



Policing life and death: Race, violence and resistance in Puerto Rico

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This book, by Puerto Rican author Marisol Lebrón, encompasses a detailed analysis of the various public and social policies that have been enacted in Puerto Rico to control how life and death are manifested in that context. As a Puerto Rican researcher who until recently lived on the island, I have witnessed, or at least been aware of, many of the events that Lebrón mentions in her full description of how different governments since 1948 have approached the issue of citizen security. The author shows that the paradigm used by each and every government to develop measures to handle violence has been reactive, not preventative, ignoring structural issues including the colonial situation and social inequality in Puerto Rico. Along these lines, the book presents several examples of how the public discourse of leaders has alluded to the promise of public security through political slogans such as *mano dura contra el crimen* (tough stance against crime), *castigo seguro* (ensured punishment) and *golpe al punto* (striking the drug point). Lebrón's work shows that citizen security has little to do with these types of punitive measures and more to do with the development of political and social situations that guarantee people, regardless of race, social class, and the like, full enjoyment of their human rights. Lebrón is successful in presenting a solid case of the Puerto Rican situation so that the reader can see, through the examples provided, that the island's government has responded primarily through interventions in poor communities linked to drug trafficking (i.e., public residential areas) and imprisonment of people who typically represent a sociodemographic profile (i.e., male, young, dark-skinned, poor). The policies of *mano dura* and *castigo seguro*, as the author points out, have become strategies that lead to increasingly high prison sentences and criminalization of behaviors. Thus, the aforementioned policies are a manifesto of repressive measures that respond largely to a process of social control based on race and class. Race and class, as axes of

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inequality, are also evidenced in the social meaning ascribed to victims of violence. Lebrón states that in Puerto Rico not all deaths carry the same social value. If you are a white and economically privileged person, the social response is outrage. If, on the contrary, the victim is a poor and dark-skinned person, your death is usually met with snide comments: “He/she looked for it.”

Although the events that Lebrón enumerates are essentially regional, they bear similarities with the violence that has been experienced in other Latin American countries that have also suffered the effects of colonization, classism and structural racism. However, the fact that Puerto Rico is considered by many to be the oldest existing colony in the hemisphere, and the detrimental effect that this colonization implies for the economy, politics and life in society, make the book extremely relevant for understanding the damages of the colonial process. The book also presents a reflection on how necropolitics are manifested as a form of gradual extermination and expulsion, as has been happening through the massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the US mainland.

As a researcher on violence, and a victim of it in the Puerto Rican context, I am keenly aware how it manifests itself in this context. However, the book generated in me the typical discomfort of having to critically look inside and inevitably recognize that, despite the fact that the island has a privileged geography, its social environment is gradually in decline. This feeling of discomfort was exacerbated by the numerous examples included in the book exposing the local government’s foolish measures supposedly created to deal with violence, but manifesting an agenda of persecution, restriction and “elimination” of Puerto Rico’s poor and marginalized sectors. For both local and foreign readers, the book presents an ideal model of an exhaustive case study, embodied through detailed descriptions that help us understand how deadly policies manifest themselves in a colonial context. On the other hand, the book familiarizes the reader with various ways in which communities on the island have resisted necropolitics and, at times, have contributed to transform their environment. Specifically, Lebrón provides excellent examples of resistance through culture (e.g., rap music) and also initiatives of nonprofit organizations such as Taller Salud, with its Peace Agreement project.

Lebrón indicates that she began the research that precedes the book in 2011, and it is readily evident that it was an ambitious project. Although the author briefly presents some descriptions on the study’s method, it would have been beneficial for the reader to have provided additional information on this aspect. This would have allowed for a clearer picture of how systematic the analysis was and what inclusion criteria and recruitment strategies were used for participants.

As a final note, the author presents a postscript in which she refers to the devastating effects of the PROMESA law (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), passed in 2016 to restructure Puerto Rico’s debt, followed by Hurricane María in 2017. I wonder how she would have integrated the events of the “summer of 2019.” Many have identified what happened in July of that year (a mass movement that successfully demanded the resignation of Puerto Rico’s governor, Ricardo Rosselló) as the source of a sense of “possibility” for the island—the feeling that things can change. While we are creating a “future grounded in notions of justice and freedom,” quoting the author’s words, which allows dismantling the



systems that maintain social inequality in Puerto Rico, including the colonial situation, it is worth revisiting what has been happening on the island. One is left wondering how the author would have interpreted these recent events in Puerto Rico—one hopes perhaps in a new book. In this light, Lebrón's book is ideal for anyone interested in the effects of punitive governance in colonial contexts.

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