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REVIEW ESSAY

Nation, Culture, Politics and Identity:  
Recent Works on Puerto Rican Studies

FELIPE PIMENTEL

*The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico.*

By Amilcar A. Barreto.

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001.

221 pages; \$51.00 hardcover

*Reflexiones en torno a la cultura política de los puertorriqueños  
entre consideraciones teóricas y la evidencia empírica.*

By Jorge Benítez Nazario.

San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2001.

202 pages; \$14.95

*Globalización, nación, posmodernidad: estudios culturales puertorriqueños.*

Edited by Luis Felipe Díaz and Marc Zimmerman.

San Juan: Ediciones La Casa, 2001.

354 pages; \$19.95

*Afirmación nacional.*

By Juan Manuel García Passalacqua.

San Juan: Editorial Cultural, 2001.

142 pages; \$24.95

*Nación postmortem: ensayos sobre los tiempos de insostenible ambigüedad.*

By Carlos Pabón.

San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2002.

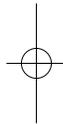
429 pages; \$21.95

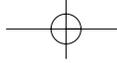
*Islands at the Crossroads: Politics in the Non-Independent Caribbean.*

Edited by Aarón Gamaliel Ramos and Ángel Israel Rivera

Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001.

190 pages; \$22.95





During the past decade we have seen the unfolding of political and cultural debates challenging well-entrenched theoretical and philosophical views on the meaning of national identity, nation-ness, the desirability of Puerto Rico's independence, and the possibility of emancipatory projects in a new age characterized by increasing skepticism and ideological disenchantment with modernity. Though the main focus of the controversies has been on the island, Puerto Rican scholars residing in the United States have been involved in heated discussions, significantly changing the perception of some issues.<sup>1</sup>

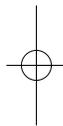
Paraphrasing Jorge Duany,<sup>2</sup> we are “a nation on the move,” and the constant flow of people moving between multiple locations—travels that link diaspora communities with those of the island—certainly facilitates the revitalization of ideas and theoretical perspectives in a context of a globalized culture and borderless political economy.

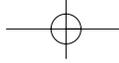
Critical ideas and theories that emerged in the last fifteen years or so—given the label of “postmodernism”—have reshaped views held by scholars and writers who previously identified with historical materialism and socialist and communist discourses. In that sense, some of the reviewed books do reflect views of formerly leftist intellectuals, who reconsider their previous perspectives influenced by the post-Marxist environment of the 1990s.

Within that context, Pabón's collection of essays and the book edited by Díaz and Zimmerman belong to the same postmodern sensibility. Hence, these authors propose critical (re)interpretations on questions such as nationalism, cultural and national identities, colonialism, and radical politics. In contrast, the focus of other works is on sociological and political science scholarly research.<sup>3</sup>

To frame the debates mentioned above, I recommend the essay “Posmodernidad, globalización e identidad nacional en Puerto Rico” by Francisco Vivoni (published in Díaz & Zimmerman, 2001), which presents an excellent synthesis of the political and cultural issues argued in public discourses during the past two decades. In thirty pages, more or less, Vivoni sketches current intellectual controversies regarding issues such as globalization, national identity, and post-modernity. Focusing on works published by postmodernist intellectuals (such as Arturo Torrecilla, Juan Duchesne, Carlos Gil, and Carlos Pabón) and on some postmodernist journals, such as *Postdata*, *N mada* and *Bordes*, Vivoni analyzes how postmodernist discourses have reshaped the public sphere, contributing to the redefinition of cultural politics on the island.<sup>4</sup>

Another essay from the same book, also deserving of critical attention, is “Tránsitos y traumas en el discurso na(rra)cional puertorriqueño del siglo XX” written by Luis Felipe Díaz. The essay's focus (and the problematic examined) overlaps with Vivoni's work since both explore similar questions, but with different historical perspectives. Giving more historical depth to his analysis, Díaz goes back to Pedreira's *Insularismo* and to issues associated with the cultural nationalism of the 1930s. Connecting current cultural controversies with the ones that the island experienced at that time, the author links recent cultural debates with previous ones. Furthermore, he examines the island's intellectual climate of the 1970s and 1980s, showing how the works of Marxist thinkers associated with CEREP<sup>5</sup> were instrumental for the reexamination and reinterpretation of traditionalist nationalist narratives. For Díaz the emergence of postmodernist discourses in the late 1980s and in the early 1990s represent an attempt to move beyond previously dominant theoretical models, which are being challenged in a new cultural environment characterized by the dismissal of strong meta-narratives.



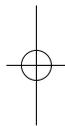


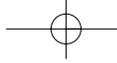
Other valuable pieces included in the collection edited by Díaz and Zimmerman are the thoughtful essays authored by Juan Gelpi (“Historia de la literatura en *Página en blanco y staccato* de Manuel Ramos Otero”) and Frances Aparicio (“Las migraciones de la escritura. Los espacios de la literatura puertorriqueña estadounidense”).<sup>6</sup> Both constitute excellent works in the domain of literary studies. Another significant contribution, worth mentioning, is the translation of “The Lite Colonial” (“El colonialismo ‘lite’: discusiones de un discurso puertorriqueño”) originally published in Juan Flores’s *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*. But not all the essays assembled in *Globalización, nación, posmodernidad: estudios culturales puertorriqueños* share the same level of scholarly quality. As happens too often with edited books, several published essays don’t possess the same level of academic excellence, such as the ones I have mentioned above, and these weaker pieces still need additional improvement. But regardless of the flaws, the book deserves to be read, given its valuable contribution to the growing literature on cultural politics and postmodernist rethinking of unsettled theoretical issues and problems that need further investigation.

The growth of a postmodernist intelligentsia that has abandoned political orthodoxy and the terrain of the traditional left has generated bitter disagreements and deep animosities among former comrades. Within that context, Carlos Pabón’s *Nación postmortem*, a new release of Ediciones Callejón, has stirred a heated discussion among scholars and nationalist sympathizers. For example, Juan Mari Brás (a well-known pro-independence figure) publicly attacked Pabón, referring to him—and to other postmodernist intellectuals—as idiots who, in his opinion, have written nothing relevant regarding the current Puerto Rican colonial reality.<sup>7</sup> For Mari Brás, political and cultural nationalisms are still untouchable principles that cannot be dismissed so easily because of “the fantasies of frustrated former pro-independence intellectuals who are fascinated by theoretical abstractions.” Paradoxically, as he admits in the cited article, Mari Brás did not read Pabón’s book, and so he ventured to criticize it without knowing its main arguments. Responding to Mari Brás’ criticism, the author of *Nación postmortem* states that this peculiar opinion represents an intolerant expression of a conservative nationalism that has failed to understand the complexity of postmodern Puerto Rican society.<sup>8</sup>

For those who do feel strong nationalist and pro-independence sentiments Pabón’s book might provoke this kind of visceral reaction. Understandably so, since this book attempts to dismiss both political and cultural nationalism, attacking the feeble foundations of the pro-independence discourse. Many Puerto Ricans identifying with the project of creating an independent nation-state found they could reject Pabón’s book without even considering its arguments. However, one should not discard Pabón’s ideas without a serious analysis and a critical reflection. For good or for bad, the times have changed, and today we are all standing on shifting theoretical grounds.

*Nación postmortem* is a collection of essays, some of which appeared previously as journal articles or chapters in scholarly publications. The book is divided in three parts, each one focusing on a related subject. The first section deals with recent cultural debates and the postmodernist critique of nationalist discourses. The second part addresses methodological and epistemological issues in the field of historiography, and the last section looks into a broad set of problems such as nationalism’s xenophobic and exclusionary aspects, and the effects of globalization on the nation state and on the nature of national and cultural identities. The book concludes by examining the question of an emergent postnational political imaginary inspired by a radical notion of democracy and by a new global citizenship.



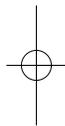


Pabón's book is an important piece of political and theoretical thinking that deserves serious consideration—even if one disagrees with many of its arguments. The first essay reprinted in the book, “De Albizu a Madona: para armar y desarmar la nacionalidad” did generate a lot of public debate when it appeared originally in *Bordes* in 1995.<sup>9</sup> The new expanded version has been restructured and is strongly documented with extensive new sources. Yet the core arguments have remained the same. The piece challenges traditional nationalist narratives seeking to deconstruct what he calls “essentialist (mis)representations” of the nation. Additionally, Pabón questions “neo-nationalist discourses” that—in his opinion—mystify certain representations of *puertorrique idad* (Puerto Rican-ness). As a result, dubious images of the nation as a homogeneous entity are promoted, without acknowledging the social fissures and cultural hybridities that set apart late modern Puerto Rico as a “globalized post-colonial colony.” Hence nationalist discourses have sought to construct a questionable image of Puerto Rico as a threatened nation in which traditional identity symbols (such as the Spanish language) have become essentialist representations that are being used to exclude “others” such as Nuyoricans and those seen by the nationalists as “less authentic” Puerto Ricans.

Therefore, Pabón addresses the question of language and the “Hispanic culture” by arguing that these cultural views attempt to exclude Puerto Ricans born or raised in the United States from the “authentic nation.”<sup>10</sup> Nationalist essentialism, Pabón argues, has been embedded in public discourses produced by the Hispanophile intelligentsia, for whom the Spanish language is at the core of their restricted conception of who should be part of or must be excluded from the nation.

According to this analysis, nationalism needs to be deconstructed as a discourse and as an ideology intended to exclude “others” (homosexuals, foreigners, criminalized and marginalized groups, and so on). For Pabón, there is a close connection between all forms of nationalist discourses, from the routinary and culturalist, which have been named *banal* by some scholars,<sup>11</sup> to extreme manifestations justifying the annihilation of “others” considered enemies who must be ostracized. Thus, Pabón fails to distinguish between diverse forms of nationalism and oversimplifies the variety of political discourses. He disagrees with scholars who have set apart diverse forms of nationalism (civic versus ethnic) and disregards less intense forms (for example, what Yael Tamir has named *liberal nationalism*, or what Jürgen Habermas calls *constitutional patriotism*). Evidently, for Pabón there is not room for compromises with any kind of nationalist discourse whatever its nature. In that vein he rejects Jorge Duany and other scholars who have asked for a reconstructed nationalist discourse that seeks to overcome authoritarian, xenophobic inclinations and “exclusionary” tendencies associated with the kind of local nationalism that has dominated public representations of *puertorrique idad*.<sup>12</sup> What we need, according to Pabón, is to move beyond the nationalist imaginary and by doing so, to abandon entirely what Benedict Anderson calls “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, Pabón's passionate defense of a postnationalist radical democratic discourse may sound appealing but, ultimately, could be politically dangerous. Though I am sympathetic of his critical views, which reject any form of political, ideological, or nationalist fundamentalism, I am afraid that in Pabón's utopian anti-essentialism there is an embedded threat of “ideological purification” that may contradict his own stated intentions. Conscious of this frightening possibility Pabón rejects any attempt of claiming the truth and humbly admits that





he cannot speak with absolute certainty. That is the reason why in more than one occasion he refers to Hannah Arendt's work, which makes a distinction between the "search for truth" versus the "search for meaning." In other words, he only wants to make sense through critical thinking of the issues and questions addressed by his book without claiming that his ideas are flawless.<sup>14</sup>

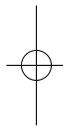
Regarding political action and alternative democratic projects, Pabón's views reflect his deep skepticism and frustration with modern democratic pluralist politics. His book rejects specific reformist proposals that have been made in favor of a politics of consensus and national reconciliation. Stating that there is not room for shared understandings among Puerto Ricans who favor diverse forms of autonomy and self-determination, including moderate pro-independence views, Pabón attacks what he calls the "neonationalist consensus." Inspired by Mouffe, Laclau, Savater, Gaillard and specially Slavoj Žižek, the political perspective that Pabón defends is a problematic postmodern ethic of "antifoundationalism" that rejects discourses based on shared moral values and a common democratic identity. Since conventional moral and ethical discourses claim to have philosophical foundations grounded on the modern democratic and liberal political tradition and Pabón's theorizing is inherently anti-foundationalist, the only political view he can defend is one based on the radical rejection of the project of modernity.<sup>15</sup> This theoretical point of view explains why Pabón disagrees with scholars who are sympathetic to some of his criticisms but cannot identify entirely with his postmodern ethics.

Regarding new approaches on nationalism and national identities, the book criticizes most of the current research on the subject because (according to this interpretation) these scholars are still functioning within the same parameters of traditional narratives on the nation. The main problem, for Pabón, is that alternative interpretations on the nation constitute discursive constructions founded on "totalizing representations" that, in his opinion, share theoretical assumptions identical to the traditional nationalist discourses that have "excluded" and denied racial, sexual, and cultural differences under homogenizing categories such as "national identity" and "national community."

In the book's last part, Pabón moves a step further by proposing to abandon any attempt to reconceptualize the nation—or the national community—since it is not possible (nor desirable) to represent fluid, hybrid, and contingent human ties and uncertain social relations employing conventional conceptualizations. What is needed, according to his view, are postnational and stateless forms of representation that contravene modernist criteria (territory, ethnicity or sense of peoplehood, political institutions) that historically had been used to define and conceptualize the nation before the age of globalization.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the impact of Pabón's ideas, other researchers doing empirical work on the question of cultural nationalism have addressed similar issues. For example Arlene Dávila's ethnographic research<sup>17</sup> documents how nationalist discourses are reproduced by social and political actors and how the commodification of the nation has altered shared cultural understandings of the meaning of Puerto Rican-ness in this Caribbean post-colonial colony. In a similar vein other scholars working on the question of national and cultural identities have sought to overcome narrow essentialist conceptualizations based on questionable criteria such as territory and sovereignty and are trying to incorporate the hybrid diasporic communities as an inseparable part of the Puerto Rican nation.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, even if one disagrees with the political and intellectual implications of





Pabón's work, I must stress that this book is a significant contribution to the needed debate on the problematic meaning(s) of the nation and the theoretical limitations of traditional conceptualizations regarding this subject in Puerto Rico.

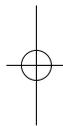
On the other hand, the issue of racial or sexual exclusion and xenophobia among Puerto Ricans are relevant questions that need to be addressed seriously. According to empirical studies completed during the 1990s, many islanders don't see their fellow co-nationals residing in the mainland as part of their national community. Social rejection and cultural intolerance *vis-à-vis* Nuyoricans is recreated against local immigrant groups, notably Dominicans living in Puerto Rico. While Pabón mentions the issue of increasing xenophobia against Dominicans, Jorge Benítez's *Reflexiones en torno a la cultura política de los puertorriqueños* provides empirical evidence on this problem.

The focus of Benítez's book is on the political culture. In addition, it deals with several interrelated issues such as national identity, the quality of democracy, civil society, postmaterialist values, and political and cultural intolerance regarding immigrants. Most chapters are based on empirical researches that the author did during the 1980s and the early 1990s.

According to survey findings analyzed by Benítez, in many aspects Puerto Rican society increasingly shares characteristics associated with late-modern postindustrialism. In contrast to this, he found that a significant part of the islanders still support values and cultural practices considered pre-modern or traditional, such as a strong identification with "political personalism" and *caudillismo* (charismatic political leadership). Essentially, the image that emerges from findings reported by a large survey completed by him in 1995 is that Puerto Rico resembles simultaneously a late modern postindustrial society (regarding its social and economic structure), while people's values and worldviews are similar to those found in other Latin American countries in which traditional and patrimonial cultural norms and values are still dominant.

Regarding social and cultural intolerance, the book sheds light on the complexity of this multifaceted problematic. While previously published studies stressed the political intolerance experienced by supporters of the island's independence, Benítez's work expands the field of the persecuted to include homosexuals, convicts, and especially Dominican immigrants. The book examines the anti-immigrant dynamic that has unfolded as a consequence of the increasing transnationalization of the Dominican migration. It found out that the level and intensity of anti-Dominicans' intolerance is much higher in the urban region of San Juan in comparison to other parts of the island. Amazingly, in the western part of Puerto Rico (the region through which most undocumented immigrants from the Dominican Republic enter this US territory) relatively low levels of intolerance were reported. On the other hand, the author suggests that xenophobic attitudes are widespread across the entire social spectrum. Apart from its sociological causes, Benítez stresses the magnitude of the problem and the need for effective public policies to tackle discriminatory practices tacitly accepted by a significant part of Puerto Rican society.

The nature of civil society in the island is an important matter examined by this book. Coinciding with other scholars, Benítez shows how civil society is too fragmented and how the role played by political parties makes them the dominant institutions that channel interests and citizens' preferences. His analysis reveals how difficult it would be for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to represent alternative projects and aggregate social demands. According to his interpretation,





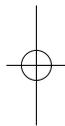
actual possibilities for autonomous social movements to challenge the hegemony of the colonial state, and to expand the so-called public sphere, are quite limited. Part of the problem, as stated by Benítez, is that most civil and social organizations depend on public funds, and also that the few NGOs that have been created are linked in one way or another to the federal or the local government. The author suggests that a great part of the existing social, civic, and professional organizations have been corporatized by the state and they lack real institutional autonomy. On the other hand, most of the social and community movements that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s have been “colonized” by the political parties. Community activists and political militants are the same ones who take effective leadership roles in these informal groups.

Though Benítez favors cultural and social democratization, he is skeptical that civil society’s organizations and social movements have the potential to bring about change. In his opinion the so-called civil society really is a fragmented body of diverse, underorganized social actors lacking effective means to transform existing institutional arrangements and expand the realm of citizenship and democratic rights. On this question I think he is partially wrong, though his analysis may sound correct. I agree with the author’s thesis when he states that Puerto Rican civil society is weak and that the *partidocracia* (party-centered regime) dominates public life. However, I must say that diverse citizens’ initiatives, as well as emerging democratic movements seeking to generate alternative forms of participation and enhance the democratic culture of this post-colonial colony, have been launched without the involvement of either the government or the parties. To what extent can these initiatives succeed? That remains an open question.

The last issue I will discuss concerning Benítez’s book refers to the question of national identity and cultural nationalism. As part of the “World Values Study” (coordinated by Benítez in 1995), islanders were asked a set of questions regarding nationality, citizenship, and national and cultural attachments. Confirming other scholarly works’ core arguments, Benítez’s findings show that Puerto Ricans uphold a strong sense of nation-ness and that a substantial majority of islanders identify primarily as part of the national community and less as US citizens. Strangely enough, survey evidence seems to support Pabón’s views regarding the existence of a strong sense of *puertorriqueidad* and a nation that is not under threat or in danger of “disappearing.” In that context, the level of national pride reported among Puerto Ricans—85 percent of the total sample said that they were very proud of their national identity—was the highest among all the Latin American countries included in this worldwide study (see table, page 78 in the book).

Besides contributing to the sociological study of the political culture, Benítez’s work adds to the growing academic literature on the question of national identity and provides empirical support for the widespread sentiment that, regardless of Puerto Rico’s colonial situation, the people living in this island do constitute a Caribbean nation according to both objective and subjective criteria.

The author considers that the strong cultural sense of nationality shared by the majority of Puerto Ricans does not necessary mean that a traditional pro-independence project is still relevant today, at a time characterized by compelling economic globalization and the appearance of new transnational arrangements. Hence, Benítez agrees with analysts who have stated that the resiliency of the Puerto Rican identity in part has been a reaction *vis-à-vis* frustrated attempts to “Americanize” the island during the first part of the 20th century. Within that





context, the peculiar political ties that link Puerto Rico and the United States have created conditions that in many ways encourage the consolidation of a cultural nation in the grips of a legitimated neocolonial arrangement.

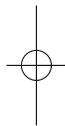
The question of self-determination in Puerto Rico and in the Caribbean region, and the possibility of new types of post-colonial arrangements for non-independent territories, is the subject of the book edited by Aarón Gamaliel Ramos and Ángel Israel Rivera. Inspired by the late Carmen Gautier Mayoral's work, the editors seek to analyze the Puerto Rican case in its Caribbean geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural context.

In *Islands at the Crossroad* one finds an excellent collection of analytical essays exploring political, cultural, and economic alternatives in a region such as the Caribbean, where modern globalized colonies apparently have legitimated peculiar political and economic relationships with their respective metropolises. These post-colonial and neocolonial territories have found an acceptable *modus operandi* with foreign rule and for most of them political independence is no longer either a desirable or an attractive option. While a majority of chapters deal with British, Dutch, and French colonial territories, some of them focus on Puerto Rico. Regardless of their different cultures and historical experiences, all these "postmodern" colonial societies seem to have something in common. Their local economies are completely integrated within the domain of their respective advanced, postindustrial imperial powers. In addition, these Caribbean modern colonies enjoy relatively high standards of living, benefiting in one way or another from the social policies of the metropolitan welfare states.

But not everything is working perfectly under this type of welfare colonialism. There is one significant dimension in which the current neocolonial arrangements seem to have missed something that cannot be measured in terms of enjoyable material resources. I am talking about symbolic questions of cultural identity and national and ethnic distinctiveness. Though all these colonial societies are deeply integrated into the political and economic structures of their European or North American metropolitan societies, their inhabitants have remained strongly attached to their ethnic, racial, and national local identities.

Politically speaking, there are significant differences in the region that need to be highlighted. While Puerto Rico's classical colonial status underwent changes with the establishment of the Commonwealth in 1952, other territories, such as Martinique, Guyane, and Guadeloupe, were integrated into the French nation-state as *D partements d Outre Mer* after the end of the Second World War. In addition to this, the British and the Dutch territories enjoy diverse degrees of autonomy in administrative and local affairs.

According to the book's editors, the political climate of the late 1990s, which has encouraged the adoption of neoliberal policies by most of the metropolitan states and the retrenchment of the welfare programs, plus the increasing globalization trends that are restructuring the world economy, are main factors that need to be taken in consideration in a time when some of these non-independent Caribbean territories are reassessing the question of self-determination and are exploring new routes toward effective decolonization. Within this shifting domestic and global context the time has come, according to Ramos and Rivera, to rethink traditional political options. Specifically, traditional independence might have become unfeasible or unattainable given the lack of citizens' support for complete separation from the metropolises and the economic and structural constraints set up





by welfare colonialism, which has shaped the social life in these neocolonial and postcolonial territories.

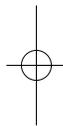
In the concluding chapter (“Conclusion: Rethinking Politics in the Non-Independent Territories”), Ángel Israel Rivera makes a strong case in favor of a new political arrangement, named *Sovereign Free Association*, that, in his opinion, might be the ideal decolonizing solution for most of these non-independent Caribbean islands. This novel alternative seeks to combine the economic benefits of being a “prosperous (neo)colony” with the political dignity and freedom of a non-colonial status. In Rivera’s own words:

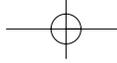
...free association may be viewed as ‘the best of two worlds’, as an instrument for maximizing the opportunities for economic development in small island countries through the blending together of the advantages of integration with a larger advanced or ‘First World’ economy and the advantages of independence (that is, the sovereign powers conveying freedom for promoting other economic linkages beyond those established with the former metropolis) (page 174).

The proposal for the so-called *Free Association* has been debated in Puerto Rico’s public arena, and the aforementioned scholar has published several books defending this solution as the preferable route for decolonization in this U.S. territory, for the reasons stated above.

In a jointly written essay, Ramos and Rivera (“Puerto Rico: Regional Transformation and Political Change”) examine the political dynamic in Puerto Rico during the 1980s and 1990s. Within that context, they address the old theme of the *political status* analyzing the current impasse *vis-à-vis* the traditional solutions, independence, statehood, and the current Commonwealth status that has remained unchanged since its establishment in 1952. The essay shows how diverse congressional initiatives have failed and why those traditional formulas—for different reasons—must be discarded in the context of a rapidly changing globalized political economy and the absence of a clear consensus among Puerto Ricans in favor of any of the aforementioned political alternatives. Summarizing their arguments, we can say that independence lacks popular support, while statehood does not have enough electoral backing to convince Congress when the legitimacy of the Commonwealth has been weakened to a point that is not longer acceptable for the majority of the citizenry. Acknowledging that most Puerto Ricans want to keep their U.S. citizenship, but at the same time refuse to “assimilate” and give up their Puerto Rican national identity, the authors conclude that the current situation demands a new political arrangement, one that could blend certain positive aspects of independence with security and some of the economically beneficial aspects of the island’s current political relationship with the United States.

The political analysis regarding the current situation in the country-island, developed by Ramos and Rivera, has been expanded in an essay written by Idsa Alegría. Her essay (“Culture and Politics and Self-Determination in Puerto Rico”) examines the complex relationship between culture and politics. Stressing that this Caribbean society, and its diasporic people residing in the United States, constitutes a nation, the author analyzes several important political events that took place during the past decade. Among them were the celebration of two non-binding local plebiscites in 1993 and 1998 and the controversy that unfolded at that time regarding





the issues of language and nationality. Within that context, Alegría addresses the feasibility of federal statehood for a culturally and linguistically distinctive society that, in her opinion, cannot be integrated into a predominantly Anglo nation state. According to her interpretation, cultural issues have been among the most controversial ones raised by Congress each time it has considered the remote possibility of granting federal statehood to this neocolonial territory.

According to Alegría, the previous government of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), led by Rafael Hernández Colón (1984–92), was characterized by its attempt to promote Puerto Rican cultural and national identity. In 1991 this government passed a law making Spanish the only official language, but by doing so, it created domestic opposition from the pro-statehood local party and also generated ambivalent reactions in political circles in the United States about the meaning of its old relationship with the island.

The question of *Spanish* versus *English* in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s is precisely the focus of Amílcar Barreto's book. Of all the works examined *The Politics of Language in Puerto Rico* might be considered the most mainstream publication in the field of academic political science. The author develops a systematic analysis of the factors that explain the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) government's decision of making Spanish the only official language of the island in 1991. Grounding his approach by emphasizing a modified version of rational choice theory and Anthony Down's model of vote maximization as the core principle of electoral politics, Barreto examines the language controversy from a historical perspective.

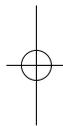
For those unfamiliar with this process I should point out that in 1902 both English and Spanish were made official languages after a frustrated brief attempt to impose English as the only legitimate idiom to be used in the newly acquired possession of the island after the Spanish-American War of 1898.

However, after imposing English as the instruction's language in the island's public schools, during the first half of the 20th century, the U.S. government attempted to press forward a process of cultural and linguistic Americanization that in many aspects did fail. In a certain way, American colonial policies in Puerto Rico were consistent with federal policies implemented in the United States at that time, which were intended to bring about the cultural and social integration of European immigrants arriving in large numbers during the first two decades of the 20th century.

As stated by Barreto and other scholars, such as Nancy Morris and Ana Celia Zentella, Spanish became a significant identity maker of *puertorriqueidad*, under a political stressful situation that encouraged a sense of cultural resistance among islanders *vis-à-vis* the intended displacement of cherished identity symbols by the new rulers.<sup>19</sup>

While the issue of language was at the center of nationalist discourses during the early decades of U.S. colonialism, the intensity of the question began to wane after 1952, when the cultural realm became Puerto Rico's domain of sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> Then, the reformist government of the PPD began its redefinition of nationalist symbols such as the flag, the Spanish language, and the national culture. Therefore, Puerto Rican people were told that there was no contradiction in maintaining a distinctive national and cultural identity and at the same time enjoying the benefits of U.S. citizenship.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the middle of what Arlene Dávila has described as a period dominated by "cultural wars," the question of *Spanish* versus *English* language reappeared in the public arena. At that time political parties were in a process of redefining their discourses *vis-à-vis* the ongoing debates concerning





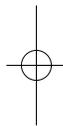
Puerto Rico's status, which unfolded in diverse fields including the federal Congress. As indicated by Ramos and Rivera, at the end all these attempted initiatives discussed in legislative committees and other public forums did not prosper and the two local plebiscites on *political status* held in 1993 and in 1998 failed to achieve the needed backing among federal lawmakers.

From a narrowly defined electoral rational point of view the government's decision of declaring Spanish the only official language did not make much sense. After all, according to a poll realized in 1990 cited by Barreto, 77 percent of Puerto Ricans supported two official languages while only 22 percent of the citizens favored declaring Spanish the exclusive idiom of the island. The pro-statehood party (Partido Nuevo Progresista, PNP) drew strength from the public discontent that mounted after the repeal of illusory bilingualism, and the PPD was defeated in the following general election. The first legislative bill passed in January 1993 by the new pro-statehood government was the reestablishment of the original act of 1902, returning to the *ante status quo*.

I agree in part with Barreto's interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the decision made by the PPD government in 1991. The author shows how the autonomist governor Rafael Hernández Colón wanted to send a political message to Congress and to federal policymakers about the cultural and linguistic unfeasibility of statehood for Puerto Rico. According to Barreto's analysis of the Official Language Act of 1991 (originally the López Galarza Bill, which the reader can consult as part of the book appendixes), the text of the law is consistent with this party's timid culturalist nationalism. Therefore, it was cautiously written in a way that it minimized any trace of anti-American rhetoric. The PPD and his main leader at the time did not want to convey an openly nationalistic message, with the possibility of its misinterpretation as a demand for political sovereignty.

Finally, Barreto's analysis illustrates how political rationality is a multidimensional concept that cannot be reduced only to instrumental goals. In this case the electoral logic that feeds party politics did indicate that, in the short run, the government's language policy pursued after 1991 was harmful for the PPD. In spite of those basic electoral facts, the PPD took a high political risk approving legislation that reflected a different kind of rationality. In this case, the choice made by Hernández Colón and the PPD corresponded to what Max Weber has named *Wertrational* action, based on the inherent value of the decision itself. Apart from its electoral consequences, the intrinsic symbolic value of making Spanish the only official language became a vital ideological objective for the party in the context of the island's cultural politics. In a neocolonial society like Puerto Rico, where the status question is at the core of party politics, there are other significant factors beyond winning elections that must be considered if one intends to explain the political dynamic. In that sense, it was more urgent for the PPD to defeat the pro-statehood project of the PNP than to play by the logic of electoral politics. Given the colonial situation of the island, according to Barreto:

...under certain circumstances politicians forgo electoral expediency in favor of a vital objective or policy concern. In Puerto Rico, as in other societies where the *national question* is a major concern or the central focus of partisan debate, political actors might be willing to make electoral sacrifices as long as it advances their preferred status option. (p. 93)





Although I agree in part with Pabón's criticism on the adulation of the Spanish language as a key identity marker for some nationalist discourses, we need to understand the reasons why it has played so a significant role in the construction of narratives of *puertorriqueidad*. Scarce empirical evidence gathered by available studies suggests that this strong identification between Spanish and national and cultural identities is associated in some ways with failed attempts of assimilation and plans designed to displace local national and cultural symbols. We can argue that this phenomenon epitomizes a reactive linguistic consciousness of local neo-nationalist intellectuals seeking to reaffirm what they understand to be a national identity being threatened by a foreign power.

Needless to say, we must reject the chauvinistic views held by some *compatriotas* (as Pabón does) who exclude people from the diaspora communities because of the linguistic differences between "them" and "us." In that sense, Morris has signaled that "the rejection of Nuyoricans is based on perceptible differences in characteristics that are identified as Puerto Rican, notably language."<sup>22</sup> Among Puerto Ricans in the United States a symbolic identification with the Spanish language still plays a part in their self-definition as part of their ethno-national community. However, that does not mean that to be considered *puertorriqueo* you need to speak Spanish and use it as your main language.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, the unintended consequence of the revival of Puerto Rico's cultural nationalism is that it has lost its previous contestatory character. Thus, Pabón seems to be right when he states that the metamorphosis of the *national question* in Puerto Rico was instrumental for the redefinition of the national imaginary after the "taming" of the nationalist discourse by the PPD during the 1950s. Hence the latest renaissance of *puertorriqueidad* and the dissemination across the political spectrum of what Juan Flores has named *lite nationalism* could have undermined the appeal of radical political discourses by creating the "illusion" of national unity and masking real social, racial, and sexual differences. The idea "*todos somos puertorriqueos por encima de cualquier otra diferencia*" (we are Puerto Ricans regardless of any other difference) makes Pabón uncomfortable and, in his opinion, promotes new ideological mechanisms pursuing to rend invisible social cleavages and conflicts. Within an increasingly globalized socioeconomic and cultural environment the so-called discourse of *puertorriqueidad* has been converted, as Pabón suggests, in a dominant representation of the national imaginary. According to this observer:

...el nacionalismo se redujo fundamentalmente a una expresión de afirmación cultural y la "puertorriqueñidad" se constituyó en discurso domesticador de consenso social, es decir, en una identidad que privilegió la identidad consensual. (Pabón, p. 42)

While this scholar disagrees with most of the positive interpretations concerning the island's cultural nationalist revival, others tend to celebrate it. One of these optimistic interpretations is *Afirmación nacional*, written by Juan Manuel García Passalacqua. Let me say that this book is not an academic publication but rather a collection of short historical essays, and excerpts from previously published articles, which have been assembled to offer a personal perspective on historical events and political and cultural processes that have reshaped Puerto Rico during the past decades. The book intends to reach a broad audience and is written in an accessible language without elaborate theoretical conceptualizations.

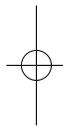


The volume is organized in two interrelated parts; the first one deals with historical questions while the second addresses current issues. García Passalacqua is a prolific writer whose writings tackle current political controversies unfolding in the island. In that sense, this book responds to the current situation, focusing on the question of cultural nationalism and the strengthening of national and cultural identities. The author, a self-declared political analyst, examines the construction of Puerto Rican nationality since the times of Spanish colonialism, claiming that in the early 18th century the seeds of nation-ness had already germinated. But this is a grand statement that the author cannot support, given the academic literature on nation building. A serious problem with this book is that García Passalacqua repeatedly confuses ethnic or protonational sentiments with the existence of a modern national consciousness.

Following a scheme that resembles somehow the model of stages proposed by José Luis González in his essay “El País de Cuatro Pisos,” the author divides the process of national formation in four constitutive dimensions, each one with its unique elements. The first one is called the *naci n-gente* (people’s nation), and it represents the historical basis of the Spanish colony, a time when the early settlers began to identify with their new geography. Subsequently he introduces what has been named the *naci n-criolla* (creole nation), which refers to the processes of late colonization after 1815, when the Spanish Crown conceded the so-called Cédula de Gracias and Puerto Rico became the place of destination for an increasing number of South Americans, Europeans, and other immigrants from the non-Hispanic Caribbean. Within that context, García Passalacqua examines emerging nationalist sentiments and local movements demanding independence and political autonomy, which the colonial regime repressed until the end of its rule in 1898. The counterpart to this process was the appearance of a new kind of nation, which he baptized as the *naci n-letrada* (enlightened nation). This national entity embodies the refined nationalist discourses represented by the *jibarista* and creole intelligentsia. Nineteenth century writers such as Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, Salvador Brau, Manuel Zeno Gandía, and Eugenio María de Hostos, jointly with others from the 20th century, are seen as the genuine representatives of Puerto Rico’s national consciousness. The last nation to arrive in his scheme is the *naci n-pol tica* (political nation), which only appeared under U.S. colonialism. In this section the author engages the writings of some well-known neonationalist intellectuals (Antonio S. Pedreira, Tomás Blanco, Emilio S. Belaval) arguing that these views represented the ideological frustration of the island’s elite *vis- -vis* uncertainties created by the new colonial regime. Moreover, García Passalacqua cheers up the tragic and heroic figure of Pedro Albizu Campos and the nationalist movement led by him as the true defenders of Puerto Rico’s nationality.

The book addresses other themes relevant for the understanding of modern Puerto Rico. Focusing on the political processes that unfolded after the populist experience of *mu ocismo* in the 1940s and the transformation of the PPD as gatekeeper of U.S. interests in the island, the author explores the development of the culturalist version of tamed nationalism that this party promoted since the 1950s and how new institutions such as the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña were created at that juncture.

However, García Passalacqua does not make any significant contribution to the existing literature on the subject, and most of his statements are based on extensive paraphrasing of cited sources. For the reader unfamiliar with the original works, certain popularizing aspects of this part of his book may be helpful. But for the scholar acquainted with the original academic literature, reconsidering the material may be a waste of time.



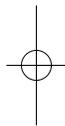


The book concludes with the stormy question of Vieques and the popular protests that have unfolded in Puerto Rico since the late 1990s. Linking the struggle against the U.S. Navy in Vieques with other cultural and sport events, like the victories of the Puerto Rican boxing champion Tito Trinidad and the selection of Denise Quiñones as Miss Universe in 2001, García Passalacqua celebrates *la puertorriqueidad* in a grandiose way. Amazingly, at this point in his life this former advisor of Muñoz Marín has rediscovered his father's nationalist roots and has become a strong defender of Puerto Rican cultural and political nationalism.

In this review essay I have examined different perspectives on modern Puerto Rico, specifically on its culture, politics, and society. From different angles and with diverse levels of success, these books contribute in their own original ways to the critical understanding of this late modern society.

Today most Puerto Ricans living in the island see themselves as a people upholding a distinctive sense of nationhood. They see themselves as living in a country that is not a sovereign independent state. Certainly this is a nation that, from a sociocultural point of view, has evolved under a peculiar colonial regime since 1898. As a result, the island's political status remains unsolved and has become a troublesome issue for the United States. As Trías Monges wisely asks in his latest book:

Does the United States really need, finally, to keep Puerto Rico in a state of dependency, subject to its sovereign and unencumbered will, or does the reality of United State power allow it to decolonize Puerto Rico, in any of the many possible ways, without fear of disaster?<sup>24</sup>



For some authors of the books examined, the urgent question for Puerto Ricans is to find an appropriate path towards effective decolonization. Others think that what we should do is to reconsider many of our own assumptions and views of what is Puerto Rico and what kind of nation we are. Regarding the possibility for decolonization the truth is that traditional solutions might have become obsolete, as Rivera and Ramos suggest. Historically the support for independence never has been high, and without strong democratic enthusiasm it would be too risky to undertake the route leading to political sovereignty. Furthermore, to fully understand the dynamics of late modern Puerto Rico, we need to go beyond the issues of colonialism and dependency. Thus, we must address the interconnection between the diaspora communities and the island society, as Jorge Duany does. And we need to tackle public concerns such as xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and other collective fears well ingrained among us, which are threatening the democratic fiber of civil society. As Pabón's and Benítez's works show, these are stern questions that must be addressed in the public arena in order to strengthen our shared democratic values and highlight the importance of social and civic responsibility.

Finally, this is a time of rapid change, a historical juncture characterized by increasing social and political uncertainties and the triumph of global capitalism. At this point in the early 21st century we don't possess compelling solutions *vis-à-vis* most of our collective dilemmas. What we have in front of us are competing interpretations and diverse ways of thinking about Puerto Rico as a postcolonial colony.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Though most of the participants in those debates live in the island, we should not disregard the contributions of scholars such as Juan Flores, Arlene Dávila, Ramón Grosfoguel, Agustín Laó-Montes, Frances Aparicio, Raquel Rivera, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, and others to the current controversies.

<sup>2</sup> I am borrowing the metaphor from Duany's book *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Although these books focus on similar subjects (nationalism, colonialism, and political issues), they do so from the opposite theoretical angle and without the philosophical implications of the postmodernist approach.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately (for the English-only reader), most of these writings are in Spanish. A forthcoming publication, *None of the Above: Contemporary Puerto Rican Cultures and Politics*, edited by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, is scheduled for late Spring 2004. This book will offer English translations of works written by Pabón, Duchesne, and others.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars associated with CEREP (Center for the Study of Puerto Rican Reality) played a significant role questioning and reinterpreting Puerto Rico's history, culture, and social development. In 1978 Ángel Quintero Rivera, Juan Flores, Ricardo Campos, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, and the late José Luis González participated in the so-called Princeton Colloquium, in which several papers dealing with the national question were presented. For the reader with historical curiosity, the papers were published in *Puerto Rico: identidad nacional y clases sociales* (San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> These essays deal with specific issues related to literary writings and address relevant cultural questions in that field.

<sup>7</sup> See Associated Press, "Crítica Mari Brás a un historiador" in *El Nuevo Día*, domingo 29 de diciembre de 2002 (p. 40).

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Pabón responded to Mari Brás in a press interview. See Ismael Torres, "Condena Pabón las críticas de Juan Mari Brás" in *El Nuevo Día*, lunes 6 de enero de 2003 (p. 23).

<sup>9</sup> The essay triggered an intense debate and nasty words against Pabón and the journal *Bordes* and the eventual publication of *La nación en orilla* (San Juan: Editorial Punto de Encuentro, 1996) by Luis Fernando Coss, in which Pabón's essay is confronted from a nationalist point of view.

<sup>10</sup> On this question Pabón's ideas are not different from what Juan Flores, Jorge Duany, and others have stated in their criticism of the traditionalist nationalist discourses.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Billing, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995).

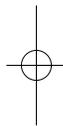
<sup>12</sup> Duany states that "Puerto Rican nationalism through the twentieth century has been characterized by Hispanophilia, anti-Americanism, racism, androcentrism, homophobia and more recently xenophobia—as well as more positive attempts to define and uphold local values and customs." p. 24, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> See page 3 in B. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> However, the implicit certainty of his implacable critique against those who have dealt with these questions may contradict his stated intentions. Only a limited number of postmodern intellectuals (Torrecilla, Duchesne, and Díaz González) are spared by Pabón's demolishing statements against those of us who disagree with the idea that the nation is something *pas*.

<sup>15</sup> My views on this subject are based on my reading of Jürgen Habermas and other scholars working within the parameters of a pragmatics that Habermas has developed since the publication of a *Theory of Communicative Action* in the late 1970s.

<sup>16</sup> Ironically, Pabón's book tends to dismiss the excellent work of Jorge Duany, who has done exactly what he proposes. Duany's book, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*,





asks the reader to rethink traditional categories based on shared territory, citizenship, language, and political sovereignty. Instead, he conceptualizes Puerto Rican identities as hybrid, translocal, and postcolonial by interconnecting the diaspora and the island communities.

<sup>17</sup> See *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Besides Duany's book I can mention Arcadio Díaz Quiñones (*La memoria rota*) and Juan Flores, whose works on the subject are widely known.

<sup>19</sup> See Nancy Morris, *Puerto Rico: Culture, Politics, and Identity* (Westport: Praeger, 1995) and Ana Celia Zentella, "Language Policy/Planning and the U.S. Colonialism: The Puerto Rican Thorn in English-Only's Side." In T. Huebner, K.A. Davis, eds., *Socio-Political Perspectives on Language Policy and Planning in the USA* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> I borrow the expression from Dávila's *Sponsored Identities*, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> This is the period in which Puerto Rico experienced a revitalization of national symbols and the flourishing of strong cultural nationalism.

<sup>22</sup> See Morris, *Puerto Rico: Culture, Politics, and Identity*, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Zentella points out: "Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are changing the definition of Puerto Rican identity to include those who do not speak Spanish because of their unwillingness to reject any of their family or friends as members of the group," op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> José Trías Monges, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 194.

