Puerto Rico

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Just last month, my tía Emilia and tío Anardi, both in their eighties, announced that their power had been restored. For eight months, since Hurricane Maria pounded Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, they had muddled along, sleeping and rising with the sun, relying on aid organizations and neighbors for fresh water, refusing our offers to relocate them to New York. Cubuy was their home, after all. How could they leave? Like other towns all over the island, the small community of Cubuy (near El Yunque) continues to suffer from random power outages that last from a few hours to days, prolonging people's suffering. Running water comes and goes. Access roads have yet to be cleared. Hurricane Maria further compromised the already decaying water infrastructure, which, like the power grid, has been neglected for decades. As I write this, at least 75,000 people still have not had their electricity restored, and like my relatives, even those with electricity are subjected to ongoing outages, re-traumatizing a crushed and exhausted population that has already experienced intolerable suffering and deprivation.

The US government's response to the latest catastrophe in Puerto Rico has been woefully inadequate and ineptly managed. Unlike in Florida or Texas, where relief was sent relatively quickly following Hurricanes Irma and Harvey, the response to Hurricane Maria has been slow and negligible. The majority of the 3.5 million Puerto Ricans, those without access to wealth or resources, have suffered for months without electricity or water, their homes and livelihoods upended in unimaginable ways. Many people's lives remain in disarray: 500,000 still have severely damaged or nonexistent rooftops. And this year's hurricane season will be upon them soon (<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/01/607483473/how-fema-failed-to-help-victims-of-hurricanes-in-puerto-rico-recover>).

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The official death count from the Hurricane is sixty-five, but a recent Harvard study estimates that the number of deaths is in the thousands (<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1803972>). Also, rarely acknowledged in media coverage is the collective post-traumatic stress suffered by a population living in the midst of vast devastation, with essential utilities degraded to nonexistent and little hope of assistance. Two hundred and fifty-seven suicides were reported in the month following Hurricane Maria, in October 2017, a rate 55% higher than the already high rate for a comparable period in the 2016 (<https://splinternews.com/the-silent-crisis-killing-puerto-ricans-months-after-hu-1824263169>).

It cannot be stressed enough that Hurricane Maria is just the latest disaster in a long line of catastrophes that have beset Puerto Rico in its history of over 120 years under US colonial rule. Even before the hurricane, Puerto Rico was reeling from an economic mess as it strove to dig itself out of a \$72 billion dollar amassed public debt. In 2016, Congress passed and President Obama signed into law the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, charmingly called PROMESA. This law imposed an unelected Fiscal Control Board to create a process for restructuring the island's massive debt and approving government expenditures. As Pedro Cabán aptly lays out in his *El Foro* article in this issue, the current disaster in Puerto Rico can't be divorced from the economic and political control the US has exerted over Puerto Rico during its long status as a colonial possession.

Among other features, the oversight board has imposed a harsh austerity plan that calls for the closing of more than three hundred elementary and secondary public schools, massive cuts to higher education, and drastic cutbacks to spending for health, education, and government pensions. In addition, the board recommends slashing the current federal minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$4.25 for people under twenty-five years of age. Many foresee that privatization of publicly owned utilities such as the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) will follow. For students already hit hard by relentless economic and psychological trauma, the doubling of tuition in public institutions this year, and tripling by 2023, renders education prohibitively expensive. These measures hardly seem compassionate in normal circumstances, much less in the wake of a natural disaster.

Puerto Ricans are not sitting passively by. Immediately following the hurricane, *centros de apoyo mutuos* (CAMs) sprung up in municipalities across the island, as community members worked together to help feed their more vulnerable neighbors and begin the recovery work (<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/11/17/puerto-ricos-diy-disaster-relief/>). Tired of waiting for FEMA, self-taught "electricians" risked their lives to restore the electricity in their towns (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBeivGA2b6E>). In addition, thousands of students and others are pushing back, calling for strikes and demonstrations in response to such inhumane austerity measures. No one there is fooled by the discourse that highlights natural catastrophe and subverts the consequences of policy measures and the colonial history that have long facilitated the plundering of the island's resources.

Nonetheless, extremely harsh conditions have accelerated an ongoing exodus from the island. Over the last decade, about 500,000 people have left Puerto Rico (10% of the population) as a result of the economic recession, and the Center for Puerto Rican Studies predicts that 100,000–200,000 more will leave in the next

couple of years thanks to conditions exacerbated by Hurricane Maria and the absence of relief: it is estimated that from 2017 to 2019 Puerto Rico could lose a whopping 14% of its population (https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/RB2017-01-POST-MARIA%20EXODUS_V3.pdf).

Despite the heroic efforts of its residents, it is hard to imagine how Puerto Rico will maintain its cultural and historical integrity while it progresses into the twenty-first century. It will take all our most imaginative efforts (<https://puertoricosyllabus.com/resistance-and-new-imaginaries/>) to work toward a solution that restores the autonomy and dignity of people like Emilia and Anardi, who, even in their eighties, remain committed to their island and strive to preserve their homeland.