Re-imagining the Puerto Rican Nation? Shifting Identities in Late Modernity

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Introduction

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Marxism the growing scholarly preoccupation with nationalism and ethnicity is noteworthy. The intellectual problematic of previous decades—class analysis—that held the attention of so many social analysts has shifted to questions that until recently were the exclusive domain of not many researchers engaged in historical, social, and cultural investigations. With the noticeable exception of the seminal works of Ernest Gellner, (1983) Anthony Smith (1991) and Benedict Anderson (1991), not too many academic publications on this subject came to light during that period. It’s true, nevertheless, that nationalism and ethnicity have been the subject of serious reflection of a significant number of social and political thinkers since the 19th century, while many 18th century philosophers addressed the nature of emergent modern nations in their writings.

Encouraged by Anthony Smith (2000) I can argue that the complex relationship between modernity, nationalism, capitalism, and culture remains a contested terrain that cannot be cut down into a few sentences. In his most recent work, Smith (2000) attempts to bridge the distance between his work and other intellectual perspectives (primordialist, perennialist, and modernist paradigms) giving more importance to the symbolic-ethnic formation of modern national identities. I feel close to that approach since for me “national identities” are symbolic social constructions that, as Stuart Hall points out, produce meanings through systems of cultural representation. Furthermore, identities in general (social, political, cultural) are positional forms of identification reflecting the inner conflicts and contradictions embedded in the social terrain in which they are being constructed (Matos, 1995:28).

In this paper I address some of these theoretical questions only indirectly. I have dealt with some of these issues in another paper (Pimentel, 1998), and this one focuses more on some specific problems related to the way in which the Puerto Rican national identity is being conceptualized.
The first part of the paper surveys recent works published on the field and it examines briefly part of the scarce empirical data that other researchers have gathered. In the second part I advance my own eclectic ideas on how to “re-think” that imagined community called the Puerto Rican nation trying to articulate together complex collective representations of identity of Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. to the expressions of identity of the Puerto Ricans living in the island by examining symbols, meanings, and representations produced by people in both places.  

Although I was born in Puerto Rico, I have spent most of my adult life abroad. To a certain extend my personal experiences as a “nomad” —since I’m not really a migrant— tend to color the way I understand my feelings of peoplehood and the way I understand my “imagined community”.

A last point I want to make is that the paper before you is not a finished piece of scholarship. Rather it represents an early stage of an ongoing work on the subject.

How others have conceptualized the Puerto Rican nation?

Since the publication of “El País de Cuatro Pisos” (1980) Puerto Rico as a national community has been theorized in rather different way in regard to what had been written up to that point. José Luis Gonzalez’s essay opened new venues of inquiry questioning the traditional “hispanofilia” of part of the nationalist intelligentsia that had produced the dominant cultural and historical interpretations on the Puerto Rican nation. This essay attacked the traditional foundations of the Puerto Rican nationalist ideology linking the country’s historicity to the Afro-Caribbean cultural and social processes of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. According to Gonzalez’s Puerto Rico historical and sociological formation connected us to the African non-Hispanic Caribbean’s culture, something that most of the scholarship inspired on Pedreida’s Insularimo had failed to recognize.
During the 1980s a new Marxist historiography approached the national question from a working class perspective using a structural socio-economic framework to explain the weakness of a national bourgeoisie unfitted to erect its own national state. In the perspective of “history from below” class-consciousness took primacy over “national identity” and the concept of the nation was reduced to opposite class definitions of “patria”. According to that perspective this dominant conception on the Puerto Rican nation excluded the popular cultural representations of the proletarians. Writers such as Pedreira were portrayed as representatives of the point of view of a class in a process of social decomposition. With the exception of few social scientists writing from a Marxist perspective (Carrión, 1996), for the majority of these analysts the project of building a national polity was by its own nature a bourgeois undertaking in which the working class should not participate. Without underestimating the significant contribution of the Marxist historiography to the re-interpretation of the social, economic, and cultural processes that have shaped modern Puerto Rico since 1898, the true is that in that perspective culture and identity were conceptualized mostly as manifestations of economic based class conflicts. Instead of an autonomous domain of human symbolic representations, culture was seen as a super-structural manifestation of structural material processes.

In the 1990s, with the arrival of postmodernism, the post-colonial interpretations inspired in Foucault and the so called “subaltern studies” Puerto Rican historiography has taken new directions. In the last decade this new approach has replaced Marxism, and the figure of the “subaltern” has emerged taking over the vacated social space that not long ago was the privilege domain of the proletarian.

Within this context works such as Lillian Guerra’s Popular Expression and National Identity in Puerto Rico (1998), Carlos Pabón’s (1995, 1998) interesting essays, or Myrna García-Calderón’s (1998) literary study on “narrations of the nation” share common theoretical assumptions. These works examine discursive national constructions to hold their respective analysis on the cultural dynamics of the nation.
For instance, Guerra’s work is based on writings of a group of late 19th and early 20th century Puerto Rican writers named “jibaristas”. She focuses on both the elite intellectualization of Puerto Rican-ness and on the popular expressions in folklore and other public cultural manifestations. According to her both discursive domains make use of the same symbols and understandings of the collective self by incorporating the “Other” and interconnecting jíbaro-centered constructions of national identity. She proposes the deconstruction of the jibarista discourse seeking to demonstrate how the social representations on the nation reveal both “how elite intellectuals viewed themselves as about how they saw others (Guerra, 1998: 9)”.

Guerra’s main focus is the”refined” literary representations of the jibarista writers’ understandings of the meaning of puertorriqueñidad. The main weakness of this kind of discourse analysis is that it builds its theoretical interpretations exclusively on written texts, reducing society and culture only to narrow definitions of identity. The textual materials examined are a small piece of broader social and cultural accounts of symbolic representations of Puerto Rico’s nationhood and peoplehood during that period.

On the other hand, the folkloric material analyzed— as an expression of the popular representations (and of what she termed folkloric politics)— cannot be argued that is exclusively the cultural product of the so-called “subalterns”. Although Guerra’s analysis may be invaluable in deconstructing part of the cultural and national imaginary of late 19th and early 20th century Puerto Rican society—as imagined by the jibarista elite— we must stress that it hardly was a fully developed national imaginary yet.

In a similar vein Myrna García-Calderón (1998) focuses on the literary production of the new generation of Puerto Rican writers whose cultural imaginary is rather distant from the jibaritas writers analyzed by Guerra. This new literature celebrates the cultural hybridity of late modern Puerto Rico as a heterogeneous social domain in which the cultural meanings for national
identities are constantly redefined in a new “social imaginary” that emerges within these new literary practices.

Literary production is a significant component of the cultural representations of the nation. Anderson’s (1991) seminal essay acknowledges the role played by the so-called national literature in forging the national imagination and shaping the national consciousness, a process that was accelerated by the development of the so-called “print-capitalism”.

No one deny that Puerto Rican literature is a valid source of writing materials on how the national imaginary has been represented through these cultural artifacts. The problem, however, is to privilege literary cultural representations as the main form of identity expressions of the national society.

Most of what has been written about national and cultural identities in late modern Puerto Rico does not ground these questions on empirical research, even when they are being elucidated in current political discussions. For instance in the recent exchange of ideas between Coss (1996) and Pabón (1995) on contested meanings of nationality and national identity, both authors address some of these issues without relying on any empirical basis.

While Pabón stresses on the heterogeneity and hybritidy of the Puerto Rican cultural identities and criticizes the dominant forms of cultural nationalism appropriated by hegemonic discourses on the nation, Coss argues that under the specific political context of the island, this strong cultural nationalism plays a progressive role strengthening the Puerto Rican anti-colonial consciousness against North American’s forms of ideological domination. Behind the difference of ideas what we really have are two discursive constructions on the future of the Puerto Rican left and the lost of its political horizon. While Coss remains committed to the traditional project of an independent nation-state, Pabón represents the post-Communist disenchantment with the totalizing narratives of modernity and the problematic nature of emancipatory politics today.

After one hundred years of colonial subordination to the United States (U.S.), Puerto Ricans have a strong sense of national identity and an undeniable cultural self-identification as a national community. Available quantitative and
qualitative researches carried out during the past decade confirm the public perception of the socio-cultural existence of the nation. Further most Puerto Ricans self-identify themselves as part of that “nation” independently of their ideological and party identifications (Carrión, 1996; Rivera, 1996).

According to survey findings from the World Values Study of 1995 over 80% of those interviewed designated “Puerto Rican identity” as their most important identification while less than 20% preferred some form of dual identification which included both Puerto Rican (ethnically) and American (U.S.) as the stronger political component (Rivera, 1996: 192). In addition, Nancy Morris’s research (1995) based on interviews and focus groups reached similar conclusions on the same question.

More recently the ethnographic study of Arlene Dávila (1997) sheds light on the global and local dynamics at stake in the production of hybrid forms of cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico. She analyzes the conflicting views on contested representations of the national culture espoused by the various groups (political parties, private corporations, grassroots organizations) involved in the dynamics of cultural nationalism. According to this analysis all these actors share certain common understandings on the maintenance of a national cultural identity. The promotion of cultural nationalism from above (state) and from below (civil society) has shaped the islander’s conceptions of national identity forging the basis and the processes by which identities are constructed.

Even if sociological and anthropological evidence supports the argument that Puerto Ricans have a relative strong sense of nationality we cannot disregard the current controversy on how to conceptualize the nation and what are the diverse meanings of puertorriqueñidad (Puerto Rican-ness) in the island-country, and among Puerto Ricans living in the US (Carrión, 1996; Coss 1996; Dávila, 1997; Duany, 1996; Pabón, 1995, 1998).
According to recent works on globalization and shifting social identities, the advanced post-industrial societies are experiencing the cultural erosion of national identities. Paraphrasing Stuart Hall (1996) I can argue that in the face of simultaneous cultural and economic globalization processes a relative weakening of territorially bounded national states,—as the main frame of reference for national identities— is taking place. In this perspective traditional national and cultural boundaries are being repositioned and redefined. That is why to speak of the nation today means to address a shifting historical entity whose cultural dimension is becoming borderless and unpredictable since nation-states by nature are unable to fully control transnational dynamics of cultural production and identity-formation. This does not mean, however, that we are living in a nation-less world and that national identities are irrelevant.

From a sociological perspective the question needs to be addressed from the point of view of the human beings themselves, as members of the nation. How Puerto Ricans (on the island and in the U.S.) “imagine” and “represent” their national ties? How they define their cultural and social identities? Which are the collective sentiments of cultural togetherness that many Puerto Ricans may share? To what extend Puerto Rican national and cultural identities are hybrid and heterogeneous representations? These are some of the questions that I try to address in this paper.

Until recently, sociology had little new to say about identities. The implicit model of modernity, which shapes much of the discipline, assumes that social identities in the modern world were formed by contingent processes of political, economic and cultural modernization. This sociological concept of identity, Stuart Hall (1996) has argued, was formed as a reaction to the essentialist notion that identity was an individual characteristic, understood as the essential centre of the self. More recently, the revival of the interest on the question of identity has been seen as a response to the descentering of the subject in post-structural social theories and the current controversies concerning the so-called “postmodern condition”. The post-modern subjects struggle on how to define themselves since previously forms of social identification have been eroded and
questioned. According to this perspective we live in a cultural world that is constantly shifting, in which there are not fixed stable identities.

On the other hand, there are scholarly works arguing that some forms of social identification appear to be more stable, or at least provide some sense of security and continuity vis-à-vis the “crisis of the self” that has entered the current discourses on post-modernity (Smith, 2000).

I argue in this paper that national identities belong to those forms of social identification that have resisted somehow better current dynamics of cultural destabilization —brought by globalization processes— and apparently they remain relatively more stable sources of meanings and collective understandings of who we are.

In his book *Social Identity*, Richard Jenkins points out that identity is the result of a dialectic between similarity and difference. Accordingly “social identity is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and reciprocally other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)” (ibid. 1996:5). Later in *Rethinking Ethnicity* (1997) he agrees with Anthony Smith (1991) on how important is to distinguish nationalism from the concept of national identity as such. Jenkins makes an important distinction between both:

“National identity or nationness can exist in the absence of nationalism….; nationalism without some kind of national identity is unthinkable.(ibid., 1997:160).”

The idea of a national identity that does not require a strong nationalist ideology to exist is similar to the notion of “banal nationalism” that Michael Billig (1995) has introduced recently into the field. In this perspective national identities are understood as something maintained and reproduced in the daily life of the nation as social and cultural categorizations that people use to make sense of who they are without necessarily being fully aware of how they act as “members of the nation”.

Billig’s provocative essay in part is a reaction to Anthony Giddens’s conceptualization of nationalism as essentially a socio- psychological
phenomenon that rises by the disruption of social routines. According to Giddens nationalist sentiments give a sense of ontological security and are the exception rather than the rule in our day to day social lives. By the contrary Billig makes a sharp distinction between what he claims are “hot” and “banal” expressions of nationalist sentiments. Although he does not challenge Giddens’ view regarding the virulent manifestations of ethnic and political nationalist ideologies that have reemerged in many parts of the planet during the last decade, Billig points out that these are extreme forms of nationalism that are uncommon in most advanced post-industrial societies. In which, he argues, what we may find are symbolic constructions of national identities that through processes of cultural routinization appear as “natural” to most citizens.

Regarding Puerto Rico the evidence shows that “banal’ expressions of nationess are the ones that Puerto Ricans generally use to define themselves. Most studies on this phenomenon make a conceptual distinction between both, cultural and political nationalism as two separated realms in that case. The argument has been that Puerto Ricans express a strong cultural national identity without political claims for independence.

For instance, Morris’s work (1995) suggests that Puerto Ricans have a strong sense of who they are as a “sociological and cultural nation” sharing a common territory (homeland) over which they claim certain political rights (self-determination). Most of her informants acknowledged the current colonial condition of their homeland but only a minority favored independence as their preferred solution. Furthermore, the majority made a clear distinction between their “nationality” and their “citizenship” as relatively independent domains.

Other evidence indicates that most Puerto Ricans have an instrumental understanding of their U.S. citizenship. When they were asked what of both was most important to them, 57% preferred their nationality before their U.S. citizenship. In addition, only 16% considered their U.S. citizenship to be more important while the rest, (27%) gave the same value to both, (their U.S. citizenship and their Puerto Rican nationality) as equally important (Rivera, 1996:205-6).
The separation between cultural and political citizenship has been the outcome of the singular colonial experience of the country. In the early fifties the island became a “Commonwealth”, a new political arrangement characterized by a relative autonomous local government under the sovereignty of the United States. (Ramos, 1999; Pimentel, 1998).

Under the long supremacy of the Partido Popular Democrático, (PPD) Puerto Ricans were told that they could be American citizens and remain culturally a distinctive people. Under the new arrangement the hegemonic political discourse of the PPD sought to disjoin politics from culture and the question of national identity and political citizenship became two different spheres in public discourses (Ramos, 1999:189).

The PPD in power during the period when the country experienced a rapid process of economic modernization tried to compensate for its “abandonment” of its original pro-independence ideology by making official certain new definitions of “Puerto Rican-ness” that were embedded in public institutions trusted with the task of promoting the “Puerto Rican culture”. As Arlene Dávila’s research makes evident, culture became “Puerto Rico’s domain of sovereignty, a realm wherein the local government could establish a degree of autonomy even under colonial control (ibid. 1997:10-11)”. 

In 1956 the PPD-government established the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture (ICP). The background for the establishing of the ICP was the so-called operación serenidad (operation serenity) that Luis Muñoz Marín and others nativistas (neo-nationalists) inside the PPD encouraged as a cultural reaction vis-à-vis the economic policies of Moscoso and the “technocratic modernizers” of the party (García-Passalacqua, 1996). For Arlene Dávila (1997) the creation of the ICP was strategically a political decision seeking to consolidate the party hegemony on the cultural realm.

The colonial modernization of Puerto Rico under the PPD accelerated the already advanced process of economic and social integration of the island-country. Through new educational policies and a notable increase in mass literacy, the PPD’s government facilitated the establishment of the social
communication networks that Deustch (1994) considers are indispensable elements for nation building. Moreover, the use in public schools of history books written by neo-nationalist intellectuals served to evoke the passive form of cultural nationalism that the PPD embraced since the early 1950s.  

Without analyzing this process in details the important question to keep in mind is that the PPD played a significant part by re-inventing nationalist traditions and symbols (P.R. flag, Spanish language, etc.) that were reconstructed inside a new political mold that I have characterized as a form of passive nationalism. (Pimentel, 1998).  

This passive nationalism transformed conventional political codes and cultural meanings by changing public forms of national identification. Therefore cultural identities were fractured apart from political nationalism inasmuch as a strictly cultural definition of national identity might exclude national claims for the erection of the nation’s own political roof (Gellner, 1983).  

After the mid fifties, ironically, the popular support for independence fell while stronger national sentiments of peoplehood and a peculiar national imagining matured. Puerto Rican identity became widely legitimized while the new political colonial arrangement was secured (Pabón, 1995; Rodríguez-Castro, 1993; Díaz-Quiñonez, 1993).  

During the decade of the 1970’s, —a period when the post-war colonial arrangement of 1952 became an increasing contested terrain— some of the national symbols that the PPD had “legitimized” as patrimony of all Puerto Ricans (flag, hymn, Spanish language) were reclaimed by the anti-colonial forces as their distinctive “political markers”.  

In a new political style the contestatory power of these nationalist symbols reacquired new political meanings and cultural significance. For the pro-independence forces the national flag should never has been deployed next to the U.S. flag, as the PPD’s government customary did after 1952. At the same time many Puerto Ricans started to sing the national anthem with old verses that commemorated the short but epic rebellion against Spain’s colonialism in the 19th
century, while Spanish language became a political tool for the reaffirmation of the “national culture”. These nationalistic symbols reappeared at a juncture characterized by the growth of the pro-annexation forces in Puerto Rico, and the decline of the neo-nationalist project of the PPD.

The radicalization of the pro-independence movement after the late sixties and its increasing social and cultural presence in the public space (through new cultural practices and political mobilization) served to reshape the country’s public sphere during the 1970’s. Within that context stronger collective feelings of nationhood and shared cultural identities had an impact on public discourses about Puerto Rican-ness. Even the populist pro-annexation party (Partido Nuevo Porgresista, PNP) that had emerged from the collapse of the old Republican Party in 1968, proposed the political incorporation of the island into the U.S. federal system through a formula called “estadidad- jíbara”. More recently the PNP has abandoned this idea although it is still committed to defend Puerto Rico’s language and culture.

After that period (late 1960’s to early1980’s) characterized by increasing social protest and the flourish of new national meanings and cultural practices the pro-independence forces reached a point of relative stagnation. Nevertheless, the cultural sequels of the period have had a lasting impact on the formation of collective identities in Puerto Rico.

Today, while the majority of the citizens appear to support some form of political relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, most Puerto Ricans see themselves as belonging to a distinct national community. While almost half of the Puerto Ricans can be considered part of a transnational fragmented entity whose cultural and social ties are borderless and fluid, many of those who are still in the island-country remain remarkably attached to the national territory.

Paradoxically, in the age of globalization, boundedness and growing cultural contingencies, when new cosmopolitan identities are in the rise, most Puerto Ricans remain strongly identified with their local and national geographies. At least that is what the World Values Study of 1995 indicates. According to it, less than 20% of the interviewed expressed any form of
identification beyond symbolic attachments to their town, region, and island spaces (Rivera, 1997: 6). Instead of global cultural identifications what has been found is a society characterized by a high degree of “localism” and “provincialism” with rather little social identification to the U.S., an even less with the cosmopolitan dimension of the “world”.

This finding is consistent with Morris’s research. She argues that the identification with the U.S. among her informants was rather negligible, even among statehood supporters.9

Other forms of social identifications — such as race — neither have the significance that national identity seems to hold among Puerto Ricans (Rivera, 1996, 1997). Morris does not address the question of racial identities directly but we can infer in her work that they are part of what she calls “nested identities.”10 According to data I have mentioned above, ethnic or racial forms of identification don’t seem to play a significant role in the way Puerto Ricans self-identify themselves. Only 6% of the respondents of the World Values Study did give to racial categorizations the same importance that they assigned to their national identity (Rivera, 1997:29). Something similar to this finding is what Alegría (1997 outlines in her study on race and nationality among Puerto Rican youths.11

This does not mean, of course, that race is an unimportant factor for social identification among Puerto Ricans. What it means is that it may play a secondary role vis-à-vis nationality, as the most common form of self-identification. Since we lack empirical studies on race formation and its cultural significance in Puerto Rico it would be scholarly irresponsible to dismiss this question so easily.

I agree with Dávila (1997) and others who have pointed how in the dominant discourses on nationality race has been played down seeking to mask the racial heterogeneity of Puerto Rican society. These dominant discourses tend to understate African components in the Puerto Rican culture while giving too much weight to the white-European ones.
The question of race, as well as gender and other social identities need to be addressed regarding the formation of Puerto Rico’s national identity. Among Puerto Ricans in the US, race seems to have more significance in the ways they construct their “identities”.

Among the informants interviewed by Micheau (1990) in her ethnography of the Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican community, many stressed their African ethnic heritage as a component of their Puerto Rican-ness. This is congruent with what Juan Flores (1983) and other investigators have written on the cultural and ethnic identities of many U.S. born-Puerto Ricans. Apparently, in the identity formation processes of many Puerto Ricans born (or raised) in the U.S., the rediscovery of their national ties implies also their re-connection to their African-Caribbean roots.

These stronger racial identities (blackness) in combination with the issue of language may be two of the most significant reasons that explain why so often Puerto Ricans who have grew up in the U.S. feel that they are not welcome in the island. Paradoxically, people who has been rejected in the U.S. because they don’t fit the ideal of the typical white American are being rejected in Puerto Rico because they don’t look, dress, interact and speak the same way other islanders do.

Too many islanders tend to exclude return migrant Puerto Ricans —and other members of the diaspora communities located in the U.S.— because the linguistic differences between “them” and “us”. For instance, Morris (1995) has signaled that: “The rejection of Nuyoricans is based on perceptible differences in characteristics that are identified as Puerto Ricans, notably language (ibid. page 125)”. For Puerto Ricans living in the island Spanish is one of the most significant symbols of identity and it has been used as an strong cultural marker for in-group boundary making (Barth, 1969).

Among Puerto Ricans in the U.S. a symbolic identification with Spanish language can play a part in their self-definitions as members of their ethno-national group (Micheau, 1990). However, that does not mean that to be
considered “Puerto Rican” you need to speak Spanish and use it as your main language. As Zentella points out:

“Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are changing the definition of Puerto Rican identity to include those who do not speak Spanish because their unwillingness to reject any of their family or friends as members of the group (ibid. 1999:167)”. This statement is supported by Micheau (1990) who also argues that for the majority of her informants “Spanish language skills were not a criterion for Puerto Rican-ness” (page. 421) since they refused to exclude their children and grandchildren from the group.

For Puerto Ricans in the U.S. their self-identification processes as part of their “ethno-national” group entail the selective re-interpretation of criteria that better accommodate their own understandings of what a Puerto Rican may be. The people in the diaspora communities in the U.S. “are conscious of the rather strict criteria for Puerto Rican-ness held by many islanders, the majority of them have concluded that they may define themselves as Puerto Rican, they may chose the elements which will distinguish them as Puerto Rican (Micheau, 1990: 436)”. In last instance, what the evidence gathered by Micheau (1990) tell us is that for most Puerto Ricans in the U.S.their “feelings of Puerto Ricanness” may be more significant than any set of linguistic or cultural idioms. These heterogeneous cultural sentiments and a shared sense of belonging to a certain collectivity are present as well within islanders’ representations.

According to Morris (1995) with the exception of a small set of shared symbols (language, flag, culture) it was hardly difficult for most Puerto Ricans to give undisputed definitions of Puerto Ricaness. Her informants’ representations varied according to personal experiences and party positions. Many of them made references to these feelings of puertorriqueñidad that they assumed were shared by most Puerto Ricans.

We only know what it is to be "Puerto Rican" because of the way "Puerto Rican-ness" has come to be represented, as a set of meanings by the culture. It follows that a nation is something which produces meanings —a system of
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cultural representation—(Hall 1996). However, Hall’s focus is still on the top-down processes (the ways in which the nation produces meanings), rather than on how individuals negotiate their way around national identities. How human beings engage in complex symbolic constructions through which they “include” or “exclude” others? Or using Fredrik Barth’s notion of “symbolic boundaries”: how Puerto Ricans draw the cultural and social ties that connect or separate them, that are used cognitively to map their fluid heterogeneous identities?

These are questions that can be answered only empirically, but we don’t possess the materials to develop a sound cultural analysis yet. What we can do at this point it’s to outline some of these questions seeking a better understanding of the dynamics behind the formation of identities.

The evidence examined so far let’s indicate that Puerto Rico’s national identities have been constructed in opposition to the U.S. national imaginary. When the U.S. invaded the island in 1898 the process of nation building was still unfinished even if political and literary elite’s conceptions of nationhood have being forged since the second part the 19th century.

During the first four decades of the 20th century contending cultural understandings on nationality emerged —even if the dominant representations produced by the Hisphanophile elite during the 1930’s became the hegemonic ones—. Later under the PPD’s governmental control from the late forties up to 1968, these cultural representations were institutionalized through public policies that promoted a softhearted brand of cultural nationalism.

Differently from other colonial cases Puerto Ricans have been able to strengthen their collective national identities independently of their political subordination to the United States for more than a century. What can be identify as the “nationalizing” of Puerto Ricanness —manifested in fluid cultural and national identities in late modern Puerto Rico— has been the contingent outcome of ongoing social processes started several decades ago.

In late-modernity the cultural emphasis is placed on differences, on the “Other” —or otherness—, on decentering the subject, and so on. The literature
on this topic tell us that internal and external others have always been entangled in the process of construction of national and cultural identities. There is enough evidence that exemplify how in the process of constructing nations (as cultural and political entities) some identities are excluded while new ones are produced (and included).

Based on the quoted evidence so far, I would argue that Puerto Ricans have developed a very possessive and personal form of nationhood characterized by strong cultural and emotional attachments. This notion of personal nationalism has been theorized by the Scottish anthropologist Anthony Cohen (1996).  

In short, we can understand personal nationalism, as regular symbolic practices people use to construct personal national self-identities in reference to their membership in a cultural/national community, rather than the passive construction of these cultural and national identities by the collectivity itself. Personal nationalism as a form of self-identification is not the “natural” outcome of our membership in any nation; rather it is “the symbolic association that individuals make between themselves and the nation (Cohen, 1996: page 802)”.

Finally, the recent debate on the nature of Puerto Rican national and cultural identities has missed some central questions. For instance, how cultural and social differences and social sentiments of sameness and togetherness coexist within shared national identities? Although we reject the idea of an homogeneous national identity, and a single undisputed definition of authentic puertorriqueñidad, we need to understand the nature of the symbolic boundaries that Puerto Ricans, —as any other nation (or ethnicity)— construct to categorize themselves. As Barth (1969) and Cohen (1996) indicate these “symbolic boundaries” condense those social and cultural ties of sameness and togetherness that according to Anderson (1991) are collectively imagined as a nation.
Endnotes

1 There is very little empirical material on the subject. I have found one ethnographic research on “ethnic identity” among Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, (Micheau, 1990) and two studies completed in Puerto Rico in the 1990’s (Morris, 1995; Rivera, 1996, 1997).

2 Insularismo published in 1934 by Atonio S. Pedreira “stands as the classic, and in many ways pioneering, statement on Puerto Rican national identity (Flores, 1993:55)”.

3 A good example of this Marxist approach on national identity is “Puerto Rico: Identidad Nacional y Clases Sociales” (coloquio de Princeton) published in 1979.

4 The Jíbaros were the traditional peasants inhabiting the mountains in the center region of the island. They became a “national symbol” in the emerging national imaginary of 19th century Puerto Rico.

5 Guerra’s main source of “data” is the popular folklore collected by Alden Mason early in the 20th century. The methodological problem is that we don’t know by sure whom were his informants. Guerra assumes that Mason relied exclusively on the common people as his source.

6 “..textos como Insularismo y Protuario Histórico de Puerto Rico recibían la interpretación de una lectura ideologizada.....Canonizados oficialmente al convertirse en textos escolares, la expansión del sistema educativo y de sus instituciones le aseguraría a esa lectura domesticada una posición hegemónica en la política cultural del estado (Rodríguez-Castro, 1993:101)”.

7 The notion of passive nationalism is inspired on Chatterjee (1986). He uses the term passive revolution regarding the transition from colonial to postcolonial societies in the 20th century.

8 Díaz-Quiñonez’s (1993) personal memories depict this in a superb way. “La definición culturalista de la nación empezó a presentarse como absoluta y exclusiva, postergando otras posibles identidades y visiones políticas...Cada vez era más claro que la nación se iría definiendo como una cultura, que no requería la creación de un estado independiente (Ibid. page 65)”.

9 “Almost as consistent was the absence of identification with the United States (ibid.,1995: 125)”.

10 “…multiple layers of other identities, —class, race, gender, sexuality, and more— coexist...All of these identities inflect one another in different ways at different times, investing identity with a great variety and dynamism (ibid., 1995:126)”.

11 According to Alegría “la cuestión racial tal y como es presentada y percibida por los entrevistados está subordinada a la nacionalidad puertorriqueña (ibid. 1996:5)”.

12 “...the power of these symbols (national, cultural) lies in providing us with the means by which to think rather than in compelling us to think certain things. The problem for nationalism as a political posture is simultaneously to leave individuals with the sense of having the right to their own interpretative space within which to maneuver and to experience and express themselves in terms of their personally constructed national identities...(Ibid. page 812)”
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