 and obviously sees something that is not correct and they figure out that something out of the ordinary was happening; that’s when they named it a “bomb-factory.” After that, Carlos Alberto went underground.

EM: You were arrested for seven months because you did not testify against your brother.

JL: Wait, I was not arrested; I was held in contempt of the grand jury. They subpoena me to testify against him and the independence movement before a grand jury. The way the law works is that you must speak to the grand jury if you don’t speak to them you are held in contempt. So I was held in contempt, there was no criminal proceedings, there was no trial; you just go to jail until the life of the grand jury or until you testify. We challenged the legality of this grand jury investigation. We were able to present evidence that my phone was tapped, and to demonstrate how the FBI was using the grand jury as a tool of their investigation, which of course is illegal. Our litigation lasted more than eight months. In August 1977, I was ordered to be held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center.

EM: In 1978 the police put a gun to your head and broke your ribs, all while you were trying to hide your daughters so they couldn’t see what was happening to you… How has your political activism affected your family?

JL: This was not the only repressive experience I have gone through. My family and I have been subjected to numerous attacks—my mother’s house was raided by the FBI, the FBI landed a helicopter on the roof of my house, my oldest brother was threatened at gunpoint in his house by the FBI; my entire family lived in nearly a state of siege for dozens of years. Anyone that has been involved in the Puerto Rican independence movement knows the price that you pay. My daughters were traumatized by that horrible day of June 7, 1978; however, when I see my daughters today, when I speak to them, when I see what they do, I see how much of a social conscience they have developed. For me, that is what is really important; it is as if this process helped shape a sense of themselves as Puerto Rican, and to house a deep commitment to social justice. From that position I think it is positive.

PART II

When we met this time, we started from a different angle...

JL: I think that a new generation of intellectuals gets influenced by postmodernism and that’s what guides their studies. We have to keep in mind that a researcher is not the same thing as an investigator. An investigator is someone that it is already attached to a system of intelligence and we have to be very careful with that. Some scholars of Puerto Rican nationalism understand this paradigm; however, the problem comes into play when some of these researchers reviewed all forms of nationalism. This has been the problem in understanding albizuista nationalism. A school of thought in Puerto Rico, starting with César Andreu Iglesias, later on with José Luis González and even later with Luis Ángel Ferrao, criticizes albizuista nationalism as hispanophile, conservative, and even fascist.

The problem relies in that a lot of scholars, after they find their evidence; they try to fit it into their theories.

EM: Do you mean that instead of the evidence proving theories, theories are the ones who have to prove the evidence?

JL: Exactly, that is the problem. For example, postmodernism proposes that we shouldn’t believe anymore in big ideas. Well, okay, but up to a certain point, their paradigm is exactly the same which they are criticizing. They are positioning themselves in ivory towers to speculate about the world without really engaging in the exercise of critical knowledge.

EM: In 1997, a group of Puerto Rican postmodernist published an article with the title of La estadidad desde una perspectiva democrática radical. 10

JL: I know to whom you are making reference to, Grosfoguel and others who propose the notion of radical statehood. The theory is basically that Puerto Rican nationalism is something retrograde; it more or less follows the ideas of González who, although was still an independentista, for him the most important thing was the class struggle, but in the meantime he was forgetting about everything else. A similar thing happens in the 1910s and early 1920s with Santiago Iglesias Pantin and the Socialist Party of Puerto Rico; in their opinion, the Puerto Rican working class would be able to get more democratic rights within the North American system. There is not much difference between the Socialist Party in the early 1900s and the so-called radical statehood proponents of the late 1990s.

EM: What is your take on that?

JL: Well, there will always be people that will disagree with you. Grosfoguel is within Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory; for him, nationalism is passé and as of today, what is more important are the class struggles. But what’s wrong with this line of thought is that it undermines all the problems that have to do with nationalities.

We must make a distinction between the nation-states and the many distinct nationalities which exists within their borders. This is something that not many people want to deal with. Right now in the world, there are about 3,500 distinct nationalities, and only about 200 nation-states. The problem is that most nations have been marginalized between a minority that dominates and a majority that is subjugated. I can go even further; there are almost no nation-states in the world that do not have a problem of nationalities. We see it within Mexico and the indigenous people, within Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and in most of Latin America, in China, India, I mean, all around the world, in Nigeria, Rwanda and other nations of Africa. You cannot reduce these problems to a class-based struggle; the problem is much more profound than that. It is a problem caused by colonialism and perpetuated by internal colonialism.

EM: But on the other hand, what this so-called radicals have tried to do is to, perhaps unfairly, reduce a nation into an ethnicity; they call it an ethnonation11 in which Puerto Ricans could unite with other minorities to struggle for social and democratic rights.

JL: Well, that sounds very good and they can named it however they want. But, the fact is that they have a limited view of the United States. The US is defined by a structure: federalism. It is the only country in the world without a name. From its very inception it was conceived by the puritan elite as a settler state where the settlers came to, in the words of John Winthrop in 1630, a “city upon a hill;” there was no space for anyone else. No state has entered the Union because the natives of these territories have demanded to be annexed; instead, it has always been the settler population. It has always happened from the
Ohio Valley in the early 1800s to Hawaii and Alaska in 1959. If incorporation and annexation meant an improvement in the quality of life of the settler population, then statehood would be a goal to be achieved. Nevertheless, the incorporation of every state in the Union has meant a further subjugation of native populations.

For example, in Mexico you have the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) which has a huge problem with the Zapatistas. The PRD is one of the most leftist parties in Mexico; however, it has not been able to deal with the problems of the indigenous populations.

EM: Are there ethnic minority groups in Puerto Rico?
JL: No. In Puerto Rico what we have is more of a homogenous group in terms of ethnicity. The only thing that comes close to an ethnic minority, perhaps are the Dominicans on the Island.

EM: The independentistas in particular do not want them there...
JL: Of course not. This is not a national problem, but a transnational one that, more than a nation-state problem, it is a Caribbean problem. For me, this would be very easy to resolve: every ethnic group must have the right for auto-determination in the Caribbean and most importantly, we need to have a regional conception for the Caribbean—what Eugenio María de Hostos, José Martí and Ramón Emeterio Betances named the Confederation of the Antilles.

EM: Puerto Ricans have consistently chosen the ELA...
JL: That is true, but the ELA has not been able to evolve since the 1950s. In Puerto Rico there are three common themes that most people agree on: 1) that Puerto Rico is a culturally defined nation; 2) the democratic rights that Puerto Ricans have acquired through out one hundred years of United States domination cannot be lost or taken away; and 3) the need to maintain United States citizenship. This is where the game comes to a halt; this problem with the US citizenship can be resolved by transforming the citizenship concept. For me, citizenship should not have anything to do with nationality; citizenship is a human rights issue, therefore, all human beings should benefit from the rights of the citizenship. So, if the US demands that there be a free-flow of goods, there has to be a free-flow of peoples with rights and dignity. And that is exactly what the European Union did, they dissolved the concept of national citizenship and they established a European citizenship. That is what the Americas should do.

On the other hand, what this “globalized world” wants to do is to homogenize everything at all levels, like for example in architecture. For example, everywhere McDonald’s has the same structure; the Hyatt Hotels too. Thus, as you travel around the world, you are still inside the same world. What better example of this than the globalized city that gentrification is creating. We cannot accept a globalized world, because it takes away your identity—the right of being your self; it takes out the right of the smaller communities to be what they are.

EM: What do you think about the discrimination that exists in Puerto Rico in terms of Puerto Ricans in the US?
JL: I can answer that question by defining the three systems of colonialism: 1) the first system was developed when the Europeans arrived into the Americas: mercantilism, a colony exists to benefit the mother country, and the mother country decides everything; 2) the next one is neocolonialism, which emerges after the wars of independence in Latin America, and the Monroe Doctrine, the first political framework of the United States to uphold neocolonialism. Now you have independent countries whose economies are completely controlled by foreigners. They may have a flag, a constitution and all kinds of national symbols, but they do not have control over their economy—they are politically independent, but economically dependent; and finally 3) internal colonialism. Today, in the world there are few direct colonies, Puerto Rico being one of them; most of the world’s nation-states are in a neocolonial situation, and most people of the world are facing internal colonialism. I believe that Puerto Ricans change spaces, but do not change situation. What I mean by that is that they change from being a direct colony—Puerto Rico—into an internal colonialist situation—in the US. In other words, if you look at all the social indexes, Puerto Ricans continue to be among the poorest; what causes this to happen? There is obviously something systemic about their reality.

Going further, Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and particularly in the US, not only rescued the flag from anonymity and illegality, but also were the first ones who established Puerto Rican studies programs in our universities. In the late 1960s, Puerto Ricans started to demand these kind programs in order to affirm themselves. The same thing happened with salsa; salsa was created by Puerto Ricans in New York. It was a second generation Puerto Rican like Eddie Palmieri who began to compose salsa. Puerto Rican literature is currently being redefined in English and spanglish. I can show you that almost every aspect of Puerto Rican culture on the Island has been defined or redefined by Puerto Ricans in the US.

EM: In the late eighties the City of Chicago was accusing the Roberto Clemente High School of financing terrorist groups such as the FALN. What was that about?
JL: What happened is that in the late 1980s three teachers from Clemente were interviewed and they made these incredibly racist comments about their students. The students, their parents and the community came together and decided that we had to do something about it. Two of the teachers left, but the third teacher fought and went to the court claiming that it was a violation of her academic freedom. She won her case. Something out of the ordinary happened by that time, the Illinois Legislature began to give schools more autonomy; on the other hand, we realized that the problem was not one of two or three teachers; it was a problem of the system of racism as a whole in the educational process. An active local school council brought in two educational consultants, Dr. Áurea Rodriguez and Dr. Luis Nieves Falcón to do a study in order to assist in the implementation of a holistic school reform program. Soon after, every aspect of the school had turned out to be very successful and it was becoming a model for change; and this was exactly the problem.

At the same time, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and its affiliates were infiltrated by Rafael Marrero—an agent provocateur working for the FBI; they had this entire plan to destroy us. They started issuing El Pito; it was a newspaper in the best tradition of yellow-journalism. In it, Marrero and company started saying that the money that Clemente received from government was being issued to fund the campaigns to free the Puerto Rican “terrorists.” Five grand juries were called and a two-year investigation was done by the state legislature. They had, from 1992 to 2002, all kinds of investigations which you can think of. Yet, they found no evidence to support their claims. But, obviously, they were able to create a distorted image of us that was out of our control, thus putting an end to the Clemente school reform.
EM: What was the MLN.

JL: The Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueño was an organization created in 1977. It really comes out of a need for us, as we are confronting the grand jury, to be able to have an organism through which we could speak about the issue of repression; in which we could articulate a vision about the Puerto Rican independence, and which, to some extent, we could maintain a semblance of the work that we had initiated in the community. The MLN was not the first Puerto Rican independentista organization in Chicago. As early as 1952, there was already a small nucleus of independentistas in Chicago; as a matter of fact, Lolita Lebrón's brother had organized a Junta, a committee, of the Nationalist Party in Chicago. In 1954, after massive repression, the Junta ceded to exist. In addition, after the nationalist attack in Congress that same year, Lolita's brother was one of the people who actually turned against her and became a state witness; consequently, the nationalists here were prosecuted. However, a small group of people continued to work quietly through the years, sometimes distributing newspapers and by keeping people interested on what was happening in the independence movement in Puerto Rico. Some of them became our mentors; in the process, by the late 60s, some of them were in the periphery of the work that some of us began to do in terms of the demands to improve the quality of life of Puerto Ricans living here. They were able to bring some of their ideas to the fore; the same thing happened with the Young Lords: José "Cha Cha" Jiménez was actually influenced by a few of these people. Interesting enough, if you see what was happening in Chicago with the various areas where Puerto Rican communities were established, there were some linkages to these older nationalist. Also, during the 60s, some Puerto Rican nationalist groups organized political events in Chicago, including one where Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, head of the PIP, attended.

The development of Puerto Rican consciousness really takes place after 1966; this year is the watershed of Puerto Ricans in Chicago. It is the year of the so-called riot—which I believe it was more of a rebellion. Puerto Ricans were sick and tired of being treated as second-class citizens; the body politics had to change and treat us as human beings. Soon after, in 1967, you have the emergence of the Young Lords, and in 1971 of the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI); there was also the emergence of the FALN in 1971. By the time the MLN emerges, the Young Lords began to dissipate after confronting massive repression; also, in 1977 the MPI became the PSP.

The MLN basically came out of the need to be able to establish our presence in the Puerto Rican independence movement; we were a group of people who were not a political block and we found that because of that, we were pretty much excluded from anything that was happening in the independence movement. So, we had been on the periphery of some sort of work with the PSP; I mean, we distributed Claridad, we went to the activities of the Centro Betances, but we were not the PSP and we were not a visible independent political movement. We obviously couldn't see ourselves as being part of the Young Lords nor the FALN; so, what we needed to do was to establish our own identity. As we did that, grand juries were being organized across the country, and there was also an attempt to criminalize and jail many Mexicans in the southwest. When the MLN was initially created, it was primarily led by grand jury-resisters; people were resisting in different parts of the country like in New York and in Chicago, but also in places as New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas.

An interesting phenomenon is that the MLN had a twofold purpose: Puerto Rican independence and the demand for reunification of Mexico; something like this had never occurred in this country. The idea was that by organizing this linkage between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, we could better resist FBI and grand jury repression. So, originally it was both an organization of Puerto Ricans advocating for independence, but also struggling for the rights for Puerto Ricans here, as well as Mexicans struggling for an idea that become very prominent at the time, which is the notion of the reunification of Mexico and the struggle for the democratic rights of Mexican people in the US. The organization became to be known as the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueño/Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Mexicano. In 1985 we decided to split in order to better articulate our own struggles. The MLN existed until 1993 and dedicated itself with other members of the community to the campaign to liberate the Puerto Rican political prisoners and to continue the community work based on the right of self-determination for our country. Nevertheless, the idea of maintaining a Puerto Rican organization for independence here, sort of begins to dissipate... That's what really happened.

EM: And finally don José, without forgetting your independentista ideals, have your ideas and work have shifted more into community work rather than on the status of the Island?

JL: I think that there was definitely a shift in priorities. I think that by mid-1994, we began to realize that our work was not rooted enough in the direct lives of the Puerto Rican people here. And that was demonstrated by the struggle at the Roberto Clemente High School. I mean, here is this school, with all of this problems and that, for a long time, since 1973, we had pretty much abandoned; we had to put all of our resources to help liberate the political prisoners. The call of the students at Clemente, and of the community at large, helped and encouraged the Cultural Center to act more critically. We realized that we are now dealing with 3rd and 4th generation Puerto Ricans; they are no longer able to make that direct link with Puerto Rico. They are facing an internal colonialist reality without really being able to make the conscious connections to Puerto Rican colonialism. We felt that we had to make a shift in such a way as to better articulate the connection between the internal colonialism of the Puerto Rican diaspora here and the colonialism of Puerto Rico.
That ideological shift needed to happen; any movement that doesn’t listen to the people and that thinks that it has the truth by the handle looses its perspective. We have to constantly challenge our paradigms; I think that what we did was to start looking at the internal colonialism here and how we could better link it to the colonialism of Puerto Rico. For about 12 years, our emphasis has been more in organizing Puerto Ricans to really understand the day to day struggles and on how these are deeply rooted in the colonial question of Puerto Rico, without making the national question primary. In shifting our paradigms, we were able to look at colonialism from a perspective that makes sense to the Puerto Ricans living here.

NOTES

I want to thank first and foremost my wife, Rosamaría López (who is not related to the interviewee), who has read over and over everything that I have written with much love and patience. I also want to thank José for letting me interview him from A to Z. And last but not least to Félix Masud-Piloto who suggested to submit this interview for publication.

1 López, J. E. (n.d.). Making the Impossible Happen: An Introduction to the Life of José López in His Own Words. http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/joselopez.cfm

2 Populares are the members of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), the political party founded by Luis Muñoz Marín, the first elected governor of Puerto Rico, and of course, the creators of the current political status (ELA, Estado Libre Asociado or Commonwealth).

3 Independentistas are people who believe that Puerto Rico should be an independent country. They range in ideology from nationalists to social democrats.

4 “I have Puerto Rico in my heart” (my translation).

5 Initially a daily newspaper, Claridad is now a weekly publication and a supporter of independence.

6 The Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño is the only registered political party in Puerto Rico that supports independence; it is also the only independentista organization that actively participates in elections.

7 Nationalism in the homeland organized to recover its sovereignty (my translation).

8 The Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (Army Forces of National Liberation) was a clandestine revolutionary organization of Puerto Ricans that advocated for independence by violent means from the mid-1970s to the early 80s.

9 Albizuista nationalism refers to the particular type of nationalism of Pedro Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party.


Efraín Martinez is an independent scholar. He has a Bachelors Degree in Spanish with honors from California University of Pennsylvania and a Masters Degree in Hispanic Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has presented papers in the American Comparative Literature Association, the Puerto Rican Studies Association and the Congreso de Literatura Iberoamericana. His research focuses on Modern Latin American history. He has special interest in the Hispanic Caribbean with Puerto Rican history and culture. Contact him at efra79@gmail.com.