

BORICUA CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE YOUNG LORDS ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

This paper pulls from historical accounts of the activities of the Young Lords Organization and draws connections to theories on nationalism, community, and Black Radicalism in the 20th century. Addressing the development, triumphs, and limitations of the Young Lords Organization (also known in New York City as the Young Lords Party) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the paper examines the assumptions that lead to the rise of the Young Lords, and the political environment that resisted their agenda. As Puerto Ricans living on the mainland, the Young Lords held a unique position as a colonized multiracial people, despite borrowing ideologically from the Black Panthers and contributing as members of the Rainbow Coalition. The paper discusses the radical and nationalist social movement discourse the Young Lords engaged with, which was accessible to many disenfranchised groups but uniquely targeted for the Puerto Rican experience. Lastly, the paper explores how the Young Lords implemented community development techniques in order to navigate the political and social climate of the United States in the sixties and seventies, and the conditions that would need to exist today in order for their programs to succeed in our modern world.

Introduction

The mid-to-late 20th century in the United States was ripe with struggle, and identity-based resistance movements were able to be publicized to a wider audience than ever before in history. These decades shaped our current academic perception of race in the U.S, and allowed for examination of unequal power distributions and the structural inequalities contributing to entrenched marginalization. For certain communities in particular, the long history of American white supremacy and colonization influenced the very movement of ideas and bodies in this country. Discussion around community development began to take form during these same years, and I use those theories and discourses on community development as well as on nationalism, Black Radicalism, and colonization, to illustrate how our understanding of community development has been deeply impacted by the resistance actions of the communities most affected by colonization the United States, specifically Puerto Rican activists operating within a Black Radicalism framework. I work to unpack the community development implications that were revealed through studying the triumphs and struggles of the Young Lords Organization, and all Puerto Ricans in the United States.

Puerto Ricans in the United States

Puerto Rico, La Isla Del Encanto, is complex in history. Puerto Rico's population is diverse, as many Caribbean nations profoundly shaped by colonization are. The island experienced the longest period of Hispanic influence in the region, due to its status as one of Spain's last two remaining colonies in what would become known as the Americas (Duany, 2003). The racial and cultural influences of Spanish colonialism, African slave trade, and the established indigenous Taíno contribute to the modern multidimensional face of Puerto Rico. As residents of an unincorporated, organized United States territory, Puerto Ricans became United States citizens in 1917 with the signing of the Jones Act. However, there are significant gaps in civil and political rights afforded to Puerto Ricans, despite their status as United States citizens. Puerto Ricans have no voting representation in Congress, and famously do not have the right to vote for President of the United States. Officially, Puerto Rico is considered self-governing as a Commonwealth. The limited self-governance includes areas including taxation, housing, and education, among others. However, the United States federal government retains jurisdiction in most affairs including citizenship, defense, currency, transportation, immigration, and foreign trade (Duany, 2003). This is the current political manifestation of colonialism and imperialism affecting the Puerto Rican

people, and it carries over to the historically marginalized Puerto Rican experience in the contiguous United States. In response, Puerto Ricans in U.S. cities have developed a strengthening thread of grassroots community development action over the decades of diaspora. Identity-based revolution developed and bolstered community development in these cities with significant Puerto Rican populations, and one of the most well-known of these revolutionary groups is the Young Lords Organization. The Young Lords called for the liberation of Puerto Ricans in America as well as in Puerto Rico. The Young Lords operated under the assumption that “Puerto Ricans on the island lived in an oppressive colony of the United States, while Puerto Ricans in America lived under conditions of internal colonialism” (Jeffries, 2003, p. 293). The Young Lords’ mark has been felt for generations in Boricua communities on the mainland, and their community development programs, inspired by the programs of the Black Panther Party and the teachings of Black Radicalism, affected change in a tangible and sustaining way.

The first several decades of the twentieth century was an era of diaspora for Puerto Ricans to the mainland due to the detrimental effects of American control on the island and the near complete monopolization by the United States over the Puerto Rican economy. Over 65% percent of the industry was controlled by four absentee American companies, which directed profits away from Puerto Rico and contributed to a steep and dramatic decline in employment on the island (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2018). This economic climate exacerbated their already disadvantaged circumstances of having limited resources/ opportunities in Puerto Rico, and contributed to a lack of sovereignty and agency for the Puerto Rican people. This continuing example of primitive accumulation was comprehensive across all structures of life on the island. In search for economic opportunities, Puerto Ricans began to cluster in U.S. neighborhoods in cities such as New York City and Chicago, where they encountered ethno-racial discrimination and restrictive residential and employment opportunities (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2018). It would be clearly incorrect to state that racism and colorism did not exist on the island during the 1910s and 1920s (and still today), but the American racial binary of white versus black thrust Puerto Ricans into unfamiliar territory. Furthermore, Puerto Rican immigrants were newly immersed in a primarily English-speaking society, which presented challenges in every area of daily life. Grappling with structures and institutions built under American white supremacy, Puerto Ricans faced much of the same brutal racism and discrimination that non-Latinx black communities faced. Racism contributed to the otherness that Puerto Ricans felt on the mainland (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2018).

Nationalism and Community

Anderson (1991) famously defines the nation as “an imagined political community,” and his explanation of this gives us a glimpse into the structure of nationalism. According to Anderson, the nation is imagined because of its cohesive image in the mind of the citizens, resulting in a unified vision of what it means to belong to that nation (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Though the members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them”, there is an image of oneness and communion in each of their minds that enforces the existence of the nation (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). He goes on to write that a nation is a community, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail”, and that nations are conceived through a sense of deep comradeship. Anderson writes that the concept of innately desiring to be part of a legitimate nation (despite the idea of a “nation” having no true scientific definition or explanation) has persisted and will persist for the foreseeable future. He writes, “Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson, 1991, p. 3). From this perspective, it can be expected that populations with significant histories of inconsistent nationality, including Puerto Ricans, may be particularly socially and politically vulnerable. Similarly, Caribbean scholar Duany (2003) writes that Puerto Rican migrants cross intangible and profound borders during their migration between the island and the mainland. Cultural, geographic, and linguistic hurdles are navigated by Puerto Rican migrants, and their national identity evolves in response to the displacement. Duany (2003) proposes that cultural nationalism occurs as most Puerto Ricans maintain a distinct national identity, despite the lack of a legal nation, with their own language, culture, and land.

Community Development and Black Radicalism as Revolution

Identity-based revolution has a rich history in the United States, and has proved necessary for many generations since the inception of this country under the oppressive circumstances of racism and American white supremacy. The Black Panther Party serves as the primary example of an identity-based sociopolitical organization that operated through mass organizing and community-based programming, and it laid the groundwork for other identity-based organizations to activate their members and organize their blocks. Black Panther Party Survival Programs were a successful and enduring form of resistance against traditional neoliberal policy. In the mid-to-late 20th century, federal neoliberal community development policies, such as CAP, were implemented as political power plays by the government, and ultimately led to the official beginning of the War on Crime a month after the Watts uprising. The War on

Crime disproportionately targeted black and Latinx communities in the United States, which were communities already historically disenfranchised by neoliberal policies and economic strategies that profit(ed) off of inequality in marginalized communities. The Young Lords Organization and their community development programs, modeled after the Black Panther Party's Survival Programs, were a radical response to the cutback of social service programs, and thus worked against the existing neoliberal design that threatened their neighborhoods in the form of a militarized police force and an economic system that thrived off of inequity.

One of the unique tenants that made the Young Lords enduring in their message was their inherently diverse membership. While whites were not allowed to join (instead referred to white activist organizations such as the Young Patriots (Jeffries, 2003)), the Young Lords welcomed all other Latinx to join their ranks regardless of ethnic or national origin, as well as non-Latinx black members (Jeffries, 2003). Predominantly Puerto Rican, the Young Lords reflected the racial diversity of the island, with a phenotypic spectrum representative of Spanish, indigenous, and African ancestry. Furthermore, the very practice of opening membership to other ethnic and racial groups reflected the internationalist influence of Black Radicalism on the Young Lords (Ortega-Aponte, 2016) and highlights the cultural nationalism that Puerto Ricans were fostering through solidarity with other disenfranchised communities. This also illustrates the impetus behind the Young Lords' decision to join the Rainbow Coalition, in partnership with the Black Panthers and the Young Patriots (Sonny & Tracy, 2011). The original vision of the Young Lords' José "Cha Cha" Jiménez was inspired by his education on Black Radicalism and the black revolutionary movements occurring on the west coast at the time. The reality of internal colonialism that Puerto Ricans in the United States were living under aligned with the values and motivation laid out by Fred Hampton and the other leading members of the Black Panther Party, and Black Radicalism gave a theoretical and organizational framework for the Young Lords and other identity-based resistance movements to follow.

The Formation and Action of the Young Lords Organization

The Young Lords Organization began as a street gang in Chicago, and turned into a bonafide political organization under the leadership of Jiménez in September 1968. Jiménez had already developed a relationship with the Black Panther Party by that time and had extensively researched the works of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. during his time in jail (Jeffries, 2003), and thus shaped the Young Lords Organization into a comparative and radical representative party of Puerto Rican communities in

Chicago (Sonny & Tracy, 2011). The Young Lords were initially formed in Chicago directly in response to decades of increasing police brutality against black and Latinx communities in the city. Two years prior to the establishment of the Young Lords, the 1966 Division Street Riots erupted after a white police officer shot a Puerto Rican reveler, Aracelis Cruz, who had been attending the first ever Puerto Rican pride parade (Méndez, 1997). This three-day series of protest and violent altercations between residents and Chicago police was later recognized as the first major Puerto Rican riot in United States history, and Division Street eventually became known as “Paseo Boricua” (Spanish Coalition for Housing, 2016). The effects of the riot traveled as far as the island itself, where it inspired Simón Gómez to write a song in the traditional jíbaro style of recording history, “Los Motines de Chicago (The Chicago Riots)” (Méndez, 1997). In an example of the neoliberal fear surrounding the empowerment of marginalized communities during the War on Crime, “Los Motines de Chicago” was banned by the FBI and purged from record stores (Méndez, 1997). Despite the police violence and community trauma that was freshly illuminated by the Division Riots, the event served as an effective turning point for Puerto Rican residents and activists after years of economic, political, and social disadvantage and discrimination. It also marked a historical moment where the militarized police force was thrust in the spotlight as a neoliberal mechanism of oppression, and allowed for cross-cultural organization to swell in response. The aftermath of the riots led to the formation of groups and organizations addressing local concerns, and Puerto Rican community organizers began to host the first community meetings to plan action around community needs, including housing, education, and health (Méndez, 1997; Jeffries, 2003).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Young Lords, who by that point had launched a New York City chapter in addition to the original Chicago chapter, implemented a number of community development initiatives that made headlines and put the local and federal government on alert. These community programs were inspired by some of the Black Panther Party’s most successful actions, including their Free Breakfast Program. In May 1969, the Young Lords took over the Academic Administration building of McCormick Seminary, in protest of urban development projects (or as the Young Lords called it, “urban removal programs”) funded by McCormick (Ortega-Aponte, 2016). The Young Lords made a list of demands, and by the end of the action a number of them were agreed upon: investment in low-income housing, \$25,000 to open a free health clinic, and cultural preservation activities (Ortega-Aponte, 2016). A few months later in the summer of 1969, the Young Lords of East Harlem launched their first well-known action, the Garbage Offensive, in a successful effort to force city sanitation to remove neglected waste from predominantly Puerto Rican communities. Organizing a neighborhood-wide cleanup, the initiative

culminated in a mass garbage burn on city streets. In what would become a defining moment in their activism, The Young Lords embarked on their most famous action in December 1969. After thirteen Young Lords members were beaten by police and arrested at the First Spanish United Methodist Church in East Harlem for requesting to use the space for a breakfast program, the Young Lords seized the church, and renamed it the People's Church. They established a free breakfast program, community dinners, a daycare, and educational workshops that provided resources related to Puerto Rican history and culture (Gonzalez, 2017). This action gained national media attention, and the People's Church was visited by celebrities and communication outlets (Ortega-Aponte, 2016). The holding of the People's Church and the community programs implemented offered a public show of solidarity with the resurging Black Radicalism movement that The Young Lords paralleled. After eleven days of holding the church, 106 Young Lords were arrested, marking an end to the action and the community programming that took place there (Gonzalez, 2017). The Young Lords went on to hold several more successful actions, including holding Lincoln Hospital for 12 hours in 1970, demanding maternal and child care, drug addiction care, door-to-door preventative health services, door-to-door preventative health services, and increased minimum wage for hospital workers (Gonzalez, 2017). The same year, they also liberated a mobile tuberculosis x-ray machine and implemented community-wide TB testing, reaching more than 770 residents in three days. These are just a handful of the programs, actions, and initiatives that the Young Lords hosted during their active years.

Implications for Modern Community Development

Anderson's (1991) theory of nationalism as a collective feeling of communion, and his assertion that nationless communities will always attempt to create this feeling of nation-based fraternity, speaks to the effectiveness of Puerto Rican anti-colonial efforts in the era of the Young Lords, and also to the enduring identity of Puerto Ricans today. Similarly, Huey P. Newton's theory of oppressive imperialist racial capitalism and its detrimental effects on global and domestic communities shaped how the Black Panthers approached intercommunalism and solidarity with other identity-based movements (Narayan, 2017). Newton also brought forth the idea that the United States had grown so globalized in its power, that it was no longer a nation but rather an Empire (Narayna, 2017). If we were to assume this, then it can be reasoned that this places Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the United States in an even more isolated position as a nationless people, living internally colonized in an Empire that seems to transcend geographic bounds. As we move forward the effort to enact justice-based

community development, it is helpful to look at Newton's theory of intercommunalism and the Young Lords Organization's community programs to develop and support existing modern resistance techniques that dismantle the structures of inequality that neoliberalism in all its forms feeds from. The implications of the Young Lords' and the Black Panther Party's success in grassroots community development is that we need to restructure our current way of thinking about community development. This means analyzing our systems of education, healthcare, transportation, urban planning, food access, etc. from the perspective of racial injustice, and centering communities in discussions, planning, and action. Johnson (2016) advocates for examining justice from the standpoint of slavery. This can be applied to all justice-based community development work, but the impact of the Young Lords and the experience of the Puerto Rican people may prompt a new perspective, one from the standpoint of colonization. Puerto Rico's history as a colonized entity frames the topic of Puerto Rican experience in a social context, and 525 years of colonization requires the cultural to become the political. Anti-colonialism in action as community development is seen in the programs of the Young Lords, but it is also seen in the current organization and collective movement of the Puerto Rican people, in partnership and solidarity with all marginalized communities.

Author Bio

The author is a Puerto Rican daughter, student, and sister, from the beautiful Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York. Her academic interests include studying the structural contributors to food insecurity in urban areas, successful food justice initiatives, and the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in the functioning of communities. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, drinking tea with her family, and binging a variety of Netflix shows.

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