Revolution Around the Corner

Revolution Around the Corner is the story of the U.S. Branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), whose years of activism were the late 1960s through the mid-1990s. Also discussed is the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI), which was founded in 1959 and was the precursor to the PSP. This volume provides the first complete account of the rise and decline of the PSP’s U.S. Branch. Combining historical accounts, personal stories, interviews, and retrospective analysis, Revolution Around the Corner offers readers an in-depth view of various mass campaigns, the inner workings of a revolutionary organization, and the drama of ideological tensions over time.

Beyond the literature written by Puerto Ricans themselves, this story has remained hidden from most accounts of radical social and political movements in the United States. The editors hope this book will help broaden the knowledge of the PSP’s history. We also hope it will bring more attention to Puerto Rico’s present crisis of austerity economics and extreme climate change.

The PSP sought to tear down the “curtain of silence” concealing U.S. colonialism in its Caribbean territory. Its members also led and participated in numerous social justice campaigns throughout the United States where Boricuas (Puerto Ricans) had formed communities. The U.S. Branch, called La Seccional, was organically tied to the national PSP, based in Puerto Rico. Its members perceived themselves as simultaneously part of a national
liberation movement and the U.S. Left. This double role was at once a source of vibrancy, success, and exhaustive internal conflict. The effort to fulfill this double role partially contributed to the PSP’s decline.

We believe the PSP experience has been underappreciated in the scholarly literature about the U.S. Left and social movements. In part, this lack of attention is due to the general neglect of radical movements of racialized minorities. Perhaps scholars also feel some confusion over the organization’s mission: a common misperception is that its exclusive mandate was to attract solidarity for Puerto Rican independence from Boricuas in the United States and North American anti-imperialist sectors. Anyone familiar with the full scope of its activity, however, recognizes the PSP’s deep involvement in the daily life and struggles of the diasporic community and its aspirations for self-determination in the United States. A somewhat binary view emerged among observers of the time: your mission may be to rouse up solidarity for Puerto Rican independence or to be part of the Puerto Rican “minority” struggle—but not both. They did not recognize the impracticality of this vision. Rather, they disputed the PSP’s claim to a double role, as a political prerogative. The PSP asserted that the role of its U.S. Branch would not be confined to this either/or vision and that it would pursue both goals.²

Furthermore, members of the PSP’s U.S. Branch argued that organizing Puerto Rican workers and community residents was not strictly about advocating for democratic rights; rather, doing so would induce Boricuas to participate in the revolutionary transformation of U.S. society. This notion meant engaging directly with the U.S. Left and with social movements inside the “belly of the beast.”

The PSP was partially complicit in the confusion over its identity. Its theoretical statements suffered from some inconsistency. Its practical work tended to alternate haphazardly between the roles espoused as its leadership searched for proper balance among performing solidarity work, fighting for democratic rights, and forging revolutionary alliances. In the early phase, this confusion was not always evident or even consequential, as so much was done on both fronts. In time, though, the strength that came from a creative approach, largely a result of the PSP’s view on the “national question,” became a weakness that exhausted the organization. The explication of this tension is one of the hallmark themes of this book.

Revolution Around the Corner serves as a sequel to The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora, an anthology that looked at organizations and individuals instrumental in the movements that emerged in the late 1960s. Several pieces on the PSP in general and its work in Boston and Hartford are published therein.³ The present book exclusively discusses the PSP. Since the 1990s, other works have also been published.⁴
The title for this book came to us through testimonies and interviews. It refers to a perception that the political conjuncture in the early 1970s promised independence for Puerto Rico in the short run. This sense of immediacy emboldened militants to perform acts of passionate activism and enormous sacrifice. It also undermined the capacity for adopting new approaches once reality sunk in.

The personal testimonies—and excerpts from interviews interspersed throughout various chapters—are at the center of this book. As such, they offer a range of views and interpretations of people’s PSP experiences. As the editors of this volume, we did not seek consensus or an overarching coherence from the contributing authors—only clarity of expression. Neither did the authors seek to suppress testimonies that some readers may find problematic (i.e., articulations that may come across as hyperbole, rhetoric, dogmatism, or political jargon). Some readers may even interpret certain testimonies as advocating for supporting leaders, movements, or governments they consider indefensible. We did not see our editorial role as contesting assessments or conclusions with which we differed. Our opinions are voiced in the Introduction, the Conclusion, and the chapters we individually authored. As for the testimonies—these are life stories and political views. They are truthful, passionate statements from genuine activists for social change, worthy on their own terms.

Finally, a separate and independent enterprise that has assembled much of the primary source material included in this book is the ¡Despierta Boricua! Recovering History Project. This extensive archival collection of primary documents, posters, photographs, and oral histories dealing with the PSP is organized by coeditor Carmen V. Rivera and several former PSP members, including some contributors to this book.

Some Historical Context

Most people in the United States were unaware until recently that the country possesses a colonial territory in the Caribbean. Fewer still were aware that Puerto Ricans are fellow U.S. citizens, whether they live on the island or in U.S. communities. It took the monumental catastrophe of Hurricane María in 2017 to bring this point home. Some readers of this book may therefore benefit from a brief review of Puerto Rico’s history under the United States, the state-sponsored migrations to which it has been subject, and the political and social struggles of Puerto Ricans in U.S. communities. It will be useful for readers to keep in mind that the Puerto Rican diaspora has a long history of social and political movements, both radical and reformist. The movements that started in the late 1960s did not arise out of thin air.
Puerto Rico has been subject to U.S. imperialism since the early nineteenth century as part of the Monroe Doctrine. A small community of Cuban and Puerto Rican merchants and political exiles were already organized in the United States, before the Spanish-American War led to the military and political occupation that ended the short-lived Autonomist Charter granted to Puerto Rico by the Spanish authorities. Puerto Ricans in this first wave of migration advocated for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, with some even hoping that the U.S. invasion would be a prelude to independence. The first Puerto Rican organizations, such as the Puerto Rican section of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, had the struggle in Puerto Rico as their primary frame of reference. Exile leaders, including Sotero Figueroa Hernández, Julio J. Henna, Juan de Mata Terreforte, and Antonio Vélez Alvarado, formed such organizations as the Club Borinquen and the Liga Antillana, a racially mixed group of working-class women.

The Foraker Act of 1900 initiated the process of Puerto Rico’s incorporation into the U.S. political and economic domain, increasing the number of people migrating to and settling on the mainland. Migration increased after the Jones Act of 1917 conferred citizenship, despite objections by Puerto Rico’s House of Delegates. Puerto Rican organizations in the United States began to address what have been historically the two major concerns in the diaspora: the colonial situation of Puerto Rico and the political, social, and economic conditions of those who live in the “Metropolis.”

Increased migration and presence in American cities also meant that Puerto Ricans faced head on the issues of racism, discrimination, and racial identity. News reports about the Harlem riot of 1935 identified the main protagonist, Lino Rivera, a Puerto Rican, as simply “Negro,” revealing the sometime invisibility of Puerto Ricans. America’s so-called one-drop rule for racial identification meant that Puerto Ricans would be classified as “Negro” or “nonwhite” and therefore second-class citizens of color as well as newcomers. During the Harlem Renaissance, many black Puerto Ricans immersed themselves into the African American community and its struggles, as in the cases of Arturo A. Schomburg, Pura Belpré, Sammy Davis Jr., and others. This multicultural syncretism continues in the present and is often overlooked.

During the 1930s and 1940s, many Puerto Ricans viewed increased migration as a consequence of U.S. colonialism, and the general tendency of progressive working-class Puerto Ricans was to join already-established socialist formations that also supported independence for Puerto Rico. By 1920, New York City’s Puerto Rican population numbered 7,364, centered around Harlem, the West Side, Chelsea, Lower East Side, and Red Hook, Brooklyn.
Although they formed local civic organizations of their own, Puerto Ricans also joined the Communist Party (CP) and the Socialist Party. Jesús Colón, arriving in 1918, became the chair of the Puerto Rican Commission of the CP. He was a major contributor to its newspaper and the leader of the Alianza Obrera Puertorriqueña (Puerto Rican Workers Alliance), which called for Puerto Rican–Negro labor unity. Other well-known Puerto Rican leaders joined him in the CP, such as Clemente Soto Vélez, Homero Rosado, and Bernardo Vega. Colón ran for office on the American Labor Party ticket and is credited with founding more than twenty community organizations.

The CP-inspired Centro Obrero Español (Spanish Workers Center) helped found the Hotel Workers Union, which had a large Puerto Rican membership and pushed for Puerto Rican–Negro labor unity. It is estimated that during 1918–1920, the Socialist Party received 40 percent of the Puerto Rican vote. The International Workers Order (IWO), founded in 1930 by the CP, had more than ten thousand members in its Hispanic Section by 1947. In addition to socialist formations, such groups as La Liga Antiimperialista, La Asociación Pro-Independencia de Puerto Rico, and El Congreso Pro-Independencia de Puerto Rico focused on the struggle in Puerto Rico.

The post–World War II era initiated a second wave of migration from Puerto Rico often called “the Great Migration (1946–64),” a movement that was still predominantly focused on New York City but also included cities in New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Chicago. The “push” and “pull” factors for migration were accompanied by recruitment on the part of U.S. companies, government-sponsored migration, and Operation Bootstrap development policies. This migration spurred growth of distinct Puerto Rican communities throughout the continental United States. This new development meant greater influence of Puerto Rican radicalism, as seen in the support for the American Labor Party and Congressman Vito Marcantantio in New York City. Marcantantio, an Italian American, was a long-time and stalwart advocate for Puerto Rico’s independence and the defense of Puerto Rican rights in New York.

The 1950s ushered in a period of mass repression of the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico, while the rise of McCarthyism weakened the Left and Socialist movements in the United States. The 1954 Nationalist attack on the U.S. Congress also led to a culture of fear and anti–Puerto Rican sentiment. Support for the American Labor Party waned, and it was dissolved in 1956. Colón ran for office in 1953 and 1969, with a platform that emphasized Puerto Rican rights. The politically active sectors, without ignoring the colonial situation, began to focus on Puerto Rican rights and empowerment on the mainland, although not always from a radical perspective. The repression of the Left led to what has been referred to as a “fragmenting of memory.”
The Great Migration led to a sharp population increase, from seventy thousand in 1940 to almost nine hundred thousand in 1960, with the great majority still living in New York City. Many of the first social service agencies in the late 1950s and 1960s, such as the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs (PRACA), the Puerto Rican Community Development Project (PRCDP), the Puerto Rican–Hispanic Leadership Forum, and the Puerto Rican Family Institute, provided second-generation Puerto Ricans with access to resources, public policy advocacy, and professional development. Generally, they did so without overtly challenging the U.S. systems of racism and capitalism.

Until 1964, New York City and other cities required potential voters to pass a literacy test in English before they could register. The elimination of this requirement by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 launched the rise of political power brokers, such as Herman Badillo, elected in 1970 as the first Puerto Rican congressional representative; Ramón S. Vélez; and Robert García.

Grassroots organizations, such as United Bronx Parents (1966), led by Evelina Antonetty, and the Congreso de Pueblos, took a more militant stance in the struggle for Puerto Rican rights. Especially important was the Congreso de Pueblos, organized by Gilberto Gerena Valentín, previously a member of the American Labor Party. He was a pro-independence activist who had previously led a campaign in defense of political prisoner Oscar Collazo. The Congreso de Pueblos brought together the many local grassroots organizations hosted in towns where Puerto Ricans lived; more than twelve hundred delegates attended its second congress in 1957.

The National Association for Puerto Rican Civil Rights formed in 1963, led by Gerena Valentín and others, had a national and progressive perspective that used the terminology of the civil rights movement. Gerena Valentín supported the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where he was an invited speaker; was a leadership member of the 1964 New York City school boycott; and later participated in the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. Manny Diaz was another important figure who won the confidence of black leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, and Ralph Abernathy.¹²

A renewed Left also focused attention on the labor movement and pressured New York City’s Central Labor Council to form a Hispanic Labor Committee in 1969. New York’s District 65 withdrew from its parent union and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to protest the lack of organizing among Black and Puerto Rican members. The Puerto Rican Welfare League sought to organize farm workers in Lorraine, Ohio, and similar campaigns took place in New Jersey and Connecticut.
By the mid-1960s, Puerto Rican youth were becoming inspired by the struggles of African Americans, the Cuban Revolution, the anti–Vietnam War movement, the women’s movement, and the upsurge of support for Puerto Rico’s independence. Reacting to police brutality and socioeconomic oppression, Puerto Ricans were involved in uprisings in Chicago (1966) and joined African Americans in uprisings in 1968 in New York City, Philadelphia, Hartford, and New Haven. Aspira, formed in 1961 by Antonia Pantoja and others, became a hub of cultural affirmation and Puerto Rican Left formation.13

Bypassing the prior tendency to join existing movements on the Left, young Puerto Ricans with a radical perspective began to talk about launching a “Puerto Rican movement.” Existing Nationalist and Leftist groups, such as the Nationalist Party, the MPI, and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), were now joined by the Young Lords Organization (Chicago); Puerto Rican student organizations, such as the Puerto Rican Student Union (PRSU); Puerto Ricans Involved in Student Action (PRISA); the Young Lords Organization in New York City; the PSP, newly transformed from the MPI; El Comité–MINP (Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puerto-Rriqueño [Puerto Rican National Left Movement]); and subsequently such groups as the Latin Women’s Collective and the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. Opposing the anti-poverty, reformist, and assimilationist philosophy of earlier Puerto Rican organizations, these groups all centered on an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial perspective.14

This Introduction has been focused on New York organizations because, prior to the 1960s, that is where the Puerto Rican community and political developments were overwhelmingly centered. But subsequently, community and political formations developed in other cities and regions, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, northern New Jersey, New England, and suburban New York. Indeed, by 1980, the majority of diaspora Puerto Ricans lived outside New York City.

Part I: Histories

The PSP’s history is marked by several contentious issues. The membership tried to resolve several ongoing questions: What is strategy, and what are tactics? Is there an inescapable contradiction posed by the “double role” of the party? In the relationship with the national PSP, how much autonomy is desirable? Similarly, what should the base-leadership interaction look like? What are the criteria for determining the relationship with the North American Left? What is the proper balance between centralism and democracy in party functioning? What is the real significance of the “national question” as traditionally understood? These and other
stress points are embedded in the history of the PSP. In the Puerto Rican diaspora, other organizations—before, during, and following the era covered by this narrative—were obligated to handle several of these tensions, whether these groups were revolutionary or reform-oriented. And beyond the Puerto Rican experience, numerous groups and movements—whether Left or progressive—faced aspects of these tensions. The PSP experience is relevant beyond its confines.

Parts I, II, and III of this book are each grouped by general theme. Part I focuses on history. Part II is a collection of “testimonies” written by PSP members. Part III covers the coalition work of the PSP, written by nonmembers. The contributors had no hard and fast rules, so readers will notice varying degrees of narrative history and personal reflection across the chapters.

Part I, the main history section, includes chapters dealing with the overall U.S. Branch (written by Andrés Torres) and the two largest PSP organizations, in New York (written by José E. Velázquez Luyanda) and Chicago (written by José E. Velázquez Luyanda, América Sorrentini, and Pablo Medina Cruz). These chapters trace the narrative arc of an organization’s rise and decline. Indispensable to an understanding of the U.S. Branch of the PSP is the story of the national PSP, based in Puerto Rico. Coverage of the national PSP is woven into key junctures in the story of the organization in the United States.

Major events and activities of the MPI-PSP are outlined in Part I’s three chapters. A partial list includes internal transitional assemblies (1969, 1970, 1971); the First Congress (1973); the National Day of Solidarity with Puerto Rico (El Acto Nacional) in Madison Square Garden (1974); the Save Hostos struggle (1975–1976) and other democratic rights struggles, beginning in the late 1960s (see next paragraph for examples); the Hard Times Conference in Chicago (1976); the release of the Nationalist prisoners (1979); the Vieques campaigns (late 1970s); the People’s Convention in the South Bronx (1980); electoral participation (1980s); and advocacy at the United Nations throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, the MPI-PSP led or supported numerous democratic rights, labor, and social justice campaigns. Some of the most well-known events include anti–Vietnam War protests; the Young Lords church occupation in El Barrio, New York; the Newark, New Jersey, uprising against police brutality in 1974; farm worker organization in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts; resistance to community displacement in Boston, Chicago, and Hartford; Local 1199 Hospital Workers Union; and the campaign to end sterilization abuse in New York. These and other issues are referenced or discussed by the contributors to this book.
Other accounts describing the work of local chapters in Hartford, Boston, and California have been published elsewhere. Still other aspects of the PSP experience have also been discussed by writers and scholars elsewhere.


Part II: Testimonies

Part II presents the personal testimonies of PSP activists. Some central themes emerge in these testimonies. Here in this Introduction, we discuss five: (1) diversity of the membership as a resource and as a source of tension, (2) engenderment of loyalty and compañeroismo (comradeship), (3) transnational political practices of the PSP, (4) management of the “double role,” (also termed dos vertientes in Spanish) and (5) lessons learned.

The editors encouraged contributing authors to address five categories of topics: (1) their origin stories, including birthplace, coming of age, sources of their ethnic and racial identity, and sources of their political and social consciousness; (2) their MPI-PSP experience, including their reasons for joining, their roles in the organization, and their involvement in specific campaigns; (3) their reflections on various facets of the experience, including the PSP’s strengths and weaknesses, their perception of the internal conflicts and external factors that led to its eventual decline, and its contributions to the Puerto Rican community and to the aspiration for Puerto Rican independence; (4) lessons learned from PSP activism relating to personal development and other issues; and (5) their post-PSP life, including their present political beliefs, activism or involvement in later years, career choices, and assessment of the current struggle for independence and, generally, Puerto Rico’s future and that of the diaspora.
The contributing authors touched upon the following themes of particular interest.

Diversity as Resource and as Tension

Notwithstanding the heavily working-class background of *Seccional* members (and not just of U.S.-born members), significant differences in identity and political perspective among PSP members sometimes stirred up cultural tensions and affected their sense of belonging. Yet a deep bond of loyalty and comradeship prevailed among them.

The PSP’s base and leadership, like that of the diaspora in general, comprised many bilingual/bicultural individuals. Members of different backgrounds were constantly interacting with one another:

> My upbringing in two worlds of language and culture prepared me for the role of editor and writer. ... *Claridad*, as well as life in the PSP, provided me with continuous enrichment in Spanish. ... [I]t was another unanticipated benefit, if you will, of being engaged in revolutionary struggle. (José-Manuel Navarro, Chapter 9)

The joke of *Claridad* “Trilingüe,” coming from Puerto Rico–based members and sometimes even accepted self-mockingly by U.S.-based members, was evidence of internal language oppression. And it was hurtful, if rarely challenged openly:

> We laughed ... , and yet we felt humiliated. We were one, but there were cracks in the unity. (Maritza Arrástia, Chapter 4)

Many PSP colleagues in Puerto Rico believed that members whose dominant language was English were not as Puerto Rican. ... I witnessed many debates among members in New York and other U.S. cities as to who was more “Puerto Rican” than another. ... I found the whole debate superficial; what mattered to me was that we were exploited equally as a people and oppressed as colonials whether we lived in San Lorenzo or Jersey City, Barranquitas or the Bronx, Ponce or Philadelphia. (José-Manuel Navarro, Chapter 9)

For a Puerto Rican militant whose life was formed on the island, to hear Puerto Ricans speaking English was a reminder of the potential cultural genocide that is the ideological nutrient of imperialism and colonialism. (Alfredo López, Chapter 7)

Other fissures had to do with individual political backgrounds or orientations: some members were grounded in Marxism, others were oriented
toward nationalism or radical community activism, and still others were not grounded in any specific ideology:

There had always been fundamental differences in our leadership and organization. . . . Each of the members of the Political Commission during the bulk of the 1970s had a different perspective that, behind the drive of our community and independence work, never really came up in the early years. (Alfredo López, Chapter 7)

Loyalty and Compañerismo

Several PSP initiatives were central to enhancing loyalty and comradeship, including the newspaper Claridad bilingüe, political education classes, and family-based social activities. Others had to do with party theory itself, such as the very fact that the PSP’s view on the national question served to unite all Puerto Ricans, whether in the United States or the diaspora. Not to be underestimated was an official philosophy of compañerismo that emphasized mutual respect and support. One contributor reminisces about experiencing this feeling as a child:

I remember one time floating in a sea of hundreds of people at a rally against the Vietnam War. I was about three or four at the time, and although I had no idea where my parents were, I simply went up to strangers and opened my arms for them to carry me. I felt loved and protected in rallies, like I could trust anyone. Being raised red and Boricua inspired this faith in people. (Lenina Nadal, Chapter 8)

Claridad bilingüe was a powerful vehicle for bridging language differences in the PSP as well as within the community. The newspaper was also a workplace of intense activity and interaction among the staff, which was recruited from the base and its diverse membership. Claridad reported on events and trends in Puerto Rico, often serving as the main source of such information in the more far-flung chapters of the PSP, and it covered what was going on in the diaspora with a political edge, going beyond what was available via mainstream and Spanish-language newspapers. Sharing this information created opportunities for bonding among party members.

If Claridad was often the gateway to recruitment, political education was the principal mechanism for following up on initial interest. The PSP had no official policy on language use. For the most part, classes were conducted in Spanish, but certainly some were conducted in English, especially those for students and younger Boricuas from the diaspora. Classes were oriented toward the preferences of the majority. Many English-dominant
participants chose to stay in Spanish-language classes, a form of rapid immersion for those ready to take on the challenge. There was give-and-take when it came to the discussion of reading material, although bilingualism was the typical mode. Materials were often bilingual, with a prime example being Desde las Entrañas.

Political education programs enhanced unity. Members received an introduction to Puerto Rican history and culture, benefiting U.S.- and Puerto Rico–born members. Discussions about Puerto Rican migration and settlement told of the multigenerational experience inside the “belly of the beast.” Across languages and across generations, members read about and discussed their backgrounds and heritages, even those aspects that did not perfectly overlap:

The discussions were animated, and I loved that they included younger twenty-somethings such as I along with the middle-aged ones who never went to college or even high school. (Digna Sánchez, Chapter 11)

The first undertaking [in the Los Angeles nucleus] was to set up weekly study group meetings. For me, the study group opened a world of investigation and intellectual inquiry. (Zoilo Torres, Chapter 12)

Other ways in which social bonds were cemented across generations and diverse backgrounds were through social activities (e.g., picnics, basketball and baseball games, and parties) and cultural events (e.g., concerts and dances) that were often tied to fundraising. Inclusion of the children of PSP members was typical:

The annual summer outing, Jiras de Verano, was one of many party fundraising efforts. . . . In 1972, eight buses left from the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, filled with members, sympathizers, and their families, all heading to Arrow Park in Monroe, New York. These outings served as a recreational outlet and moment of respite from the demands of political work for PSP members and their families. (Teresa Basilio Gaztambide and Carmen V. Rivera, Chapter 5)

Transnational Practice and Experience

The PSP saw itself as a force for the liberation of a colonial people who had one foot in the colony and the other in the metropolis. In asserting that the diaspora was part of the Puerto Rican nation, the PSP was engaging in a
range of transnational practices well before that notion became popular in academic discourse. The strategy, structure, and program of action of the U.S. Branch concretized the field of action for these transnational practices. The testimonies in Part II as well as the histories rendered in Part I describe myriad forms of these practices.

These include, for example, the constant flow of Seccional members who attended meetings, seminars, and congresses on the island and, simultaneously, the multiple visits and tours of PSP national leaders to the United States. Other interrelationships involved the transmission of island-originated campaigns, such as the defense of the copper mines, support for labor struggles, sterilization abuse, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crisis, and opposition to the “Super-Port”; these campaigns became opportunities for the Seccional to build the organization.

One example of a cause that bridged the island and the mainland United States was the case of José Soler, who was an active member in the U.S. Branch and in Puerto Rico. Raised in the United States, he became politicized during the 1960s and eventually joined the Seccional. He moved to Puerto Rico with his family in the early 1970s, maintaining his membership in the PSP. At one point, he was recruited to run as the party’s candidate for the Puerto Rican Senate from Mayaguez in the 1976 election. Shortly after, he returned to the United States to take care of his ailing father, but he remained very actively involved with the PSP. Other contributors in Parts I and II relate their experiences; see Chapters 2, 9, 10, and 11.

The very nature of a colonial people in constant motion has spawned a number of descriptors, including “va y ven” (going and coming), “circular migration,” and “la guagua aérea” (air bus). For many, the transnational life is concretized in the act of returning to the island, in middle age or as an elder, in pursuit of the “sueño del retorno” (dream of return). Or it may be a decision made in young adulthood to explore one’s heritage and test the idea of permanent residency in Puerto Rico. It may even reflect a desire to establish roots in both locations. Among PSP members, this dream was not uncommon; see Chapters 3, 9, 10, and 11.

Managing the Double Role

The issue of the double role continues to be relevant beyond the confines of the PSP context. Even today, activists in the diaspora face the question of prioritization. Here are the words of just two contributors regarding this subject:

I firmly believe that for progressive Puerto Ricans in the United States, the dual nature of the struggle remains and will continue
until Puerto Rico is a sovereign nation. The struggle for national liberation cannot be set aside while the struggle for democratic rights is waged. We must do both! The balance of how much effort is given to one versus the other will, of course, depend on the conditions that exist at a given time. (Digna Sánchez, Chapter 11)

As Puerto Ricans here, we need to continue to link our struggle to the broader Latinx diaspora and the African diaspora, and we need to seek support and help in solidarity efforts with empowering the resistance groups on the island while educating them on the issues we face here.

And we need to be openly and unapologetically fabulous socialists. Because the more we project our vision, the more we will feel the impulse not just to participate but to lead. (Lenina Nadal, Chapter 8)

Lessons Learned

In their testimonies, contributors point to lessons they learned from PSP activism, including those relating to personal and political development:

My experience in the MPI, and later the PSP, was very rich in terms of learning and personal growth. . . . We created a stimulating environment of political debate and decision making; these were fast-paced learning experiences that built our resistance and resilience. . . . To devote ourselves to bringing our country to freedom is . . . worthy of an entire life. . . . It is a great honor. (Olga Iris Sanabria Dávila, Chapter 10)

My time in the PSP was a determining factor in my ideological formation, which I define as critical Marxism. It was fundamental to my organizational and Spanish-language skills, to the expansion of my “Puerto Rican national consciousness,” and to the deep relationship I maintain with Puerto Rico and family members who returned there. (José E. Velázquez Luyanda, Chapter 2)

The PSP taught us how to look at the bigger picture, break it down into its component parts, and get a handle on understanding events and proposing solutions large and small. . . . It instilled an empowering self-confidence. My hope is that my children and the young people of today will experience similar life-changing events born from participation in a mission-driven organization like the PSP. (Zoilo Torres, Chapter 12)
Yet there could also be negative lessons for anyone who experienced separation as a loss:

My membership in the PSP was, other than leaving Cuba, the most formative experience of my life. My five years or so with the party prepared me for everything else I have done in my life. And at the same time, or maybe because it was so formative and generative and central, losing the party was a big hurt, a big loss, a multiple divorce. I do not think I have fully grieved it—maybe writing this account will be healing. (Maritza Arrastía, Chapter 4)

While perusing the various chapters in this volume, the interested reader will identify several more themes beyond those highlighted here. As argued earlier, the voices heard here are not exclusive to the PSP and its members; they resonate, to a larger or lesser degree, with the experiences of other activists, organizations, and movements in Puerto Rico and beyond.

Part III: Coalitions and Alliances

The PSP understood that North American support for Puerto Rican independence or for multinational unity on behalf of transformational change in the United States would require a measure of reciprocal action: if you wanted the support of people and organizations for your cause, you had to deliver when they came with their own requests for help or collaboration. Mutual support was essential not only for achieving specific ends but also for building widening relations of trust. The forms of reciprocity were manifold, including mobilizing PSP members and supporters to attend an anti-racism rally, sending participants to reinforce a direct action or occupation, assigning a speaker for an International Women’s Day forum, providing security for a march in support of Palestinian liberation, and offering strike support at a factory or hospital. In each of these instances, the struggle was not primarily centered on Puerto Ricans, yet socialist principles of solidarity and class unity demanded a *quid pro quo* response.

Part III is devoted to the PSP’s policies relating to coalitions and alliances. The PSP counted on and worked with numerous activists and organizations that were generally aligned with its goals and campaigns. They were indispensable to the success of various major efforts that the PSP was known for, including *El Acto Nacional*, the Hard Times Conference, the U.S. Bicentennial, the People’s Convention, the United Nations case, and several electoral campaigns. They were also instrumental to other struggles of the larger Puerto Rican movement, providing solidarity for the causes of Puerto Rican independence, freedom for the Nationalist prisoners, and the
expulsion of the U.S. Navy from Vieques. They were in the mix of forces that coalesced around projects for the revolutionary transformation of U.S. society, such as the Mass Party Organizing Committee (MPOC) and the People’s Alliance. These were multiracial cooperative projects with their own agendas, and each required significant commitments by member organizations and individual activists. 20

Some examples of unity processes involving other forces are described in Part III, written by three individuals who were not members of the PSP, although Borenstein and Glick were involved for years in collaborative projects. Ribeiro is a young scholar who has researched and written about the Puerto Rican community in the Philadelphia area.

Borenstein opens Chapter 13 with the winding road that led to her eventual connection with the PSP. She provides thorough coverage of two key solidarity groups of which she was an activist and leader: the Committee for Puerto Rican Decolonization (CPRD) and the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee (PRSC). Remembering the beginning days of planning for the Madison Square Garden event, she recalls:

I believed that I was at the heart of a colossal military-like operation, although I knew nothing about military mobilizations except what I had seen on movie and television screens.

In her recounting, as in the chapters by Glick and Ribeiro in Part III, the reader finds a virtual honor roll of the people of leftist and progressive movements who were involved in Puerto Rico solidarity work. She describes the meetings, decisions, and debates that took place in the background of the major successes referenced above. But as the 1980s approached, these coalitions fell apart, as did so many other radical political journeys of the time. She interprets the causes of the fraying as well as its personal effects on her.

Glick opens Chapter 14 by proclaiming, “I was not planning to be a revolutionary.” Yet many courageous young men and women put their lives on hold, and on the line, to oppose anti-imperialism. He describes such pivotal moments in his life, including his prison term for an anti-war protest, a collective late-night action that destroyed the records of a draft board in New York. His politics eventually conveyed him to the Puerto Rico solidarity movement and the PSP, at a point when the party was connecting with such vital figures as Arthur Kinoy. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Glick’s political energies partially overlapped with those of the PSP. Beyond solidarity activities, other campaigns that received his commitment included the MPOC, the Bicentennial, the Dellums Resolution, the People’s Alliance, the People’s Convention in the South Bronx, and independent electoral campaigns. He witnessed not only the successes but also
the difficulties of sustaining broad, multiracial, multi-class coalitions for transformational change.

In Chapter 15, Ribeiro offers a historian’s deep dive into the U.S. Bicentennial campaign. Relying on extensive press accounts and internal documents of the July 4th Coalition (J4C), she recounts the preparations in the lead-up to the mobilization, the forces holding the coalition together, and the tender spots threatening unity. The event itself is judged as successful for its propagandistic impact, for the turnout exceeded that of the official Philadelphia event promoted by the U.S. government. The organizing coalition was able to surmount several obstacles imposed by the city of Philadelphia, some local community groups, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), not to mention a virtual boycott by the media. Ribeiro evaluates the cost to coalition sponsors of the People’s Bicentennial, including to the PSP, and comments on the inability of the “fragile coalition” to endure over the long haul.

Part IV: Conclusion

In the Conclusion, we summarize our reflections on the PSP’s achievements, contributions, and mistakes. We reconsider the national question, which was at the heart of the organization’s distinctiveness. In claiming that Boricuas in the diaspora formed part of the Puerto Rican colonial nation, it created a political space in which the PSP could thrive, at least for a time.

Revisiting the national question in its contemporary meaning, we consider whether U.S.-based Boricuas continue to identify as Puerto Ricans in substantive ways and the degree to which islanders may reciprocate such ties. Evidence on this question is examined through reports on recent developments in Puerto Rico. Is the diaspora viewed as a strategic resource in building the future Puerto Rico, following the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) and Hurricane María? If so, this perspective would appear to be further affirmation of the national question as originally posed by the MPI-PSP. Finally, what is the status of today’s Puerto Rican Left in the diaspora? We briefly speak to these questions.

NOTES

1. The term Seccional is used interchangeably with U.S. Branch.
Puerto Rican radical movements in the United States; for example, Chapter 6 (“Social, Civil Rights and Empowerment Struggles”) in this comprehensive work omits coverage of the PSP’s activism. We believe that these passages underplay the PSP’s push for democratic rights and for social the transformation of U.S. society.


5. Steps are currently underway to place the archive in an institutional home. Interested individuals and researchers may contact the editors for further information.


17. The contributors were at liberty to address the topics of interest to them; not every chapter speaks to each topic. Chapter 6 by Ramón J. Jiménez was written prior to the rest of this book. The chapters written by Rosa Borenstein (13), Ted Glick (14), and Alyssa Ribeiro (15) respond to a modified set of questions.

18. Larson, “José Soler.”

19. The differences between the two forms could be murky at times, but generally the former were of an ad hoc, issue-oriented nature, while the latter involved longer-term coalescing around strategic goals. Either of these approaches could be Boricua-focused or involve a range of intersectional dimensions (e.g., race, class, gender).