A CRUCIAL ASPECT of the Puerto Rican migration experience to the United States in the postwar period is the central role played by the island government in the process of organizing the movement of its people. In this process, although the government of Puerto Rico formulated and implemented its own migration policy, it did so while accepting the boundaries of its colonial subordination to the United States. Its migration policy was influenced not only by what was happening in Puerto Rico, but also by the way its migrants were received in the metropolitan society. Puerto Rico’s migration policy in the late 1940s has to be understood within the perspective of what U.S. and Puerto Rican government functionaries defined as the “Puerto Rican problem,” both on the island and in the United States. Government functionaries believed that migration was the best solution to overpopulation, which was considered one of Puerto Rico’s most important policy problems. State officials had been engaged with this issue from the very early days of the U.S. regime in Puerto Rico.

The making of Puerto Rico’s migration policy in the late forties cannot be seen only as a long-thought-out and well-planned Malthusian alternative to the island’s perceived overpopulation problem by the state officials, particularly by those represented in the PPD. Other important factors need to be considered in order to have a more comprehensive analysis of the Puerto Rican migration experience. First, since the very first days of the American
colonial government in Puerto Rico, state officials have seen migration as an alternative to overpopulation, believed to be one of Puerto Rico’s major social and economic problems. Second, although many Puerto Rican government officials in the postwar period shared this idea, representatives of the federal government and other U.S. institutions and North American advisors to the Puerto Rican government were influential in promoting migration as a serious alternative to the island’s economic plight. And third, the historical context in which migration policy was elaborated is extremely important in its definition: Puerto Rican policy makers in the late 1940s formulated a migration policy only after the massive migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City became a political issue there, with the ensuing negative response by the city’s government representatives and media—what became known there as “the Puerto Rican problem.”

The first part of this chapter elaborates on the concept of the relative autonomy of the colonial state in Puerto Rico to explain the role played by the Puerto Rican government in migration. I will argue that migration policy—like economic policy—was one major area where the colonial government achieved certain autonomy in the management of local affairs. The second part of this chapter explores how since the beginning of U.S. rule in Puerto Rico, leading government officials—many appointed by the U.S. government until 1948—began to advance migration as a solution to the problem of overpopulation. The chapter discusses migration policies and programs from the early days of the twentieth century to the 1940s. It argues that some important migration policies implemented by the popularly elected PPD government during the late 1940s had already been executed by previous governments.

MIGRATION AND THE RELATIVE AUTONOMY OF THE COLONIAL STATE

At the heart of this book is an examination of the role that the government of Puerto Rico played in the encouragement and organization of Puerto Rican migration to the United States. If the colonial status of Puerto Rico and the status of Puerto Ricans as citizens made the unrestricted movement of islanders to the U.S. mainland possible, the concrete manifestation of this process after 1945 significantly involved the colonial state in Puerto Rico. Like colonialism and citizenship, and closely related to the two, the colonial state is also a manifestation of U.S. rule in Puerto Rico.
In the last few years, renewed interest in the manifestations of U.S. empire abroad has brought attention to this peculiar state formation. McCoy, Scarano, and Johnson, for example, conceive the colonial state as a structure within what they call the American “imperial state.” Recent interest in the workings of colonial states in U.S. empire is related to another important issue in the imperial dynamic: the role of local elites in maintaining colonialism in their territories. In *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning*, Go examines how the U.S. co-opted but also accommodated the interests of local elites in its colonial regimes in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and how these elites participated in the management of the colonial state. In his study of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, Kramer conceives the colonial state as a “new inclusionary formation” that works to accommodate the local “elite’s desire for power and recognition.” Although scholars studying the Puerto Rican experience have examined the role of the colonial state on the island and the role of local elites in its management, they have not related the latter to the issue of migration. The increased role played by the Puerto Rican government in the late 1940s in managing migration to the U.S. mainland has to be related to its increased relative autonomy in local affairs and vice versa: migration was significant in increasing the colonial state’s management of local affairs in Puerto Rico.

*The Colonial State in Puerto Rico*

Although the U.S. government had previous experience in colonial administration with annexed territories such as those taken in the Mexican-American War, the experience in the overseas territories acquired in 1898 was quite different. The latter would not be settled by Euro-Americans and would not be incorporated into the nation as states. Thus, not only did the ideological and judicial justifications for colonial subordination have to be distinct from those applied in the annexed territories, but the structures of their colonial governments had to be different as well. Using the experience of previous European colonial powers, as well as its own experience in the annexed territories, the United States created colonial states in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the other overseas territories in order to sustain its colonial rule there.

Go asserts that in order to maintain its rule over the Philippines, the United States “had to construct a colonial state—a political institution that was geographically distant and juridically distinct from, but subordinate to,
Go argues that this experience was something new for U.S. state functionaries; American colonial administrators had to construct and administer a political, juridical, and economic system separate from the metropolitan state. Simply put, U.S. colonial rule of the Philippines demanded something that the Americans had not yet perfected in their prior experience: an overseas colonial state. Two interrelated processes had to unfold in the Philippines: colonial state building and colonial governance.

As in the Philippines, the process of colonial state building and colonial governance in Puerto Rico were interrelated. Building the colonial state implied colonial rule on the island. More important yet, both processes required the co-optation and cooperation of local elites.

Although during the first half of the twentieth century the colonial state in Puerto Rico was administered by a cadre of American colonial functionaries appointed by the federal government, this structure always included the participation of local elites in positions within the executive and legislative branches of colonial government. The Foraker Act, for example, allowed for a party system that provided a resemblance of democratic ruling and political participation—although limited—within a colonial context. The election of the PPD in 1940, the appointment of New Deal reformist governor Rexford G. Tugwell, and the reformulation of colonial policies in the aftermath of World War II illustrate how the metropolitan state allowed more participation of local elites in the governing of the colonial state during this period. This imperial detachment from direct colonial governance responded to increasing nationalism and desire for participation among Puerto Ricans and the needs of a changing global system where the United States now played a hegemonic role. The process of increased participation of local elites in the management of the colonial state culminated with the creation of the Commonwealth in 1952.

While the position of Puerto Ricans changed within the American polity when they became citizens in 1917, the status of Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory and the major structures of the colonial state did not. The major reforms to the colonial state by the Jones Act were the creation of a fully elected senate and the provision to allow the still presidentially appointed governor to name all except two of the cabinet members (previously appointed by the U.S. president). That is, colonial state building and colonial governance in Puerto Rico did not change with the new status of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens. The main functions, workings, and structures of the colonial state remained the same during the first half of the twentieth century, as Pedro
Cabán has argued. He contends that the colonial state “was set up to administer the colony, promote economic growth, preserve political stability, and legitimize colonial rule.” Furthermore, Cabán asserts that “its functions have changed as the colonial state has gained relative autonomy to mediate the content and direction of social and economic change.”9 Although always subordinated to the metropolitan state, the colonial state nevertheless functioned as a contested space for conflicts and accommodations between local elites and between the elites and the U.S. government.

Throughout its several incarnations (1900–1917, 1917–1952, 1952 to present), the colonial state has played an important role not only in governing the territory but also in maintaining the stability of the colonial regime and thus in sustaining U.S. hegemony in Puerto Rico. The move toward allowing more autonomy to local forces in Puerto Rico during the late 1940s responded to the increasing demands for reforms (up to and including independence) in Puerto Rico as well as to the new global responsibilities of the United States as a hegemonic power in the postwar period. To retain a colonial outpost in the Caribbean—one of U.S. citizens, no less—seemed hypocritical at a time when the United States was moving to reshape the international order by supporting the independence of European colonial territories. The very first act of the U.S. government after consenting to the Commonwealth status for Puerto Rico in 1952 was to have the United Nations declare that Puerto Ricans had exercised their right to self-determination and that Puerto Rico had thus ended its colonial subordination to the United States.

The intervention of the Puerto Rican government in migration coincided with those U.S. policies seeking to enhance self-government for Puerto Ricans. The management of migration must be understood as an integral element of the increased autonomy of the Puerto Rican colonial state in overseeing local affairs in Puerto Rico in the postwar period. For U.S. and Puerto Rican policy makers, migration—understood as the outflow of surplus population from the island—was intertwined with the increased autonomy in local economic and political affairs by providing stability in these two areas of colonial governance. Furthermore, as indicated by the negative reactions in New York City and elsewhere to the entry of Puerto Ricans in the postwar period, for many U.S. policy makers Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland was a policy question that should be managed by the Puerto Rican government. If, as understood by U.S. and Puerto Rican decision makers, migration was a means of providing social, political, and economic stability to the colonial regime in Puerto Rico at a crucial juncture in time for the American government, then by managing migration, the Puerto Rican government played an important role in maintaining U.S. rule on the island.
The Colonial State’s Relative Autonomy in Migration

In the early 1970s, a new generation of Puerto Rican scholars began to redefine the study of Puerto Rican history and economic and political development, particularly the changes that Puerto Rico experienced during the 1930s and 1940s. This is understandable, given the importance of that period for the creation of the Commonwealth in 1952 and the era of economic growth spurred under Operation Bootstrap. It was also the period that established the PPD’s political hegemony and thus ushered in the economic and political developments of the 1950s.

One of several concepts that gained particular acceptance during this process of reconceptualization of Puerto Rican history was the notion of the relative autonomy of the colonial state in Puerto Rico. The idea of the relative autonomy of the state was, of course, widely discussed in Europe and the United States regarding the development of the modern liberal welfare state. In Puerto Rico, the idea of the relative autonomy of the colonial state was an attempt to understand the transformations occurring on the island since the 1930s, particularly the political and economic reforms of the 1940s. The concept of the relative autonomy of the state was used to understand the greater role played by the colonial government in economic development and economic policy and how the Commonwealth’s supposed autonomy in local affairs was used to sustain and maintain U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico.

Dietz applied the concept of “relative state autonomy” to explain the so-called ideological transformation of the PPD economic program, from one emphasizing reforms and populism in the early 1940s with policies like state-owned industries, land reform, and workers’ rights to one set on providing incentives to foreign (i.e., U.S.) capital as the basis of economic development by the end of that decade. He argued that the colonial state assumed a relative autonomy with regard to the established elite in response to the economic and social crisis of the 1930s. The reforms implemented by the colonial state under the leadership of the PPD and Governor Tugwell provided the basis for the social, economic, and political stability that made the creation of the Commonwealth possible. But these reforms could not surpass the limits imposed by Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the United States. The process of reforms in Puerto Rico that began in the mid-1930s was promoted both by those local forces that coalesced in the PPD and by the metropolitan state. That is, the relative autonomy enjoyed by the colonial state that allowed the PPD to have a more influential role in public policy was something that was not only acceptable but was indeed promoted by the dominant sectors of the metropolitan state. As Dietz and others have argued
before, the autonomy enjoyed then by the colonial state was always relative within the constraints imposed by the colonial subordination of Puerto Rico to the United States.

Missing from this analysis is the relevance of migration in this period and the role that the colonial state played in this experience. I would like to claim once again the use of the concept of the relative autonomy of the colonial state in order to understand not only the role that the colonial state played in migration, but also what migration meant in terms of policy making in the process of reforming the colonial state. Several scholars have argued that the colonial state used its relative autonomy in economic affairs to promote economic growth and maintain the stability of the colonial regime. This relative autonomy in economic affairs was recognized by the metropolitan state as part of its reforms of the colonial relationship with Puerto Rico.12

The colonial state developed another area of relative autonomy in the realm of migration. As in the economic arena, migration was a sphere where the metropolitan state allowed a certain autonomy for a policy issue that was deemed local and of a relative interest to U.S. policy makers, but not one that required their immediate intervention. In the economic area, the colonial state—before and after the Commonwealth—used the colonial relationship with the United States to attract U.S. corporations to the island with local tax exemption, exemption from federal wage laws, a common market and currency with the metropolitan state, and the political and constitutional presence of the United States in the territory as the final arbiter in case of any conflict with the local authorities. In the area of migration, the colonial state was encouraged by federal, state, and private institutions in the United States to assume an active role in the regulation and control of migration from Puerto Rico to the United States. As the representative of colonial citizens, the Puerto Rican government acted and had a direct presence on U.S. soil, something that no national state could openly do.

To manage its economic and industrialization policy, the colonial state created government bureaucratic institutions, like the Economic Development Administration (Fomento), that negotiated with U.S. corporations and the federal government over the conditions under which American capital would invest on the island. Likewise, to manage migration, the colonial government created its own bureaucratic institutions, such as the Bureau of Employment and Migration (BEM) in San Juan and the Migration Division in New York. As in the area of economic development, where the colonial government created its particular policy (the Industrial Incentives Act, better known as Operation Bootstrap), the Puerto Rican government also formulated and implemented its own migration policy (both, by the way, approved...
The BEM opened offices throughout the island to organize and regulate migration and was supported in this mission by municipal mayors. The island government used the Department of Education, its largest bureaucracy, to “advise” and “orient” “prospective migrants.” To manage the affairs of its migrants in the United States, Puerto Rico’s government established migration offices in dozens of cities there, extending its bureaucratic and political reach well beyond its territorial and constitutional boundaries.

Like in the economic realm, the autonomy enjoyed by the colonial state in migration was also relative to what was allowed by the colonial relationship and by the metropolitan state. As happened with economic policy, Puerto Rico’s migration policy was constrained by the limits imposed by the colonial relationship with the United States. For many years, even after the implementation of its migration law in 1947, Puerto Rican policy makers attempted to carry out migration plans to Latin America, plans that were repeatedly rejected by U.S. government officials and thus never accomplished. That is, the direction of the flow of Puerto Rican migration to the United States was determined not only by U.S. citizenship but also by the limits imposed by Puerto Rico’s colonial subordination. Migration to the United States thus imposed a set of policy goals, like facilitating the incorporation of Puerto Rican migrants in the metropolitan territory and society, a job that private and state institutions in the United States were demanding that the Puerto Rican government should assume. Indeed, U.S. citizenship facilitated Puerto Rican migration to the United States, but it was the nature of that citizenship as a colonial one, along with the cultural and ethnic makeup of the island migrants, that presented obstacles and imposed limitations to their full incorporation in the United States.

The role played by the Puerto Rican government in organizing migration and in facilitating the incorporation of its migrants in the United States reflects the ambiguities of the colonial relationship with the United States. If indeed the status of Puerto Ricans as citizens and the status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. colonial territory facilitated migration to the United States and made possible the intervention of the Puerto Rican government there, it was precisely because of the status of Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects that the colonial state had to intervene in order to advance and ease their incorporation in the U.S. mainland.

Because of its character as a colonial state, the Puerto Rican government was limited in what it could do in terms of protecting and representing its “citizens” in the United States. The Puerto Rican government had to secure protection and services for its migrants from private and state institutions, always acknowledging their institutional and political jurisdictions and spheres of
influence and power. That is what happened in New York City after the anti-
Puerto Rican campaign emerged in 1947 and, later, elsewhere in the United
States where the Puerto Rican government established its presence in repres-
sentation of Puerto Rican migrants. And that is why Puerto Rico’s migration
policy followed very closely the recommendations made by private and public
institutions in the United States in how to deal with Puerto Rican migrants,
from the creation of the BEM in San Juan, to screening and selecting migrant
prospects and channeling them away from New York City, to the creation of
the Migration Division in New York in order to facilitate their incorporation
and assimilation in the United States. In doing this, the Puerto Rican gov-
ernment followed the traditional perspectives of U.S. institutions in dealing
with immigrants, that is, to facilitate their incorporation and assimilation into
American life. But these were different times and Puerto Ricans were differ-
ent migrants, and the institutions that had previously facilitated the incorpo-
ration of European immigrants—the dominant political parties, the church,
unions, Tammany Hall, and so on—were not there to do the same for these
migrants. This role was assumed by the Puerto Rican government for nearly
two decades.

Although it is important to recognize that this autonomy in managing
migration to the United States was relative—that is, one limited by Puerto
Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States—one should not minimize
or downplay the role that the Puerto Rican government played in the repres-
sentation and protection of its “citizens” in the U.S. mainland. The Puerto
Rican government regulated the hiring of workers by U.S. employers with
government-approved contracts. It lobbied and pressured the federal govern-
ment to protect and give priority to Puerto Rican agricultural workers over
alien workers based on their rights as citizens. It regulated and lobbied the
federal government for safe air transportation for Puerto Ricans moving to
the United States, and lobbied the U.S. government to allow major airlines
to fly to Puerto Rico to satisfy the needs for air transportation and eventu-
ally opening air routes to many major U.S. cities. It mediated labor conflicts
between Puerto Rican migrants and U.S. employers—the 1950 sugar beet
strike in Michigan is a noteworthy example—not only to protect the farm-
workers but also to assure mainland employers of the Puerto Rican workers’
and government’s reliability. It became the representative of New York Puerto
Ricans for notable private city institutions like the Welfare Council and for
the political establishment, in the form of the Mayor’s Committee on Puerto
Rican Affairs. It got involved in New York City politics in 1949 by campaign-
ing and mobilizing against Congressman Vito Marcantonio and in support of
Mayor William O’Dwyer.
In Puerto Rico, the government used its bureaucratic institutions, like the Departments of Labor and Education, to advise and organize the flow of migrants to the United States, be it as individual migrants (those moving to the U.S. mainland on their own) or in organized migration (mostly farm-workers going under a government-approved contract to work in U.S. farms). The Department of Labor’s BEM created a vast government superstructure to oversee and regulate the flow of people to the U.S. mainland. In order to fulfill its goals in the United States, the government of Puerto Rico developed an impressive bureaucracy after it opened its Migration Office in New York in 1948. It later became the Migration Division, with main offices in New York City, Chicago, and the Lake Erie region, and by 1958–59, field offices in Boston; Hartford, Connecticut; Rochester, Middletown, and Riverhead in New York; Keyport and Camden in New Jersey; and Hamburg, Pennsylvania (these would grow in numbers in the 1960s).

MIGRATION AND THE “PUERTO RICAN PROBLEM” IN PUERTO RICO

In the second part of this chapter, I will examine how Puerto Rico’s government dealt with migration from 1900 to the mid-1940s. The colonial government promoted the organized migration of workers under labor contracts to Hawaii and other countries in Latin America starting in 1900, and migration to the United States became an alternative during World War I. After 1917, when Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship, the migration of individuals to the United States increased, particularly to New York City. During this period, there were attempts by the Puerto Rican government to regulate migration due to the abuses experienced by island workers. Local and federal government officials tried to foster migration to the United States and other places like Panama during World War II, plans that faced many obstacles. Migration was also a metropolitan objective inasmuch as North American advisers and U.S. federal government institutions favored migration as a mechanism to alleviate the island’s social and economic plight and thus provide stability to the colonial regime.

Contract Labor, Individual Migrants, and Migration Policy Before World War II

Most of the U.S.-appointed colonial functionaries since 1900 understood Puerto Rico’s main problem to be a lack of resources, a lack of capital and
industries, and overpopulation. Migration was seen as an alternative to the island’s overpopulation problem. In the first report by a U.S.-appointed governor, Charles Allen favored the migration of Puerto Rican laborers to Hawaii, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Noting that “these emigrants comprise the least desirable elements of this people,” he argued that “the emigration of these people can do no great harm to the island. . . . Porto Rico has plenty of laborers and poor people generally.” In 1915 Arthur Yeager, the colonial governor who oversaw the grant of citizenship to Puerto Ricans, ascertained that “undoubtedly the fundamental cause [of poverty] is the enormous population.” He argued that “the only really effective remedy is the transfer of large numbers of Porto Ricans to some other region.” He proposed a project to colonize the Dominican Republic by Puerto Rican laborers.

An important mechanism through which the colonial state intended to lower the surplus labor on the island since the time of Governor Allen was the use of contract labor. Thousands of Puerto Rican workers went to work under labor contracts to places like Hawaii, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic in the first years of the twentieth century, mostly in the sugar industry. Nearly three thousand workers went to work under contract to Hawaii; their experience there was an important reference regarding migration for other workers and for the government as well. As the Puerto Rican press reported, many laborers returned dissatisfied with the working and living conditions in Hawaii. In 1903, a report by Puerto Rico’s commissioner of labor sustained the complaints raised by Puerto Rican laborers on the contract violations, abuses, harsh living conditions, and discrimination suffered in Hawaii.

Other contract labor expeditions to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico during the first two decades of the twentieth century were not very successful, either. The complaints were similar to those of previous experiences in Hawaii. In several instances, workers abandoned their jobs and had to be repatriated back to Puerto Rico, as when the Puerto Rican legislature funded for the repatriation of Puerto Rican workers from Mexico in 1911. As a consequence of these experiences, Puerto Rico’s Labor Bureau felt that these expeditions had to be regulated; it concluded in a 1914 report: “If selected Porto Rican laborers could be sent in small groups to Cuba or Santo Domingo, protected by proper contracts in which the government of Porto Rico is a party, such emigration might be advisable.” This was precisely the intent of the 1919 emigration law approved by the Puerto Rican legislature to protect Puerto Rican migrant workers, not only for their benefit but also as a means of allowing the continuance of migration flows.

The 1919 law, the island’s first legislation to regulate migration, established an important precedent that would be followed by the migration law approved in 1947. This law authorized the commissioner of agriculture and labor to
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intervene “in all matters concerning the emigration of laborers from Porto Rico”; it allowed this institution to “regulate such propositions, promises, conditions or offers made to native laborers in cases of emigration; to procure, subscribe and enforce such contracts” between Puerto Rican laborers and any U.S. or foreign contractors. Furthermore, it states that the insular government “shall have no obligation in any emigration to protect or enforce the rights of such persons as shall leave this country, unless the contracts entered into and between emigrants and the State contracting them shall have been approved by the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor.” Nevertheless, its effectiveness was never proven since the intensity of hiring Puerto Ricans under labor contracts decreased in the 1920s and the Puerto Rican government proved incapable of enforcing the law, as shown by a 1926 investigation into the abuses suffered by Puerto Rican migrants in Arizona.

World War I had an important impact on the character of Puerto Rican migration to the United States. In 1917 the Jones Act made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens, one of the reasons for the increase in the movement of people from the island. Although Puerto Ricans had enjoyed free access to the U.S. mainland since 1898, migration during this period was not very significant; it increased dramatically after 1917. Furthermore, some U.S. colonial functionaries saw Puerto Ricans as a source of (cheap) labor that could satisfy the manpower needs created by the conflict in Europe. Around thirteen thousand Puerto Ricans were employed by 1918 in war-related industries in the United States, in places such as New Orleans; Wilmington, North Carolina; Brunswick and Savannah, Georgia; and Charleston, South Carolina. As in previous experiences, contract violations and abuses were common complaints of migrants; according to newspaper and government reports, ninety-three men died on these projects during several months from 1918 to 1919.

After the war ended, U.S. colonial functionaries kept insisting on the need to encourage migration from Puerto Rico to the United States in order to reduce overpopulation on the island and to provide cheap labor to U.S. industries. For example, the 1926 annual report of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, the U.S. bureaucracy in charge of Puerto Rican affairs, noted the negative attitude of Puerto Ricans toward migration, particularly to the United States due to its different environment, but stated that “the surplus people of Porto Rico have an unusual opportunity in the United States” and could migrate “if once encouraged to do so.”

Some Puerto Rican functionaries were concerned with labor contract expeditions; they were particularly worried by the abuses experienced by migrants going to the U.S. mainland. They called for a greater supervision by the Puerto Rican government, as was reflected in a 1927 report by the
interim chief of the island’s Labor Bureau. The report questioned the viability of contract labor expeditions organized by private interests and argued that “it would be best to facilitate a voluntary migration.” It concluded with a request to the Employment Bureau of the Department of Agriculture and Employment to enter into agreements with its counterparts in the United States “as a means to obtain knowledge of the places where labor is needed and that the latter be selected . . . so that they go directly to the appropriate places, contributing this way to lower in an intelligent and methodical way the surplus population of the country.”

In the 1920s, individual, or “spontaneous,” migration replaced labor contract migration as the dominant form of labor migration from Puerto Rico to the United States. This migration was represented by the movement of Puerto Ricans on their own to the United States, most particularly to New York City. By 1930 Puerto Rican officials acknowledged that most of Puerto Rico’s migration was made of “voluntary” migrants moving to the United States. This form of migration fueled the dramatic increase of Puerto Ricans living in the United States after the 1920s: in 1920 there were 11,811 Puerto Ricans living on the mainland, increasing to 52,774 by 1930 and to 69,967 by 1940. Most migrants headed toward New York City, where, as Sánchez-Korrol so aptly put it, the Puerto Rican conglomerate developed from “colonia to community” in the 1930s and early 1940s.

World War II and Puerto Rican Migration Policy

The war years (1940–1945) were years of debate regarding Puerto Rico’s population problem and the migration of workers. Various U.S. functionaries in Puerto Rico and the mainland generally saw Puerto Ricans as an available pool of cheap labor accessible for wartime-related activities. But island government functionaries, including Governor Tugwell and some PPD leaders, were generally more cautious about sending out large numbers of workers to the U.S. mainland. Metropolitan interests would, of course, prevail, and thousands of Puerto Rican laborers were recruited to satisfy the needs of the American industries in a time of war. The War Manpower Commission (WMC) became the best example of the American government’s action in recruiting Puerto Rican labor for mainland labor needs. But although most government functionaries agreed that migration was a good alternative to deal with the overpopulation problem, there was no consensus among U.S. and Puerto Rican policy makers on how to proceed. For example, there was disagreement about whether the government should be involved in a mass
planned migration or encourage migration of individuals only. Furthermore, issues of race, culture, and the status of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens influenced how these plans were conceived.

In 1939 Admiral William Leahy was appointed governor of Puerto Rico by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, signaling Puerto Rico's increasing military importance for the U.S. government. In 1940 Leahy and U.S. functionaries began to consider the possibility of an expedition of Puerto Rican workers to work in the Panama Canal Zone. The Panama plan is a good example of how U.S. policy makers viewed the role that Puerto Rican labor could play for U.S. economic and military interests during World War II. It also shows the problems faced by the Puerto Rican government in organizing labor migrations during the war period, the place of colonial citizens within broader U.S. global interests, and how issues of race and citizenship intersected for Puerto Ricans at that time.

In a letter to Leahy on April 8, 1940, Atherton Lee, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Puerto Rico, proposed a plan to send Puerto Rican workers to Panama. On a visit there, he consulted with the American ambassador on the use of Puerto Ricans to satisfy the Panama Canal Zone's increasing labor needs; because of their status as U.S. citizens, the ambassador “felt that Puerto Ricans should have the advantage over other West Indians in such employment.” Lee added that during a visit to Panama, President Roosevelt “had expressed the opinion that American citizens exclusively should be employed in the new construction work in the Canal Zone. It seemed to me that this may have been a result of one of your conversations with the President.” Puerto Ricans, he pointed out, would be acceptable to the Panama government, which “was not particularly pleased with the importation of further West Indians,” worried that the entrance of so many black workers could have “a great influence on the racial characters of the people of Panama.” Lee discarded other migration projects to Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador for several reasons, including the possibility they might be “at considerable expense to the Federal Government. The Canal Zone seems to have the best opportunities for any mass migration from Puerto Rico.”  

For U.S. colonial functionaries, sending Puerto Ricans to the Panama Canal Zone would also address the population problem on the island. In a letter to Harold Ickes, U.S. secretary of the interior, Leahy argued that

in view of the heavy overpopulation of Puerto Rico this would appear to be a critical time to press upon the War Department the desirability of utilizing Puerto Rico’s excess labor population for work on the Canal Zone, and by
doing so to relieve to some small extent the unemployment situation which
now exists here.\textsuperscript{31}

On May 21, C. S. Ridley, governor of the Panama Canal Zone, informed Leahy
that he had received authorization for the recruitment of Puerto Ricans to
work in Panama and submitted a plan that included specific conditions to be
enclosed in a labor contract.\textsuperscript{32}

But there were some apprehensions from functionaries in Puerto Rico
about the idea. In a June 6 letter to Carlos Gallardo, Puerto Rico’s executive
secretary, Atherton Lee dismissed his objections to the migration of Puerto
Ricans to Panama, reasoning that if “properly organized” and if the events
that led to the disastrous migration to Hawaii could be avoided, there should
be no reason for this project to fail. He concluded that “the easiest solution
for the crowded population conditions would be an intelligent migration”
and Panama “can be made a first step in such a migration.”\textsuperscript{33} Other Puerto
Rican functionaries also raised doubts regarding the proposal to send Puerto
Rican laborers to Panama. Labor Secretary Prudencio Rivera Martínez ques-
tioned the proposed labor contract, declaring that under the conditions of
the contract, the Panama Canal people would not be able to recruit in the
United States. But even after the contract was modified to include his con-
cerns, the secretary of labor asserted that the “prevailing conditions” in the
Panama Canal Zone should be investigated by representatives of the Puerto
Rican government before any agreement was made or any worker sent there.\textsuperscript{34}

Other war-related obstacles prevented the Panama proposal from com-
ing to fruition. Brigadier General E. L. Daley complained to Leahy in Oc-
tober 1940 that he lacked labor to complete required military constructions in
Puerto Rico in time; he requested some thirty thousand laborers, maintaining
that the current twenty thousand were insufficient.\textsuperscript{35} Another critical issue
was the transportation of workers to Panama. Leahy had suggested the use of
military vehicles for this purpose. But on October 25, U.S. Secretary of War
Henry L. Stimson denied this petition, saying that the military needed their
transportation vehicles for purposes related to the war.\textsuperscript{36}

The idea to send Puerto Rican workers to the Panama Canal Zone came
to an end due to war-related events, the improvement in the economic condi-
tions in Puerto Rico during the war, and continued concerns among island
government functionaries on how island workers would be treated there and
what their working and living conditions would be. In a February 1941 report
on his visit to Panama, William D. López, acting commissioner of labor, com-
plained that salaries there were too low for Puerto Ricans and that they would
be treated as other “foreign” workers and not as U.S. citizens.\textsuperscript{37} The Canal Zone
governor complained to Puerto Rico’s governor, Guy J. Swope, that worker transportation to Panama and lower wages were two main obstacles to the proposal. After insisting that López’s suggestion for higher wages for Puerto Ricans was unfeasible since they would have to raise wages for other “tropical workers,” he concluded that “there is little prospect of obtaining desirable employees for our work from Puerto Rico in the immediate future.”

Swope replied that the employment situation in Puerto Rico had improved dramatically due to military projects and the construction of the navy base in Vieques and that lower salaries on the Panama Canal Zone were not an incentive for Puerto Rican workers to go there since unemployment on the island had decreased, there was a lack of skilled workers, and higher salaries in construction had propelled an increase in other areas.

Although the proposal to send workers to Panama went no further, migration continued to be a preoccupation for U.S. and Puerto Rican policy makers. Several proposals to send Puerto Ricans to Latin American countries were discussed by government officials in the United States and Puerto Rico during the war period. As on previous occasions, island functionaries raised concerns regarding these proposals for planned migrations. In April 1942, U.S. newspapers reported on a proposal to send five hundred thousand Puerto Ricans to colonization projects in undisclosed Latin American countries. The proposal raised some concerns, primarily about the adaptation of Puerto Ricans to working conditions in a foreign place and the cost to the government of such an endeavor. Also considered was the issue that “Puerto Ricans are American citizens. If the government should sponsor their emigration to foreign soil, the fact that they went on their own volition would not relieve us of moral responsibility for their future welfare.”

In late May 1942, an El Mundo editorial commented on a proposition under consideration by the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs to send Puerto Rican workers to Brazil and Venezuela. The newspaper complained that although the proposal had been under discussion for several months in Washington and Latin American capitals, Puerto Rico “has not yet had the occasion to even know properly the basis and orientations of the migration proposed.” In December 1942, it became public that Puerto Rico’s Land Authority was considering buying five hundred thousand acres of land in the Dominican Republic to distribute to Puerto Ricans moving there.

Another proposal for a planned migration to Venezuela was explored by island functionaries in 1945. Following a petition by Governor Tugwell, Carlos Chardón, then director of the Institute of Tropical Agriculture and better known for the Chardón Plan of 1935, traveled to Venezuela to study the pos-
sibility of sending Puerto Rican workers there. Like previous Puerto Ricans
officials, Chardón raised questions regarding the idea of a planned migration
to this country. He reported that the problem with Puerto Rican emigration
was that “Puerto Ricans have no emigration tradition; they love their country
and their people too much to take risks going abroad.” He concluded that if
there was to be a planned migration, it should be “on individual basis,” send-
ing only workers with the adequate skills. 43

U.S. government officials also expressed their opposition to the Venezuela
migration plan. In a report to the secretary of state from the U.S. embassy in
Caracas, Frank Corrigan quoted Chardón’s negative response to the plan; he
also stated that even though the idea was supported by Venezuela’s ambas-
sador in Washington and by Abe Fortas, under secretary of the interior, it
was opposed by Governor Tugwell and had been ignored by the Venezuelan
government. Furthermore, Corrigan mentioned other negative aspects of the
colonization plan already named by previous reports and proposed that the
State Department give no further consideration to this plan. 44

Beginning in 1942, officials in the United States and Puerto Rico began
to discuss planned migrations to the U.S. mainland. One of the earliest pro-
posals comes from the minutes of a meeting between two Puerto Rican offi-
cials (Jaime Bagué and Commissioner of Labor Santiago Iglesias Jr.) and four
North American functionaries on December 26, 1942. The meeting was called
to “discuss problems associated with the migration of Puerto Ricans to the
U.S. during the present emergency both in order to satisfy labor needs in the
States and to relieve the pressure of overpopulation in Puerto Rico.” The com-
mittee concluded that “migration should be on an individual basis and that
settlement into strictly Puerto Rican communities . . . should be automati-
cally discouraged.” Two important issues raised in this meeting were the racial
composition and the selection of the migrants. Regarding race, the commit-
tee report stated “that only white workers should be encouraged to migrate
to Southern states although this policy should not be formally incorporated
in any statements or documents.” The report added that “good selection in
Puerto Rico and adequate supervision in the States was considered indispens-
able to any successful migration program.” It also reported that migration
should be encouraged without worrying “whether the migrants will secure
permanent or only temporary jobs” and that at the present only “only younger,
single, skilled workers whether proficient in agriculture or industry” should
be encouraged to migrate. 45

In early October 1942, El Mundo editorialized in favor of a planned migra-
tion to the United States and rejected an earlier proposal to take Puerto Rican
workers to Brazil on the basis that they were not prepared for the harsh work
on rubber plantations; it argued that a well-planned and well-organized migra-

tion, with a careful selection of workers, would be effective and valuable for

the island. Days later, Resident Commissioner Bolívar Pagán was informed

that the U.S. House of Representatives would consider a bill to facilitate the

hiring of Puerto Rican workers on the mainland. Puerto Rico’s Chamber of

Commerce also favored the migration of workers to the mainland to alleviate

unemployment and misery on the island. Later that month, several members

of congress gave their support to a measure that would finance the transport

of Puerto Rican workers, thus allowing their employment on the mainland.

In October 1942, Iglesias Jr. reported to Tugwell on his trip to Washington
to discuss Puerto Rico’s “labor problem.” There he met with numerous gov-
ernment officials interested in island affairs, including Interior Secretary Har-

old Ickes and War Projects Administration Commissioner Malcolm Miller.
Iglesias traveled to Washington for another round of meetings in November
1942. In mid-December he announced an agreement that would facilitate
the emigration of twenty thousand Puerto Rican workers to the mainland.
Transportation of an estimated one thousand workers per month would be
provided by the army and navy, as conditions allowed. Iglesias also announced
that the government of Puerto Rico would not sanction the transfer of work-
ers to Brazil and Venezuela, arguing that it was a risky proposition and that
the government was concentrating on sending workers to the United States,
which “assures absolute guarantees for the Puerto Rican worker.”

In December 1942, the War Department agreed to transport from 800
to 1,500 workers to the mainland. The U.S. Employment Service (USES) was
asked to coordinate recruitment with island functionaries. As recommended
in previous government reports on migration, the government was to select
workers based on several qualifications: workers were required to have a
working knowledge of English, a “nest egg” of from $75 to $100, and the skills
demanded by mainland employers. Some 1,030 workers were recruited. The
program was ended after six months, however, and the WMC decided to have
employers carry out their own recruitment of workers through labor con-
tractors. Clarence Senior reported the major employers and the number of
workers recruited as follows: Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, 1,038; Campbell
Soup Co., 488; Huff Canning Co., 338; and Utah Copper Co., 200. In March
1943, George H. Cross, of the U.S. Human Resources Commission, met in
Puerto Rico with federal and local functionaries and representatives of the
labor movement to discuss a migration plan to the United States. According
to him, the federal government would establish a recruitment center and pay
for the transportation to the mainland, wages, health services, and transporta-
tion back to the island.
According to Edwin Maldonado, the policy change in favor of recruitment of Puerto Rican labor was due to several reasons, including the decrease of Mexican *bracero* labor in the United States during this time and—perhaps the most important reason, according to him—the pressure by congressional sources, mostly the Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions, to hire Puerto Ricans and not aliens for war-related jobs. Nevertheless, the recruitment of Puerto Rican laborers during the war raised some apprehensions in the United States. A significant issue with Puerto Ricans was precisely their status as citizens, which prevented their return to the island once their contract expired, as many U.S. government functionaries and employers demanded. The latter considered Puerto Ricans unreliable, breaking their contracts and leaving for other destinations, and often favored the contract of “domestic” workers before “foreign labor.” But many U.S. policy makers believed that hiring Puerto Ricans provided a safety valve for the island’s unemployment and was in the United States’ best interests, politically and economically. The WMC ceased its recruiting program in Puerto Rico in June 1944, after Congress voted to deny the necessary funds for its campaign on the island. According to Senior, “Congressmen are reported to have objected to bringing Puerto Ricans on the grounds that they could not be sent back home after the need for them had ended.” As stated by Maldonado, the WMC blamed Puerto Ricans for the program’s failure, arguing that 60 percent of workers abandoned their jobs before the end of the contract, only 25 percent completed their contracts, and just 15 percent returned to Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rican government functionaries also had some reservations about the recruitment of labor on the island. Governor Tugwell favored the recruitment of island workers for war-related needs on the mainland but “was skeptical of the success of large scale labor importation programs.” Commissioner of Labor Manuel A. Pérez was also apprehensive of planned migration. He favored individual migration and restraint on the part of government in playing any role in the recruitment of labor for the United States, as he stated in a memo to Tugwell dated February 1945. According to him, the “Department has had a bad experience with the group of workers who emigrated to the States during the last two years” to work at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Co., the Huff and Campbell companies, and the Calco Chemical Co. There were numerous complaints and “discontent prevailed among the workers.” He alluded to the example of the Calco Chemical Co. in Brooklyn, where 72 out of 104 workers broke their contracts and left; the other companies had an even worse experience. Pérez concluded that the government should not encourage these migrations unless “we could plan these migrations very carefully, making the proper selection of the workers according to their skill and that
steps be taken to insure that they would not have difficulties on account of the language, food, etc.” It was precisely against this background of labor recruitment during the last years of the war that the Puerto Rican government functionaries began to debate the issue of migration immediately after the war.

Migration and Puerto Rico’s Political Status

The end of the war was a time of debates in Puerto Rico and the United States regarding the political future of the island. The PPD won the 1944 elections by a landslide, but it was internally divided regarding its option for the island’s political status. Pro-independence forces within the PPD wanted to push this alternative in the United States. During 1945 and 1946, Muñoz Marín himself was revising his ideas about Puerto Rico’s political future, moving away from a weak support for independence to some form of autonomous government with a continued economic and political relationship with the United States. In 1946 Muñoz Marín expelled the independentistas from the party, which allowed him and the party to support a status of self-government in autonomy with the United States, what later came to be the Estado Libre Asociado (or Commonwealth, in English).

Winds of change were also strengthening in the United States regarding Puerto Rico. In 1946 President Truman appointed Jesús T. Piñero as the first Puerto Rican governor of the island. In 1948 the people of Puerto Rico elected their governor for the first time after Congress approved this measure. The huge electoral victory by Muñoz Marín and the PPD in 1948 facilitated their push in Washington for further reforms to the political status of the island. In 1950 Congress approved Law 600, which allowed Puerto Ricans to write their own constitution and led to the creation of Commonwealth status in 1952.

This was the context in which Puerto Rican migration to the United States became a “problem” for the PPD government. The point to be made here—and which shall be elaborated further in later chapters—is that the issue of migration was always present in the discussions of Puerto Rico’s political and economic future during this period. To support this argument, I would like to mention three reports from Washington that were important in this deliberation. Scholars who study the evolution of Puerto Rico’s political status concur on the importance of these reports to debates in Puerto Rico and the United States on the subject. The reports spoke of the deplorable economic conditions the island suffered and presented some suggestions for the reform of its government and its relationship to the United States. They questioned the viability of independence for Puerto Rico, rejected statehood as an alterna-
tive that was not feasible for the island and that would be turned down in the United States, and suggested some form of self-government for Puerto Ricans. What no scholar of the island’s political status question ever mentions is that these reports also discussed the issue of migration when analyzing the economic and political future of Puerto Rico.

The first report, the 1943 U.S. Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs’ report on the problems facing Puerto Rico, tried to define the “Puerto Rican problem” in a wider perspective regarding U.S. global, national, and regional interests. It argued that the “the Puerto Rican problem”

transcends national life; it unavoidably injects itself into the wider field of international relations, an undeniable fact which we cannot afford to ignore. The Caribbean zone has recently become of unusual mutual interest to the United States and England and the policies which will be necessarily adopted in any event will affect Puerto Rico to a large extent. . . . It must be considered from three aspects: (a) The viewpoint of the island, (b) the viewpoint of the Nation, and lastly, (c) the international viewpoint.

According to the committee, among the most important issues facing Puerto Rico were overpopulation, lack of arable land, emigration, a high birth rate, agriculture, and need of new industries. With regard to the issue of migration, the report stated:

Unlike the problem of arable land, which cannot be solved emigration can be accomplished if there would be a determined effort on the part of the Federal Government to that end. Left to the individual or to the local insular government, it will never be accomplished.62

The second report, produced by the House Committee on Insular Affairs in 1945, was the conclusion of an investigation of political, economic, and social affairs in Puerto Rico. The inquiry carried its own political agenda, since it was used by congressional Republicans to examine and criticize Tugwell’s government on the island. Migration of Puerto Ricans was one of the issues addressed in its conclusions. It stated that in view “of the fact that there appears to be no immediate complete solution to the current chronic problems of Puerto Rico arising because of the lack of natural resources and the congestion of population there, the subcommittee feels that a wise and prudent program of emigration might be helpful.” The report goes on to propose migration to Latin America, where some countries reported a need for labor. It advises a migration of one million persons, or half the island’s popu-
lation at the time, so that “there would be a sharp increase in the island’s living standards, unemployment would end, and United States taxpayers would be relieved of the heavy annual relief burden.” The report added that Puerto Ricans and their government “have been cool toward emigration in the past and might be so again. The island’s past experiences have not been favorable although it is the feeling of the subcommittee that wise and adequate planning could overcome obstacles that are now objectionable to Puerto Ricans.” It suggests that with the support of the U.S. secretary of interior and Puerto Rican leaders, “such a plan could be worked out successfully” to the benefit both of the United States and the island.63

The third report was produced by the U.S. Tariff Commission and came to be known in Puerto Rico as the Dorfman Report (in reference to its chief economist, Ben Dorfman). The commission was asked by Congress to examine the economic and political consequences of independence, statehood, and self-government for the island. Like the two previous congressional reports already mentioned, the Dorfman Report recommended self-government for Puerto Rico accompanied by new U.S. policies to help the island’s economy.64

According to Muñoz Marín’s biographer and historian Carmelo Rosario Natal, the Dorfman Report, along with Muñoz Marín’s conversations with leaders in Washington, had a great impact on the leader’s thought regarding the island’s political status. Relevant to his new thinking was the negative economic impact independence would have on the island, according to Rosario Natal. Publication of the Dorfman Report in March 1946 preceded the now-famous writings by Muñoz Marín in El Mundo, generally known as nuevos caminos hacia viejos objetivos (new paths to old goals). In these articles, the PPD leader presented his arguments against independence and statehood and proposed a “third way” to solve Puerto Rico’s colonial status: self-government with the United States.65 This was precisely what some policy makers in the United States and congressional reports were saying. The Dorfman Report also recommended migration as one of its major conclusions.

While the Dorfman Report’s conclusions regarding the island’s political status received the most attention in Puerto Rico (the report rejected both independence and statehood on political and economic grounds), it was received differently on the U.S. mainland. For example, the New York Times headline on the report read: “Ask million people leave Puerto Rico: Tariff experts say this and not change in island’s status offers the only economic hope.” The article asserts that Puerto Rico would suffer economically under any of the political status options that were considered (independence, statehood, or dominion). It then adds: “The Commission’s economists reached the conclusion that only the emigration of 1,000,000 people and a sharp diminu-
tion in the birth rate among those remaining would permit the island even to approach economic self-support.” After reviewing the disadvantages of the three status alternatives, the news report indicated that although emigration in itself would not solve the island’s economic problem, it “would make a solution possible.” If Puerto Rico was not able to control its population, maintaining a minimum standard of living “will be contingent upon their receiving a substantial and very likely an ever-increasing, measure of outside aid.”

It is also worthwhile to point out how a prelude to this report was embraced a year earlier in Puerto Rico. The Tariff Commission study had been commissioned by the Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs at the request of Senator Millard Tydings, who, in 1945, submitted another of his bills for the independence of Puerto Rico. In April 1945, Dorfman presented some of the report’s findings to the Senate committee, arguing that all status alternatives had economic disadvantages for the island, although he acknowledged that Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States had been on the whole beneficial. He questioned the idea (under discussion by the Puerto Rican policy makers and scholars then) that measures like population control, industrialization, and increases in health and education standards alone would remedy the island’s dismal economic situation. Dorfman advanced the Tariff Commission’s conclusions that a “large-scale emigration from the island, amounting to between 750,000 to 1,000,000 persons, would not of itself assure a solution of the island’s major economic problems, but would merely make a solution possible.” The report added that past Puerto Rican experiences with emigration had been unsuccessful and that “any new emigration program would clearly have no possibility of success unless it were carefully planned under competent and honest auspices and unless it were adequately financed.” It then presented one of the findings repeated throughout the report: “As long as Puerto Rico remains in its present political relation to the United States, however, Puerto Ricans are legally free to move to the mainland without restriction.” On the other hand, Puerto Rican emigration to the United States “would be restricted under the proposed independence alternative.”

It is very important to notice here that although throughout the war period U.S. and Puerto Rican policy makers debated the idea of migration, there was really no consensus regarding its character (if it should be on an individual basis or a mass planned migration) or its direction (whether it should be directed to Latin America or to the U.S. mainland). For example, the three congressional reports discussed earlier recommended migration—but not necessarily to the United States; these usually suggested that Puerto Rican migration would be directed to Latin America or the Caribbean. By the
summer of 1947, Puerto Rican policy makers would be debating not whether to promote migration but where to direct it: to allow the continuation of migration to the U.S. mainland or to direct it to Latin America. But by the time U.S. and Puerto Rican policy makers came to discuss the issue, Puerto Rican migration was already moving in one direction: to the United States. It was decided by the Puerto Rican masses, not the government. Puerto Rico’s migration policy simply followed the footsteps of migrants.