



Mutual Aid as a Strategy of Mobilization in a Colonial Context: The Case of Puerto Rico after 2017

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This thesis delves into the potential impact of grassroots mutual aid organizations within post-catastrophe and crisis scenarios in colonial contexts. It utilizes the archipelago of Puerto Rico as an illustrative case study, given the ongoing economic, financial, political, and humanitarian crisis that has transpired since 2006, resulting in a protracted state of emergency within the territory. Stemming from the Political Process Theory assumptions that movements act according to the opportunities their context gives them, the purpose of the study is to understand why mutual aid could be regarded as strategic in Puerto Rico. More specifically, I investigate the connection between the political environment in Puerto Rico and the emergence of a national Network of Mutual Aid composed of multiple organizations, mainly referred to as the Centros de Apoyo Mutuo (CAMs), starting in September 2017, after Hurricane Maria violently hit the archipelago.



The first chapter of this thesis provides the background to the discussion of the topic, presenting the main theoretical tools used to analyze the context of a modern colony and the collective actors mobilizing in it. The starting point of this research was the analysis of Puerto Rico's closed and complex political context using Kriesi's Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theoretical framework for analysis. The cornerstone of this approach is that political opportunities, that is, options for action with risks and chances attached to them, emerge from the structure of the context in which social movements move (Koopmans 97). Furthermore, the chapter introduces the concept of direct social action as a type of collective action that "aims to change society as a whole or a specific aspect of it through action itself rather than by turning in vindictive or confrontational terms toward state authorities or other power holders" (Bosi and Zamponi 90). This definition offers an essential interpretative lens to explore how grassroots mutual aid movements can be considered contentious, despite not adopting the traditional social movements' repertoire of action, which involves addressing and targeting institutions. Latin American theoretical perspectives on social movements, such as Zibechi, Svampa, and decolonial scholars' contributions, are also a compulsory supplement to Western theories as they highlight different power relations between state and collective actors in their regional context. This way, the limits of the Political Process Theory and the Political Opportunity Structure heuristic, mainly applied to Western liberal democracies and institutional-political social movements, are underlined, and challenged.

The political environment of the archipelago of Puerto Rico, officially known as a "Free Associated State", is distinguished by its ambiguous political situation, commonly referred to as the "Status" issue: since 1898, Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States and, despite historical efforts of both the local and the US federal administration to present the current political status, in place since 1952, as noncolonial, recent political developments have highlighted its undoubtedly colonial features. In the second chapter of this thesis, I provide a historical overview of the most important features of the Puerto Rican political and social environment, to help understand how the current political and economic crisis came to be from a panoramic perspective. Since the 1970s, two parties have been managing power alternately, one advocating for the incorporation of Puerto Rico as the 51st state of the United States, and the other defending the current commonwealth option. Furthermore, the political elite in Puerto Rico is considered corrupt and clientelist; it has imposed a neoliberal agenda and fostered the enclave economy dynamics on its territory, cooperating with US interests on the island. The option of independence has been historically repressed and criminalized, mainly by the United States through legal and illegal means, and, as a result, it has been erased from the political arena, both electorally and discursively. At the same time, the country has undergone an economic crisis since the 1990s, which culminated in 2016 with the establishment of a Financial Oversight Board, composed of members appointed by former US President Obama, with the ability to surpass local law on the archipelago's economy. This body reaffirmed the power of the United States over the territory and the colonial nature of their relationship. It is in this critical scenario that Hurricane Maria came, in September of 2017, and exacerbated the pre-existing conditions of precarity, as local and federal agencies were unable to provide useful



recovery plans, and basic services such as energy and telecommunications were absent for many months.

The third chapter presents the subject of study, the Mutual Aid Network, a network of grassroots organizations established in 2017 after the Hurricane and steadily expanding its reach while nurturing concrete experiences of alternative modes of living within the colony. The post-hurricane recovery posed some serious problems for Puerto Ricans since local and federal agencies were not able to respond to the emergency, leaving communities isolated, unconnected, and abandoned. Consequently, citizens spontaneously started to help each other, filling the void left by local and federal authorities. Despite the fact that the CAMs initially developed as centers for the collection of food and other necessities, they never restricted their actions to immediate assistance, as leaders and activists fostering these processes reconduct the root causes of Puerto Rico's precarious conditions and political mismanagement to the whole colonial and neoliberal complex of power. It is for this reason that the CAMs have united with pre-existing organizations to create a network of anti-capitalist and decolonial realities guided by the same principles of dignity and justice and operating toward the same direction: sovereignty and decolonization.

Chapter four delves into the results of the in-depth interviews I conducted with six leaders of organizations belonging to the movement, which were later interpreted through Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis approach. Through this methodology, I was able to find the connection between the critical and colonial context and the aims and objectives of the movement, and I developed my data around three main themes: the first is the convergence of political organization and the necessity of assistance in the moment of emergence of the Network. This theme addresses how Hurricane Maria represented a leveraged political opportunity and a "structural opening" (Vélez-Vélez and Villarrubia-Mendoza) for mutual aid, as it urged people to act, regardless of whether they were previously politically organized or not, prompting citizens' participation and overcoming a stalemate in collective action. The second theme concerns the prefigurative and direct social action character of the movement, expressed through their decolonial alternative modes of living, consuming, and producing. Some of the activities carried out by the CAMs and the other organizations of the Network are a grocery shop in collaboration with local agroecological brigades, a community initiative to teach the installation of solar panels to generate energy that is sustainable and independent of private supplier companies, and the occupation of abandoned schools to realize decolonial educational projects and community care events. Finally, I reprocessed my participants' perceptions of their political environment in the third theme, which deepens the relationship between actors and structure in Puerto Rico, stressing the lack of confidence in the entire institutional political system and actors, and the will to rebuild alternative institutions and democratic practices from within communities.

By combining the information derived from the interviews with the study of the movement's ability to generate conflict while also proposing a change in a critical and colonial context, as well as the historical features of the context and its POS analysis, I was able to draw some conclusions on the case and some more general remarks.



The first finding of this thesis is that mutual aid practices and community self-management are strategies intentionally employed by the organizations of the Network to foster a subjectification and politicization process from the bottom-up through a counter-appropriation of resources—such as spaces, energy supply, agricultural processes, collective care—and the promotion of a social and cultural counter-project, in a context where both discursive and institutional opportunities are minimal. Thus, the link between agency and structure emerges as it reveals that organizations and leaders choose not to rely on corrupt and illegitimate institutions to produce change, as they strive to spread political conscience through the direct exercise of self-management, and communitarian, horizontal decision-making processes.

A secondary contribution of this inquiry lies in its recognition of the capacity of these organizations to manifest conflict, notwithstanding their deviation from conventional definitions of social movements, and even in the absence of direct engagement with political institutions. As Svampa's work on territoriality allows us to appreciate, in Puerto Rico, there is a conflict for and on the territory itself. While the economic crisis forced millions of Puerto Ricans to move to the United States, the choice of the local government and the Board has been to keep attracting foreign investments through tax exemptions and incentives. This is consistent with the exploitative and extractivist colonial dynamics that have characterized the archipelago's economy, as their inhabitants claim they are being displaced and their territories expropriated. Furthermore, there is a conflict in the determination of the direction of the political structure: as Garriga-López argues (124-126), what happened after Maria was a process of resurgence of collective action and a process of decolonial transition that is future-oriented. The Network aims at dismantling the legitimacy and dominion of the colonial structure by going to the roots of the system's distortions, challenging its power relationships, rather than directly confronting only its juridical-political dimension. This is, however, a long-term trajectory project that has to overcome obstacles deriving from colonialism but also coloniality, thus encompassing change at all levels of society. As scholars of pre-figurative politics claim, the meaning and impacts of these types of action are only intelligible if power is conceived as not only located in formal political institutions and structures but in personal and communitarian relationships and practices as well (Gravante; Romani).

Finally, while the analysis of the POS and activists' perceptions allowed me to understand how mutual aid in the post-catastrophe context was an exploited opportunity for grassroots organizations in Puerto Rico, it also generated some contradictions: the mass cycle of protests of the summer of 2019—when Puerto Ricans managed to make former Governor Rosselló resign, for the first time in the archipelago's history—was mainly regarded by the interviewed as a missed political momentum. They claimed that lack of organization and mobilization in a resilient but depoliticized and colonial society was one of the most important factors in it. This challenges one of the POS assumptions that political opportunities are the most important determinant for social movements. Agency, available resources, and the impact of external factors must be equally considered, along with structure. Furthermore, since the POS analysis captures a limited moment in time, historical trajectories remain marginally addressed.



Attempting to generalize from the case study, the POS heuristic alone appears non-explicit of the complicated processes of interaction between actors and structure in a colonial context. Whereas in democratic settings the assumptions of the theory have been substantiated, in a colonial context, changes at the institutional-political level within the same structure may carry less significance. First, because political processes happen in a broader context perceived as resistant and unfavorable to transformation and greatly limited/determined by the US dominion. Second, because the repercussions of the systematic suppression of independence movements (Atiles Osoria) and the internalization of colonial dynamics can result in societal demobilization and a rooted skepticism toward prospects for change. It follows that focusing on cultural change, community organization, and self-management from a decolonial perspective, aiming to rebuild institutions and achieve sovereignty, thus weakening the colonial ties of dependence, is an elaborated rational response to a closed colonial and neoliberal political complex of power. Therefore, I believe that the findings of this thesis propose an expansion of the application of the POS analytical framework to encompass more colonial settings and cultural movements; in doing so, the formulation of more appropriate indicators would be facilitated, concurrently necessitating a departure from a state-centric and Western-centric point of view.

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