The Great Migration at Mid-Century

Following the Second World War, the number of Puerto Ricans in the United States escalated from 69,967 individuals in the decade of the 1940s to 887,662 in the 1960s. Over 4,200 individuals were estimated to have arrived in the United States each year in the period between 1946 and 1956, 85 percent of whom would settle in New York City. U.S. Puerto Ricans appeared in the census records of every state in the union, with visible concentrations forming in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, California and Florida. To illustrate, Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican barrios doubled in size to over 14,000 individuals in the decade period from 1950 to 1960, while Chicago’s Puerto Rican districts underwent a substantial increase from 32,371 persons to 78,913, in the same period. In the ten years between 1970 and 1980, the population in Connecticut had increased by 47 percent and many newcomers either used New York City as the first point of entry, or came directly to the state.[1]

It was in the 50s and 60s, however, that New York became strongly identified with the group designated in research literature as an airborne migration of American citizens and as stereotypical outsiders in popular culture. Until the decade of the 60s, Puerto Ricans constituted over 80 percent of New York’s entire Latino population, and 85 percent of all Puerto Ricans throughout the nation. The census figures for Puerto Ricans now included second and third generations and revealed three out of every ten individuals were U.S. born. Moreover, the population was exceedingly young. Based on a census of the school-age population in New York, 12.5 percent of every school district in Manhattan and the majority of the districts in Brooklyn and the Bronx were of Puerto Rican parentage. Although a mere 7.9 percent of the city’s total population was Puerto Rican in 1960, 11 percent of all youth aged 15 through 19; 11 percent of children aged 10 to 14 years; 12 percent of aged 5 to 9 years and 14 percent of all children under 5 years were Puerto Rican.[2]

An additional 20,000 contract farm labourers rounded out the migrant flow throughout the 50s and 60s. Studies on Puerto Rican migrant life along the Connecticut River Valley and the southwestern agricultural regions of New Jersey permit glimpses into the conditions that shaped the first encounters with U.S. Americans.[3] Although legal aspects surrounding employment were closely monitored by the island’s Department of Labour, employers often failed to comply with contractual obligations. Seasonal workers had always toiled under harsh conditions, and with the passage of time these hardly improved. Labourers usually paid for transportation on instalment plans, the costs subsequently subtracted from wages. Salaries and meals were provided by the employer, but medical coverage was rarely granted. Housing and sanitary conditions met minimal standards at best, and because ground transportation in rural areas was limited, workers were often forced to buy their necessities in company stores.
The move to organize agricultural workers in the decade of the 70s led to formation of representative unions not unlike César Chavez’s United Farm Workers Association in the Southwest. These sought to negotiate more equitable contracts that improved working conditions. Several Hispanic groups emerged committed to reform for farm workers. In Connecticut these included the Comité de Apoyo al Migrante Puertorriqueño, the Asociación de Trabajadores Agrícolas and the religious group META - Ministerio Ecuménico de Trabajadores Agrícolas.[4] Many seasonal migrants did not return to Puerto Rico after termination of their contractual obligations but moved instead to surrounding urban regions. A conservative estimate places the number of contract workers who opted to stay in the United States at ten percent. Under such circumstances, it was not unusual for seasonal labourers to spearhead initial inroads into specific geographic regions, establishing enclaves for future migrants. Entire communities soon sprouted that traced their origins to specific towns and cities in Puerto Rico.

Significantly, a number of post-war communities outside of New York City were founded precisely because seasonal workers remained in the region of their contractual employment. Among the earliest barrios, Chicago, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Gary, Indiana; Lorain, Ohio; Dover, New Jersey; Hartford and Bridgeport, Connecticut, were born of this experience. One might argue that were it not for the island’s colonial status, which facilitated direct labour recruitment, half of the Puerto Rican nation would not be living in the continental United States.

The surge towards migration following World War II was not divorced from economic considerations. After decades of neglect, the United States was pressured to relieve the abject misery of its colonial possession. In 1941, the journalist John Gunther described conditions in the following manner:

I saw, in short, misery, disease, squalor, filth. It would be lamentable enough to see this anywhere. It would be shocking enough in the remote uplands of Peru or the stinking valleys of the Ganges. But to see it on American territory, among people whom the United States has governed since 1898, in a region for which our federal responsibility has been complete for 43 years, is a paralyzing jolt to anyone who believes in American standards of progress and civilization.[5]

The conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 opened the way for Puerto Rican planners and statesmen, including the Commonwealth’s first elected governor, Luis Muñoz Marín, to push for a redefinition of the island’s legal status. In 1952 the creation of the Commonwealth with Muñoz Marín at the helm, gave the island’s leadership the opportunity to develop a framework for Puerto Rican economic recovery. Industrialization and modernization of Puerto Rico, known as Operation Bootstrap, rested on three major components:
1) industrialization by invitation: the inducement of American corporations to relocate in Puerto Rico in exchange for lucrative tax benefits;

2) a cheap labour pool, educated in the English language and under a U.S. imposed curriculum;

3) proposed emigration of over a third of the island’s population, a security measure to insure the plan’s viability.

Praised as a model for democratic and capitalistic development, Bootstrap attracted worldwide attention. Indeed, Bootstrap appeared to have worked miracles over the first decades of implementation. Advances in the island’s standard of living were evident in several spheres. Indicators for the period 1954–1964 pointed to a myriad of socio-economic improvements; life expectancy rose by ten years, and the birthrate declined by five percent. Per capita income doubled as the labour force shifted from an agrarian-based economy to an industrial one. School enrolments also increased. In sum, the United States could point to Puerto Rico as a showcase for capitalism and democracy in the Caribbean at a time when Castro’s Cuba was undergoing its own dramatic political and economic transformations under Marxist-Leninist ideology.[6]

To insure the success of industrialization, however, emigration was promoted aggressively, for it was indeed the “safety valve” envisioned by the plan’s architects. A shift in the economic base from agriculture to manufacturing and tourism was expected to result in minimum incorporation of the island’s agrarian workforce. The excess population would be curtailed by at least two strategies. One was the active recruitment of labourers by continental enterprises. This included seasonal migrant workers as well as voluntary émigrés, supposedly leaving of their own accord and heading for urban areas. The other was the marketing of female sterilization as a means to control what was viewed as a “surplus,” or overpopulation.[7] Women were increasingly important for factory employment as many of the initial companies lured to Puerto Rico were in the garment production business. Production in the marketplace could ill afford to compete with biological reproduction, and persuasive public relations campaigns encouraging limitations in family size blanketed the island. The benefits of having two children per family were not only reinforced in the media that sold the idea as the gateway to middle class status, but also surreptitiously in the school curriculum, health care counselling centres and government offices.

Problems

The onset of the 70s revealed the darker side of Operation Bootstrap, however, for it indeed failed to generate employment as promised. Thousands were displaced from the land as King Sugar gave way to industry. The radical decline of this sector not only translated into mass unemployment, but indicated as well an increase in imported
staples and other products vital for survival. Fully two-thirds of the island’s total population of 3.5 million qualified for food stamps when that federal program was extended to the island in 1978. Dependency on food stamps and other government assistance programs formed part of the net U.S. disbursements that increased from $608 million in 1970 to $2,381 million in 1977.[8]

Profits accrued to corporations under Bootstrap rarely remained in Puerto Rico. As the initial manufacturing and tourism phase of Operation Bootstrap outlived its usefulness, efforts to bolster profit margins hinged on the introduction of heavy industries, pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals. A highly technical phase of production, these industries required a highly skilled and educated work force. In time, these corporations, particularly the petrochemical, would contribute to the destruction of the island’s ecological system.

Finally, the relocation of American franchises to the island helped create a consumer class for U.S. products that reinforced dependency on an unprecedented scale. Not only did Puerto Ricans consume American burgers, pizzas and hot dogs; listen to American music; wear American clothes and see American movies, but industrialization and modernization whetted the appetite for cultural commodities that tested the very core of traditional island society.

In spite of the rapid incorporation of Puerto Rican labour into the continental economy at the start of the “Great Migration”, their status proved tenuous. The occupational sectors they came to fill were often on the brink of decline or marginalization. As early as the 1960s, the brunt of increasing joblessness fell heavily on Puerto Ricans and other minorities because the sectors in which they were employed gradually deteriorated. Among the multiple causes were foreign competition and the shift from industry to technology in north-eastern and middle Atlantic States, the major sectors where Puerto Rican labour concentrated. As these sectors suffered contraction, Puerto Rican workers faced limited employment prospects. Jobs disappeared, lost to technological changes in the forces of production and automation, and knowledge of computers or high-speed technology became essential. Although conditions were subject to regional variations, in New York City and the surrounding metropolitan area, fundamental changes took place. Significant declines in manufacturing forced firms to relocate off shore, or to other regions of the country where favourable economic projections were more likely. Some companies moved to the sunbelt region, where the labour pool was large and less expensive.[9]

Growing unemployment and the rise in female-headed households further attested to the drastic conditions in which Puerto Ricans were found. Perhaps the most significant indicator, households headed by women disproportionately fell below the poverty level. Families in poverty frequently became dependent upon public assistance,
triggering downward socio-economic spirals that would continue unabated for generations.

The dramatic decline in the labour force of women in gender-segregated employment sectors of the Northeast further illustrates the dire economic conditions of that region. A sharp contrast existed in the employment of Puertorriqueñas in that part of the country and other Latinas in the Southeast, Mid-west or Southwestern regions. Even though Puerto Rican women in the Northeast were concentrated in manufacturing, they comprised 38.9 percent of the women in garment related industries. By 1970 that figure had declined to 29.8 percent.[10] To a significant degree, this resulted from the collapse of an industry that until now had counted as a mainstay in the employment of Puerto Rican women. In the following decade, more women were employed as clerical workers than as sewing machine operators. Although women, among them U.S. born second generation, moved steadily into white-collar employment in increasing numbers, that sector necessitated at least a high school diploma with English language proficiency. It never sufficiently accounted for the displaced workers. Historian Altagracia Ortiz points to Puertorriqueña workers in the New York metropolitan region as the “first in the area to experience on a large scale the negative consequences of the production and labour market changes that resulted from the globalization of the industry after the 1960s.”[11] Yet, despite disclaimers to the contrary, the Puerto Rican worker, regardless of gender, proved vital to urban industrial functioning. From the moment they predominated in the cigar making industry in the early decades of the century as manual labourers in the Depression work force of the 30s and as skilled and unskilled workers in hundreds of plants, factories, restaurants and other enterprises in the ensuing decades, Puerto Rican hands helped to turn the wheels of progress in New York and its environs. These workers enabled the maintenance of a low-wage labour force, without which many more corporations would have fled.


