



# STATUS ANXIETY IN



SUPPORTERS OF THE PUERTO RICAN  
INDEPENDENCE PARTY

## LEFT-WING ADVOCATES OF PUERTO RICAN STATEHOOD COME UNDER FIRE FROM ALL SIDES

BY CHRIS MOONEY

# SAN JUAN

*"POR FIN TE TENEMOS, POSTMODERNO SUCIO."* FINALLY WE GOT YOU, you dirty postmodernist.

Juan Duchesne heard a female voice shout these words as he came to the defense of his wife and colleague, Aurea María Sotomayor, in her darkened classroom. A group of student strikers had disrupted the exam Sotomayor was administering, pushing her students out the door and overturning all the desks. They'd fixed Sotomayor in the spotlights of their video cameras, with portable loudspeakers blaring. "Some twenty people were screaming obscenities, slurs, and threats," Duchesne recalls by e-mail. *ROMPE HUELGA*—strikebreaker—the students scrawled on her chalkboard. ¡VENDE CULO! You sold your ass.

It was May 5, 2000, and strikers were shutting down the University of Puerto Rico's central Río Piedras campus to protest the U.S. Navy's use of the island of Vieques as a bombing range. Still, Sotomayor wasn't the only professor teaching during the strike. She'd even offered her striking students a makeup exam. What's more, like most Puerto Rican intellectuals, Duchesne and Sotomayor oppose the navy's presence in Vieques.

So why the student antipathy? For one thing, Duchesne and Sotomayor, both professors in UPR's Spanish department, are notorious for questioning the concept of a distinctive Puerto Rican nation, a stance that often pits them against professors and students of more nationalist, or *puertorriqueñista*, leanings. And not only that: Among Puerto Rican academics, they have committed what may be the cardinal sin. They have suggested that Puerto Rico—a U.S. territory since 1898 and home to nearly four million Spanish-speaking, nonvoting citizens—should have its star as the union's fifty-first state.

Puerto Rican statehood is not a new idea, but its supporters have traditionally hailed from the island's pro-business political right. Few professed "statehooders" inhabit Puerto Rico's left-leaning campuses, where intellectuals much more frequently favor independence. Duchesne and Sotomayor have upset that dynamic, arguing that Puerto Ricans need not choose between wholesale assimilation with the United States, on the one hand, and fiercely protective nationalism, on the other. Rather, drawing on postmodernist theory, they claim that Puerto Rico's

cultural identity does not hinge on the island's political status. And they reject other political stereotypes as well—arguing that one can marry the left's pacifist, pro-labor, and environmentalist politics with an appeal for incorporation into the United States. In making such a case, they have not only maddened their colleagues. They've thrown a wrench into Puerto Rican status politics.

**JUAN DUCHESNE** is the kind of bilingual speaker who can lull you into thinking his English is only so-so and then say something verging on the lyrical. By phone from Puerto Rico, he explains that what irks his colleagues most about his endorsement of the statehood option is that it comes from a left-wing perspective: "They would be very happy if I would say, Okay, I confess, I'm a rightist, I'm a pro-American imperialist.... They would be very happy with me. They would even start to say hello again."

brate Three Kings Day) to cable television and the English language. In fact, as Duchesne and I talk at El hipopotamo, yet another impurity comes across the airwaves: Bon Jovi's ballad "Never Say Goodbye."

In 1997, Juan Duchesne broke dramatically with his pro-independence past. Together with five other formerly pro-independence scholars, he published a manifesto titled "Statehood From a Radical-Democratic Perspective" in UPR's monthly newspaper, *Diálogo*. (Sotomayor, who supports independence, signed the document to make a statement against dogmatic nationalism.) The radical statehooders presented a distinctly left-wing case against independence: They argued that as a sovereign republic in a U.S.-dominated global system, Puerto Rico, which is twice as poor as Mississippi, would simply swap de jure political colonialism for de facto economic enslavement to global markets and political elites. Representation in the U.S. Congress, on the other hand, could give

only" amendment in the House of Representatives, and was then quashed by Trent Lott and Don Nickles in the Senate. Were the radicals really so naive about the United States? Or were they simply traditional statehooders speaking the sophisticated language of postmodernism?

As intellectual provocation, the manifesto was certainly a success. Writers in *Diálogo* hotly debated radical statehood for several months, and the pro-independence weekly *Claridad* attacked it regularly for a year. Meanwhile, manifesto signer Ramón Grosfoguel, a Boston College sociologist, expanded on the radical-statehood idea in his column for the newspaper *El nuevo día*. Together with Frances Negrón Muntaner, another signer, Grosfoguel also published *Puerto Rican Jam* (Minnesota, 1997), an English-language collection of cultural criticism, arguing that nationalism was far from the only antidote to colonialism. In fact, wrote the book's editors, nationalism might not really be of much help at all—for though

## THE RADICAL STATEHOODERS WARN THAT PUERTO RICAN INDEPENDENCE WOULD MEAN SWAPPING POLITICAL COLONIALISM FOR ECONOMIC ENSLAVEMENT TO GLOBAL MARKETS.

But as I learn when I meet Duchesne at El hipopotamo—a Río Piedras dive where you can get a table without ordering anything—his leftist credentials are impeccable. In 1974, Duchesne spent three months in Cuba at a seminar on revolutionary tactics; for more than fifteen years, he was a radical activist for Puerto Rican independence in the now-defunct Marxist-Leninist socialist party. He was part of "the movement" when, in 1969, Vietnam-protesting UPR students burned down the ROTC headquarters and later banished the program from campus. (Though Puerto Ricans can't vote for president, they can be drafted.) But by the 1980s, Duchesne felt, Puerto Rican nationalism had lost the subversive content it had incorporated in the 1960s and 1970s—feminism, socialism, the sexual revolution. Instead, it had become traditionalist: terrified of assimilation and dedicated to policing the culture to protect against impurities from the United States. The threat of U.S. domination lurked in everything from Santa Claus (Puerto Ricans traditionally cele-

Puerto Ricans more control over their fate than they would enjoy if they were represented in the legislature of a poor Caribbean nation (which might even succumb to a Castro-style dictatorship). The manifesto also expressed the hope, founded on demographic predictions of an ever-diversifying United States, that as a state Puerto Rico could help forge a "multiracial, multicultural, democratic, pacifist, and internationalist...Nuestra América."

One commentator at the time called the manifesto "a very stimulating and creative exercise in ideological sabotage." But critics quickly dubbed "radical statehood" an oxymoron and accused the radicals of attacking the left from within. It would be all too easy to overestimate the United States's democratic goodwill toward Puerto Rico, the detractors cautioned. After all, the last thing U.S. Republicans want is the overwhelmingly Democratic Puerto Rico electing two senators and at least six congressmen. Perhaps that's why a 1998 bill to create a binding referendum on Puerto Rico's future had to dodge a GOP "English-

it "often refers to ethnic culture and solidarity strategies," it rarely entails "a mass demand to administer the chaos left behind by five hundred years of colonial and neocolonial relations."

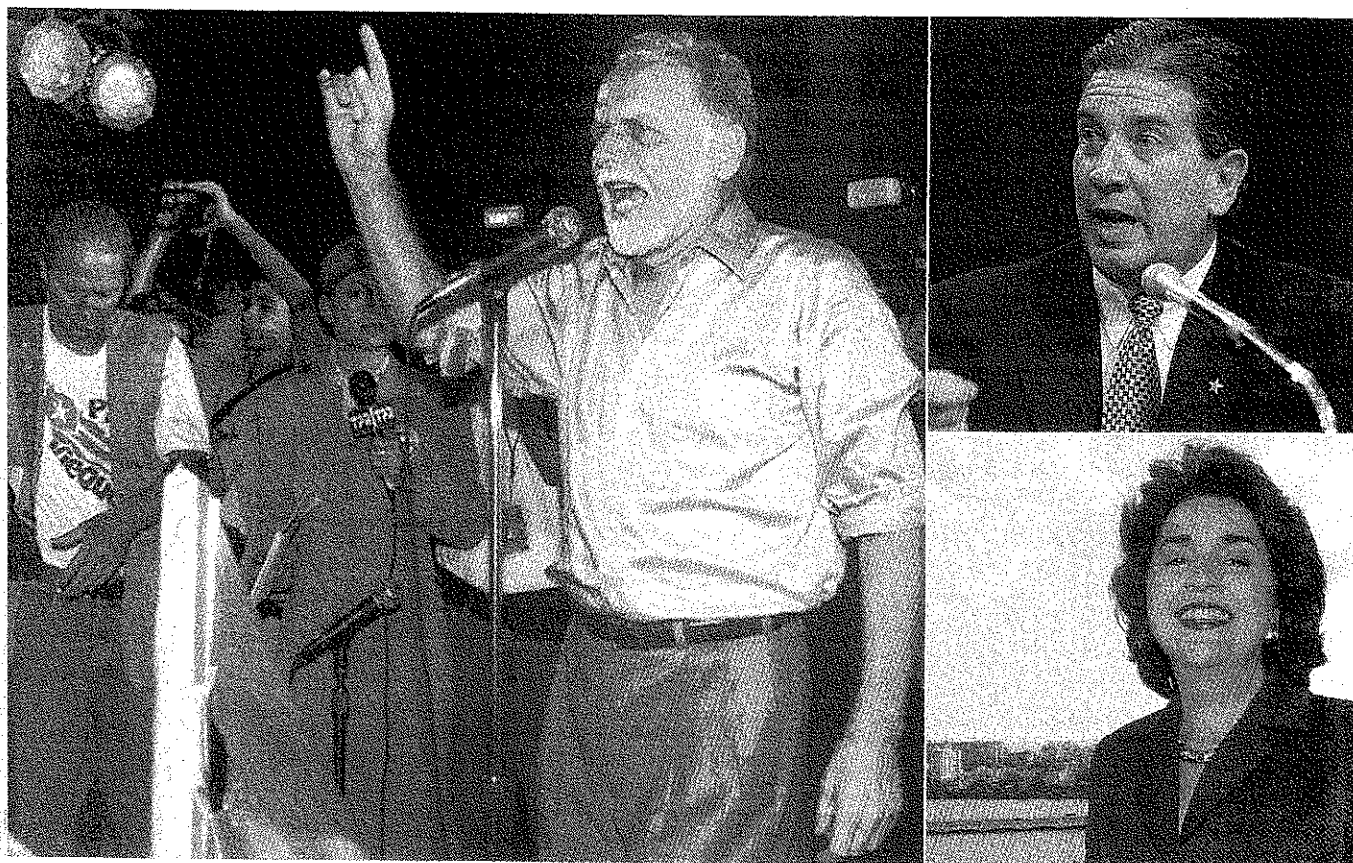
**PUERTO RICO**, writes the island's former chief justice José Trías Monge, is "the oldest colony in the modern world." The claim is hard to dispute. Before 1898, the island was a Spanish possession for four centuries. And in the 103 years since troops hoisted the U.S. flag at the southern Puerto Rican town of Guánica during the Spanish-American War, nothing fundamental has changed. True, Puerto Ricans have been granted U.S. citizenship, the right to elect their own governor, and a statelike commonwealth administration. But the island remains a U.S. territory, subject to federal laws devised in chambers from which Puerto Rican representatives are all but excluded. Puerto Ricans are not, by any stretch, governed by their consent.

It's no surprise, then, that for the last century, Puerto Rican politics has cen-

tered on the island's status. Would the territory remain a commonwealth, gain independence, or become a state? Shortly after Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States, the first statehooders embraced American institutions and aspired to join the new nation as equals. But as it became clear that full democratic rights would not extend to Puerto Ricans (see sidebar, p. 54), anti-American sentiment smoldered. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party converged around the Harvard-educated orator Pedro Albizu

politics. But the leading approach to colonial power, advanced by Puerto Rico's Popular Democratic Party (PPD), is more compromising. In the 1940s, under the leadership of the legendary Luis Muñoz Marín, the PPD swept into power on a platform of economic modernization through industrialization. As Puerto Rico's first elected governor, Muñoz advocated putting off the status question. He worked both with U.S. politicians and with independence supporters, whose nationalist stance he partly humored and partly

Rosselló, was a Democrat and ran Al Gore's campaign in Puerto Rico). By contrast, centrist-liberal commonwealth supporters (*populares* or *autonomistas*) vote for the PPD, which supports maintaining ties with the United States while gradually increasing Puerto Rico's autonomy. The commonwealth arrangement, PPD supporters note, exempts Puerto Rico from federal income taxes and has allowed Congress to create special tax incentives for mainland companies to relocate in Puerto Rico. Finally, left-radical *inde-*



ABOVE: RUBÉN BERRIOS OF THE PRO-INDEPENDENCE P.I.P. TOP RIGHT: EX-GOVERNOR PEDRO ROSSELLÓ OF THE PRO-STATEHOOD N.P.P. BOTTOM RIGHT: CURRENT GOVERNOR SILA CALDERÓN OF THE PRO-COMMONWEALTH P.D.P.

Campos, who eventually advocated Puerto Rico's liberation by violent means. Albizu's followers would later shoot up the U.S. Congress and try to assassinate Harry Truman. In the 1970s, an *albizuista*-style militancy also fueled the Puerto Rican nationalist FALN, several of whose members were jailed for terrorism until the Clinton administration offered them clemency in 1999.

Uncritical love and violent hatred—both directed toward the United States—mark the two extremes of Puerto Rican

co-opted. In 1952, Congress created the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which Muñoz headed upon his reelection. Since then, Puerto Rican statehooders and *independentistas* have attacked the arrangement, accusing the centrist PPD of trying to gift wrap colonialism.

Today, three rival political parties split the Puerto Rican vote. The pro-statehood and pro-business New Progressive Party (PNP) is the furthest right, though it tends more toward fiscal than social conservatism (the last PNP governor, Pedro

*pendentistas* support the small pro-environment, pro-labor, and pacifist Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP).

As members of a broadly nationalist cultural elite and a traditionally leftist intelligentsia, Puerto Rican professors disproportionately support the pro-independence PIP. Though the PIP generally attracts the votes of only 4 percent of the population, it looms much larger on campuses. And if independence and commonwealth are the most-favored options in the Puerto Rican academy, statehood is, by default,

the least. "The tradition of positioning yourself intellectually in Puerto Rico usually meant distancing yourself from statehood," explains UPR comparative literature professor Rubén Ríos. Indeed, though statehood supporters make up roughly half of the Puerto Rican population, pro-statehood professors are "a minority of a minority of a minority of a minority" at UPR, according to the pro-statehood historian Gonzalo F. Córdova. (Córdova refuses to mention the names of some of the "closet statehooders" he says he knows.)

Given the fixity of these positions, the academic left seems an unlikely, even heretical, place to find a plea for Puerto Rican statehood. Juan Duchesne, Aurea María Sotomayor, and their allies were once reliably pro-independence. Now they critique Puerto Rican nationalism with European-sounding cultural theory, and their support for the Vieques protesters strikes some as merely lukewarm. Critics further charge the radicals with taking a patronizing approach to Puerto Rico itself. Juan Giusti, a UPR historian who supports a version of independence that includes a lengthy transition period, takes umbrage at the radicals' contention that statehood would open up democratic possibilities for Puerto Rico. "That really is

insulting," says Giusti, "because all the democratic dimensions of popular culture in Puerto Rico are just passed over."

**LIKE MANY** Puerto Rican intellectuals, the radical statehooders complain of a growing disillusionment and fatigue with the island's long-deadlocked status debate. Yes, Puerto Rico's colonial problem must be solved. But must the commonwealth's political parties remain shackled to status positions, which can lead them to overlook such pressing issues as San Juan's staggering crime problem? "It's as if somebody had a heart problem and a broken leg, and he said, Well, the only way in which I can fix my leg is to deal with my heart problem," observes the UPR law professor Efrén Rivera Ramos. Ramos is not a radical statehooder, but his words echo many intellectuals' disenchantment with status politics as usual.

In grafting a defense of statehood onto left-wing politics, radical statehood attempts to break out of the traditional status debate by subverting its categories. It's a trick the statehooders learned from UPR's original mavericks, *las postmodernistas* (the epithet is often meant pejoratively). This brand of postmodernism derives, to a significant extent, from the work of the Marxist scholar José Luis

González, who critiqued nationalist nostalgia for Puerto Rican cultural traditions and folklore. (Among the island's most frequently cited folkways are musical rhythms like *bomba* and *plena* and staple dishes such as rice and beans.) In his 1980 book, *El país de cuatro pisos*, González claimed that this concept of Puerto Rican national identity was socially constructed by particular groups for particular purposes: Its core elements were predicated on Puerto Rican social hierarchies and appealed most to the middle class. (The book was published in the United States in 1993 as *The Four Storeyed Country and Other Essays*.)

Building on the theories of González and others, Duchesne and Sotomayor helped found *Postdata*—the first of UPR's postmodernist journals—in 1991. The premiere issue, produced with a photocopy machine and paper clips, included articles by Duchesne, Sotomayor, and others questioning the very concept of a fixed Puerto Rican national identity. From its inception, *Postdata* opened an intellectual chasm among Puerto Rican cultural theorists that has not closed. Is there a Puerto Rican nation? And if so, is it bound tightly together by the Spanish language and a Caribbean culture, or could its elements be more diverse?

## "A PATENTLY INTOLERABLE SITUATION"

If you log onto the "International" section of America Online, you will find Puerto Rico classified as a separate country—a strong sign that most Americans know very little about the island's political status. Given that Puerto Rico's fate was decided in the U.S. courts, you'd expect professors of constitutional law to know better. Surprisingly, however, the legal literature on Puerto Rico remains noticeably sparse.

According to Sanford Levinson, a University of Texas law professor, the legal academy unjustly ignores the Supreme Court cases that defined Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States. Levinson contends that the early-twentieth-century *Insular Cases*, as they are known, are "central documents in the history of American racism." Indeed, they are the work of the same Court that upheld segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In a recent article in *Constitutional Commentary*, Levinson argues that *Downes v. Bidwell*, a 1901 decision that still controls Puerto Rico's political status, is a scholarly "treasure trove."

*Downes* was decided in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, and its central concern was whether residents of newly acquired territories would be entitled to the same

constitutional protections as U.S. citizens. Or, as the question was phrased then: When the United States expands into new territory—spatially, but also racially and linguistically—does the Constitution follow the flag?

In *Downes*, the Court answered that question in the negative, providing a legal justification for U.S. imperialism. The Court ruled five to four that Puerto Rico was an "unincorporated territory" of the United States, unlike Arizona and other "incorporated" territories then on the fast track to statehood. Hence, it was fully subordinate to the powers of Congress. This meant the island could be held as a colonial possession indefinitely and its people kept in a state of political disenfranchisement.

A 1917 statute granted citizenship to native Puerto Ricans, but *Downes* continues to define those citizens' relationship with the United States. Although he concurred with a recent decision denying resident Puerto Ricans the presidential vote, First Circuit Court of Appeals chief judge Juan R. Torruella took the opportunity to describe the legacy of the *Insular Cases* as a "patently intolerable situation." Torruella, a pro-statehood Puerto Rican and the author of *The Supreme Court and Puerto Rico: The Doctrine of Separate and Unequal* (University of

Like postmodernists elsewhere, the *Postdata* writers insisted on the mutability and multiplicity of identities, as against any notion of a unitary and fixed national character. Puerto Ricanness, the postmodernists asserted, continually transforms and evolves, combining elements from the United States, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. In his *Puerto Rican Jam* essay, "Islands at the Crossroads," the radical statehood Augustín Lao exults in "the continuous transit of peoples, TV programs, icons, ideologies, letters, newspapers, money, goods, festivals, dramas, conspiracies, and so on," between Puerto Rico and the United States. Many *puertorriqueñistas*, by contrast, fear that U.S.-dominated globalism threatens authentic Puerto Rican culture—Spanish-speaking and Catholic, hospitable and fiercely proud of its Olympic team, which would presumably be lost if statehood prevails.

After the debut of *Postdata*, the next landmark moment for the postmodernists was a wildly controversial article by the UPR historian Carlos Pabón in the first issue of *Bordes*, another postmodernist journal, in 1995. The essay, "De Albizu a Madonna," was illustrated with an inflammatory montage grafting the head



JUAN DUCHESNE AND AUREA SOTOMAYOR SIGNED THE ORIGINAL RADICAL STATEHOOD MANIFESTO.

of nationalist firebrand Albizu Campos onto a picture of the seminude pop star draped in a Puerto Rican flag—suggesting that militant Puerto Rican nationalism had gone mainstream, taking a softer, cultural turn. In the article, Pabón—who takes no status position and says he abhors the whole debate—traced the mutation of nationalism from an anticolonial *albizuista* version in the 1930s to its present incarnation, which defines itself more against cultural assimilation and statehood than against direct colonial subjugation. Pabón called this newer incarnation "neo-nationalism," a term that has stuck.

Many on the pro-independence academic left found Pabón's article insulting. Felipe Pimentel, a professor of Puerto Rican studies at Hunter College who calls himself an *independentista* but not a nationalist, remarks that the *postmodernistas* conflate supporters of independence with nationalists, freely attributing totalitarian impulses to both. Others echo the concern. "I don't see any need to sacralize the nation," says Juan Giusti. However, he continues, postmodernists and radical statehooders all too frequently assail a

straw-man version of Puerto Rican nationalism. "I've heard postmodern thinkers make the connection between Puerto Rican nationalism and genocide in the Balkans," he says. "I have big problems with that."

For radical statehooders, the challenge is to fashion a distinct, if flexible, sense of island culture that neither invites nor excludes U.S. influence. Unlike more traditional statehooders, some of whom are so enamored of the United States that they are often mocked as *piti yankis* (little Yankees), the radicals understand that the island is not culturally suited for swift assimilation with the United States. But in *Puerto Rican Jam*, the editors also suggest that

Puerto Rico. 1985), further threatened "corrective judicial action" à la *Brown v. Board of Education* if Congress does not cease its "outrageous disregard" for the rights of the nearly four million Puerto Ricans currently under its power.

Levinson believes *Downes* could precipitate a constitutional crisis if a majority of Puerto Ricans, after democratic deliberation, petitioned Congress for statehood and were refused. In a thought experiment in his *Constitutional Commentary* article, Levinson wonders what possible justification Congress could give for such refusal: "That most Puerto Ricans are non-white? That they are Catholic? That they are poor? That they do not speak English?" Such reasoning might be consistent with *Downes*'s precedent, but it would certainly not pass muster in today's legal environment.

Levinson describes his article as an "evangelical" work, and some signs indicate that the legal establishment is open to conversion. The newly published law textbook *Race and Races: Cases and Resources for a Diverse America* (West, 2000), by Juan F. Perea, Stephanie M. Wildman, Richard Delgado, and Angela P. Harris, includes a section on Puerto Ricans and a discussion of the *Insular Cases*. This August, Duke University Press will publish a

collection of essays called *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*, edited by Christina Duffy Burnett, a Second Circuit law clerk, and Burke Marshall, an emeritus professor of law at Yale who was a civil rights official during the Kennedy era. The book will contain a version of Levinson's *Constitutional Commentary* article as well as pieces by Torruella, the Second Circuit judge José A. Cabranes, and other Puerto Rican and Stateside legal scholars exploring the problem of the U.S. territories.

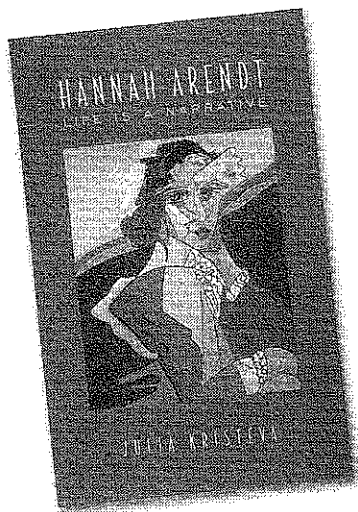
None of this attention will necessarily avert the constitutional crisis Levinson foresees. As with electoral reform, Levinson observes, Puerto Rico's political status is "not going to become a front-burner issue until the train wreck happens." The University of Puerto Rico law professor Efrén Rivera Ramos, who has written extensively on the *Insular Cases* and is a contributor to *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*, concurs. Says Rivera Ramos, "What would have happened if people had forgotten about the *Dred Scott* case, nobody talks about it, and all of a sudden people started to say, Oh my God, *this* is what the Supreme Court decided a hundred years ago! What have we been looking at that we missed this?" —C.M.



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because Puerto Rico's pervasive but vague cultural nationalism has not translated into widespread support for independence, the notion of a strong connection between Puerto Ricanness and any particular status option should be abandoned.

Whatever does define the Puerto Rican nation, radical statehooders stress that nearly half of it (3.2 million *voting* Puerto Ricans) already lives Stateside anyway. Puerto Rico, says *Puerto Rican Jam* co-editor Frances Negrón Muntaner, has become "a cultural nation that has transcended its immediate borders." Of the Stateside Puerto Ricans, she says: "They're us!"

**ON MY WAY** to UPR's Río Piedras campus in search of statehooders, radical or otherwise, I walk south along Avenida Ponce de León. Crossing an overpass over Avenida Jesús T. Piñero—named after Puerto Rico's first native governor, who was appointed to office in 1946 by President Truman—I get a strong sense of the political culture in Puerto Rico, where voter turnout regularly exceeds 80 percent. I'm still several blocks from the university, but campus-related graffiti have spread to the overpass like kudzu. Slogans such as LA UPR ESTÁ CON VIEQUES and VIEQUES SÍ, MARINA NO compete with layered rows of weathered political placards from the November election advertising the campaigns of the commonwealth governor, the newly elected resident commissioner (Puerto Rico's single nonvoting representative in Congress), and numerous others. Taking in all these political ads, I realize that swing states like Florida, Pennsylvania, and Michigan weren't the United States's only electoral battlegrounds.

The neighborhood's junk peddlers, construction, and urban crud recede behind me as I walk through the gate to UPR's neatly manicured campus. An avenue of palm trees points toward the central university clock tower, beige but encrusted with brightly painted Spanish-style relief work. In Puerto Rico's equatorial December, the students dress the way Ivy League students do in September and May, in tank tops and flip-flops. They seem to spend a lot of time smoking and playing classical guitars. All the bulletin boards feature lavish Sprint advertisements, and many of the students carry cell phones. As if that weren't Americanized enough, one student I pass along a breezeway greets

his friends with: "Whassup, mutha-fuckas!?" Then they carry on their conversation in Spanish.

What's now the University of Puerto Rico was originally founded as a school for teachers shortly after the United States won Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam in the Spanish-American War. Between 1923 and 1925, the United States provided generous funding to help found today's University of Puerto Rico. But at the same time, the United States continued to treat the island like what it was—a colony.

As a result, UPR became both the intellectual center of the island and a breeding ground for nationalist independence advocates. These included scores of professors and students who would play key roles in Albizu Campos's militant Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. When Muñoz and his pro-commonwealth PPD came to power, Muñoz reached out to nationalist-leaning intellectual elites with a cultural-development campaign called Operation Serenity and the founding of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Muñoz's politics also played well at UPR, where the most audible faculty voices were those of nationalists and independence supporters, on the one hand, and supporters of his newly founded commonwealth government, on the other. As for the pro-statehood PNP? "What it has never had are intellectual cadres," explains Carlos Pabón.

That became clear to pro-statehood PNP governor Pedro Rosselló when he showed up to speak at UPR in 1997. In his party's typical fashion, he was advocating the sale of the then-public Puerto Rico Telephone Company. Protesting students clashed with Rosselló's security entourage. Some counterprotesters defended the governor and *la privatización*, but their campus legacy appears to be a single tattered bumper sticker, placed high up along a walkway where it can't be torn down. UNIVERSITARIOS CON ROSSELLÓ, it reads.

Today, pro-statehood students are customarily booed when they request the mike at UPR assemblies; accordingly, their political favorites tend to scorn the university. One former PNP governor and resident commissioner made it a clever campaign ritual to visit the campus, where he would rile up the *independentista* students, then denounce them as pinkos to score political points with moderates. It's

hardly surprising that radical statehooders feel uncomfortable in this environment. "I'm not going to say that the statehood movement would flower in the university," says former UPR president Fernando Agrait. "But the pro-ROTC movement wouldn't flower inside Harvard."

Still, to depict UPR as a hotbed of nationalism, as radical statehooders sometimes do, would be an oversimplification. No one has ever conducted a survey, but Carlos Pabón suspects that particularly among the students, a significant proportion may be quiet statehooders, as in the general population. Of course, there are other ways of testing the proposition. Talking with UPR students, I inevitably get a raucous reaction when I threaten to measure nationalist sentiment on campus by draping myself in an American flag. "Here? Don't do it!" cries Antonio, twenty, a junior. "They'll burn you," an eighteen-year-old freshman named Ingrid says with a laugh. "Starting with the flag, then you."

But Cristina, nineteen, offers another perspective. As we begin to talk, she lights a cigarette, then emphasizes that I had better not put an *h* in her name when I write about our interview. Cristina attended Saint John's, the most expensive high school in Puerto Rico, where all classes are taught in English. There, she says, most people think UPR is "a piece of shit," and students—wealthy and largely pro-statehood—are encouraged to go Stateside for college. Probably because of this education, Cristina's English is excellent. And she swears, also in English, when she forgets the right word.

When I ask Cristina whether everyone at UPR is really a nationalist, she explains that the nationalists are the loudest, the most outspoken. But she's not convinced they're a majority. Of nationalist students like some of the strikers who trashed Sotomayor's classroom, she comments, "I think they might take a few things too personally."

**RADICAL** statehood has arrived on the campus scene just as conservative statehooders lose their grip on the island's politics. After eight years in power, the PNP lost the commonwealth governorship in November 2000 to the centrist, pro-commonwealth PPD. (An islandwide referendum on statehood had also failed in 1998: Commonwealthers, who protested the way their option had been defined on



## STUDENT STRIKERS DISRUPTED SOTOMAYOR'S EXAM, PUSHED HER STUDENTS OUT THE DOOR, AND OVERTURNED THE DESKS.

the ballot, tipped the vote toward "none of the above.") The *populares* will soon control UPR's administrative structure, which essentially changes hands along with the government, and the arrangement might not be easy on the radical statehooders: *Populares* and *independentistas* are longtime allies in the cultural sphere, where both accuse statehooders of favoring assimilation. Nonetheless, Duchesne enthusiastically hails the PNP's gubernatorial loss as a potential "cleansing" for the statehood idea. As the PNP regroup, he reflects, perhaps the party will draw on radical statehood and veer to the left.

Can the radical statehooders infiltrate the PNP's ranks and help transform it? "The pro-statehood people either completely ignore them or still think of them as these pinkos, these hidden communists," scoffs sociology professor Juan Manuel Carrión. But radical statehooders say otherwise. Ramón Grosfoguel's political columns in *El nuevo día* had some effect on the party, they insist. And they point out that despite the PNP's conservative slant, liberal statehooders are actually quite numerous in Puerto Rico. Perhaps the paramount example is Luis Dávila Colón, the best-selling opinion journalist and television and radio com-

mentator whose pro-statehood opinions—and harsh digs at pro-commonwealth PPD politicians, like the new governor, Sila Calderón, whom he attacked in a book called *GodSila*—are known throughout the island. When I ask Dávila if he is a conservative, he lets out a belly laugh. "Well," he says, "I can tell you that my first vote in the United States, and only vote in the United States, I cast for George McGovern."

If observers can't decide whether radical statehooders are radical or conservative, postnationalist or assimilationist, there is still one trait these provocateurs clearly share: strong ties to the continental United States. Notes UPR communications professor Silvia Alvarez Curbelo, the post-modernist statehooders speak "the language of U.S. academia." Many of the Puerto Rican scholars who signed the manifesto now live and work in the States. In the words of Dávila, who invited the radical statehooders onto his radio program twice, "They're a diaspora." Duchesne and Sotomayor are the only radical-statehood manifesto signers still working at the University of Puerto Rico.

At the October 2000 meeting of the U.S.-based Puerto Rican Studies Association—where few scholars support



statehood and the luncheon entertainment consists of a Puerto Rican poet rapping about “our perverted Yankee fantasy”—one pro-independence professor fills me in on his sociological understanding of radical statehood. “One explanation would be that the sectors that promote statehood...are extrapolating from their own personal experiences as intellectuals in the U.S.,” he says. “They somehow believe that because they operate in a very free-spirited, multicultural environment at the university level, therefore [statehood will engender] the same openness in the political system or in the society as a whole. And they miscalculate, because that’s not true.”

The United States just isn’t the rosy, open-minded place radical statehooders would like it to be, say critics. Juan Giusti points out that rather than opening minds in the United States, the promise of increased demographic diversity could just as easily frighten many Americans away from accepting Puerto Rico as a state. And Javier Colón, a pro-independence political scientist at UPR, com-

ments: “It’s true that there are conditions for some kind of radical democratic space in the U.S.? I don’t see it. I see a society that is highly divided by income, that is still highly divided by race.... Why should I expect that suddenly the United States will change itself to make possible this kind of radical democratic plan?”

Statehooders counter that it is the nationalists and *independentistas* who suffer from parochialism—and perhaps even fear of leaving behind the cloistered world of identity politics. “Independence lets intellectuals be the spokespersons of a national culture,” points out Frances Negrón Muntaner. “Whereas statehood really makes you an intellectual in a much bigger pond.”

Perhaps it’s not surprising that the debate over whether Puerto Rico should become a state finally hinges on whether the United States could truly include Puerto Ricans on their own terms—as a Spanish-speaking, Caribbean people. There are good grounds for pessimism: The U.S. Senate’s defeat of the 1998 self-determination bill convinced many Puerto

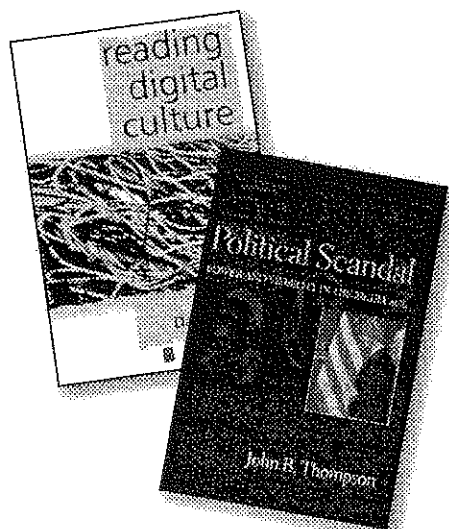
Ricans that racism was alive and well in the United States.

Radical statehood, on the other hand, is a kind of clarion call for guarded optimism about the United States—or at least about what it could become. And that’s why it raises, with a particular urgency, questions that have persisted since U.S. troops landed in Puerto Rico in 1898 to relieve Puerto Ricans of their Spanish yoke and replace it with another. Are we really so broad minded that we can accommodate a very different culture and language within our own? Or is the United States, despite its grand gestures of global benevolence, too small to accept the diversity of the people already under its sovereign command?

“When we are talking about Puerto Rico,” observes Giusti, “we are also talking about the United States.”

**Chris Mooney is a writing fellow at *The American Prospect*. His article “For Your Eyes Only: The CIA Will Let You See Classified Documents, But at What Price?” appeared in the November 2000 *LF*.**

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