

FORUM: PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES AT CRITICAL JUNCTURES

## United States Textbooks and Puerto Rican History

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Most students encounter U.S. history in the survey taught at virtually every college and university. The market for textbooks in those surveys is enormous, and their syntheses a reliable indicator of the mainstream of current historiography. Analyzing their coverage of Puerto Rico establishes a baseline for how to better integrate the island and its diaspora into “American history.”<sup>1</sup>

Before addressing that coverage, however, we should acknowledge the larger problem, which is that Puerto Rico is a *colony* and part of a vast, long-lasting *empire*. Textbook authors have grave difficulty acknowledging that fact. All the terms properly used to describe such a history—imperialism, occupation, conquest, and colonialism, as well as protectorate, sphere of influence, and hegemony—are foreign to our students. Puerto Rico meets every traditional standard for designation as a colony, and yet only one of the texts examined here uses the appropriate word to describe it. No author fully addresses how it became a self-governing commonwealth, the role of Luis Muñoz Marín in bringing about that limited autonomy in the 1940s and 1950s, or the demand for independence led by Pedro Albizu Campos’s Nationalist Party since the 1930s, including the Río Piedras and Ponce massacres of 1935 and 1937, the 1950 insurrection, and the massive FBI effort to disrupt the independence movement over many decades, let alone the multiple referenda over statehood since 1967.

These foundational issues aside, the results of a textbook review are dismaying. The eleven texts surveyed run the gamut, from several paying little or no attention to Puerto Rico, a larger number acknowledging aspects of Puerto Rican history while leaving out much else, and, finally, a handful bringing Puerto Ricans into the national narrative, although none of them addresses the archipelago’s politics.

The first group focuses only on the place, to the extent they acknowledge Puerto Rico at all. The venerable *The American Nation*, by the late John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, merely mentions that in 1898 “U.S. troops completed the occupation of Puerto Rico,” followed by its listing among the colonies “obtained between 1898 and 1903” during the “fleeting urge” to empire. The long-established *America: Past and Present*, by Robert A. Divine et al., notes that black troops “took part in the invasion of Puerto Rico,” that “Puerto Rico was close to the mainland, and appealed even to many of the opponents of expansion,” and that “Unlike the Filipinos, Puerto Ricans readily accepted the war’s outcome,” then summarizing the 1900 Foraker Act and subsequent legal developments. Neither text refers to massive Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. *The American Journey*, by David Goldfield et al., is stronger, including a full treatment of “U.S. Rule in Puerto Rico” through the 1920s, although nothing after that other than how “increasingly, Puerto Ricans left their homes to seek work in the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This essay provides a representative sample of the extent to which Puerto Ricans are visible within survey narratives. It does not claim to be authoritative; one would have to read all available textbooks in both full-length and “value” editions.

<sup>2</sup>Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States*, 15th ed. (New York, 2015), 505, 517; Robert A. Divine, T. H. Breen, R. Hal Williams, Ariela J. Gross, and H. W. Brands, *America: Past and Present*, 10th ed. (New York, 2012), 498; David Goldfield, Carl Abbott, Virginia DeJohn Anderson,

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A different approach characterizes three textbooks known for emphasizing multiracial social history. *Created Equal*, by Jacqueline Jones et al., notes that “Americans remained ambivalent about their country’s imperial venture,” and, after promising “eventual independence to the Philippines” in 1916, “granted U.S. citizenship to residents of Puerto Rico in 1917.” Later, it describes how “Puerto Ricans migrated to New York and other eastern cities” in the 1950s, “where they could earn four times what they were making on the island.” Its description of “The Many Fronts of Liberation” in the 1960s does not include Puerto Ricans. The Seventh Value edition of *The American Promise*, by James L. Roark et al., mentions that “a few brief campaigns in Cuba and Puerto Rico brought the Spanish American War to an end,” and later, under the heading “Latino Struggles for Justice,” that “People of Puerto Rico and Caribbean descent populated East Coast cities,” but discusses only Chicano activism. Most impressive is *The American People*, by Gary B. Nash et al., which explains how, as

... the island’s sugarcane [economy] ... became more mechanized, nearly 40 percent of the inhabitants left their homes. By the end of the 1960s, New York City had more Puerto Ricans than did San Juan, Puerto Rico’s capital. El Barrio, in East Harlem, became the center of Puerto Rican activity, the home of salsa music and small *bodegas*, grocery stores that served the neighborhood. Puerto Ricans, like many other immigrants, hoped to earn money in America and then return home.... Most failed to enjoy the promise of the American dream.

Its discussion of “Latino Mobilization” in the 1960s also omits Puerto Ricans, however.<sup>3</sup>

A third group encompasses both colony and diaspora. *Global Americans*, by Maria Montoya et al., has exemplary coverage of colonialism’s legal apparatus in Puerto Rico and other “territories recently acquired from Spain,” including the Foraker Act, the Insular Cases, and the Jones Act, as well as the effects of the Great Depression on the island, but stops there. Conversely, *Out of Many*, by John Mack Faragher et al., only briefly alludes to the archipelago’s colonial relation to the United States, while presenting a more extensive history of diasporic Puerto Ricans than any text yet mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, three texts stand out for their relatively comprehensive treatment. *America’s History*, by Rebecca Edwards et al., refers to how after 1898, “a strategic base was needed in the Caribbean; that meant Puerto Rico,” before moving onto the Insular Cases. Its coverage from the 1940s on is impressive, describing how World War II “labor shortages” led to large-scale migration, quoting the great Puerto Rican radical, Jesús Colón, on how “the bosses very dexterously pitted Italians against Puerto Ricans and Puerto Ricans against American Negroes and Jews.” From there, it examines the push-and-pull of mass migration in the 1950s and 1960s to New York City, “which increased the Puerto Rican population to 613,000 by 1960 [and] transformed the ethnic composition of the city. More Puerto Ricans now lived in New York City than in San Juan.” In “Beyond Civil Rights, 1966–1973,” the radical Young Lords

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Jo Ann E. Argersinger, and William L. Barney, *The American Journey: A History of the United States*, 8th ed. (New York, 2016), 513–5.

<sup>3</sup>Jacqueline Jones, Peter H. Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki L. Ruiz, *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States*, 5th ed. (New York, 2016), 496, 604; James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States*, 7th (Value) ed. (Boston, 2016), 531, 741; Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, John R. Howe, Allan M. Winkler, Allen F. Davis, Charlene Mires, Peter J. Frederick, and Carla Cardina Pestana, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 8th ed. (New York, 2016), 635.

<sup>4</sup>Maria Montoya, Laura A. Belmonte, Carl J. Guarneri, Steven Hackel, Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, and Lon Kurashige, *Global Americans: A History of the United States* (Boston, 2018), 531, 603; John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 8th ed. (New York, 2015), 645–6.

Organization (YLO) is carefully examined, noting that “as was true of so many nationalist groups, immediate victories for the YLO were few, but their dedicated community organizing produced a generation of leaders (many of whom later went into politics) and awakened community consciousness.” *A People and A Nation*, by Jane Kamensky et al., describes how in 1898 “American forces then assaulted the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico to obtain another Caribbean base for the navy and a strategic site to help protect a Central American canal.” The text then progresses to an innovative treatment of “Newcomers from Mexico and Puerto Rico” in the 1920s, followed by an account of how the archipelago’s shifting economy from sugar to coffee production created a labor surplus. This textbook writes:

Puerto Ricans left for New York and other cities, attracted by employers seeking cheap labor. In the cities, they created *barrios* (communities) and found jobs in factories, restaurants, and domestic service. Puerto Ricans developed businesses—*bodegas* (grocery stores), cafes, boardinghouses—and social organizations to help them adapt to American society. As with Mexicans, educated Puerto Rican elites—doctors, lawyers, business owners—became community leaders.

It concludes by linking “Chicano and Puerto Rican Activism” in the 1970s, noting that “by the mid-1970s Puerto Rican households had among the lowest per capita income in the nation. Like black and Chicano youth, young Puerto Ricans embraced cultural nationalism and worked to improve the conditions in their communities. In this case, though, nationalism meant something more: many activists also sought Puerto Rican independence from the United States”—the first such reference to a central dynamic linking the island and its diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty!* is by far the most impressive effort to incorporate Puerto Rico into U.S. history. His examination of U.S. policy frames the larger imperial context—that “Puerto Rico and Cuba were gateways to Latin America, strategic outposts from which American naval and commercial power could be projected throughout the hemisphere.” The text outlines how

In all the new possessions, American policies tended to serve the interests of land-based local elites—native-born landowners in the Philippines, American sugar planters in Hawaii and Puerto Rico—and such policies bequeathed enduring poverty to the majority of the rural population. Under American rule, Puerto Rico, previously an island of diversified small farmers, became a low-wage plantation economy controlled by absentee corporations.

This is followed by how the Insular Cases formalized a subaltern colonial status. Foner directly states the core issue, that

Puerto Rico ... is sometimes called “the world’s oldest colony,” because ever since the Spanish conquered the island in 1493 it has lacked full self-government. Congress extended American citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917. Puerto Rico today remains in a kind of political limbo, poised on the brink of statehood or independence. The island has the status of a commonwealth. It elects its own government but lacks a voice in Congress (and in the election of the U.S. president) and key issues such as defense and environmental policy are controlled by the United States.


<sup>5</sup>Rebecca Edwards, Eric Hinderaker, Robert O. Self, and James A. Henretta, *America’s History*, 9th ed./Value ed. (Boston, 2017), 587, 601, 751, 777; Jane Kamensky, Carol Sheriff, David W. Blight, Howard P. Chudacoff, Fredrik Logevall, Beth Bailey, and Mary Beth Norton, *A People & a Nation*, 11th ed. (Boston, 2018), 563, 614, 790.

No other text examined here acknowledges the plain facts of colonial political control so clearly. It further explains that the Jones Act's "aim was to dampen support for Puerto Rican independence and to strengthen the American hold on a strategic outpost in the Caribbean. The change did not grant islanders the right to vote for president, or representation in Congress. Puerto Rican men, nonetheless, were subject to the draft and fought overseas." *Give Me Liberty!* then describes post-1945 migration as a result of "mostly small coffee and tobacco farmers and agricultural laborers forced off the land when American sugar companies expanded their landholdings on the island," depicting the growth of *El Barrio* in East Harlem before moving on to the Young Lords, and how "the Latino movement gave rise to feminist dissent" because "[m]any Chicano and Puerto Rican men regarded feminist demands as incompatible with the Latino heritage of *machismo* (an exaggerated sense of manliness, including the right to dominate women)."<sup>6</sup>

What explains such limited attention to Puerto Rico in the nation's leading textbooks? First, it should be said that a more comprehensive analysis of Puerto Rico's presence or absence in U.S. history texts would examine how each volume acknowledges *all* people of color. Does a given text pay as little attention to Chicanos, or does it focus on them to the exclusion of Puerto Ricans? To what extent do any of these works acknowledge the uniquely dispossessed status of Native Americans, granted U.S. citizenship even later than Puerto Ricans, in 1924? Are Hawaiians absent? Are only Chinese and Japanese migrants included as "Asian Americans," excluding Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese? Such an approach would provide clues to how authors made conscious choices. Perhaps the bi-national character of Puerto Rican society was presumed too complex for students; the regional character of Puerto Rican settlement may also be a factor, since, although the *borinqueño* population stretches from New York to Chicago, students in the South and West have likely never encountered Puerto Ricans.

These are poor excuses, nonetheless. The mix of omission and cautious, partial inclusion summarized here is akin to a French history text barely acknowledging the independence struggle of Algeria and subsequent migration from the French West African colonies, or a British text referring to the Irish War of Independence, subsequent mass migration to the United Kingdom from Ireland, and the 1968–1998 civil war in Northern Ireland as no more than occasional sideshows. In all of these cases, what purport to be "national" histories are really imperial histories, and until that reality is faced, we cannot expect too much from textbooks. To end on a constructive note, however, we now have a baseline: the gap between the narratives constructed by John Garraty and Eric Foner, two eminent historians associated with the same department over the past six decades, suggests how far we have come and how far we still have to go. In the first case, Puerto Rico is no more than the site of a long-ago U.S. victory and Puerto Ricans as a people do not exist; in the second, they are fully human, and their island is a nation with its own history and culture. We should expect nothing less.

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<sup>6</sup>Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, Seagull 3rd ed. (New York, 2011), 662, 664, 668, 740, 925, 991.