

National Struggle And Class Struggle In Puerto Rico

Lessons for Anarchists

Mike Staudenmaier

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In the past 150 years, assertions of national identity and class identity have transformed the world in which we live, changing the self-understanding, motivations, and actions of billions of human beings. To the extent that one identity is deemed more important than the other, various national struggles and class struggles, sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary, have emerged in all parts of the planet. As anarchists struggling for revolution, we need to comprehend the contradictions of nation and class in historical context.

The Puerto Rican experience represents a microcosm of many of these issues. Like many nations in the Americas, Puerto Ricans have a history of repression and resistance that demands an understanding of race, class, (neo-)colonialism, gender, and other key concepts. Further, the Puerto Rican diaspora has largely settled in North America, especially in industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest of the United States. For anarchists working in formations like NEFAC or FRAC-GL, there is much to be learned from an analysis of Puerto Rican history, and the lens of national struggle and class struggle highlights some valuable lessons for anarchists.

Puerto Rican history since the mid-nineteenth century can be understood to consist of five eras (although these divisions are somewhat arbitrary). The first, extending from approximately 1850 to 1898, corresponds to the decline of Spanish colonial power and the rise of Puerto Rican national identity. The second, from 1898 to 1920, dovetails with the rise and decline of the anarchist and syndicalist movements on the island. The third, from 1920 to 1960, covers the rise of status issues (independence, statehood, and commonwealth) as the key political debate among Puerto Ricans. The fourth period, from 1960 to 1990, includes the rise of Leninism and armed struggle inside the nationalist movement on the island and in the diaspora. Finally, the fifth period, from 1990 to the present, has seen major upheavals in the political scene that have important implications for anarchists.

1850–1898: Dead History of the Tainos

The birth of Puerto Rican national identity lies in the misery of four hundred years of Spanish colonialism. The “three roots” (to use a common phrase) of Puerto Rican culture are the indigenous Taino culture, the forcibly imported culture of West African slaves, and the Iberian culture of the Spanish colonizers. Beginning with Taino and slave revolts, the creation of maroon societies — free communities, found throughout the Americas, inhabited by a mix of escaped slaves, rebellious Europeans, and indigenous peoples — in the mountains of Puerto Rico allowed for the development of a hybrid culture of resistance that continued even after the total genocide of the indigenous population. Anti-slavery struggles among liberal sectors of the Spanish population built upon this tradition, and upon the influence of South American liberator Simon Bolivar, who briefly visited the small island of Vieques early in the nineteenth century. The nascent national bourgeoisie also attached itself, at least rhetorically, to this same liberalism.

The most important leader of these anti-slavery campaigns was Ramon Emeterio Betances, who is considered to this day the father of Puerto Rican nationalism. Betances was a liberal criollo (Spaniard by descent), a European-educated doctor with a strongly humanitarian and revolutionary approach to the world. He advocated a confederation of the Antilles (the stretch of islands in the Caribbean from Cuba to Trinidad, all of which were heavily involved in the slave trade and populated at least partly by Africans) that reflected the inspiration of Bolivar’s pan-Americanism.

In classic nineteenth century fashion, Betances and others developed a revolutionary conspiracy designed to overthrow the Spanish colonial regime and establish an independent Puerto Rico. This effort, known afterward as the Grito de Lares (the Cry of Lares, named for the mountain town in which much of the fighting took place), was initially intended to be a multi-faceted attack, involving a naval invasion to be led by Betances from Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), which was intended to deliver arms purchased in the United States to a number of rural rebellions centered around Lares. The liberal middle class was approached to support the conspiracy, but response was mixed because many liberals deemed the prospects good for a peaceful transition to independence.

Unfortunately, the Spanish authorities uncovered the conspiracy a week before its scheduled start, due to the double cross of a Spanish military officer who offered to provide weapons to the conspirators, only to report the revolutionaries immediately. At the same time, the government of Santo Domingo prohibited Betances and the other exiles from sailing with the weapons, which forced the uprising to proceed with very few guns. The insurrection, short of fighters and weapons, was put down almost immediately. Many of the conspirators were killed; others died while imprisoned or survived and were later pardoned. Betances subsequently participated in other, even less successful conspiracies, but eventually went to live in exile in France, where he apparently participated in a conspiracy with turn-of-the-century Spanish anarchists to assassinate Spanish royalty. Despite the negative outcome, the Grito de Lares is considered the founding moment in the Puerto Rican national struggle.

This history offers certain parallels with the revolutions elsewhere in Latin America, but it also provides some intriguing divergences. For instance, most of the Latin American revolutions against the Spanish were animated by debates among the local bourgeoisie over the status of indigenous populations. Should they be physically exterminated via exclusion from the nation and dispossession from land (the conservative position, which corresponded nicely with the approach then being developed by the United States), or culturally exterminated through forced inclusion, christianized education, and cultural assimilation (the liberal position)? Both these approaches embraced white supremacy as an essential component in the development of national identity, be it in Mexico, Colombia, or Argentina.

An important historical fact ensured that the Puerto Rican experience would differ from this model: the indigenous Tainos had in fact been physically exterminated centuries before anyone thought of her- or himself as Puerto Rican. The dead history of the Tainos formed a convenient basis for the creation of a Puerto Rican national identity that included indigenous cultural elements (in music, food, language and other areas) without having to struggle with the messy issue of what to do with an actual human population. The result was the irrelevance of the conservative position, and the consolidation of the liberal position with the anti-slavery sentiments of Betances and others.

At the same time, grassroots struggles from below, the legacy of the maroon societies from the previous centuries, provided a substantial counter to the liberal position. There are historical parallels here as well to the wars of liberation in other parts of Latin America. The pro-indigenous class struggle led by Morelos and Hidalgo in Mexico, for instance, constituted the core of the independence movement there before the bourgeoisie was able to consolidate its control over the direction of the revolt against Spain. In Puerto Rico, Betances and his co-conspirators placed an anti-slavery plank front and center in the struggle for independence from Spain. The whole

situation exemplified the contradictions of an anti-white supremacist nationalism being built on the legacy of white supremacy.

Thus, white supremacy was hardly absent from the development of the Puerto Rican nation. As long as there have been Puerto Ricans, they have struggled with the contradictions of slavery and genocide, and with the cultural inclusion and physical exclusion of African and indigenous societies. As has been the case with every national identity forged in the Western hemisphere, white supremacy played an essential role in the development of the Puerto Rican nation, but not in the simple one-sided ways one might expect.

1898–1920: My Enemy’s Enemy

In 1898, shortly after Betances’ death, the brief and relatively bloodless Spanish-American War dramatically changed the course of Puerto Rican history. The long, slow decline of Spanish colonialism in the Americas was finally concluded, and US imperial domination was expanded into the Caribbean and the Pacific, especially in the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico. The turmoil created by the transition from Spanish to North American colonialism created an opening for the then-developing labor movement in Puerto Rico, which was heavily anarchist.

The classic image of anarchism’s rise to prominence in the Puerto Rican labor movement concerns the tobacco workers’ union, whose internationalist members rolled cigars in factories across the Caribbean, from Florida to Cuba to Puerto Rico, often fleeing repression or lack of work in one location only to take a comparable job in another. The unions, comprising these precursors of the globalized economy, routinely spent money to hire “readers” for each factory, whose job was simply to read aloud to the workers. Frequently included on the proudly radical but non-sectarian reading lists were writers like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Proudhon, and Malatesta. As the mostly illiterate, but highly mobile, tobaqueros heard more about anarchism, its profile grew.

After years of regional and trade-based organizing under Spanish rule, the Free Labor Federation (FLT) was formed in 1899, uniting most trade-unions on the island. The dominant and competing ideologies in the FLT from the beginning were anarchism, mostly imported from Spain and popular with the rank and file, and a reformist socialism reminiscent of Daniel De Leon’s North American socialism. While never an explicitly anarchist organization, the Federation represents the high-water mark in the history of anarchism in Puerto Rico.

With the transfer to US rule, the leadership of the FLT took an interesting approach to labor organizing: it actively courted the support of US labor organizations, especially the American Federation of Labor (AFL). History might have been different had the IWW existed when the FLT was formed in 1899, since the Free Federation’s early revolutionary syndicalism was a near-perfect match for the Wobblies. In contrast to the IWW, however, the FLT never expelled the “politicals” who believed in legislating social democracy; these forces were bolstered by the support of the AF of L for the bread-and-butter organizing of the FLT. Over time, the leadership of the Free Federation adopted an increasingly Americanized (and liberal) approach to labor struggle.

Among the anarchists, pragmatic grassroots organizing went hand in hand with ideological proselytizing. Luisa Capetillo, the most famous anarchist in Puerto Rican history, spent years organizing workers in all industries and all locales, advocating a mixture of mystical socialism, free-love feminism, and class-struggle anarchism. Sometimes referred to as the Emma Goldman

of Puerto Rico, she was expelled from Cuba for wearing pants in public, although her agitational activities might also have had something to do with it. Anarchists like Capetillo utilized the FLT as a resource and an organizing platform, while disdaining the increasingly liberal attitudes adopted by the bureaucrats at the top.

This pro-US liberalism led to an important and instructive dispute in the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1917, the Jones Act made Puerto Ricans citizens of the United States. The debate in Puerto Rico over the value of citizenship pitted the newly developing independentista movement, which opposed citizenship, against the leadership of the FLT, which supported citizenship. To make matters more interesting, the Unionist Party (bastion of the independentista movement under the leadership of Jose de Diego) controlled the House of Delegates, the only island-wide elected governmental body in Puerto Rico, while the Free Federation represented (in theory, at least) an entire class of the population largely excluded from the electoral process for economic and literacy reasons. The House of Delegates voted overwhelmingly to oppose the Jones Bill, while the Executive Council of the FLT sent a declaration to the US Congress outlining its support for the same legislation.

The Free Federation viewed the drive for independence with suspicion, fearing the Unionists were positioning themselves as a domestic bourgeoisie, which, once free of the yoke of US imperialism, would act swiftly to eliminate any radical organizations that challenged the class basis of the newly independent Puerto Rico. This suspicion was only reinforced by the strong ties between independentistas like de Diego and the local capitalists and land-owners who frequently doubled as members of the House of Delegates.

While the Free Federation was certainly correct in this assessment of the Unionists, as far as it went, there was more to the story. The independentistas, for instance, were eventually proven right in their fear that citizenship would make future independence from the US far more difficult. Similarly, the general independentista arguments against US colonialism have had far more historical resonance in the ensuing century than have the pro-labor arguments for integration. In addition, the interests of the Free Federation's leadership were not entirely pure: the growing relationship between the FLT and the AF of L would have been challenged by a move toward independence. On a certain level, the Unionists were right for the wrong reasons, while the FLT had (mostly) laudable motivations, but drew the wrong conclusion.

In the end, the FLT proved the old adage, my enemy's enemy is not my friend. Finding itself in a triangular struggle with the local bourgeoisie and the imperial power of the US, the Free Federation's leadership attempted to play the latter off against the former, only to get more than it bargained for. Puerto Rico's labor movement was largely spared the extreme repression that decimated the IWW in the United States after World War One, but it was still unable to adapt to changing circumstances. When the newly imposed US citizenship led more quickly to death (in the form of the draft during the War) than to equality or economic justice, the Free Federation was doomed. While subsequent labor organizations retained significant power, none was as radical at its base, or as thorough-going in its anti-capitalism. And with the death of the FLT, the anarchist presence in Puerto Rico ceased almost completely.

1920–1960: Pan, Tierra y Libertad

While anarchism fell on hard times, nationalism became the leading radical movement on the island. The independence movement was dramatically transformed in the 1920's by the rise of the Nationalist Party, headed by Pedro Albizu Campos. Albizu is a fascinating character, without a doubt the most important independentista of the twentieth century. Born to a working class black (mulatto) family, Albizu won a scholarship to attend university in the United States, where he studied at the University of Vermont and at Harvard. While at Harvard around 1920, Albizu solidified his nationalist sentiments through work with the Irish republican solidarity movement in Boston.

Returning to Puerto Rico, Albizu joined the newly formed Nationalist Party, and quickly became its leader. The Party was a jumble of elements, including strongly Catholic and even a few Falangist (pro-Spanish and pro-fascist) tendencies, alongside revolutionary internationalists and large numbers of black Puerto Ricans. Both working class and middle class communities were well represented, although middle class cultural elements (including a fondness for the Spanish aspects of Puerto Rican culture) predominated. The Party was most notable for its anti-electoral stance and its militant tactics, embracing direct action and even armed struggle on behalf of Puerto Rican independence. As a result of the passionate speeches of Albizu, and the daring actions of Party members, the Nationalists became increasingly popular.

At the same time, the old guard of the independence movement was regaining some momentum of its own. The Popular Democratic Party (the Populares), under the leadership of Luis Munoz Marin, successfully filled the electoral void left by the demise of older pro-American parties. Munoz Marin was the son of a key leader of the turn of the century independence movement, and he himself advocated a strong degree of self-government for Puerto Ricans. The rising fortunes of the Nationalist Party forced the Populares to the left politically, demanding more from the US in an effort to pacify the population.

But by the 1940's, Munoz Marin had come to an agreement with the US government to implement a degree of autonomy known as the Commonwealth, or Freely Associated State. This formula, still in practice today, represents a balance between the demands of independentistas and of statehooders, who urge full integration with the US as the 51st state. Like all such compromises, it satisfied neither side, but Munoz Marin's personal charisma and the material gains offered by Commonwealth status quieted the Populares.

These bread and butter gains were reflected as well in the rhetoric and image of the Populares. The Party adopted as its slogan the demand "Pan, Tierra y Libertad" ("Bread, Land and Freedom"), and its logo was a profile of a "jibaro", the archetypal peasant farmer who represents to this day the backbone of the Puerto Rican working class. This effort to position itself as the party of the working class was largely successful, and Munoz Marin was repeatedly elected Governor of Puerto Rico, despite his periodic changes of political orientation.

The Nationalists, meanwhile, were subject to intense repression, including the extended imprisonment of Albizu, along with the surveillance, harassment, and murder of other Party members. In the face of this repression, the Nationalists planned a three-pronged uprising to gain independence, staged (once again, ahead of schedule due to discovery of the conspiracy by the police) on October 30, 1950. The plan included an attack on the Governor's mansion in San Juan, a rebellion in the mountain town of Jayuya, and, most stunning, an assassination attempt against President Harry Truman in Washington DC.

Known as the Grito de Jayuya (the Cry of Jayuya), the uprising was a spectacular failure. Truman survived (although largely due to luck), the Governor's mansion was successfully defended, and the US Air Force quickly bombed Jayuya into submission. Albizu was besieged in his home, and only gave himself up after determining that the Grito had not gained mass support. He spent all but a few months of the rest of his life in prison in the US.

Tactical errors and bad luck were key to the demise of an already improbable uprising against the world's most powerful country. But the longer-term inability of the Nationalists to foment a revolution was the result of bigger problems. First, of course, was the massive repression the Party faced, from wire-taps to assassinations. Puerto Rico was the testing ground for what later became known as COINTELPRO, and only the strong internal discipline of the Party organization kept it from collapsing under the combined weight of legal and extra-legal persecution.

Nonetheless, there were internal problems as well. Where the Populares were able to appeal directly to working class identity, the Nationalists promoted a national identity as Puerto Ricans, with little clarification of its class basis. The tension between class identity and national identity was never clearer than in the struggles between the Albizu and Munoz Marin. Albizu was from the working class, while Munoz Marin was a classic product of the Puerto Rican bourgeoisie, but with their roles reversed, the Populares built a mass base of support that the Nationalists never obtained.

1960–1990: Cada Guaraguao Tiene su Pitirre

In 1959, Fidel Castro emerged as the new leader of a revolutionary Cuba, advocating Leninism and armed struggle for national liberation in Latin America. A few hundred miles east, a number of veterans of the Nationalist Party recognized in the Cuban revolution a potential model for their own struggle. Foremost among these was Juan Antonio Corretjer, who from the sixties to the eighties doubled as one of the island's greatest poets and as its most sophisticated theorist of armed struggle. Just as Albizu represented the move toward militancy and insurrection, Corretjer symbolized the shift toward clandestine organization and Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Corretjer had become Albizu's friend while serving time in prison with him after the Grito de Jayuya; Albizu was impressed that Corretjer, in solidarity with the Nationalists, chose imprisonment rather than informing prosecutors that he was not involved in the Grito. Corretjer went on to found the Puerto Rican Socialist League (LSP), which was a small but influential cadre group focused on reorienting the independence movement toward revolutionary Marxism.

With exceptions like Corretjer and his wife (Dona Consuela Lee Corretjer, a veteran of the Communist Party of Puerto Rico), the LSP was largely populated with younger people, products of the Puerto Rican new left who viewed themselves as internationalists. Ties were developed with revolutionaries across Latin America: Abraham Guillen, a sometime anarchist in Argentina who advocated urban guerilla strategies for revolution, wrote the introduction to Corretjer's booklet *On Prolonged People's War in Puerto Rico*.

The LSP also strove to develop ties with revolutionary elements in the growing Puerto Rican communities across North America. The Young Lords in Chicago and New York in the late 1960's represented a parallel attempt to develop a youth-oriented revolutionary organization on socialist lines within the Puerto Rican diaspora, but internal contradictions and government repression combined to limit the lifespan and potential of the Young Lords. The LSP had more success build-

ing ties with the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional (MLN), a like-minded cadre organization formed in Chicago in 1977.

The MLN represented the most radical wing of the independence movement in the diaspora: it was comprised of (mostly younger) Leninist revolutionaries, it combined a sophisticated theoretical analysis (including a radically pro-queer plank) with an awareness of the need for mass action in Puerto Rican communities across North America, and it openly supported the clandestine armed struggle then being carried out by groups like the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN) and the Ejercito Popular Boricua — los Macheteros (“Puerto Rican Popular Army of the Machete-Wielders”).

In the 1970’s and early 1980’s, these two groups were responsible for hundreds of bombings, expropriations, and other armed actions aimed simultaneously at building popular support for Puerto Rican independence and at raising the economic costs of US imperialism. The Macheteros operated primarily on the island (although they did carry out one of the largest armored car robberies in US history, in Connecticut, netting \$7 million on Albizu’s birthday in 1983), while the FALN (which filled the role of the IRA to the MLN’s Sinn Fein) operated almost exclusively on the mainland of North America, especially in New York and Chicago.

All these groups together represented only a small tendency within the relatively small independence movement in Puerto Rico and in North America, but their importance far outstripped their numbers. They lent their support to militant labor actions, feminist projects, student struggles, and ecological efforts, all of which raised their profile on the left, both on the island and in the diaspora. They attempted to integrate the national struggle with a particular vision of class struggle, along Leninist lines. Most important, they advanced a particular version of vanguardist politics, arguing that small cadre organizations (whether above- or below-ground) could inspire masses of people while striking fear into the imperialist power structure.

The phrase most commonly used to express this notion was “Cada guaraguao tiene su pitirre” (“Every guaraguao has its pitirre”). In Puerto Rican Spanish, a guaraguao is a large hawk, while the pitirre is a small bird whose young are frequently eyed as potential food by the guaraguao. Fortunately, the pitirre is endowed with a sharp beak and claws, and when the two birds fight, the smaller one is frequently the victor. This pseudo-Darwinian David and Goliath story is usually applied to battles between Puerto Rico and the United States, but the moral was equally appreciated by the small grouping of revolutionaries battling against reactionary forces (both inside and outside the independence movement) for the hearts and minds of Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the diaspora.

The armed struggle and its above-ground advocates ran into hard times in the early 1980’s, as dozens of Puerto Ricans were captured and convicted in US courts of Seditious Conspiracy and other crimes. Some refused to participate in their trials on principle, while others defended themselves in court; it made little difference, and absurdly long sentences were meted out to more than a dozen political prisoners and prisoners of war (most of whom were released by President Clinton in 1999). The clandestine organizations were fully dormant by 1990, having failed to motivate a popular movement for independence and socialism. Within a few years the LSP, MLN, and other like-minded groups were also defunct.

While it is easy to see the organizational and strategic dangers involved in prioritizing clandestine armed struggle, the real question is, was the move to armed struggle a productive error? The major problem of the Puerto Rican Leninists was their increasingly isolated position on the margins of mass social struggles in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Nonetheless, in the development of

the revolutionary struggle for Puerto Rican independence, armed struggle provided innumerable lessons to future revolutionaries, not the least of which concerns the vulnerability and resilience of the imperialist system.

It is essential to remember that revolutionaries cannot hope to defeat capitalism and the state militarily (the wishful thinking of some black bloc participants notwithstanding); only a political strategy can lead to real revolution. But, as the Puerto Rican revolutionaries of the 1970's knew in their best moments, insurrection and armed struggle, if conducted correctly, can be part of a political strategy, not merely a military one.

1990-the Present: Class and Nation in the New Millennium

It has become a cliché to attribute the eclipse of Leninist models of revolution in the 1990's to the fall of the Berlin Wall. While the fortunes of Puerto Rico's Leninist left did indeed decline in the last decade, the reasons are more homegrown. From the demise of the armed struggle in the late 1980's and the election of a Statehood government in 1992, to the plebiscite and general strike of 1998 and the struggle over the island of Vieques in 1999 and 2000, history has gone beyond the outmoded models represented by Marxism in the Puerto Rican context. The result is a window of opportunity for anarchists, but the window can also be seen as a gauntlet of liberalism that threatens the future of any radical struggle in Puerto Rico, whether based in class or national identity.

The rise of the Statehood government, under governor Pedro Roselló, forced the Populares to the left once more, this time in order to consolidate their standing as a meaningful alternative to the new status quo. In the void left by the end of the armed struggle, the independence movement was unable to build a popular base outside the Populares. The most intriguing result of this vacuum was the rise of independent grassroots action against popular targets ranging from privatization to militarization. Hand in hand with this new development went the relative displacement of status issues as a basis of struggle, with the 1998 plebiscite constituting the exception that proves the rule.

In 1998, Roselló negotiated the sale of the government-owned Puerto Rico Telephone Company (PRTC) to the US based telecommunications giant GTE. This action sparked a massive backlash, including an indefinite strike of the PRTC workforce and militant actions like cutting the fiber-optics cables at the Roosevelt Roads US Naval Base. The resistance culminated in a quickly planned general strike on July 7-8, which involved upwards of half a million people across the island. While the strike was nominally coordinated by the "Broad Committee of Social Organizations" (with the great Spanish acronym CAOS), it really amounted to the simultaneous, and often spontaneous, action of hundreds of smaller organizations, including unions, student groups, radical organizations, and so on.

While the independence movement highlighted the slogan "Puerto Rico is not for sale!", the strike drew support from across the political spectrum, including commonwealth advocates and even some statehooders. Instead of a question of status, the strike is better viewed as an example of the struggles around globalization and neo-liberalism, a year and a half before Seattle brought the issue to mainstream North American awareness. The usual range of alternatives was aired, from strengthening governmental powers to anti-capitalist revolution. Status was part of this discussion, but had lost the spotlight.

It regained center stage later in 1998, but the results were not entirely promising to the traditional independence movement. A non-binding plebiscite was organized by Roselló's government, in an attempt to demonstrate the supposedly rising tide of statehood sentiment in Puerto Rico. In an effort to split the commonwealth vote (the independence vote having been deemed marginal at best in plebiscites of this sort), the ballot had four options: Statehood, Commonwealth, Independence, and None of the Above.

Unfortunately for Roselló, residual anger after the general strike combined with an increasing popular disdain for all status options to produce an unexpected outcome: None of the Above beat all comers. The Populares claimed victory (the Party had urged its members to vote NOTA as a protest against the perceived pro-statehood slant of the language on the ballot), but the larger lesson has more to do with the displacement of status as the central issue of Puerto Rican life. National identity is alive and well in Puerto Rico, and few people support the full integration of Puerto Rico into the United States, but the traditional models of national struggle are increasingly doubted at the grassroots level.

Hot on the heels of his defeat in the plebiscite, Roselló suffered another setback in the spring of 1999, when an errant bomb killed a Puerto Rican civilian during US naval combat training on the small island of Vieques, off the east coast of the main island. For decades the Navy had occupied two thirds of Vieques, using part of the island as a bombing range for joint training exercises with NATO and other allied troops. Protests against the military presence had a long history in Vieques (including significant on-the-ground work by the LSP during the late 1970's), but the issue had never resonated with the rest of Puerto Rican society.

The death of David Sanes changed all that instantly. While the Navy voluntarily shut down the bombing range to conduct an investigation, dozens of illegal squatters' encampments sprung up across the military property in an attempt to keep the Navy from resuming operations. These actions, once again coordinated only in the loosest sense, amounted to one of the largest and longest lasting land occupations ever on US government land. It took more than a year for the Navy to evict all the squatters and begin trainings again. In the meantime, a grassroots network of community, student, and radical political groups and individuals from across Puerto Rico built a massive movement against the military presence in Vieques.

The movement once again cut across status and class divisions, involving people from throughout the political spectrum and class structure in a classic popular front. The nationalist contribution to the Vieques struggle was significant, but it represented only one among several tendencies. And, compared to the general strike, there was a less clearly recognizable class basis to the movement; the population of Vieques has been economically devastated by the Naval presence, but the protests against the Navy have included participants from all classes. At the same time, the most militant actions have incorporated an anti-capitalist sentiment, tying the Navy to corporate interests in Puerto Rico. In opening the door to new conceptions of national struggle and class struggle, the struggle around Vieques, more than any other subject in the last decade, has had a forward- rather than backward-looking approach to social change.

While this context creates an obvious opening for a resurgence of Puerto Rican anarchism, no organization or tendency has emerged to fill the vacuum. Instead, the siren song of liberalism has drawn in a wide variety of former radicals. Many have accepted Commonwealth status as the best option available; Roselló lost badly in the governor's election of 2000 and has been replaced by Maria Sila Calderón, who represents the new, progressive face of the Populares. Others remain

tied to old models of nationalism, whether bourgeois (like the Puerto Rican Independence Party) or social-democratic (like the Puerto Rican Socialist Party).

The situation is similar in the diaspora, where an emergent wing of the Democratic Party has attracted broad Puerto Rican support by pushing former President Clinton to release the political prisoners and prepare the way for the Navy to leave Vieques. Instead of embracing the new opportunities for revolution, large sectors of Puerto Rican radicals, both on the island and in North America, have retreated to the warmer confines of liberalism.

Despite this somewhat gloomy outlook, there is much cause for hope. Witness the grassroots upsurges of radicalism during the general strike and the Vieques struggle, along with the general dissatisfaction with all tendencies of the status quo demonstrated by the NOTA victory in the plebiscite. Popular struggles based in class and in national identity both have a future in Puerto Rico, and like all futures this one has yet to be written.

Conclusion: Against Egotistical Conceptions

“Those who lived and live off the ignorance of the working-class community, have they ever told the truth? No, they lied about the community’s actions, and slandered its apostles! How should we understand those who oppose the ideas of equality and human freedom? As traitors and Judases. All those who judge an idea to be utopian, impossible to put into practice, are obstacles, and obstacles should be pushed aside. They delay grand initiatives and good works. And still, these men call themselves patriots and fathers of the nation. What conception of the nation do they have? An egotistical one, that begins and ends in them. All of them are like this.” — Luisa Capetillo (1911)

Nearly a century ago, Luisa Capetillo exposed a major danger of all social struggles: that of believing one’s own efforts to be the beginning and ending of the struggle. While she was speaking of the early bourgeois independence movement, her criticism can be appropriately extended to the leadership of the FLT, or to the Nationalist Party, or later still to the clandestine armed struggle.

Or, Capetillo’s criticism could be applied to the historic tendency of anarchism (and especially class-struggle anarchism) to deny the importance of national identities and struggles. In pairing national struggle and class struggle in the Puerto Rican experience, I have been attempting to place both in a historical context that will help us move forward as anarchist revolutionaries. This process necessarily involves de-centering ourselves, rejecting the notion that NEFAC or FRAC-GL are essential to the future of revolution in North America and elsewhere. And, while class struggle will undoubtedly be central to any revolution we might hope for, it may not have a uniquely unifying role.

None of which means we should give up our efforts. If anything, the history of the FLT and of anarchism in Puerto Rico demonstrates the necessity of explicitly anarchist organizations in all struggles. The current void in new radical politics on the island and in the diaspora only reinforces the danger: loose networks and spontaneous actions are no match for the power and inertia of liberal institutions, which can grant limited demands and defuse the larger threat presented by diffuse popular discontent. Anarchists can and must help galvanize and coordinate

this discontent, and groups like NEFAC and FRAC-GL can be invaluable parts of this effort. Our chances of success are much greater, however, if we avoid messiah complexes and rigid dogma.

Earlier this year, when I asked a (non-anarchist) comrade on the island about the future of social struggles in Puerto Rico, he responded, "There is none." This depressing prognosis is the legacy of failed national and class struggles and of the apparent consolidation of liberalism. One of the historic assets of anarchism has been the combination of hope and determination. If there is hope in Puerto Rico, it will be found in the determination of a new generation of militants, a few of whom, at least, might be anarchists.

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Michael Staudenmaier has worked with the Puerto Rican community in Chicago for most of the last decade. He is also a regular contributor to Arsenal Magazine, and is currently a member of the BRICK Collective (FRAC-GL). Published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #7, Summer 2003.

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