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# Playing and eating democracy: The Case of Puerto Rico's land distribution program, 1940s–1960s

ISMAEL GARCÍA-COLÓN

## ABSTRACT

In the early 1940s, the colonial government of Puerto Rico with the consent of the U.S. federal government began to elaborate a land reform. Under Title V of the Land Law of 1941, the government established resettlement communities for landless families. One of their goals was to transform landless agricultural workers into an industrial and urban labor force by teaching them “democratic, industrial, and modern” habits. Government officials distributed land to landless families through lotteries, portraying the ceremonies as acts of democracy. Community education programs produced literature, films, and posters aimed at fostering development and political participation. The colonial state intended to mold landless workers into new citizens but land distribution and its effects over the population were uneven, disorganized, and sometimes contradictory. Landless workers and residents of land distribution communities maneuvered within, escaped from, and shaped those government policies. [Key words: Land Reform, Popular Democratic Party, Modernization, Development, Workers, State Formation, Puerto Rico]

*A resettled agregado building his house at the parcela lot—Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.  
Inset: Drawing lots for parcelas out of a pava—Toa Baja (July 1946). Photographer Charles Rotkin.*

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## In the mid-twentieth century,

governments in the United States, Latin America, and other parts of the world carried out radical projects of urban and economic development with the purpose of “modernizing” their populations and industrializing their economies. These projects involved the settlement and resettlement of thousands of people in new cities, neighborhoods, and villages. Their aim was to rationalize urban space in order to foster production (De Janvry 1981; Scott 1998). In the case of Puerto Rico, the insular government, with the consent of the United States government, began to implement policies of land reform and industrialization aimed at transforming an agricultural and rural-based society into an urban and industrial one. One of the government strategies was to establish land distribution communities for the landless population. Land distribution and community development were part of interrelated and changing political economic processes occurring at the local, island, regional, U.S., and international levels. These conditions forced government officials and populist leaders of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party—[PPD]) to revise their strategies within the land distribution by creating new government programs, and more actively promoting those in existence in order to modernize the Island.

The study of land distribution communities is not new. As part of the Puerto Rico project, leading anthropologists such as Elena Padilla and Sidney Mintz conducted fieldwork in these communities during the late 1940s (Padilla 1951, 1956; Mintz 1951, 1956, 1974; Steward et al. 1956). Their ethnographies of Puerto Rico’s land distribution communities were part of a groundbreaking study that attempted to integrate community history into larger regional, national, and global processes (Roseberry 1989: 146–53). Other studies have described the social, legal, and historical aspects of the program (Packard 1948; Edel 1962, 1963; Villar Rocas 1968; Curtis 1965, 1966; Seda Bonilla 1969, 1973; Watlington Linares 1975; Cuevas Cruz 1990; Nazario Velasco 2003), but with the exception of Seda Bonilla (1969, 1973), lack an ethnographic grounded approach and bottom-up analysis (see García Colón 2002, 2006). Drawing in these previous efforts, my research tries to explain the interplay of land distribution policies and agency of *agregadas/os* (landless workers) and *parceleras/os* (residents of land distribution communities) (Wolf 2002: 226). Although the colonial state intended to mold landless workers into new citizens, as a part of a “modern,” urban, and industrial labor force, one has to consider the government’s implementation of the land distribution

program and its effects on the population as uneven, unarticulated, and contradictory hegemonic processes (Roseberry 1994: 365–6; Murray Li 2005: 391). Landless workers and residents maneuvered within, escaped from, and transformed many of the government policies of land reform and industrialization.

Although the assertion that landless workers shape the development strategies of the government of Puerto Rico does not seem a radical one, the literature on the “modernization” programs of the PPD and its land reform does not address this point (Goodsell 1965; Mathews 1975; Baldrich 1981; Santana Rabell 1984; Quintero Rivera 1985, 1986, 1993, and 1994; Dietz 1986: 200–1; Pantojas García 1990; González Díaz 1999). Studies describe the land distribution program and state that its effects were to provide the PPD with a base of electoral support. They also take for granted that the intentions of the government to modernize and transform the landless workers into an industrial labor force occurred in a straight forward process. These assertions continue to be replicated uncritically by the Puerto Rican studies literature (see Grosfoguel 2003: 56). Therefore, it is important to explain how the attempts to “modernize” landless families in mid-twentieth century Puerto Rico did not happen, as the existing literature has argued, as a organized and homogeneous process. Furthermore, any study whose purpose is to explain the modernization of Puerto Rico has to address the way in which subalterns were engaged in this process.<sup>1</sup>

This article also builds upon the existing literature of the modernization of Puerto Rico. The new historiography influenced by postmodernism has begun to focus on how the state attempted to mold working class Puerto Ricans through the establishment of laws, institutions, and infrastructure during the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. The so-called modernization of Puerto Rico during the mid-twentieth century was only one of the many attempts that the government had pursued in order to transform the social, economic, and political character of the Island’s population (Álvarez Curbelo 2001; Cabán 1999; Santiago-Valles 1994). However, it was the effort that more radically changed all aspects of society.

During the 1940s through the 1960s, the land distribution program of the government of Puerto Rico was at the center stage of public life as a symbol of PPD success. Under the Title V of the Land Law of 1941, the government established communities in order to resettle the landless population. In the early 1940s, PPD’s leaders considered land distribution as one of the principal solutions to the socioeconomic problems of the island, because nearly 80 percent of the rural population was landless (Mejías 1946: 26–8, 38–40; Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico 1949: 3, 22, 42).<sup>2</sup> Landless families lived on their employers’ properties, receiving wages in cash, services, a share of the harvest, or tokens exchanged in their employers’ stores. These social relations kept landless workers under the arbitrary control of their employers and consequently under poverty.

Title V of the Land Law of 1941 sought to remedy the problem of landlessness by providing small plots of land mainly for housing purposes and limited garden cultivation to landless families. The government granted heads of household, almost exclusively males, with tax-free usufruct rights over the plots. Lacking ownership titles, family heads could not sell their plots, but they could transfer their usufruct rights. The government distributed land by designing communities in rural areas and extending urbanization in cities and towns. The communities consisted of ten to five hundred families, and the land received ranged from a quarter of an acre to an acre and a-half (Autoridad de Tierras [1948?]; Edel 1962, 1963). The program included a housing program, milk stations that offered breakfast for children,

*Above: Agregados in Toa Baja waiting for the drawing (July 1946). Photographer Charles Rotkin.*



*Drawing parcela lots in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.*

community education programs, and many other government initiatives that fostered community development and political participation. During the 1950s, government officials inserted land distribution within their policies to industrialize the Island and their particular views about the role that landless families would play in their schemes of industrialization.

By means of land reform, one of the objectives of the PPD was to challenge and destroy the power of the established ruling groups of the 1930s, namely the U.S. sugar corporations and their managers, and political leadership of the Republican and Socialist parties. During the 1930s, the Great Depression, World War II, the militancy of

the Nationalist Party, and the many labor strikes maintained a climate of social unrest, and economic and political instability. The PPD presented itself as the alternative to reform all aspects of society. Using the most popular local and global discourses of reform, the PPD elaborated a discourse of social justice and democracy focused on land reform and distribution. In the 1940 elections, the PPD, as a populist and pro-New Deal political party, emerged as the leading political force, winning most of the municipal governments and controlling the Senate. After forming an alliance with the Unificación Puertorriqueña Tripartita party, it gained the control of the Chamber of Representatives.<sup>3</sup> The following year, as a legitimizing gesture, President Roosevelt appointed Rexford G. Tugwell (1941–1946) as governor of the island. Tugwell, a radical New Dealer, strongly believed in the intervention of the economy through planning and was in line with PPD’s policies of land reform and industrialization. These gestures continued with President Truman and Congress, allowing the election of a governor by popular suffrage in 1948 and the enactment of a constitution in 1952.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, the PPD together with the U.S. federal government constituted a new ruling coalition that aimed at transforming the island’s social, political, and economic conditions. Industrial investors, in initially labor-intensive corporations during the late 1940s and 1950s, and later capital-intensive corporations during the 1960s, became part of this coalition until 1968, when the PPD lost its control of the governorship and legislature (see Trías Monge 1997; Bayrón Toro 2003). During the mid-twentieth century, PPD’s policies of land reform and land distribution represented a safeguard of United States military and economic interests in the Americas, a fulfillment of its colonial and imperial aspirations.

The Puerto Rican land distribution program is an illustration of the state’s efforts to create a model of urbanization to facilitate the development of a manufacture-

oriented economy. The Puerto Rican case is particularly relevant since U.S. government officials used the island as a social laboratory for foreign policies towards Latin America and the Caribbean. Some land distribution communities in Puerto Rico became model communities for foreign delegations visiting the Island as part of the Truman’s Point IV program (1950s) and Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress (1960s) (Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico 1954: 5–31; Rosario Urrutia 1993: 147–77).<sup>4</sup> The Cold War intensified Puerto Rico’s role in providing an example of expanding democracy through development.

The title of this article, “Playing and Eating Democracy,” refers to the attempts of the government to promote “democratic, industrial, and modern” habits over the landless population. “Playing” democracy refers to the practice of government officials to distribute land to landless workers through lotteries, portraying the ceremonies as acts of democracy. “Eating” democracy conveys the efforts of the government’s community and civil education programs to engineer citizens for an industrial capitalist society, for example, by means of representing healthy eating habits as a way of democratic participation during the Cold War. My discussion concentrates on these two aspects—the land distribution by lottery and the government programs of community education—in order to document the way in which Puerto Rico’s colonial state attempted to shape the landless into modern social subjects (Smith 1999: 197).

I conducted fieldwork in the community of Parcelas Gándaras in the municipality of Cidra in the 1990s. The community is representative of land distribution communities in the central-eastern region. However, my interest in documenting Cidra’s local history and the fact that I grew up and have personal ties within the community inspired my choice of Parcelas Gándaras. Juan García, my grandfather, was a landless worker who became a landholder in the community during the 1960s. Growing up, I was always intrigued by stories of how people endured many hardships but still maintained networks of solidarity and expressed a sense of community. I was also interested in their stories of how Luis Muñoz Marín and the PPD had redeemed them from extreme poverty.

### **Winning the lottery: Democracy in action**

Under the slogan of *Pan, Tierra y Libertad* (Bread, Land, and Liberty) and its party symbol of a *jíbaro* (a male rural folk), the PPD carried out its electoral campaign for the elections of 1940. PPD leaders offered to eliminate land concentration and monocrop production of sugar cane and neutralize the power of North American corporations on the island. Thus, one of the first measures passed by the PPD-dominated legislature was the Land Law in the spring of 1941. The Autoridad de Tierras (Land Authority), initially in charge of Title V, began to distribute lands in 1942 (Edel 1962: 43–4). The land distribution program became the most important evidence that the PPD could fulfill its promises of providing economic relief, land, and freedom from labor coercion to the landless population. For the PPD, distributing land was a way to democratize society and an instrument of social justice by forcing a more equitable distribution of wealth. The PPD also wanted to showcase that its political agenda of reform aimed at improving the living conditions of the working class. These discourses of land reform, democracy, and social justice caught the attention of many landless workers who became PPD supporters. However, PPD’s discourses were far from the actual implementation and developments of the program. Land distribution, democracy, and social justice unfolded partially and did not reach everyone.

On a typical morning in the eastern highlands of Puerto Rico, women and men belonging to landless families from the countryside and the small town of Cidra woke up around 4:00 am or 5:00 am in the morning. Their daily routine began with simple cup of black coffee, and if they had enough money for food, they would add soda crackers or cornmeal. In some cases, they had to walk an hour to their jobs and work from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. Friday, August 31, 1945, however, was a unique day for them; for they were going to be participants of a land distribution by lottery that the Puerto Rican government had scheduled. The possibility of winning a plot of land as a prize represented a dramatic change in their lives. Most of landless workers had to toil to cultivate the land and perform heavy agricultural tasks, such as cutting sugar cane, picking coffee, or sewing tobacco for long hours. Without any protection, they were at the mercy of their employers, who also provided their housing. Land distribution was an opportunity for landless workers to end those abuses and improve their lives.

The lotteries were a culmination of a rising discursive formation about social justice and the evils of monocrop cultivation. PPD leaders knew that landlessness was a big problem and any efforts to resolve this problem would find support among the rural population. To illustrate this point, the discourses of landless workers about their needs and efforts to overcome hardship reveal the importance of owning land and land distribution. Former landless workers expressed that their aspirations in those days were to *buscar ambiente* (to look for a place with better economic and social opportunities) and *tener con que comer y donde vivir* (to have the wherewithal to eat and live). Landless families suffered from inadequate housing, short life expectancy, endemic diseases, and malnutrition. Lack of food and medical care exacerbated their harsh living conditions. In the crowd, the enthusiasm of landless families ran high as they expected to be vindicated by obtaining land, their symbol of freedom.



Catholic priest blessing the drawing of the lots for parcels in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.

Landless workers *aspiraban a sentirse libres* (aspired to feel free) from landowners' coercion. Because housing was an instrument by which a landowner could exercise control and discipline over landless workers, possessing land was central to their aspirations for "freedom." As Pastor, a former *agregado* and *parcelero*, said, "to have a place to build a house... They were *agregados*. They would get sick, and if they could not work, they would be fired." Daniela, a small property owner, informed me that her mother constantly struggled to save money doing laundry for rich people. Her sacrifices paid off when she was able to buy a small plot of land. For landless workers, land represented political, economic, and social freedom.

That morning in 1945 in the municipality of Cidra, government officials of the Land Authority, the agency initially in charge of the land distribution program, together with the PPD municipal government officials and political leaders, began the distribution of *Parcelas Gándaras*. This ceremony was the 111th of the program and the first in Cidra.<sup>5</sup> Government officials distributed 162 plots in the new community (Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico 1949: 60). The Land Authority located *Parcelas Gándaras* to the east of the town center of the municipality of Cidra, close to roads that made the larger urban centers of Caguas and Cayey more accessible. Government officials conducted the ceremony of land distribution in front of the house of Blas, a community leader chosen by the Land Authority and an active PPD member.

Government officials conducted the ceremony under the veil of PPD's rituals and discourses about democracy, social justice, and popular participation. The ceremony began with speeches and fanfare about the benefits of land reform and the government policies against the enemies of the people, the large land ownership interests represented by the Republican Party, and the U.S. sugar corporations. Local legislators, government officials, and local prominent members of the PPD



A Protestant pastor blessing the drawing of the lots for parcels in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.

joined in the ceremony, which had overtones of a political rally or even a festival because of the music, and alcoholic beverages behind the scenes. The ceremony closed with the lottery. The officials in charge had a bag with bundles of paper from which the candidates would pick one, and if that bundle had a number, they won the plot with that specific number.

Government discourses express the fairness and transparency of the process of selecting candidates and distributing the land. In order to participate in the program, landless workers had to apply in the municipal hall. Government officials were the ones to determine who qualified for the program. The principal requirement was to be the landless head of a household and a wage earner living in a house built on another person's rural land (Autoridad de Tierras [1948?]: 101). In practice, the government also accepted landless workers who did not work in agriculture and lived in urban areas. They also gave priority to the landless workers already residing in the lands to be distributed, and people from whom the government had expropriated land for other projects.

Land distribution overall did not immediately resolve the problem of landlessness in Puerto Rico. While some recipients of land stayed in their new communities, others left the communities to become landless workers or to migrate to the cities and the United States. Fundadora and Monserrate are two interesting examples of women and former landless workers who were recipients of land. Their lives reflect the different journeys of former landless families after obtaining a parcel. In the 1930s, Fundadora was living with her first husband in the municipality of Naranjito in the central highlands of Puerto Rico. Her husband got sick and she maintained the household by washing clothes for the town's elite. Because of her husband's illness and the low income, they were *pasando hambre* (experiencing hunger) and decided to move to the municipality of Cidra, where her parents lived and worked in a tobacco farm. Eventually, her husband died from lack of medical care. Later, she was able to find a job as a domestic employee in the house of Luis Lugo, Cidra's postmaster.

During the lottery drawing, government officials gave priority to widows like Fundadora, and she had the privilege of being the first person to draw a number, and she won a plot in the Parcelas Gándaras. Ironically, Fundadora and her family left the community in the late 1940s because of interpersonal problems with neighbors. With the money from the improvements made to the parcela and the house they built, they bought a house in a working class sector of town. However, they sold it eventually and moved frequently, sometimes renting houses, or becoming landless again. Pastor, her second husband, migrated to Miami in the 1970s and 1980s, and this allowed them to buy a piece of land in Cidra and to end their frequent moves.

Unlike Fundadora, Monserrate remained in the same parcela her husband Rosendo received from the land distribution program in the 1940s. She was a former *agregada* from the Gándara family, the family that the government expropriated land from to create the community of Parcelas Gándaras. Rafael, one of the owners, suggested she marry Rosendo before the distribution so they would qualify for a parcela. They married and became one of the first families to settle in the community. When Rosendo could not find work and retired, Monserrate found a job in a cigar company, in addition to helping her husband to cultivate their parcel.

Other landless workers did not easily obtain a parcela. In the distribution of Parcelas Gándaras, government officials compiled a list of candidates on a blackboard kept in the municipal hall. Party membership, personal favors, and networks determined who would participate in the lottery. In another land distribution in the community, an *agregado* from the municipality of Cidra and a

follower of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) protested the unfairness of the process during the distribution ceremony. He had applied for the program, but a municipal official took him off the list because of his political views. According to a PPD member and a land recipient, because the PIP member was drunk, he interrupted the ceremony and shouted, "I am in favor of independence, and now, I will be more so until I die." Political leaders influenced the Land Authority in compiling the lottery lists. Neighborhood PPD commissioners usually recommended PPD members to the program and subjected biased lists of preference.<sup>6</sup> This patronage facilitated the access to government services to PPD members, while marginalizing the rest.



*At the drawing of lots for parcelas in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.*

During the ceremony, after the speeches ended, landless workers began to pick papers from a bag. Domingo even remembers taking the number from a paper bag. He told me that there were two rounds in the lottery. In the first round, he picked a blank paper, and he waited, since officials asked people to wait for the second round. While he was waiting, he got close to two people who had won parcels. They were commenting that the loose papers were the ones with numbers. He heard that, "People take the tight bundles, yet those have nothing. You can see the number in the loose ones." Listening to this, Domingo went to the second round and picked a loose paper that won him his parcel. He claims that if he had not heard about the loose papers he would not be living in the Parcelas Gándaras. Stories such as this reflect the competitive and desperate environment this system created for people to be able to obtain a parcel. Not every eligible applicant received one because of the inability of the government to purchase enough land.

The integrity of the land distribution process was also questionable. According to a PPD member, the organizers of the lotteries intentionally gave some PPD members a piece of paper with a parcela number which they pretended to draw from the lottery bag. He also claims that PPD officials offered him a parcela through this method.

Another important aspect is that the government did not distribute all of the parcels through the lottery. In the case of Parcelas Gándaras, many people who received parcels did not participate in the lottery. Government agencies were expropriating land where people lived and the government set aside some parcels for them. In Parcelas Gándaras, some of the residents had been displaced by a government project to build the artificial lake in Cidra. For example, Eduardo and many other residents received land as an exchange from government expropriations in the Miramonte sector of the municipality. In the end, land distribution was not solely an act of giving land to “liberate” landless workers and obtain electoral support, but a process that benefited particular interests. Political favors, manipulation of the list of candidates, and the resettlement of expropriated small landowners raises questions about the extent that land distribution was really about liberating landless workers from their dependence on landowners. What happened was that workers became dependent on the political patronage of PPD leaders. The lottery and its ceremony was a way by which government officials and PPD leaders could present the distribution process as a symbol of democratic practice and popular participation, rather than for what it really was.

The ceremonies of land distribution reflected the ideas of agrarian reform and social justice throughout the Americas, from the Mexican agrarian reform to Roosevelt’s New Deal. The rhetoric of liberation echoed the populist and radical leftist discourse of social justice in Latin America. However, distributing land was a political process vitiated by frequent exceptions to the rules. Despite such irregularities, the act of distributing land changed the lives of thousands of former landless families. Those who had access to the lottery and won a parcel gained the opportunity to find new ways to improve their living conditions. They also found new ways to play the democratic game. For the many landless families that were mere spectators, the “PPD fulfilled its promises.” Thus, landless families and residents of land distribution communities became strong political supporters of the PPD, giving legitimacy to its government at home and abroad.

### Cold war diets

Part of the government’s strategies for creating new citizens was to promote and create community organizations, print posters, publish literature, and release films. PPD leaders and government officials utilized these educational materials to encourage leadership and self-help in order to facilitate community development. These policies and strategies began to take importance in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the PPD introduced Operation Bootstrap with the purpose of industrializing the country. Residents of land distribution communities participated in many of these government programs. The government intended to modernize working class families by teaching them supposedly habits of an urban and manufacture-oriented society. Landless workers and residents were not passive receptors of community development. On the contrary, they accommodated, reinterpreted, and pushed for changes of these programs in order to sustain their everyday life.

In the 1950s, landless workers and residents of land distribution communities experienced changes in the strategies of industrialization and a new geopolitical

configuration. The U.S. ceded administrative autonomy to the colonial government, allowing the PPD to control office. Now in full control of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the PPD introduced new development strategies in the land distribution program. In addition, agricultural production began to decline, while the industrial and service sectors were gaining more importance in the economy (Dietz 1986: 255–9). Changes at the global and local levels closely affected the development of land distribution communities.

From 1946 to 1948, party leaders began to discuss the PPD program for economic development. The legislature began to review the policies of land reform and industrialization. In 1947, the government initiated a development strategy of industrialization based on attracting U.S. capital investments. The government began to concentrate its efforts on providing trained labor, tax exception incentives, and infrastructure for largely U.S. manufacturing industries. Land reform policies had already undermined the economic and political power of the U.S. sugar corporations. Funding problems and the political opposition also influenced the redesign of the program. The government suspended the land distribution program in 1947, while the Planning Board worked on reorganizing the program. In 1948, the government transferred the land distribution program to the newly created Administración de Programas Sociales (Social Programs Administration [APS]), under the Land Authority and later, in 1950, transferred it to Puerto Rico’s Departamento de Agricultura y Comercio (Department of Agriculture and Commerce) (Edel 1962: 55–9).



*Land Authority officials explaining the procedure before the drawing for parcels in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Jack Delano.*

Encouraging residents' involvement, the agency worked to educate them about their role as workers and citizens in a democratic and capitalist society. The government expected the population to willingly build the infrastructure needed by the country and participate in the government programs of self-help and development. The goals of the APS were to promote leadership, mutual aid, and social responsibility as keys to fostering a labor force socially responsible as well as physically healthy. This agency established committees that sought to find solutions for community problems, such as lack of potable water, electricity, bridges, and roads or inadequate housing and access to health care. The committees appointed leaders that served as liaisons between the government and the community. The APS sought to foster social cohesion and collaboration through the establishment of self-help committees, milk stations, cooperatives, and small-scale industries. Social cohesion and collaboration increased in importance when agricultural production began to decline and industrialization was expanding. The results of APS's efforts were to expand civil society, gain consent from subalterns, and foster economic development (Departamento de Agricultura y Comercio de Puerto Rico 1953: 11-36, 1958: 242; Edel 1963: 30).

Other agencies and programs used those committees as tools to promote different aspects of community development. Another government agency, the División de Educación de la Comunidad (Division of Community Education [DIVEDCO]),

under the Department of Education, provided films, posters, and literature in order to encourage hygiene, community leadership, and political participation. Other programs such as Mutual Aid and the 4H Clubs attempted to transform the lives of residents by improving their health and socioeconomic conditions. Some of these programs were already in place and the government integrated them to the land distribution program.

Providing land did not change the precarious housing conditions of former landless families. Residents had to build a house within 120 days of receiving land. With limited

access to cash and durable construction materials, residents built their houses with straw, pieces of wood, cans, and galvanized iron. Widows such as Fundadora resorted to the help of her brothers and neighbors to build a house of wood and cardboard. The communities lacked proper sanitary facilities, garbage collection, roads, electricity, and water, among other services. Jobs were not easily available for the residents. Nor had the government supplied electricity or water services or a community center. The critics perceived this situation as evidence that the communities were becoming slums. Residents protested asking for assistance



*Land Authority Program officials checking map of the land to be distributed by the drawing of lots—Luquillo (June 1946). Photographer Charles Rotkin.*

from local party leaders. This situation undermined the government's ability to implement land reform.

As a solution to the housing problem, the government established the Mutual Aid program in 1949 with the aim of building low-cost homes for residents. The government provided construction materials on credit, while participants supplied the labor. Other government agencies and organizations that provided funds to buy materials were the Farm Security Administration, the Red Cross, and the Office for War Emergency (Cuevas Cruz 1990: 128). Parcela holders were in charge of donating their work to build their houses and their neighbors' houses. In the community, a large portion of landless workers built their houses through the Mutual Aid Program. Antonio, a resident, participated in the program with some neighbors. However, in practice, most residents paid workers instead of working or sent relatives to cover their labor in building other people's houses. Parcela holders paid for work either because they did not have the time or were living outside the town. While living and working in San Juan and the U.S., some parcela holders were able to send money home in order to participate in the program. This situation in turn provided employment to other residents who could work building houses. The program evolved, changing its character of mutual aid to become an enterprise in the community.

Some residents did not understand the program and claimed that they did not participate. This is the case of Domingo, who was working in San Juan and built a concrete house through the Mutual Aid Program, though he claimed not to have participated. The program also had limits and did not reach all of the residents. Some parcela residents did not participate in the program because they could not pay the costs, or provide labor, or because they had to migrate to the U.S. All other residents who participated in the program had to continue rebuilding and expanding the houses. Although houses provided a better safeguard against weather conditions, they were small, with only one room for families with more than five members. In Parcelas Gándaras, the Mutual Aid Program contributed to improve housing conditions, but it did not solve all housing problems.

The government perceived the Mutual Aid Program as a "democratic experience," in which parcela holders could resolve their problems without depending heavily on the government. For the government, participation of residents in building their houses was a lesson of individual action and community achievement. These ideas were embodied in the government model for a new democratic, industrial, and urban society. In Parcelas Gándaras, the Mutual Aid Program did not necessarily create cooperation among residents. The practices of hiring substitutes for building the houses changed the original intentions of community cooperation and mutual self-help. Moreover, in the pre-land distribution era, building a house was a family project that involved relatives, friends, and neighbors. People used the same networks for harvesting beans or tobacco in which neighbors organized gatherings in order to help each other. Neighbors already knew how to set up networks of self-help and cooperation with each other from their previous experiences as landless workers.

DIVEDCO, established by the government in 1949, also worked to promote cooperation and community development by using popular education in land distribution communities. U.S. ideas of using community clubs to "democratize" society and engineer consent inspired government officials to create DIVEDCO (Graebner 1987: 142). DIVEDCO's agents visited rural areas with movie projectors to screen its own films such as *Una voz en la montaña* (1952), *El puente* (1954), and *Modesta* (1956). This agency also produced its own companion posters and books for the films

(Wale and Isales 1967: 7; Rivera de Otero 1976: 49–51). Among the books produced were *La mujer y sus derechos*, *El arrabal*, *La ciudad*, *El líder*, *Lucha obrera*, and *Los derechos del hombre*. These educational materials addressed topics of leadership, development, health and hygiene, and cooperation and self-help to resolve social problems. The goal was to provide residents with new knowledge and make them reflect upon their own experiences. Francisco, DIVEDCO's agent in charge of Parcelas Gándaras, remembers that awareness about contagious diseases through these educational materials were one of the most important success of the program. Government officials conceptualized community development as a process in which the population would participate in the resolution of their problems (Rivera de Otero 1976: 26, 49–51).

As an example, the topic of leadership in the books and films sought to transmit “democratic values.” The government wanted Puerto Ricans to understand the concept of liberal democracy and participation in the electoral process. The purpose was to introduce new forms of behavior and facilitate the transition from a rural order to an urban, industrial one. The films presented discourses about how people could improve their living conditions by taking action in their hands and build infrastructure, such as sanitary facilities, sewers, roads, community centers, and schools (Wale and Isales 1967; Rivera de Otero 1976: 49–51; Lauria Perricelli 1990–91: 93–6).<sup>7</sup>

DIVEDCO, together with the APS, created action groups to foster leadership and participation in community projects. In Parcelas Gándaras, DIVEDCO's officials working in the community arranged community meetings and discussion groups at the house of Blas, the community leader, or in the house of Elmer Ellsworth, an important PPD leader and landowner. The program made parcela residents aware that they could resolve their problems through collective efforts. The program taught residents how to use government services and approach government officials with concerns. Residents of Parcelas Gándaras began to discover new ways to deal with the government. They held meetings, created committees, and went to the government authorities with requests. For example, Monserrate, a long-time resident, remembers how the lack of access to potable water impelled neighbors to form a committee, write letters, and protest to municipal and government authorities. Community education taught residents to deal with the government to obtain aid that they could complement with cooperation in building community projects. Yet community education was a way in which residents might become more dependent on government help and learn how to channel grievances through institutional channels without aiming at the transformation of their society.

The state also engineered consent through their participation in development and their direct access to government and party politics. Some residents remember with enthusiasm how community meetings and neighborhood committees gave them a voice within the government and the PPD. This enthusiasm did not necessarily translate into critical thinking, but into political fanatic behavior and idolatry of the PPD and its leader Luis Muñoz Marín. As Concepción, a resident, pointed out to me, “The PPD was too strong, no one could speak against it. The PPD was the God on earth.” Avelino, a resident, recalls how he did not obtain a job as a policeman because he was a member of the PIP. Lack of political tolerance with non-PPD supporters meant lack of a political space that could produce a plurality of political options, and hence, critical thinking.

Another organization that used recreation in the communities was the 4H Clubs. The Estación Experimental Agrícola (Agricultural Experimental Station) of the Universidad de Puerto Rico, created with federal funds from the U.S. Department

of Agriculture, was in charge of these clubs.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of 4H clubs was to nurture leadership among rural youth, teach them about home economics, health, and agricultural techniques. Organizers divided the clubs in groups of young women and men. Each group elected officials among its members in order to learn about parliamentary process (Orcasitas 1936; Olivencia 1952).

Since the 1930s, the Agricultural Extension Service had established clubs throughout the Island. After the 1940s, the government, as part of the strategy of community development, encouraged the organization of clubs because of their educational role. In Cidra, DIVEDCO, with the collaboration of the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico's Department of Education established clubs in Parcelas Gándaras as well as five other wards (Orcasitas 1936: 307–11; Olivencia 1952: 1–4).



*Drawing lots for parcels in Toa Baja (July 1946). Photographer Charles Rotkin.*

In the community, 4H Clubs carried out various individual as well as collective projects. Extension agents visited the homes of club members and supervised projects such as garden cultivation and house improvements. A social worker was in charge of educating young women in home economics and developing job skills such as needlework. Vocational teachers and extension agents taught members about agricultural techniques, home economics, business administration, running cooperatives, and parliamentary procedures. The local extension agency provided loans to students so they could acquire tools, cattle, or seeds. The male club members in the Parcelas Gándaras built a small meetinghouse on the club's plot. Extension agents divided the plot into smaller units that members cultivated with vegetables and other crops. On one occasion, members planted the whole plot with tobacco. The club also set up a small factory for canning food. Members learned how to raise and vaccinate

chickens, cattle, and pigs. Some of them went to work with farmers earning cash for their families. Adults from the community such as Blas volunteered helping and teaching members. The success of these clubs depended on the support of government officials, residents in the community, and the enthusiasm of members (Orcasitas 1936: 308–10; Universidad de Puerto Rico 1943: 3).

Socialization of children in 4H clubs by means of exposure to parliamentary process and cooperation was an attempt by the government to ensure its authority and control. A pamphlet about organizing clubs states, “The youth of a democratic government should learn to work in teams and, therefore, to behave in a constructive and prudent manner. In the United States, the youth should get accustomed to working in teams that function within democratic principles from an early age. In this way, they learn how to work with others contributing their best ideas when the team makes



*Land Authority officials explaining the procedure before the drawing for parcels in Toa Alta (Nov. 1945). Photographer Edward Rosskam.*

a decision, disregarding selfish interests for the good of all, and finally, learning to accept the will of the majority.”<sup>9</sup> The government’s discourses about democracy aimed at the creation of social cohesion in the new communities, as an element of social engineering that could introduce and transform everyday life and reproduce new power relations among workers, party bosses, and government officials.

Among the materials distributed among 4H Clubs was a brochure, entitled *Dieta y democracia* (Diet and Democracy), that offered a nutritional guide specifically for citizens in a democratic society.<sup>10</sup> Inside the brochure, the subtitles read: “democracy needs healthy citizens” and “maintain your health with a good diet.” It listed the different food groups that maintain bodily functions, reproduce tissue, and provide energy. The front of the cover showed the U.S. and 4H Club flags. The Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Puerto Rico published it in 1947.

The brochure *Dieta y democracia* illustrates the way that U.S. federal government was constructing a democratic imaginary and how the PPD government was promoting it in land distribution communities. It is an example of the efforts of the federal and local governments through community education to promote political participation, define notions of citizenship, and establish a disciplined and productive labor force. This document is also part of the notions of development that attempted to expand knowledge and techniques of industrial capitalism to “third world” countries through community education. Creating healthy citizens was a way to ensure loyal and productive workers willing to cooperate in state performances. The state, through civil society, community education, and institutions such as 4H clubs, attempted to produce new forms of habits, practices of everyday life, and tactics of survival,

which would ensure the hegemony of the ruling groups (Scott 1998: 5, 191).

Economic changes that were transforming social relations, time, and space overshadowed the ability of the government to succeed in creating healthy habits among the population. During the 1940s throughout the 1960s, the diet of Puerto Ricans became gradually higher in fat. Supermarkets replaced corner stores and town markets with canning and imported food. Fast food and fried food became more predominant in the diet of Puerto Ricans (Roche 2002). What the government created, a democracy of consumerism, ended up being incompatible with having healthy citizens.

Like other government programs, 4H Clubs represented a means of developing the countryside through education, economic improvement, socialization, and recreation. Different from other programs, its targets were the children of farmers and agricultural workers. M. T. Orcasitas (1936: 308) argued, “Its ideal is to prepare citizens who are strong and free to triumph in life.” 4H Clubs attempted to prepare children to be agricultural workers, good citizens, and entrepreneurs in an agrarian society. After the 1960s, agricultural knowledge became obsolete for parcela residents and their children. Ironically, the clubs continued teaching about agricultural methods when Operation Bootstrap was marginalizing the agriculturally based economy. In addition, 4H clubs continued to reinforce gender relations by teaching home economics, canning, and hygiene exclusively to female children, while male children only learned about agricultural techniques (Universidad de Puerto Rico 1943: 8, 13). This is in clear contradiction to DIVEDCO’s efforts to educate the population about women rights by keeping the populace aware of gender inequality and traditional gender roles. Community education through 4H clubs and other programs did not transform gender relations.

Government officials viewed community education as an instrument for transforming old habits by emphasizing education in agricultural techniques, health, and political participation. Supporters argued that this strategy would promote democratic values and, consequently, a democratization of the entire society. In Latin America and throughout the world, governments were using these strategies. During the 1940s and 1950s, economic crises in the agrarian sector prompted Latin American governments and international agencies to introduce community development programs. The Cold War prompted these reforms to foster community activism and, supposedly, democracy. Community education programs sought to promote popular involvement in projects of development in order to avoid social unrest and facilitate development projects. Part of these strategies consisted of government agencies sending extension agents to “modernize” the countryside (De Janvry 1981: 3). Agencies such as the APS, DIVEDCO, and the 4H Clubs elaborated their campaigns through fieldworkers who visited the communities, establishing meetings and creating committees. Land distribution communities served as a laboratory to experiment with these new policies of economic development.

However, government policies were mere unarticulated attempts to impose a view of modernity that had uneven results over residents of land distribution communities. Community education programs democratized Puerto Rican society by reducing the power of landowners and increasing the power of PPD leaders and industrial capital. When Operation Bootstrap sought to alleviate poverty while expanding consumption to the population, the PPD began to formulate contradictorily Operation Serenity to make the population conscious about the effects of unmeasured consumerism. During the 1960s, consumption patterns had increased substantially, and U.S. commercial businesses were taking advantage of these trends (Ortiz Cuadra 2005:

32). Nevertheless, residents engaged community education programs by giving priority to their immediate survival needs. For example, the Mutual Aid program did not teach about cooperation and self-help to those residents who could pay for the labor instead of working themselves on their houses. Community education instilled political patronage and intolerance instead of participation and critical thinking. 4H clubs taught agriculture to children, but migration took people away from the countryside, and industrial manufacture and service sectors were becoming the principal employment sources. Residents also utilized their networks in the community to resolve their problems. At last, the government efforts to create community cohesion failed with community education. Sharing food, and knowing and visiting their neighbors, and taking care of elders are not important anymore for social reproduction. In post-Operation Bootstrap Puerto Rico, networks of solidarity slowly became obsolete in land distribution communities.



*Spectators at the drawing of lots for parcelas in Luquillo (June 1947). Photographer Charles Rotkin.*

### **Fragmented democracy**

The land distribution program, more than a vehicle for obtaining electoral votes, was an attempt at transforming the everyday life of landless workers with the purpose of developing the Island. Those development strategies confronted moments of tension, however, and points of rupture between government officials and PPD leaders, landless workers, and residents of land distribution communities. The PPD policies were not part of a cohesive and homogenous project. They were the result of different competing interests, international and

local conditions, and workers' claims and involvement.

The ceremonies of distribution enacted as acts of democracy against corporate interests are examples of the strategies used to build support among landless families. The landless, as well as technocrats, considered land distribution to be progress and a form of liberation from precarious living conditions. Nevertheless, the manipulation of the lotteries and the recommendation of candidates by politicians are examples of corruption and the lack of democracy in practice. Self-help programs and community cooperation were part of the PPD's efforts to articulate a centralized policy through the APS. Government agencies became a vehicle for expanding civil society by fostering industrialization, economic growth, and urbanization.

The policies of land distribution were unsuccessful in transforming landless workers into "modern" workers for industrial manufacture because the economy did not generate enough industrial employment. A large part of the residents of land distribution communities began to migrate in the 1950s, and a large number of them became dependent on U.S. federal welfare funds during the 1960s and 1970s. The government programs were partially successful only in increasing political participation and improving standards of living. Democracy did not mean a plurality of political options, but only political participation within the PPD. The government eliminated the servile social relations between landless workers and landowners and the economic and political power of U.S. sugar corporations. However, residents of land distribution communities became dependant on PPD bosses. Regardless of the government's goals, landless

workers and residents redefined those discourses and policies by stretching the rules of many programs and adapting the land distribution program to fit their everyday life.

At the peak of the Cold War, the land distribution program served to promote land reform, urbanization, and industrialization to counter the "menace" of communism. During the 1950s and 1960s, as part of the Point IV and Alliance for Progress initiatives, land distribution communities became a showcase of development. Government agencies promoted Puerto Rico's economic model by inviting foreign government officials to tour land distribution communities, factories, development projects, and a variety of industrial and social service programs (Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico 1954; United States Foreign Operations Administration [1955] n.d.). It was evident that the model community showcased by the government had all the infrastructure of an urban and industrial society. The government did not showcase communities such as Parcelas Gándaras, which lacked many features of developed urban infrastructure. These visits created a climate of legitimacy for the PPD and U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico by promoting Puerto Rico as a success story (see Rosario Urrutia 1993).

From the 1940s through the 1960s, several factors gradually transformed the land distribution program from a project of land reform into a housing program. After World War II, the PPD realized that land reform needed great financial support. Moreover, the different stages of the industrialization program, the migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S., political opposition, and the problems of acquiring land also shaped the reorientation of the land distribution program. The decade of the 1950s brought a change to mutual self-aid programs and cooperatives in their strategies to solve the problems of housing and economic development. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, Operation Bootstrap drew both the attention of the government and the money to continue the development of these programs (Curtis 1966: 56). In addition, the government designed other settlement programs, such as *caseríos* (public housing) and *urbanizaciones* (urban developments). In 1968, the PPD lost its control of the government, and the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party [PNP]) began to give ownership titles to parcel holders in 1969. By the 1970s, the government transferred the land distribution program from the Department of Agriculture and Commerce to the Puerto Rico Housing Department. In 1970, the population living in land distribution communities represented 14 percent of the families on the island. The government had established 396 communities and had distributed 78,481 parcels (Departamento de Agricultura y Comercio de Puerto Rico 1971: 42). The land distribution program evolved with the strategies of industrialization, becoming one of the most important programs that impacted a substantial part of the population. In contemporary Puerto Rico, land has lost its agricultural value and access to it is not anymore an issue to survive; therefore, the land distribution program is no longer a symbol of the PPD's power and legitimacy.

Scholars of mid-twentieth-century Puerto Rico have misunderstood and underestimated the importance of the land reform and distribution. Title V urbanized the countryside, facilitated migration as an escape valve for unemployment, contributed to industrial capital investments, improved the living conditions of landless workers, and undermined the economic and political power of U.S. sugar corporations. The importance of Puerto Rican land reform does not lie in the states' goals of agricultural diversification and reorganization of rural land ownership. The importance of the land reform lies more in its unanticipated results, particularly how it transformed the economy by providing landless families with land for housing purposes and subsistence agriculture, allowing women and men to migrate and work in the manufacture and service sectors.



NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although Gramsci (1971) uses subalterns as a synonym of working class, my definition of subalterns includes workers as well as impoverished small landholders who practiced subsistence and small-scale cash crop agriculture. I consider that rich landowners, professionals, government employees, creditors, and merchants represented the local elite in Puerto Rico's small towns.
- <sup>2</sup> The Land Law of 1941 also included: Title IV, which established Proportional Profit Farms where managers and workers share all the profits; and Title VI, which distributed individual farms to landless workers (Autoridad de Tierras [1948?]: 17–79).
- <sup>3</sup> On July 14, 1940, the Laborista Puro (Pure Labor), Liberal and Unión Republicana Progresista (Progressive Republican Union) parties established a coalition known as the Unificación Tripartita Puertorriqueña. The Laborista Puro and Unión Republicana Progresista represented splinter groups respectively from the Socialist and Republican parties. The Liberal Party grouped the remainder of liberal sectors that accepted a pro-statehood political program after the death of its leader Antonio R. Barceló (Bayrón Toro 2003: 193).
- <sup>4</sup> John F. Kennedy Library, Teodoro Moscoso Papers, Correspondence, Box 4, File 10/61.
- <sup>5</sup> Archivo Luis Muñoz Marín (ALMM), Sección IV, Serie 2, Subserie 14, Addendum 14 B, Cartapacio 1, Press Release, Land Distribution of Parcelas Gándaras.
- <sup>6</sup> On July 17, 1957, Juan Ortiz Rivera, President of the PPD committee in Rabanal, wrote a letter to the government on behalf of Josefa Figueroa Rivera. Ms. Figueroa was living under critical conditions. She lived with her nine children in one room. See Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Tarea 96–20, Caja 360, Exp. tercero.
- <sup>7</sup> These movies are located at the Archivo de Imágenes en Movimiento, AGPR.
- <sup>8</sup> 4H stands for head, heart, health, and hands. ALMM, Sección IV, Serie 10, Subserie 19, Cartapacio 184.
- <sup>9</sup> La juventud de un gobierno democrático debe aprender a trabajar en grupos y, como tales, a actuar en forma constructiva y mesurada. En los Estados Unidos la juventud debe acostumbrarse desde muy temprana edad a actuar en grupos que funcionen dentro de los principios democráticos. Así aprenden a trabajar con los demás, aportando sus mejores ideas al hacer el grupo alguna decisión, desechando intereses egoístas por el bien de todos y, finalmente, aprenden a acatar la voluntad de la mayoría (Universidad de Puerto Rico 1943: 33).
- <sup>10</sup> This document was located at the Library Files of the Agriculture Experimental Station, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

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