

(below) About 80,000 visitors celebrate the National Puerto Rican Day Parade on Fifth Avenue and witness what parade organizers understand represents the Puerto Rican culture.



Salsay CONTROL

Special Report by **Huáscar Robles**

Despite a growing population, Congressional representation and endless cultural demonstrations such as the National Puerto Rican Day Parade, Puerto Ricans in the diaspora are still struggling for true political clout. Metro traveled to New York for this special report.

T New York, N.Y.—he legendary band “La Tribu de Cortijo” plays a syncopated salsa rhythm. Feet stomp and bodies gyrate, making the stage wobble. The sun beats down on the faces of people watching from behind a metal fence. White, black, brown and yellow—faces of all colors gleam. Booths selling food and Puerto Rican flags and paraphernalia line both ends of the park. Outside the premises, families hide from the inclement rays under leafy trees. They share *arroz con gandules* and other Puerto Rican treats, and fan themselves with disposable plates.

Chris Quiñones, a light-skinned, 29 year-old, scans the crowd. From his height of over six feet, he has a panoramic view of McCarren Park in Brooklyn. Quiñones is a second-generation Puerto Rican, and like many of the revelers, comes here on a scorching Saturday afternoon to celebrate the Brooklyn Music Festival, one of the events leading up to the National Puerto Rican Day Parade.

“It’s a question of unity,” he says shyly. “It helps to see that [we have] a type of power.”

Quiñones’ answer is similar to those of many stateside Puerto Ricans interviewed here at McCarren Park and later on Fifth Avenue during the parade. Power—financial or cultural—a display of bands, floats, politicians and associations doubles as a symbol of cultural virility that invigorates those attending.

When asked what it means to be Puerto Rican, most interviewees offered rhetorical answers. “It’s something you have inside,” says 25-year-old Jenice Díaz, the reigning Miss Puerto Rico National Puerto Rican Day Parade 2008.

“It’s *la clave*.”

Many give similar answers. When defining their Puerto Rican identity, no one mentions his or her genealogical ancestry, but rather cultural heritage as a source of pride. This comes as no surprise; cultural perceptions of identity are intimately related to the search for power.

Power or Identity?

José Ramón Sánchez, a political science professor at Long Island University and chair of the National Institute for Latino Policy (NILP), offers a new perspective on power in his book “Boricua Power.” Sánchez uses the dance model to construct the concept of power in stateside Puerto Ricans. Similar to a dance couple, each partner “dances” to obtain something from the other. That which one has and the other desires gives each partner power. Sánchez illustrates this example with a dance scene from Julia Alvarez’s fiction novel “In the Time of the Butterflies,” where the former dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, and a young Dominican woman dance. She wants help to become a lawyer, and he wants to become her lover. Sánchez writes that power flows between them as they “dance” to obtain what the other has. Thus power is fluid, a constant transaction between two people or groups of people.

As the young Quiñones said earlier, Puerto Ricans flaunt their culture, their economic and political muscle once a year to show their worth as good dance partners. Writer and cultural critic David Berreby states in his book “Us and Them” that this display is characteristic of cultural groups or identities.

Berreby describes groups as like-minded individuals that unite as “human-kinds” with shared experi-



Prof. José Ramón Sánchez

ences or obligations. Those identities transcend ethnicity, since the experiences are what unify the community. The parade and other larger-than-life events are symbolic representations of who “we” are or can do as a cultural identity.

Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard takes it one step further. He writes that all our actions are a simulation—a farce—trying to be something we are not, or having something that does not belong to us. Thus these events here in Brooklyn and Manhattan could just as well be construed as our cultural identities in search for precisely what Puerto Ricans in the *diaspora* are missing—recognition, attention and, ultimately, power.

Power Play

Puerto Ricans in the United States are a powerful group, at least in numbers. According to the Atlas of

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Stateside Puerto Ricans, by 2003 there was an estimated Puerto Rican population in the United States of 3,855,608, which was 4.4 percent larger than that of Puerto Ricans on the island. The Atlas written by Angelo Falcón, a political scientist and president of the NILP, states that between 1990 and 2000, the number of Puerto Ricans in the continental United States grew 24.9 percent, from 3.2 to 3.6 million.

The history of Puerto Ricans in the United States is long and complex; one that is marked by political activism, displacement and conformism. The influence of Puerto Ricans dates to the 1860s, where, along with Cubans, both communities thought of ways to fight Spanish imperialist forces. The position of Puerto Ricans at the beginning of the 20th century was marked by their migration to the plantation fields in the continental United States, as they were identified as a source of cheap labor.

That historical moment supports Sánchez’s argument that a large population has little to do with political power.

Sánchez writes that cigar makers, or *tabaqueros*, from Puerto Rico, while small in numbers, became a force to be reckoned with in Manhattan.

Tabaqueros in Puerto Rico rolled their cigars to the recitations of the *lector*, or reader, who read current events and books by authors such as Karl Marx or Victor Hugo. They migrated to New York City where good cigar makers were in demand, as were quality cigars. Their unique cigar-rolling skills were admired by cigar manufacturers, and they soon became part of this workforce.

Puerto Rican cigar makers represented more than 61 percent of the total Puerto Rican population in New York, and 28 percent of the organized cigar makers in New York City. At the factories, they continued the *lector* tradition, and were regarded as an intellectual and political-minded group.

During World War I, cigar makers, as those in all non-war related industries, were prohibited from increasing wages, but as the war waned, the Cigar Makers International Union (CMIU) called for a general strike. On July 1, 1919, more than 30,000 cigar makers took to the streets and, Sánchez writes, it was Puerto Rican and Hispanic *tabaqueros* who powered the strike in New York City. By the end of the year, employers conceded to the workers a 44 hour week and a 50 percent increase in wages, among other benefits.

The power of cigar makers attracted the attention of politicians such as Vito Marcantonio and Fiorello LaGuardia, who started to tend to Puerto Rican’s needs and helped place the first Puerto Rican elected official in office, Oscar García Rivera, in 1937. Puerto Ricans had achieved power.

“They did so because their talents were in such demand,” explains Sánchez during a phone interview with Metro San Juan. “Employers had to bend over backwards to accommodate them, because they were able to push levers within their industry; they were also able to transform that into some sort of influence outside the industry.”

The power accrued at that time

lasted well into the 1950s. Despite the growth in the Puerto Rican community (about 46,000 in 1930 to over 500,000 in 1956), its economic and political power began to diminish.

The wane in power was evident during the West Side Urban Renewal Project in the mid ‘50s. This project, propelled under the administration of Mayor Robert F. Wagner, displaced around 10,000 Puerto Rican households. Despite the efforts of the Puerto Rican Citizens Housing Committee, the Puerto Rican community was largely ignored in the program’s planning. The Mayor’s Office for Puerto Rican Affairs (MCPRA) became an outlet for the community to channel its concerns, but its efforts were thwarted for two reasons.

First, the agency was created with other objectives. Luis Muñoz Marín and the mayor’s office used this government body to campaign for Muñoz Marín as governor of Puerto Rico; to counter the effects of the *independentistas*; to funnel cheap labor from the island to the United States; and to make a case for Operation Bootstrap, an industrialization plan for the island.

“And there was also the anticommunist period with McCarthy, with people being red-baited and black-listed and what have you,” says Sánchez. “Then you have Muñoz Marín, who was running to become the first elected governor of Puerto Rico; he knew that he needed to make some alliances with the people of the United States to be able to advance his career in Puerto Rico, so that cosmic joining of all these combined interests created this institution, the MCPRA, which is very unusual, ...and the idea was opening the flow of Puerto Ricans into New York City and keeping them away from Marcantonio.”

Sánchez adds that after Marcantonio died in 1954, and when Puerto Rican labor turned out to be hard to manipulate, the government had no use for the office. The MCPRA was replaced by the Commission on Intergroup Relations (COIR), which encompassed the needs of all minorities and focused less on issues particular to Puerto Ricans.

As the community lost momentum, civic organizations arose to help develop leaders and attack issues afflicting the community such as

housing, racism, education and sanitation. One of these institutions was ASPIRA, founded by Dr. Antonia Pantoja. ASPIRA, the Spanish word for aspire, began as a high school advocacy group, but evolved into an organization to develop leadership in the Puerto Rican and Latin community.

The work that began in 1961 with ASPIRA had several consequences, one of which was that the community started to employ better use of the media. Clearly, the media had focused on the negative aspects of Puerto Ricans in New York, but this now focused the light on the new civic institutions determined to change their ethos.

In 1969, an organized group of young men and women also started to take advantage of the media circus. The activist group, Young Lords, understood conventional and institu-

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tional methods weren’t working, and fought to call attention to the injustices affecting Puerto Ricans. During their most memorable demonstration, in the infamous “Summer of 69,” the Lords collected garbage along the streets of *El Barrio* and burned it to get the attention of the Sanitation Department. These demonstrations, Sánchez argues, helped put the Puerto Rican moderate Hermán Badillo in Congress in 1971, the first Puerto Rican to hold a post in the U.S. Congress.

Agustín Laó-Montes, author and sociology professor at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in the chapter “Niuylol: Urban Regime, Latino Social Movements, Ideologies and Latinidad” from the book “Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York” summed up the effect of these social movements and groups best: “In short, New York’s



(above) A float sponsored by the N.Y. Department of Sanitation.

(below) Prof. Félix Jiménez also says that the parade became a commercial event once the ability to fly to and from Puerto Rico, eroded the nostalgia for the island.



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The Case for the Parade

Wedged on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, I stand on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the Health First float. On its stage, a bald, dark-skinned man in a turquoise shirt and white Capri pants sings a salsa melody. No one recognizes him and, as the float passes by, salsa singer Michael Stuart goes unnoticed on that trek of the New York Puerto Rican Day Parade.

As Laó-Montes writes, these social movements—and also these organizations—set the stage for the construction of political identities. Who is Michael Stuart or Health First? Right there—under the blistering June sun, during the National Puerto Rican Day Parade—they are Puerto Rico or New York, despite no one rooting for either, but both compete to be part of the identity of the Puerto Rican culture,

scribes it, or “a tear shed vertically on Fifth Avenue.”

But after travel between New York and San Juan became easier, the nostalgia dwindled, and the parade morphed into a commercial performance.

Jiménez says that the parade is ultimately a show that requires a sale. It’s sold to advertisers by networks, to tourists as an attraction, to state-side Puerto Ricans as their cultural identity. A show. Like 29-year-old Quiñones said in Brooklyn, a place to put the power of Puerto Ricans on display.

“The image is powerful, really,” says Jiménez. “[Puerto Ricans] penetrate Fifth Avenue with the biggest phallus. They do it in the summer when the heat is on. The heat, the music, the bodies—It’s the penetration of Fifth Avenue, and no one penetrates Fifth Avenue like Puerto Ricans.”

From Parade to Politics

There are over 80,000 souls visiting the parade every year; the demonstration is indeed other-

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island or stateside.

“The parade today is a spectacle for the identity industry,” says Félix Jiménez, writer and cultural studies professor at Sacred Heart University. He adds that the parade is a reiteration that something does exist. That something is an identity identifiable by other Puerto Ricans. For Jiménez the parade is a performance of an identity that belongs to no one.

“Look at the parade,” says Jiménez. “Do Puerto Ricans feel that’s their identity? Do New Yorkers seeing the governor from Puerto Rico say ‘that’s my identity? What’s my identity: Wisin y Yandel, Brenda K Star, las batutas?”

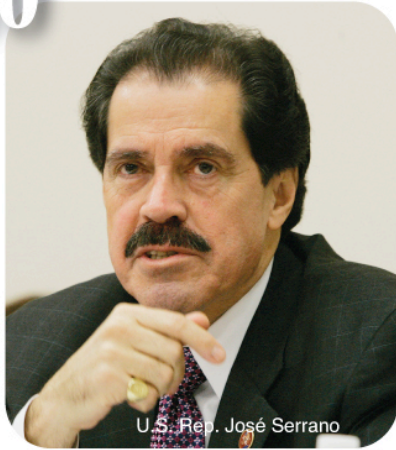
Jiménez adds that the parade evolved into a spectacle once nostalgia for the island eroded. The first parade in 1958 consisted of floats representing each municipality—“a puzzle” of the island, as Jiménez de-

worldly, but this intensity is not reflected at the voting booth.

Falcón states in his Atlas that state-side Puerto Ricans have positively influenced the nation’s democratic process. They have elected three congressmen: José Serrano and Nydia Velázquez from New York and Luis Gutiérrez from Chicago, and mayors in cities such as Miami and Hartford.

Falcón adds that a paradox lies in Puerto Ricans ability to place people in office and their voting records. “Stateside Puerto Ricans have had persistently low voter registration and turnout rates, despite the relative success they have had in electing their own to significant public offices throughout the United States,” writes Falcón.

The Atlas reported from the Census Bureau that approximately 861,728 stateside Puerto Ricans voted in the November 2000 elections, which



U.S. Rep. José Serrano

represented 0.8 percent of total votes cast that year. Only 38.6 percent of stateside Puerto Ricans of voting age registered to vote, compared to 54.7 percent of white voters, and 55.9 percent of Cubans, but it was higher than that of Mexicans (24 percent).

But those were registered voters. Of actual voters the number was 79.8 percent for stateside Puerto Ricans, lower than whites (86.4), blacks (84.1), Cubans (87.2), Central and South Americans (87.3) and other Latinos (83.8). The percentage was higher than that of Mexicans, but by just 4.8 percent.

The picture of the electoral turnout of 2000 for stateside Puerto Ricans leaves them behind almost every other ethnic group in United States. If voting rates were an index of why and how a country tends to their needs or how powerful a group can

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be, stateside Puerto Ricans would be at a clear disadvantage among other minorities.

Salsa Congress

Despite their low voting rates, Puerto Ricans—however disengaged—have placed their own in the U.S. Congress. Today, there are three people of Puerto Rican origin in Congress. They all chair important committees or are part of paramount task forces. They’ve garnered seniority and are respected pillars of their communities.

Professor Sánchez argues that our congressional representatives historically—from Herman Badillo to the present—are still at a disadvantage among other lawmakers, and that this disadvantage is evidence that Puerto Ricans in Congress have little power, and in turn proves that Puerto Ricans as a community occupy little space in the nation’s collective psyche.

He cites the fact that Puerto Ricans in Congress have less media exposure than others and, by consequence, less public attention. This, he specifies, is not related to the individual congressman, but rather to the ethnic group he or she represents, and Puerto Ricans naturally receive less media attention. “It is thus the inability of [Rep. José] Serrano and Puerto Ricans in general to get media or public attention that debilitates and weakens Puerto Rican influence in Congress,” he writes.

Sánchez further illustrates his point with a study he conducted about invitations for free trips or “junkets” given to lawmakers by corporations, interest groups or lobbyists. While these trips are frowned upon, Sánchez argues they serve as an index of how important a representative or senator is and who their constituents are.

During the four-year period ending in 2004, Puerto Rican members of Congress took an average of 1.6 trips per member, whereas Mexican American members took 8.7 trips on average, and Cuban Americans, five.

Rep. José Serrano scoffs at the idea that power and influence can be measured by these methods. “I’m saying power is: four years or so after I was here, I became a member of the appropriations committee, the first Puerto Rican ever,” Serrano says emphatically. “What trip I didn’t get invited to or who took me out to dinner, who says ‘hello’ to me on the elevator is of no consequence. What is important is that I have a budget in the committee that in discretionary spending is \$22 billion and total spending is over \$50 billion... I mean, all modesty aside, that’s power.”

Serrano adds that his fellow Puerto Rican members of Congress have also accrued power. He points out Rep. Nydia Velázquez’s appointment as chairwoman of the House Small Business Administration Committee and Luis Gutiérrez’s post as chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Immigration Task Force.

Jiménez and Sánchez agree that despite exponential growth in population and three representatives in Washington, stateside Puerto Ricans lack the political leverage they need. Other ethnic groups, despite citizenship and migratory restraints, have become more pivotal to the nation.

There are over 28 million Mexican

Americans in the United States. By 2010 their household income was estimated at \$409 billion, compared to \$65 billion for Puerto Ricans.

Mexican Americans have a larger number of their own in public office. Alberto González was the first Hispanic to serve as attorney general. There are six members in Congress, one senator, two California state senators, two California mayors and one treasurer. The current governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson, is a Mexican American, and was a presidential candidate for the Democratic Party.

This provides evidence that all ethnicities want presence and power, and strive to protect these. Historically, stateside Puerto Ricans have gained and lost their grip on American culture and politics. Displays of power like the Puerto Rican Parade—theatrical or commercial as they might be—serve as the meeting point for identities to ensure their longevity by tracing that elusive line between “Us” and “Them.”

Power is not within stateside Puerto Ricans, nor is it outside of

them. Rather, it is constantly flowing between them and the nation in which they reside.

Pushing the political agenda further requires a civic commitment, historically ignored by Puerto Ricans living in the states. Such large numbers but such little political orientation is a zero-sum formula in matters of electability.

Detractors of this theory argue that the growing Puerto Rican population, especially in central Florida, might tip power back to Puerto Ricans living in that state, and that elsewhere, the population is mounting.

It remains to be seen if the rapid growth of Puerto Ricans and their slow infiltration into the cultural and political fiber of the United States will bear the necessary results. And if political leverage is achieved, a protocol ensues. With the giant of Mexico looming over the nation, the question is not whether or not stateside Puerto Ricans will ever make good dance partners. The conundrum lies in trying to lure the United States to the dance floor, a nation that already has a partner. ●



Félix Jiménez

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