

El Punto es Progresar: Examining Slums and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration

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The story of Puerto Rico as an American territory tends to focus on the concept of progress. It is what inspired the Spanish title of this article, *El Punto es Progresar*, which translates to “The Point is to Progress.” When it comes to the island’s history, there is no term as elusive as this one. It implies that every step forward should be taken for the sake of progress itself and that looking back is to remain in the past, to remain outdated.

This idea of progress has never been as defining as it was during the time of the Great Depression (1929–1933) and the subsequent New Deal era (1933–1939), which affected Puerto Rico just as much as everywhere else in the United States. By virtue of its being an American colony, job creation and infrastructure development were serious concerns for U.S. officials. They did not want the territory to become an even bigger problem later on, and not addressing the island’s many issues meant guaranteeing exactly the opposite.

President Franklin Roosevelt established the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (the PRRA) in May 1935 to address these concerns.¹ It was established under the Department of the Interior in accordance with the Emergency Relief Act of April 8, 1935, and was headed by Ernest H. Gruening.²

The PRRA was not the first attempt at establishing a relief program in the Caribbean territory. The first program was the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration of 1933, a job creation

and relief funding New Deal program that proved unsuccessful in managing and processing the thousands upon thousands of relief grants for which Puerto Ricans applied.

The PRRA was a more focused and informed relief project that, if proven successful, could have presented the U.S. with a more stable pool of economic resources and opportunities on the island, ushering in a new era of mass employment and overall stability. Instead, the result was mixed and left the territory even more aware of its economic and political limits given its colonial status.

The problem was that the PRRA approached the relief and its work relief programs with a definition of progress that did not appear to take into account the territory’s own geographical, social, and cultural considerations. The PRRA seemed to follow a more American definition of progress (a definition that is also elusive), which was indicative of a lack of understanding of the island’s specific needs.

Progress in Puerto Rican terms has many definitions. Currently, it is a term associated with U.S. statehood. One of Puerto Rico’s political parties, the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP, or New Progressive Party, in English) includes the concept of “progress” in its name, linking progress with acquiring statehood.

Even though the PNP was established in 1967, more than 30 years after the Great Depression, the association between progress and statehood, or American intervention, had already been part of the island’s political culture. Ever since America acquired Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War (1898), Puerto Ricans saw an opportunity to emerge from the crumbling political structures of a decaying Spanish empire into an era of revitalization under a new and younger American empire.

While the transition to the American colonial system was not universally accepted, the U.S. arrival gave hope to many who wished to make poverty and fractured Spanish government systems a thing of the past. Debates on whether this new American mindset would be compatible with Puerto Rico, though, began gathering force, and pro-independence groups saw in the colonial exchange a bad trade, a substitution of one form

of political subjugation for another. Progress was one of the key items of the debates and it extended all the way to the establishment of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration. In many ways, it still dominates conversations on Puerto Rican politics today.

In this context, official PRRA pictures and reports from 1935-1941 provide an interesting opportunity for students and researchers to learn just what “progress” meant to the PRRA, the United States, and Puerto Ricans in general. The PRRA’s Slum Clearance project in particular offers unique opportunities of study due to its reliance on visual reference to present findings and suggestions for proposed housing developments.

The National Archives’ online tool for educational content, DocsTeach, includes several documents about the Slum Clearance project that are very appropriate (and adaptable) for use in the classroom. This project focused on the capital area of the island, San Juan, and presents a unique opportunity to look at the concept of progress both through textual and visual primary sources.

Context before Observation: A Layered Approach to Visual Analysis

The value of visual resources, photography in this case, lies in the flexible and creative learning activities educators can set up to explore an image in as many dimensions as possible. Context becomes an important element in this regard. It is important to present the visual resource as a kind of archeological dig site where every detail, no matter how small, offers information and can help tell part of a larger story.

The point of photo analysis with students is to invite deep observation focused on the minutiae of what’s seen in the picture. A graffitied wall can say a multitude of things about a neighborhood, and the dangerously bent electrical post beside it can add volumes to the potential story a picture suggests. It not only contextualizes the image, but

also gives students a better sense of the surroundings. These types of discoveries are the equivalent of landing on a particularly potent quote in a written document.

The Slum Clearance Report pages on DocsTeach provide enough context and background to allow for such an exercise in picture analysis. As stated earlier, context is key, and a look at the special report on the island’s slums, “Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area (see pp. 309–310),” provides enough context to kick start any assignment containing slum imagery.

The report offers a rationale of the outlook and scope of slum clearance, delineating the differences between slums and “so-called sub-standard houses,” while also commenting on Puerto Rico’s population problem as a cause for concern on housing development.³ A closer look reveals clues and hints about the type of progress the report supports. The document argues that given the “economic depression and [the population’s] consequent acceptance of low social standards, it is not surprising that the low-income group is satisfied to seek improvised shelter.”⁴

This statement can open up a preliminary discussion or debate about the report’s point of view and how it directly or indirectly dictates a specific type of progress. The report’s statement on low-income groups being satisfied with improvised shelter, for instance, is just one example of the cultural and socio-economic components specific to the Puerto Rican experience that didn’t appear to be taken into consideration when arriving at this conclusion. Being “satisfied” with improvised shelter is not the same as accepting it as the optimal solution to housing needs. It means that they were at least fortunate enough to have somewhere to live, which was not something everyone could say at that point.

In fact, satisfaction and preference in regard to improvised shelter in Puerto Rico depended much more on proxim-

ity to core family members and support groups rather than mere conformity. It meant being able to survive.

Acceptance of “low social standards,” on the other hand, could cause the report’s audience to conclude that such an inclination was a choice, i.e., Puerto Ricans were content with living below what could be interpreted as American standards of living. It’s an assumption that could come up in class discussion and can carry over into the picture analysis of the slums in question.

The report later describes the people who live in these slums as “squatters, who without authority and no respect for existing legislation, have built their poor and inadequate shacks upon swamp land owned by the Municipality or Insular Government.”⁵

Teachers can guide students in a discussion about terminology that assigns a value judgment on a population’s living arrangements and help students develop an awareness of historical vocabulary, which may be useful when engaging with the slum pictures. This opens up another short research avenue that can provide further context for the dire state of Puerto Rico’s infrastructure. With a few guided questions and some direction, students will arrive at two events that stunted economic development on the island during the early decades of the twentieth century before the PRRA was established: the 1928 San Felipe II hurricane; and the 1932 San Ciprian hurricane.

These hurricanes killed hundreds of people, destroyed upwards of 40,000 homes, decimated crops, and caused millions of dollars in losses. In this context, the report might be interpreted differently. Suddenly, the value judgment terms used to describe living conditions and preferences seem to clash with reality. They frame the history of the Great Depression in Puerto Rico in a unique way that could, in turn, be used to foster comparisons with another geographical and climate phenomena that took place in the U.S. during the Depression—the Dust Bowl.

PROBLEMS IN CONNECTION WITH SLUM CLEARANCE IN PUERTO RICO

With Special Reference to the San Juan Area

One of the most acute problems facing the Island of Puerto Rico as a whole and San Juan in particular is the accelerated and steady growth of slums. While the economic problems of the Island may to a large degree be responsible for the creation of slums and consequently an improvement of economic conditions is necessary before the slum problem can be solved, yet it is an apparent fact that some concerted effort, sponsored by Government authority, must be made along the line of slum clearance, based upon an accurate study of influencing circumstances and with long range planning.

With the pressure of Island population, which will shortly reach two million persons in an already over-crowded country, suffering the ill effects of economic depression and the consequent acceptance of low social standards, it is not surprising that the low-income group is satisfied to seek improvised shelter. With the prevailing high rental rates in San Juan, Santurce, as well as other cities in the Island, there is no alternative for these poor people but to look to the swamps around the bay and lagoons of San Juan or on the outskirts of other cities as a place to build their humble shacks.

Detailed surveys made by the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration in the San Juan and Santurce areas show that a large percentage of those living in slum areas pay no rent whatsoever. Many of the slum dwellers are squatters who, without authority and with no respect for existing legislation, have built their poor and inadequate shacks upon swamp land owned by the Municipal or Insular Government. In other slum areas the land is owned by private persons who lease plots on a "ground rent" basis, upon which the slum

dweller builds a shack to which he has, under Puerto Rican law, a degree of title.

It is true that there are sufficient laws and sanitary regulations to permit the Insular and Municipal authorities to wipe out all slum areas if such laws were enforced. The practical problem arises, however, as to what would become of the thousands of families thus dispossessed. So far there has been no disposition to take such drastic steps.

It must be pointed out also that there is a difference in Puerto Rico between slums and so-called sub-standard houses. In addition to strictly slum areas which will be treated in this report, there are yet thousands of families, especially in San Juan, who are living under terribly congested conditions. Usually, however, these are families who can afford to pay a higher rental than families living in strictly slum areas and consequently the solution of their problem should be based upon a different program.

NUMBER OF SLUM DWELLERS

No accurate Island-wide study has ever been made of the number of persons living in slum areas in the seventy-six municipalities of Puerto Rico. Slums in and around San Juan are increasing so rapidly that even the most detailed survey is inaccurate after a few years. Surveys made by the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration in 1936 showed that in San Juan and Santurce there were at that time thirteen slums areas as follows:

<u>Name of Slums</u>	<u>Approximate number of families</u>
Miranda, San Juan	1,600
La Perla, San Juan	1,325
Miraflores, Santurce	160
San Ciprián, Santurce	500

There are instances where a picture can become a singular source functioning on its own without informational support. For this topic, however, the historical context is best explored before jumping into the images. This will allow students to make more incisive observations and think about slum clearance in a variety of ways, leading to potentially different conclusions. Context sets a whole other level of expectation and enables more flexibility when creating assignments.

Keeping History Close: Visual Analysis with Context

The slum pictures found on DocsTeach are truly ripe for analysis and interpretation, especially in terms of quality of life considerations. One, titled “Shacks in a slum in Puerto Rico, ca. 1939,”⁶ offers a striking look at what the Slum Clearance Report could have been speaking to when stating the low standard of living Puerto Ricans had grown to accept and how this needed to change in order to instill progress via new infrastructure.

The picture shows a series of dilapidated shacks in an area littered with discarded wood and other objects. Two small children are in the background, in a shack that might be home to them. The image projects extreme poverty, but it also contains a vast space full of details that can tell more than one story.

There are several ways educators can approach this image. If a more creative approach is desired, students can identify as many details as they possibly can to try and piece together what life was like for those living in the shacks, and write a short narrative. This narrative can contain inferences as to how the slum ended up in this condition (whether it was lack of maintenance, cuts in government funding, or the damage done by natural disasters). The narrative can also explore possible reasons about how long the slum had been in such conditions.

Another activity that requires close visual analysis and careful observation has students take on the role of the researcher putting the Slum Clearance



Shacks in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939



Street Scene in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939

Report together. This assignment can also be a group project in which students put together the report using several pictures of Puerto Rico’s slums circa 1939, leading to a potential presentation (digital or in-person) on the students’ recommendations for steps that would facilitate Puerto Rico’s progression to a higher standard of living under its own

terms, rather than terms imposed by the United States.

Another DocsTeach image that can be used in conjunction with “Shacks in a slum in Puerto Rico,” is named “Street Scene in a slum in Puerto Rico, ca. 1939.”⁷ This image features more of the slum’s inhabitants and can facilitate discussions on the human elements of

slum life. Racial composition, clothing, activity, and daily routines are all essential points of interest that students can closely examine in regards to aspects of poverty.

The “Street Scene in a slum in Puerto Rico” image can lead to further questions as students draft their Slum Clearance Report: How would you define progress and development? What do you think the people in the image might say? These questions go to the heart of the matter, paving the way for deeper and more meaningful reflections on the concept of progress.


The original Slum Clearance Report suggests that progress for Puerto Rico’s “slum-dwelling” populations meant establishing a higher standard of living through new housing projects. The Report does not indicate how these housing projects were supposed to help its residents over time. Would a person have a higher chance of finding a job if they lived in one of these houses? Would food, medicine, and other essential resources be provided for those occupying the new homes? While the report is unclear on these components, these questions can be incorporated into the student-created reports to promote a more meaningful analysis of the project’s aims and whether they were conducive to creating

stable living conditions that secured a higher standard of living.

The PRRA’s place in the island’s history is controversial, to say the least. While it was responsible for the employment of thousands of Puerto Ricans and for the modernization of key locations through rural electrification, public housing programs, and land distribution, controversies created more uncertainty than stability. Puerto Rico’s poor suffered the consequences more than most, forced to stand on the sidelines as New Deal politics and American perspectives led the conversation on what Puerto Rico’s future should look like.

Conclusion

The sources highlighted here dare students and researchers to examine them with an analytical eye, ready to challenge the views that eventually led the PRRA to reconstruct parts of Puerto Rico without consideration for its specific needs. The value of pictures begs the careful but clever application of visual analysis to reach different conclusions than that of the Slum Clearance Report. In the process, students can question the cultural and political definitions of progress itself—a *ver si el punto verdaderamente es progreso por progresar*.

The National Archives and Records Administration has a variety of analysis worksheets available for download and use by educators and students. There are several visual source-based analysis sheets in Spanish as well as English. They can be found at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets 

Notes

1. Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
2. A known detractor of America’s colonial policies, Gruening functioned as director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions from 1934–1939 (which was part of the Department of the Interior). He became one of the main advocates of Alaskan statehood while serving as governor of Alaska from 1939–1953. It’s unclear whether his time as administrator of the PRRA shaped his views on Alaska’s territorial status, but there is a common thread in his political career regarding colonial policy and its relationship with American interests.
3. Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/problems-in-connection-with-slum-clearance-in-puerto-rico, July 30, 2020]
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Shacks in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/shacks-in-a-slum-in-puerto-rico, August 1, 2020]
7. Street Scene in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/street-scene-in-a-slum-in-puerto-rico, August 1, 2020]

Documents

Report - Problems in Connection with Slum Clearance in Puerto Rico with Special Reference to the San Juan Area; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/problems-in-connection-with-slum-clearance-in-puerto-rico, August 13, 2020]

Photo – Shacks in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/shacks-in-a-slum-in-puerto-rico, August 13, 2020]

Photo - Street Scene in a Slum in Puerto Rico; ca. 1939; Slums; General Records, 1935–1946; Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/street-scene-in-a-slum-in-puerto-rico, August 13, 2020]

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