Modes of Violence Against Puerto Rico's Urban Poor: Housing Policy in Puerto Rico from the 1950s to Today

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Introduction

Public housing projects reserved for low-income families in Puerto Rico are known as *caseríos*. A *caserío* consists of several tenement structures subdivided into one-family apartments built on a large and compact settlement (Duany 1997:201). These projects are ubiquitous around the island. I argue that *caseríos* are unable to serve the needs of their residents and are even sites of various modes of violence against the urban poor. Residents of public housing are subjected to both significant explicit and structural violence, but much more pervasive is the latter. Forms of explicit violence residents face include police brutality and media sanctioning of violence against youth. Forms of structural violence include limited socioeconomic mobility, segregation and isolation within and between neighborhoods, governmental neglect of facilities, and forced reconfigurations of kinship networks and family organization.

Background

The successes and failures of modernization projects in Puerto Rico during the latter half of the twentieth century are no more apparent than in the current housing conditions of the poor. Puerto Rico is an underdeveloped commonwealth that has long been described as a welfare state and modern-day colony of the United States. In the mid-twentieth century, the majority of Puerto Ricans lived in poverty. A monumental 42.7 percent of all families reported an income under $1,000 a year in the 1960s, and 80 percent earned less than $3,000 (Lewis 1966:xi). Unemployment was high, and a fifth of the population received food allotments (Lewis 1996:xi). As people moved from rural spaces to urban ones in hopes of finding employment, the issue of housing shortages rapidly came to the forefront. Shantytowns soon

rose up. Pre-1960s shantytowns in Puerto Rico resembled others in Latin America, such as *villas miserias* in Argentina and *favelas* in Brazil. The urban poor in large cities like San Juan built their neighborhoods from scrap metal and wooden planks and often lived without electricity or water (Safa 1974:8). These shantytowns sprawled along the city outskirts and were unexceptional from others in Latin America except in the government's "solution" to them. The public perceived shantytowns as a social problem, and the state responded by creating a sweeping urban renewal program aimed at improving the living conditions of the urban poor (Duany 1997:203). Though shantytowns were indicative of emerging structural problems with rapid industrialization, the government instead conceptualized these problems as stemming from the failures of the urban poor to bring themselves out of poverty. The state's urban renewal program was meant to rid cities of unsightly and crime-ridden shantytowns as well as provide standardized, low-rent housing to impoverished families.

Starting in the late 1950s and taking off in the 1960s, the Puerto Rican government demolished shantytowns across the island and relocated the urban poor to housing projects called *caseríos* built by the Puerto Rican Housing Authority and the United States Federal Housing Authority (Back 1962:9; Fusté 2006:55). The government expelled people from the homes they owned and placed families into apartments for which they owed a monthly rent. The state had ulterior motives for clearing shantytowns, despite claiming that it was to benefit the poor and Puerto Rican society at large. According to Blanton Winship, appointed governor of Puerto Rico by Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1939, eradicating shantytowns was necessary to convert Puerto Rico into a paradisiacal tourist destination (Fusté 2006:56). The government hoped to profit at the urban poor's expense. Relocation often freed up valuable land in major cities. Housing officials in the United States coordinated with private developers; officials would demolish shantytowns on prime lands that developers would then buy from the

government at a low price (Fusté 2006:56). Relocating the poor to *caseríos* was beneficial for the government and profiteers in more than a few ways. However, the government never consulted and rarely considered the marginalized group most affected by this urban renewal program. Despite protests from the exact people that public housing was meant to help, the state paternalistically realized their program.

The imagining and implementation of a public housing program needs to be understood as part of larger economic and social tendencies affecting all sectors of Puerto Rican society in the latter half of the twentieth century. The island was subject to a United States federal government-directed set of projects collectively called Operation Bootstrap, which began in the early 1940s and sought to industrialize Puerto Rico (Safa 1974:1). Puerto Rico's status as an unincorporated territory of the United States has historically meant that it has been the site of experimentation with modernization and industrialization attempts. The *caseríos* were one such experiment. Modernization, as Puerto Rico's housing policy illustrates, had uneven effects on society. Close to four million people live in Puerto Rico today—84 percent of who reside in metropolitan areas (Denton and Villarrubia 2007:56-57). The urban poor make up a sizable proportion of the population and have largely condensed into public housing projects, making *caseríos* optimal places to study the effects of modernization on impoverished families.

The initial and later failures of public housing bolster the argument that the government was more intent on image building than truly addressing the needs of the urban poor at the conception of the urban renewal program. Still, Puerto Rican and American agencies and academics were eager to publish works explicating Operation Bootstrap's success. They presented Puerto Rico "as the model for the developing world, an example of development with democracy" (Rios 1990:332). The media lauded the island as a paragon of successful United States-directed capitalist development in Latin America. The socialist

revolution in Cuba in 1959 made it imperative to prove this type of development was possible. However, the idea of Puerto Rico as a paragon becomes suspect in the face of evidence that while the income of all classes has increased, the gap between the rich and poor has only grown wider after these industrialization projects (Safa 1974:103). Tensions and divisions between socioeconomic classes were only exacerbated with the state's urban renewal program. Public housing projects are sites of both structural and explicit violence against the urban poor.

Explicit violence of police

The omnipresence and brutality of militarized police in *caseríos* is one type of explicit violence to which public housing residents are subjected. The history of public housing in Puerto Rico begins with state violence. Squatters who attempted to protect shantytowns from destruction in the 1960s had an antagonistic relationship with the government (Duany 1997:204). The urban poor did not willingly relocate to public housing projects because many had built and owned their homes, though they often did not own the land their homes were built on. Some actively protested and resisted relocation. Squatters formed organizations and gained the support of some government corporations, political, religious, and civic groups, but "the state apparatus... reacted with the use of violence, evicting squatters by force" (Duany 1997:204). Since the beginning of this strained relationship, the police have enforced the government's will on the urban poor. Public housing residents today are subjected to police surveillance and brutality. Certainly, criminal activity is not absent from the *caseríos*. Youth vandalism, theft, and drug addiction is a common complaint among residents (Duany 1997:204). But internal violence served and continues to serve as an excuse for heavy-handed police operations in public housing.

The 1990s saw the distinct militarization and expansion of the police force in Puerto Rico. From 1993 to 2001, the government of Pedro Rosselló promoted a policy called *"Mano*

dura contra el crimen" ("Strong arm against crime") that led to a series of police operations in public housing projects (Toro Adorno 66:2002; my trans.). The public decried *caseríos* as breeding grounds for criminals. It logically followed that police targeted these neighborhoods. Both the State Police and National Guard raid *caseríos* routinely in search of drug dealers; the police and National Guard took over twenty housing projects just between June and September 1993 (Duany 1997:206; Fusté 2006:78). Entire neighborhoods are monitored, rendered suspect, and invaded. Public housing projects are criminalized and targets of outstandingly harsh police operations. The National Guard uses the FM-100-20 manual for 'low-intensity conflicts,' developed by the Kennedy administration "as a response to guerrilla insurgency in the Third World," for invading *caseríos* (Fusté 2006:105). Residents are, in a literal sense, treated the same way insurrectionists are treated during wartime. Even the language of "invading" public housing projects suggests this. The government assumes the urban poor of these neighborhoods are guilty of some inimical crime without trial.

As a result of the state's heavy-handed approach toward crime, living in Puerto Rico's public housing projects is perilous. The island has over seven hundred police officials per 100,000 citizens and over 21,000 officers in total, giving it the third largest concentration of police per capita in the world (Fusté 2006:2). This makes it a hyper-policed state. The streets are rife with officers prepared to use force, especially against residents in low-income areas. Furthermore, the number of private security guards is almost triple that of state and local police (Fusté 2006:102). State and local police harass public housing residents, while middle and upper class neighborhoods have security guards to keep out criminals who presumably come from the *caseríos*. The poor are therefore bound to the heavily policed areas. The state's attempts to control spaces occupied by the urban poor became further evident in the 1990s, when the government erected walls around public housing projects and set up permanent police

checkpoints along them to monitor the movements of residents (Fusté 2006:78). The police target public housing residents—by extension, the urban poor—in particular. The walls and surveillance points made public housing projects into veritable prisons. The police also acquired new cars, weapons, and gear under Rosselló's term as well, and the number of officers patrolling the streets doubled (Fusté 2006:78). The state created an inexorable police force free to impose its will on public housing residents. Residents now are often targets of discrimination and harassment by the police; days and nights are marked by bursts of violence (Toro Adorno 2002:61; my trans.). A militarized and massive police force keeps the urban poor in submission to the state. Many of the people in Puerto Rico view police action in *caseríos* as just. Therefore, explicit violence of the police against residents is severe and unquestioned.

Explicit violence of the media

Another type of explicit violence is that of media incitation to violence against *caserío* residents. The public supports raids on public housing projects because the media portrays *caserío* residents as criminals. The media often laments youth delinquency among the urban poor. The newspaper *El Mundo* published articles blaming the government for failing to remove those residents whose "corruption threaten[ed] the civic progress and wellbeing of all others," while journalists claimed that most young men in public housing projects perpetrated crimes and behaved violently to hide their insecurities about their manhood (Fusté 2006:91-93). The media had and continues to have a hand in pathologizing and criminalizing public housing residents. Journalists warn that even a few corrupted individuals in the *caseríos* could corrupt entire projects. Publishing articles on crime is also lucrative; the newspaper *El Vocero* became famous by regularly publishing pictures of the dead bodies of young men from public housing projects (Fusté 2006:102). The public saw *caseríos* as places of crime, fear, and death. Images of dead "criminals" also desensitized the middle and upper class to extreme violence against public

housing residents, particularly youth. The media's lambasting of the urban poor is part of the unofficial education of Puerto Rico's population. Explicit violence of varying forms is unfortunately routine within public housing.

Structural violence of limited socioeconomic mobility

More pervasive—though perhaps less sensational—is structural violence in *caseríos*. One type of structural violence faced by the urban poor is the way in which public housing policies limit of the socioeconomic mobility of *caserío* residents. The initial disruption of the informal economies that existed in shantytowns and the later obstacle of income ceilings for public housing residents have kept the urban poor locked in their socioeconomic class. Despite the government and media lauding the public housing projects as a sign of progress, many of the people living in shantytowns in the fifties and sixties opposed relocating to the housing projects. The promise of new buildings, playgrounds, and health clubs failed to generate enthusiasm (Williamson 1964:495). The urban poor initially met the low-rent *caseríos* met with suspicion. Relocation proved an onerous process as a result. Some people left to the *caseríos* only to return to the slums; others refused to move at all until their homes in the shantytown were destroyed (Wood 2006:230-231). The new residents quickly became disillusioned in the public housing projects, and many of the earliest problems the urban poor had with the *caseríos* continue today.

A common complaint of men and women residing in the *caseríos* presently is that they are not allowed to make over a certain amount of yearly income and still qualify for residency in public housing; this discourages residents hoping to increase their earning capacity (Safa 1974:85-86). Eviction threatens those seeking high-paying employment. It takes time to reap the benefits of a higher paycheck, and eviction comes too quickly for a resident to save enough to afford moving into another apartment or home. Income limits meant to ensure housing is

only provided to the impoverished also keep low-income families in poverty. United States federal legislation dictates that a family's monthly rent is proportional to the income earned by all household members, so *caserío* residents will not always report how many in their household are actually employed to keep their monthly rent from rising (Duany 1997:205). If residents are able to find a job that pays well, their rent is raised to negate the effects of a higher income. Circumventing income ceilings is one of the few ways one can build funds as a public housing resident. This also drives residents to adopt informal economy practices that may be dangerous, such as prostitution and drug trafficking.

Indeed, another obstacle to socioeconomic mobility is the trouble in finding safe, informal ways of producing income in public housing communities. The concentration of low-income families into neighborhoods means that picking up casual work from wealthier neighbors, as was once possible in shantytowns, is tough (Back 1962:10). The networks of relationships that made work easier to find in the shantytowns no longer exist. Coping strategies that existed in shantytowns, such as mutual assistance and interaction between relatives and friends, are laborious to reconstruct due to United States federal housing policies (Duany 1997:203). Relocation broke up networks that ameliorated the economic struggles of the urban poor. With low official income ceilings, limited alternative sources of earning income, and the threat of eviction should one find a higher-earning job, public housing residents are forced to stay at poverty level. Puerto Ricans give home ownership enormous symbolic value (Safa 1974:86). Considering this, it is disheartening that the state limits the urban poor to apartments they can never own. Socioeconomic mobility for *caserío* residents is brutally difficult. The possibility of mobility and even survival is uncertain in public housing projects.

Structural violence of segregation and isolation

The second type of structural violence *caserío* residents face is segregation and isolation both within public housing projects and between neighborhoods of different socioeconomic strata. Housing policies resulting in segregation and isolation have made *caseríos* appear as criminal, undesirable places to outsiders and exist as hostile, unfriendly environments for residents. Public housing residents old enough to remember the shantytowns reminisce of the sense of solidarity that existed in those neighborhoods; there was an atmosphere in which neighbors helped each other in emergencies (Back 1962:10). People were united in their plight. Public housing has largely embittered relations between the urban poor and other groups. Now, residents lament that most people in public housing are nasty; they gossip and fight among each other as they try to live better (Wood 2006:230). They feel at odds with one another.

Even familial ties are weakened in *caseríos*. One woman illustrated how the layout of public housing projects and internal gates impede community-making practices as follows: "Before, I would go to my sister's house in a moment, directly. Now I have to go around" (Dinzey-Flores 2013:97). Forming and even maintaining relationships is challenging. Another man claimed that there was no brotherhood in the public housing projects—a person could die and no one would take notice (Safa 1974:82). Eking out a living in the *caseríos* is a lonesome endeavor. The tenuousness of survival has created a sense of competition among residents. Another reason this terse environment exists is the sheer scale and crowding of public housing projects. Two examples of sprawling *caseríos* are Luis Lloréns Torres in Santurce, which boasts 2,000 housing units, and Nemesio Canales in Río Pedras, with 1,150 housing units (Duany 1997:201). Families are crammed together. In a sea of people, residents feel isolated.

Public housing residents are not only isolated from one another, but from people of other socioeconomic classes as well. With the construction of housing projects, cities were

restructured according to social class divisions. The state built public housing projects for the poor, planned separate neighborhoods for the lower- and middle-class, and reserved other spaces for the elite (Duany 1997:203). Oftentimes, landscape reflects inequality. The government's implementation of public housing was a way of imposing a certain idea of order onto the urban poor. Furthermore, gates constructed since the mid-1980s to control public spaces, reduce crime, and socially rebuild public housing have changed and formalized relationships "within and across communities of divergent socioeconomic profiles" (Dinzey-Flores 2013:96). *Caseríos* visually stand out from the rest of the urban landscape due to these gates. Gates are isolating on various levels. Internal gates surround clusters of buildings and control traffic (Dinzey-Flores 2013:97). Residents must navigate gates that often frustrate what had once been easy trips to the homes of friends and family. This contributes to the aforementioned isolation felt by many in public housing.

However, these gates do more than interfere with contact inside *caseríos*; they have also barred contact with outsiders (Dinzey-Flores 2013:97). Gates physically separate communities. Though most neighborhoods are gated in some way, gates perform different functions depending on the socioeconomic strata occupied by the residents being surrounded. Gates around private housing are elaborate and landscaped to denote the prestige of middle and upper class neighborhoods; they advertise class position (Dinzey-Flores 2013:99). These neighborhoods are marked as clean and safe in comparison to dirty, perilous public housing projects. As mentioned earlier, private security guards protect these areas. Gates here are meant to keep criminals—often perceived as male youths from public housing—out. The gates around *caseríos* are instead warning signs that suggest danger (Dinzey-Flores 2013:99). They keep the delinquents so feared by the public contained and allow for police to more effectively monitor the urban poor at enter and exit points. One resident stated the following about gates: "[Gates

are meant to] lock us up as if we were animals. Aside from putting the big one outside, they divide us inside, too, little animals divided by sections" (Dinzey-Flores 2013:97). Residents feel dehumanized within these gates. They are treated like dangerous beasts that require a cage to contain. The purpose that gates serve is ironic, considering the original goals of public housing. One goal was to place public and private homes near one another to encourage social integration, but gates have concretized urban inequality (Dinzey-Flores 2013:103). Neighborhoods of varying class are now discernibly and actually separated from one another. State-imposed segregation and isolation are forms of structural violence against *caserío* residents.

Structural violence of governmental neglect

Structural violence against public housing residents also comes from governmental neglect to provide and maintain facilities in public housing projects. In the mid-1960s, soon after public housing projects were first built, residents demanded that housing authorities modernize already deteriorating *caserío* buildings and common areas (Fusté 2006:83). Homes in shantytowns were prone to improvement since it was a simple task to add on to existing structures over time. People in public housing projects, in contrast, cannot make repairs to homes and neighborhoods they do not own. One op-ed piece in *El Mundo* in the 1960s glibly noted that when President Kennedy made a visit to Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican Housing Authority only painted the sides of the Luis Lloréns Torres *caserío* that the president would be able to see from his limousine as he drove by (Fusté 2006:83). The government rarely maintains public housing projects. When the state does take action, it is typically more for appearances than out of concern for the urban poor. Residents today lack vital services such as transportation, parks, clinics, and day care centers because the state is widely incapable of providing these services to any sector of society (Duany 1997:206). Public housing

neighborhoods are particularly vulnerable to this lack of services. While middle-income communities may take private initiative and install streetlights and maintain parks, lower-income communities have a harder time with such endeavors since they often cannot come up with the necessary resources (Duany 1997:206). The state fails to make services accessible to the urban poor. *Caseríos* are both basically inadequate and continually neglected living spaces. Thanks to this, public housing projects have become synonymous with "uncollected trash, illegal drugs, crime, unemployment, school dropouts, delinquency, and welfare dependence" (Duany 1997:205). They are insufficient housing.

Still, the urban poor living there have no choice but to make do. In 1992, the deplorable conditions of the public housing projects led to the government transferring administration of housing projects over to private corporations (Duany 1997:205). The state proved too inept to maintain the projects it once celebrated on its own. The gross neglect of *caseríos* by the government helped even further perpetuate the stereotype of the residents as lazy and unable to keep their neighborhoods from becoming rundown. Unfortunately, the discourse of public housing projects as failed experiments legitimized cuts to government spending on public housing "by privatizing the *caseríos* and cutting back on social welfare" (Fusté 2006:74) Conditions in *caseríos* are cause for alarm. Instead of addressing these conditions, the government views the dilapidation of urban poor neighborhoods as immutable and refuses to even attempt to improve them. Low-income families face the structural violence of having to live in substandard, neglected public housing projects.

Structural violence of forced reconfigurations of kinship networks and family organization

Another form of structural violence public housing residents face is the violence against kinship networks and family organization. With relocation in the 1950s and 60s, former shanty

town residents saw their extensive kinship networks and contiguous residential patterns disrupted; the restrictive demands of the project management upset those used to the freer shanty towns (Duany 1997:203; Williamson 1964:490). It became much harder to maintain preexisting kinship networks, and people were now subject to new regulations in the public housing projects. The urban poor balked at the forced changes to family organization. However, the destruction of the shantytowns made it so there was nowhere else to turn. The state also consciously attempted to affect family organization among *caserío* residents. In the 1950s, the Puerto Rican Housing Authority and the University of Puerto Rico's Domestic Science school implemented programs for teaching women in public housing how to be proper housewives capable of cooking and cleaning (Fusté 2006:64). The programs promoted the idea of the modern, patriarchal, nuclear family. Married women in public housing were taught to maintain the home and manage the family while still being subordinate to their husbands.

Though this reinforced the traditional view that men should be the heads of household, other housing policies undermined this. Men in public housing feel that their authority is eroded because they do not own their own homes, they depend on project management for maintenance, and they must report every change in their occupation or salary (Duany 1997:204; Safa 1974:81). Low-income families have less freedom and control in public housing. Because the urban poor are directly dependent on the state, the government is the ultimate authority of the household. Project management maintains rigid standards and has made *caseríos* function bureaucratically (Williamson 1964:498). Rather than the bread-winning husband, the de facto head of household is project management. Management's control in the *caseríos* extends past maintenance of the buildings and supervision of residents' incomes. Social control also lies in the hands of management, to whom most disputes between neighbors are referred (Safa 1974:81). Residents even have their relationships mediated by management. In

this way, the state exercises authority over many aspects of the lives of the urban poor.

Changes in employee demographics during the industrialization of Puerto Rico have also affected low-income family configurations. Industries in the new global economy depend on low-paid women workers for their survival, leading to women's share of total employment rising from 23.4 percent to 36.5 percent between 1950 and 1980 (Rios 1990:323, 328). Many women have entered the workforce, but their often-low salaries necessitate their reliance on government assistance. Some women separate from their husbands because it is the only way for them to lower their incomes and be eligible for public housing (Safa 1974:85). When considering marriage, family organization, and family size, the urban poor must consider how to qualify or remain qualifying for public housing. Public housing policies have reconfigured the kinship networks and family organization of the urban poor in a violent manner.

Conclusion

Limited socioeconomic mobility, segregation and isolation, and different forms of violence make *caseríos* an inadequate and even dangerous housing policy for the urban poor. *Caseríos*, once proposed by the government as solutions to the problems of low-income families, are now viewed as a major societal problem (Duany 1997:206). The public blames the failures of the *caseríos* on public housing residents rather than the government. They further fault the urban poor for failing to maintain their neighborhoods, for being petty and violent, and for depending on welfare. A marginalized group in dire need of sympathy is instead loathed. Though the state hoped to "rehabilitate" the poor through these projects, it only ended up criminalizing and oppressing them. Ironically, public housing projects are spaces of contradiction that were first "celebrated as the answer to landscapes of poverty and the promise of social equality...[then] publicly and politically rearticulated through the same stigmatized narratives of undesirable difference" (Fernández Arrigoitia 2010:313-314). The

discourse surrounding public housing changed to suit the state's needs. The government first championed public housing projects as a solution and later demonized them and their residents.

Caseríos are wholly unacceptable homes for low-income families. Duany suggests that the Puerto Rican government reassess policies that encourage agglomeration into large metropolitan areas, provide support for self-help initiatives by poor households, and intervene in the laws and regulations governing the distribution of urban space in order to implement a housing policy that better serves the needs of the urban poor (1997:211-212). Finding alternative ways of providing shelter to the urban poor is paramount. The successes and failures of self-help housing policies similar to those in Cuba—though likely impossible to envision in states subject to United States hegemony—can be expanded upon and used to inform public housing policy in Puerto Rico (Mathéy 1997:184). Alternatives to the current housing policies are numerous. Creating a housing policy that works particularly in the context of Puerto Rico will be quite a task. Regardless, the troubling extent of both explicit and structural violence faced by residents of *caseríos* makes this task a critical responsibility of the government.

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