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The Influence of The People of Puerto Rico Project on Mexican Anthropology

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In the 1970s in Mexico, anthropological regional projects were designed to explore new research interests: irrigation works, peasants, rural capitalism, and mines. Julian H. Steward, Eric R. Wolf, and Sidney W. Mintz, participants in the research project on Puerto Rico, were all popular authors among the new generation of anthropologists and were frequently cited in their thesis bibliographies. This article explores the influence of the People of Puerto Rico project at the design level of these new collective and regional projects. Students were distributed within larger areas, covering various climatic and production subareas, in their research training. The important role of cities, industries, haciendas, markets, and government programs was highlighted. I suggest that senior anthropologists and academic leaders who were planning this new anthropological era were more familiar than their students with the conceptual lines of the Puerto Rico Project. I gained greater insight into the difficulties of a regional research enterprise when I did anthropological research in the 1980s at the Tennessee Valley project.

Key Words: Puerto Rico, area studies, regional research, Mexican anthropology

The People of Puerto Rico Project had a great impact on Mexican anthropology. Crucial to this effect were the intellectual exchanges that Angel Palerm had with Julian Steward and members of the research team in the 1950s. Two of them had a particularly strong academic influence in Mexico: Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf.

Palerm was an immigrant to Mexico, an exile from the Spanish Civil War. As an anthropology student at the National School of Anthropology, he had research training under the supervision of Isabel Kelly in the Totonaca region, in Northern Veracruz. Looking for the material bases of ancient Mesoamerican civilization, Palerm began to explore the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production. This orientation was not welcome in Mexico at the time, and he, along with other younger exiles who shared that interest (Pedro Carrasco, Pedro Armillas, and others), had to emigrate again to find jobs in anthropology.

Palerm found a job at the Panamerican Union in Washington, D.C., in charge of an effort to seek out the most promising initiatives in social science research and teaching. He published these academic trends in a journal, *Social Sciences*, which included selected articles and book reviews. Along with his wife, Carmen Viqueira, Palerm translated into Spanish a number of significant English publications, such as George P. Murdock's "Outline of Cultural Materials" (1950, "Guía de Murdock" in Spanish); Julian Steward's "Area Research: Theory and Practice"; and a memoir of a roundtable on the topic of hydraulic civilization that was held in Tucson. All these publications of the Panamerican Union were available in Mexico when I began my anthropological studies in the early 1970s.

Steward's application of Wittfogel's hydraulic hypothesis to the New World civilizations of Mesoamerica and Peru became one of the most productive intellectual perspectives in both archaeology and contemporary ethnography in Mexico. Steward's writings also reported on the Puerto Rico project in three separate books: *Area Research: Theory and Practice* (1950) (Spanish translation 1955, as noted above), *Theory of Culture Change* (1955), and *The People of Puerto Rico* (1956). The first two books, each with a chapter on the Puerto Rico Project, were widely read in Mexico, but the third was not equally known. This assertion is supported by the availability of these books in the libraries of Mexican anthropological programs.

The young researchers on the Puerto Rico Project became linked to Mexican anthropology in several ways. Eric Wolf visited Mexico frequently from 1952 on, first joining Palerm in research on the role of irrigation in the Pedregal de San Angel and Texcoco areas. He then studied the silver mines and agricultural haciendas in the Bajío area of central Mexico, looking at these as key historical linkages of New Spain to the world economy and as a staging area for the independence movement in 1810. Wolf and Mintz both wrote on the rural capitalist enterprises they had studied in Puerto Rico in articles that were widely read and influential in Mexico in the 1970s, especially among anthropologists engaged in research on peasants and haciendas. Both used their work on Puerto Rico, on the coffee hacienda and the sugar plantation, respectively, to draw analyses relevant to Mexico. Mintz' critical article on Redfield's "folk-urban continuum" approach to the Yucatan peninsula (dominated, Mintz noted, by henequen plantations) was important, particularly in his insistence upon the need for a historical perspective (Mintz 1953). Wolf's analysis of personal social arrangements in the coffee- hacienda area led him to see what others had missed about the organization and functioning of Mexican

society: the country had weak social and political institutions, and most functions were embedded in relationships based on friendship, kinship co-parenthood, patron-client relations, and power-brokerages (Wolf 1956).

Just before he returned to México in the early 1960s, Palerm initiated a research study at the Panamerican Union on regional planning as a tool for economic and social change in Latin America, in response to the different forces of reform and revolution then spreading all over the Americas. He did some field exploration of planning experiences in Italy and Israel and read extensively on the Tennessee Valley regional planning and on national planning in France. He considered these cases as valid examples for social scientists embarking upon regional research and action projects in Latin America.

As soon as Palerm arrived back in Mexico, he translated his survey of social science practice in Latin America and elsewhere into a program for anthropological study and training. Both area studies and collective research were key elements of his program. He participated in the design of several new anthropological programs and institutions: Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH), Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA) Centro de Investigaciones Superiores del INAH (today CIESAS), Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM). When I started my studies in anthropology at the Universidad Iberoamericana, I found a contagious mood of academic and social change.

I was invited to participate in a peasant research project in the state of Morelos, cradle of the Zapatista rebellion during the Mexican revolution, directed by Arturo Warman. The research area was divided into three climatic and topographic areas, where different crops were grown, and more importantly, different sets of social, economic, and political relations could be discerned according to historical and geographical features. I do not know how much Warman borrowed from the lessons of the Puerto Rico Project, but he did have close academic and friendly relationships with both Wolf and Mintz. Mintz was also a visiting scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where Warman wrote his Ph.D. dissertation.

In 1975 I was invited to join the new graduate program in anthropology at the John Hopkins University, under the leadership of Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. There I acquired a copy of the book *The People of Puerto Rico* (1956). Mintz was my advisor, who taught me a great deal about rural formations and the key institution of the plantation. This was a central topic in a research project initiated under the sponsorship of the Mexican Center for Advanced Research (CISINAH

until 1980, later CIESAS), one of the important anthropological institutions created under Palerm's leadership. The research was about the enormous influence of a regional planning project in the United States South, namely the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority). There are references to this project both in Steward's "Area Research: Theory and Practice" (1950) and Palerm's (1965) survey of successful regional planning cases. This project became my Ph.D. dissertation, under Carmen Viqueira. The initial topic was the influence of the TVA on dam construction projects in Latin America, particularly Mexico. However, I rephrased the project to address the question of why a project directed toward the declining social and economic conditions of the plantation economy in the American South, focused on harnessing the flooding waters of the Tennessee River, became a model for regional development around the world. The field research was carried out in a tributary area of the Tennessee River, the Elk River Valley, by a team of three Mexican anthropologists. My dissertation (1990) was the culmination of lessons learned from reading Steward's area research and Mintz' and Wolf's work on rural plantations and haciendas, experience in area research in the state of Morelos, and conditions in the field in Tennessee. This may be seen as an ever widening circle of ideas: Oriental despotism, cultural ecology, area research, haciendas, and plantations, The Bajío, Wolf's (1950) "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," peasants, Warman's *We Come to Object* (1980), and the TVA and river basin development. The People of Puerto Rico Project occupies an important place in that circle.

Notes

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