

THE PUERTO RICANS



RICHARD M. ELMAN

Recently a group of Puerto Rican social workers on New York City's Lower East Side attempted to organize some of the Welfare mothers. They hoped to send petitions to the Commissioner and, if necessary, the Mayor, to picket the local Welfare office and the main office on Church Street—for better services and more ample benefits. The workers were, of course, all from the middle classes. They thought it would be nice if the women got to know each other socially before any effective agitational actions were taken. Accordingly, they proposed a Mother's Day party at

which the women who had been meeting together formally for many months would select one mother from their group to be honored with a symbolic gift. The proposal brought angry cries from the group. All the mothers thought they deserved such a present. They, apparently, had never received any before. In a city in which abundance has created new opportunities for the most frivolous and conspicuous waste, they were still acting out the manners of scarcity.

Many of the approximately 800,000 persons of Puerto Rican descent now living on the American mainland seem to be in such straits. They are also keenly aware that they are members of a minority group. As the sociologist, Nathan Glazer, has pointed out, this ethnicity is one of their chief strengths, but it is also a terrible

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weakness. As members of a minority group they sometimes seem to be seeking an assured status and are more intent upon distributing gains than in gaining some measure of power. It is because the Puerto Rican newcomer thinks he has so many options for himself that he is not so anxious to engage in the more strident inter-racial movements. Puerto Rican spokesmen have often found themselves in opposition to vocal Negro groups about such issues as *de facto* school segregation.

These strategies seem to be based, in part, on a greater trust which Puerto Ricans have in the rest of us. I have heard punitive Negro social workers describe this as "dependency," but it seems to involve a certain realistic appraisal of the facts of their existence in the United States. If the Negro population still seems weak when compared relatively to the so-called "white power structure," the Puerto Rican community is weak in absolute numbers and in its total resources. Perhaps, by inadvertence, this was what Vice-President Hubert Humphrey meant when he stated, in the foreword to the volume by Clarence Senior, that Senior "has done a fine job of putting the Puerto Rican immigration in perspective."

In perspective, Puerto Rican immigration to the mainland has been small; others have come in far greater numbers. It has been the sudden density of the flow here which some have regarded as troublesome and others as problematical. But, whether or not we now decide to regard this immigration as the nearly unqualified success story which the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and other interested parties find it necessary to publicize, it may still be wise to question Dr. Senior's optimistic "perspective" as, in part, a deception. He tells us that Puerto Ricans are 'making it' here. That is small consolation to those who are not.

Clarence Senior is a distinguished social scientific activist whose interesting accounts of Puerto Rican entrepreneurship in the Virgin Islands community of St. Croix were cited by Nathan Glazer with great effectiveness, but in providing this brief, rather too breezy introduction to "our Puerto Rican neighbors" under the auspices of the ubiquitous Anti-Defamation League, his chief aim would seem to be to liken the Puerto Ricans and their problems to those of any other immigrant group in a nation of immigrants. This blurring of their culturally-acquired distinctions for the purpose of making them into one-hundred-percent Americans balances their growing roster of celebrities against their many grievances. Dr. Senior never quite says that Orlando Cepeda is "a credit to his race," as they used to say of Jackie Robinson, for example, but he does say: "Most newcomers from Puerto Rico are in almost

exactly the position occupied by the majority of our ancestors," without pointing out that opportunities may have changed considerably.

And, along with that familiar ADL plea against discrimination (which musters all the available sociological and cultural platitudes in the form of highly selective data showing that Puerto Ricans are potentially as equal as you and I) there is a special pleading made that, in fact, the Puerto Rican may be even more equal than you and I. They do not, for example, seem to discriminate against others because of color. With approval Dr. Senior quotes Joseph Monserrat of the Commonwealth Department of Labor in a characteristic attempt to dispute the invidious definitions implied by Boards of Education when they use the term "culturally deprived child."

"Is a culture that has for four centuries been able to maintain the individual dignity, value and worth of its members (despite differences in race and class) a deprived or disadvantaged culture when compared with one that has been striving to achieve these values and yet has not been able to do?"

But on the very next page, when discussing how skin color affects Puerto Rican geographical mobility, Senior tells us that there are even now areas of Puerto Rican settlement in the suburbs which are virtually all white. If this, as he seems to believe, is due mostly to the difficulties which dark-complexioned people experience when they try "to move out of distinctive 'colored' neighborhoods," it may also be indicative of just how pervasively our successful Puerto Ricans are beginning to acquire the dominantly racist colorations of American social life.

The Workingman's Supplement

This is a silly book! Whatever Puerto Ricans are capable of becoming when we make them into our neighbors, the effort must, of course, continue; for the status of many of those who are not yet neighbors is often quite unendurable as well as being, in some ways, uniquely their own. What other immigrant group has had so many of its employed males supplemented by the dole? In New York City they are one of the principal consumers of public assistance funds. They come to the richest city in the world from an island community that was poor and overcrowded to begin with and, even now—despite the successes of Operation Bootstrap—is still trying to catch up to the *per capita* incomes of the State of Mississippi.

Quite a few of the older immigrants are handicapped

by illiteracy in both English and Spanish. Some are habituated to a meager paternalism. Wherever they go, their principal difficulties are not community-wide patterns of discrimination but the shrinkage of jobs, the instability of their sources of income, the extremely low levels of income maintenance which are further reinforced by our grudging and niggardly public welfare system when it assumes that they must endeavor to be self-supporting, even though such efforts are sometimes merely self-defeating. It is no secret that Puerto Ricans are being exploited when they are forced to take jobs below the minimum wage which welfare then supplements with additional income, but are they finally helping themselves by doing so? Compared to the current status of the Negro, the Puerto Rican's weakness as a political force puts him at a unique disadvantage. He needs and wants services which he cannot always get; because he lacks the potential for demonstrating his political muscle in the manner of the Negro he must be satisfied with waiting until he is served, with depending upon others to wrest for him those items and services which most of the rest of us would consider as our due. The Puerto Rican's dependence upon social workers, the Commonwealth and its allied organizations, can be viewed as a measurement of his socialization and relative well-being, but, for those who are most dependent—those least well-off—it can also be an excruciating, debilitating state in which there are few options beyond waiting one's turn.

In the April 1964 issue of *Psychiatry*, Dr. Albert Rothenberg of the Yale University Psychiatric Institute described what he called "the Puerto Rican syndrome." The term is, apparently, well-known among psychiatrists on the Island and is referred to variously as "*mal de pelea*" (fighting sickness) or "*ataque*." It is also what many Puerto Ricans mean when they say they are "nervous." A seizure of *mal de pelea* can often lead to violent consequences, bringing one into conflict with authority. What is singular about such behavior is its suddenness, the violence of the seizure, the person's uncommunicativeness during it. It is, apparently, not coincidental that the island has a higher rate of involuntary manslaughter than any section of the Mainland and almost three times as many deaths due to vehicular accidents.

In discussing the cultural factors which may contribute to such spasms of hysterical behavior, Rothenberg notes that the degree of formalism in the formerly colonial Puerto Rican society is such that many Puerto Ricans have a hard time handling anger and aggression. "Actually," he points out, "the superficially warm,

friendly Puerto Rican is often a slightly passive, unassertive person, who at times can be moved to extreme outbursts of anger. In business relations, retail salesmen and repair persons often promise to obtain items and carry out repairs and do not carry through. Instead, promises for delivery dates are made and often broken. Such behavior is, of course, not unique to Puerto Ricans. What does seem unique is that the Puerto Rican sales or repair person is always charming and dignified. He smiles and is friendly throughout the transaction. If the customer gets overtly angry, the sales or repair person seldom responds with direct hostility. He may feel that the customer is too demanding or that his request that the item be available by a specific date is unreasonable but he seldom states this . . .

"The importance of the repressed hostility, the lack of assertiveness, and the problem of violence is that adaptive aggressiveness seems to be lacking," Rothenberg continues. ". . . The man who cannot ask for a raise at work solves nothing by wrecking his car. To be sure, problems with aggressiveness exist in abundance in the United States. In Puerto Rico, however, cultural practices support and, to a certain extent, are resultant of a personality pattern of repression and indirectness with regard to aggression. This pattern is maladaptive in a society which stresses the value of upward mobility." It is also, one might add, *maladaptive* to the needs of those Puerto Ricans whose lives become enmeshed with our public welfare systems. Or, rather, it is a perfectly awful adaptation for the unquestioning poverty status of those who have been made to think of themselves as an "under class."

Self-defeating Rage

One needs only to go to any welfare office in the City of New York to witness the way in which Puerto Rican petitioners for services "sit back and just take it." If they manage to keep themselves in check, they are not likely to intimidate the various functionaries who exercise such a large degree of control over their lives. If they flare up, they are likely to be punished by the withholding of services. The Puerto Rican newcomer who wants something from the System which he has been denied and yet cannot bring himself to demand it without succumbing to a self-defeating rage (which is not the same thing as controlled anger) is suffering under a unique handicap in any well-organized bureaucratic situation. Puerto Ricans must deal with these situations continually. Their lives are, to that extent, precarious.

Much of what takes place in their deteriorating family

situations can be reviewed as a reaction to the rebukes they regularly receive in the world we have organized for them.

The problem, of course, is poverty and the lack of benevolence of so many of the institutions which we have set up to provide relief from it. If Puerto Ricans contribute at all to such a problem, they do so by their lack of assertiveness. I have seen bullying welfare workers become angry toward Negroes whereas they generally condescend if the client is Puerto Rican. If their main problem continues to be that of acquiring reasonably stable sources of income, it is likely that they will continue to find themselves in a dilemma *vis-à-vis* authority.

For this reason some experimental social work agencies—aware of the ultimate power deficits of the Puerto Rican—are beginning to provide them with proper surrogates who can express their anger for them to the crucial functionaries without bringing on punitive acts of discretion. At Mobilization For Youth, for example, there is a store front center where Puerto Ricans can repair immediately after suffering a rebuke from one of the agencies with which they must deal.

The workers at these centers are advocates with a mandate to argue, cajole, and browbeat their opposite numbers within the service bureaucracies in the interests of their clients. In effect, they legitimize the anger of those who come to them. Rarely, do they fail to get the results in goods, money, and services which these same clients were denied. By allowing their clients to remain present throughout the encounter, they have begun to instruct them in the uses of such anger. But, from my observation, it would seem that clients come back again and again to have the same service performed, in part because of their need and because of the resistance they face and the legalisms used, but also because of the passivity which they have not yet been able to shake off.

It takes nothing away from the Puerto Rican's potential to put the immigration in this, admittedly, less-than-optimistic perspective. It does make one wonder if the organization of the Puerto Rican community with its present goals is really capable of working in the interests of all its members. Is there a commonality of interest between the second generation welfare investigator of "Spanish" descent and the Puerto Rican mother of three children receiving Aid to Dependent Children? Perhaps alliances will have to be formed with the other needy ethnic groups. Or perhaps—as Dr. Senior cannot say, being himself a spokesman—there will have to emerge a Puerto Rican intelligentsia which can begin to articulate the newcomer's excruciating depen-

dency upon forces which he believes are really beyond his control.

Whether or not the Puerto Rican will continue to suffer for his failure to make a legitimate expression of his anger depends, in part, upon the benevolence of the rest of us. No other minority group had such long odds to contend with. No existing group has been more accommodating within recent years. But, if Dr. Senior believes they are just like all the other immigrant groups of the past, he should bear in mind that there really aren't such other immigrant groups in the present; and he has failed to explain why there has been so little of the Puerto Rican's unique existential dilemma in the form of literature or polemics, popular music, or even popular journalism. It is not coincidental that the Puerto Rican press is quite willing to translate welfare literally as *bienestar*. The Negro is struggling to regain his rights and self-respect. The Puerto Rican—having his dignity—cannot bring himself to express his anger against a cruel and exploitative milieu. But, unless he is able to do so, unless he is also able to create effective organizations which will take his anger into account, he may find his journey here a terrible and enduring ordeal. I look forward to the day when a young novelist of Puerto Rican descent tells us what it must be like to be dependent upon the New York City Department of Welfare. In the meantime, as Dr. Senior does not tell us, there are still far too many poor Puerto Rican families suffering in passivity in places like the Lower East Side.



ROBLEY WILSON, JR.

ON A MAINE BEACH

Look, in these pools, how rocks are like new change
Bearing the ocean's mint-mark. Barnacles
Miser on them; societies of snails
Hunch on their rims and think small thoughts whose
strange
Salt logic rust like a mainspring, small dreams
Pinwheeling to a point and going dumb,
Small equations whose euphemistic sum
Stands for mortality. A thousand times
Tides swallow up such people, shellfish and stone
Show green and yellow shade in groves of weed;
Rocks shrink, barnacles drink, snails think they bleed
In their trapped world. Here, when the sea is gone,
It is old coins squandered under the sky,
Barnacles counting them, snails spending slow
Round lifetimes half-awake. Beach rhythms flow
In circles. Perfections teach us to die.