

Town Without Fear

Squatting in Puerto Rico

Penny O'Reilly

1984

Puerto Rico is a United States colonial possession, but most North Americans know little about the island or its people. The U.S. government does not want our ignorance disturbed because then we are less likely to protest the exploitation of the island.

The people of Puerto Rico are also victims of a different type. The island is in the middle of the Caribbean, closer to Latin America than the United States, and shares the Spanish language with most of its neighboring nations.

Yet only a trickle of the rich cultural and intellectual life of these nearby countries can penetrate the communications stranglehold of the United States. The strongest influence of Puerto Rican culture is the North American consumerist lifestyle portrayed on TV and in local magazines and newspapers.

Despite North American propaganda and ambient military presence, the island has developed its own squatting movement. Without the aid of government agencies, political parties or radical theoreticians, people have occupied vacant land and set up their own communities.

Because it is important to lift the information blockade here, I will summarize the evolution of Villa Sin Miedo (Town Without Fear), a Puerto Rican squat ("rescate") which possessed a particularly strong communitarian cohesion. And because it is important to think about the Puerto Rican squats within the context of Puerto's colonial status, I want to first give a brief economic history of the island.

Cheap Labor Supply for Mainland

When Puerto Rico came under the dominion of the United States following the Spanish-American War, most of its people were agricultural workers on sugar, coffee and tobacco plantations. Many of the plantations were taken over by North American corporations. Everything produced on the plantations had to be exported to the U.S. Very little grown was consumed on the island itself. Everything that Puerto Rico imported had to come from the United States. Today most of the food consumed on this fertile island is imported.

In the 1950s, after the island was "granted" Commonwealth status with the U.S., the sugar industry collapsed, throwing a large percentage of the population out of work. As the pressure of unemployment grew, so did the need for a cheap labor supply on the mainland.

Puerto Ricans were officially encouraged to migrate. Hundreds of thousands have left their homeland. Those who stayed had to confront a U.S.-prompted sterilization campaign. Today, forty per cent of Puerto Rican women are sterilized.

At about the same time as the collapse of the sugar industry, U.S. manufacturing plants and, later on, petrochemical and pharmaceutical industries, began to locate on the island. They were attracted by the tax-free status they would enjoy and the many unemployed desperate for work and willing to accept low wages. People started to move from the country to the urban centers of the island where they could get jobs in the new factories.

For a while, Puerto Rico experienced a relative economic boom. In the mid-'70s, coinciding with the end of their tax-free status and the beginning of the recession, industry began to leave the island for countries where workers could be paid even lower wages.

Now in Puerto Rico, forty percent of the people are unemployed and 65% receive food stamps. Since most of the countryside is owned by U.S. corporations and the U.S. military, few people have the legal option of returning to the land where they could grow some of their own food

The lush coastal areas are being smothered beneath stark, concrete versions of North American subdivisions and shopping centers. The very poor live in "caserios" which are essentially urban concentration camps. The middle-class secure their tract homes behind a maze of locks and iron grillwork.

Squatting Is A Survival Movement

The petrochemical and pharmaceutical industries have contaminated the coastal waters and ruined the livelihoods of many local fishermen. Inland waters have been polluted by defoliants tested on the mountainous jungles by the U.S. military. There are few jobs either for the working class or the educated, professionally trained Puerto Ricans. Along with unemployment, poverty and dependence on U.S. sub-subsistence welfare, both violent and organized crime abound.

The "rescates" are clearly survival movements. Because some people do not even have a place in the state-owned tenements to live, they group together and settle land left unused either by the government or by private landlords. In the case of Villa Sin Miedo, the inhabitants began to build a self-sufficient community. Other land settlements are not as revolutionary. Some are composed of people who are given "parcelas" by the government. "Parcelas" are small pieces of land which people are allowed to use as their own until the government tells them to leave. The people living on parcelas (as well as other less official squats) often fence their land and do not plant or build for the common use. Parcelas benefit the government by siphoning off some of the frustration and anger which fuel more threatening developments such as Villa Sin Miedo. For the poor, parcelas can provide a relative economic independence. But the inhabitants of parcelas have the government as a landlord and are ultimately subject to eviction.

Riot Squads Dispatched

On January 1, 1980, a group of Puerto Ricans took over the sixty-five acres of government farmland which later became known as Villa Sin Miedo. Within the eighteen months of Villa Sin Miedo's existence, its inhabitants planted gardens, built homes, opened a store and tapped into the official water supply and electrical lines. Unlike other squatting communities, residents of Villa Sin Miedo were outspokenly determined to remain together on their land.

At the end of January 1981, an eviction threat was directed at Villa Sin Miedo and two other recently settled squatting communities. The threat was not acted on, but at the end of the thirty day warning period, the man who had legally rented the Villa Sin Miedo land suddenly appeared. He claimed to desperately need the land, and to have lost a great deal of money during the months of its occupation.

A new injunction against the squatters was immediately filed in court. Villa Sin Miedo lawyers contested the legality of the injunction. While the courts debated the injunction, representatives from the Popular Democratic Party filed two bills in the legislature that would have either given legal title to Villa Sin Miedo to its inhabitants or would have had the government redistribute the land to the squatters as parcelas. The courts upheld the injunction, and the entitlement bill, which had passed the legislature, was vetoed by the governor.

The Riot Squad was dispatched to evict the squatters who rammed an old car across the road and set fire to a line of tires to block the approach of the police. The protection these tactics provided was meager, and soon the police were herding the people from their homes with clubs and drawn rifles. Gunfire during the initial struggle killed one policeman and wounded two others.

A young resident, wounded also, was blamed for the death. He claimed that only rocks were used as defense by the squatters. "I have never fired a weapon in my life, I don't know how," were his words. Police found weapons ranging from a machine gun to a knife, and quickly arrested the several men "responsible" for them. The police stressed that they would investigate the possibility that the weapons were connected with other crimes of "terrorist" origin.

The Squatters Become Refugees

The authorities blamed the residents for setting a fire which consumed most of the settlement, but the evidence suggests that the blaze was the fault of the police. It seems hard to believe that the squatters would have started the fire which burned their homes and all their other belongings.

Although it is required by law and standard practice in evictions, no attempt was made to remove the people's belongings to a safe place. The government shelter constructed prior to the eviction received only sixteen of the Villa Sin Miedo families. None of the promises made to find alternative housing for the squatters during the months of the community's existence were kept, but these families' housing applications were speedily processed. Authorities announced that housing would be found for any other Villa Sin Miedo residents who could "qualify."

The bulk of the community's families walked to the city of San Juan to protest their eviction by occupying the Capitol Building. The rest of the island was well aware of the group's predicament. Unions, professional associations, churches and individuals donated food, clothing, mattresses, diapers and medicines to the refugees who possessed only the clothes they wore. The Popular Democratic Party, which controlled a majority in the legislature, gave the protesters belated permission to stay in the Capitol Building.

After two days and a night spent negotiating with the politicians, the refugees agreed to vacate the building, when they were assured that the temporary shelter offered them by Hogar Crea (not the permanent shelter) would be adequate for all and that they would not have to be split up.

The representatives of the Popular Democratic Party also promised to sponsor a resolution in the House in support of the group's demands that 1) they regain their land in Villa Sin Miedo, 2) the government compensate them for personal possessions houses and gardens that were destroyed during the eviction, 3) all jailed residents be freed, and 4) the police stop its "repressive measures."

The Strength to Resist

The commitment of the people of Villa Sin Miedo to one another and the life they shared must have given them the strength to resist the harassment of the bureaucracy and the police. Their spirit is best revealed in the words of one of their spokespeople. "No way will we permit the community to be torn apart. The community is intact, it has not died, no matter where it is located."

The widespread popular support for the community can perhaps be partly explained by the fact that the economic condition of many of the island's people is not so far removed from that of the squatters. The governor and the police were anxious to associate Villa Sin Miedo with terrorist groups and activities, undoubtedly to better justify the eviction and burning of the peoples' homes.

The opposition party also recognized Villa Sin Miedo's potential political influence and did not hesitate to attempt to co-opt it. The party's sponsorship might have protected the refugees from a more severe persecution, but it will probably also prove to be instrumental in the re-absorption of the community by the welfare state.

We should understand that Puerto Rico is one of the most strategic military fortresses controlled by the United States and that it is slated to become a center for the production of nuclear and other military armaments. The minerals buried in the island's mountains and the oil located beneath its coastal waters are more valuable to the United States than are the Puerto Rican people. These people might be useful as consumers, as guinea pigs for social and scientific experiments and as a source of cheap labor, but basically they are expendable.

When they reject their expendability and reclaim some control over their lives, then they become a direct threat to military security. Hence, the retaliation of the island's super-developed police force. The efforts of the state are directed toward splitting the community, and relocating its members in different "caserios." The U.S. prefers to have its colonized people divided and dependent on diminishing welfare hand-outs.

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1984

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/316-spring-1984/town-without-fear>
Fifth Estate #316, Spring, 1984

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net