Introduction

Casa Pueblo (casapueblo.org) is a community-based organization in Adjuntas, a municipality of approximately 20,000 people in the lush subtropical mountains of south-central Puerto Rico. The group started as a loose gathering of people joined in opposition to a series of planned open-pit mines in the 1970s. It quickly grew in number and organizational acuity to the point that by 1995, the group had put a definite stop to all mining in the region. A major watershed had been saved, and a major environmental catastrophe had been averted. But Casa Pueblo did not stop there. Instead, the group moved swiftly from protesting mines to proposing and implementing far-reaching solutions to further benefit the natural environment and the people who live in it. Casa Pueblo calls itself a sustainable project of community self-governance, a radical bottom-up alternative for transforming the social and political colonial model in Puerto Rico.

With a small and dedicated staff, Casa Pueblo today administers a Forest School of approximately 150 acres, an income-generating coffee plantation that produces 100% arabica seeds for their signature Madre Isla Coffee, an ecological guesthouse, a solar-powered radio station, a solar-powered movie theater, and a growing solar grid that functions as a cooperative. Its base of operations is a
welcoming 1920s-era house in the center of Adjuntas that doubles as a community center and community refuge, as in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, when hundreds plugged into solar-powered outlets there to run medical equipment, while thousands more benefited from information broadcast on the solar-powered radio station. Naomi Klein wrote a compelling and widely circulated piece on these and other initiatives post-Maria, for *The Intercept*.

More broadly, the Casa Pueblo house is the physical manifestation of what can happen when seeds of hope are carefully planted and cultivated in a sustained and thoughtful fashion. The fruits are impressive: not a top-down utopia imagined for some time in the far-off future, but a living, breathing, bottom-up, and ever-evolving sustainable community on our planet today. Casa Pueblo’s most recent campaign to liberate Puerto Rico from fossil fuels by way of solar power is an example. Since Hurricane Maria in 2017, Casa Pueblo has expanded its solar power grid beyond its own properties and is now on track to making Adjuntas the first fully solar-powered municipality in Puerto Rico, and perhaps the world, even as it spearheads local efforts to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. In these and other ways, Casa Pueblo leads by example, demonstrating how community self-governance and community-based mutual aid can deliver health, safety, and sustainability when the government does not.

Alexis Massol González, a co-founder of Casa Pueblo and the recipient of the 2002 Goldman Prize (popularly known as the Environmental Nobel Prize), reflects in this book on the extraordinary 40-year history of Casa Pueblo and how the principle of *community self-governance* (*autogestión comunitaria*) emerged over time as a bottom-up approach to community organizing, in contrast to approaches that rely on governments and distant non-profits. In a soon-to-be-published study of Casa Pueblo and two similar grassroots organizations—the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico and the Boggs Center in Detroit—philosopher Gregory Fernando Pappas notes that the three groups “practice
horizontal models of ‘conviviality’. They share a communitarian, holistic, ecological, and experimental approach to ameliorating injustices. They have experimented with community-based transformative justice in all spheres of life. They have proclaimed openly that the preferred way to move forward to address injustices is via a radical conception of democracy . . . from the ground up.” Massol González puts it as follows: “Since its foundation in 1980, Casa Pueblo has set in motion an alternative process, a radical response to the barriers imposed by Puerto Rico’s colonial model of representative democracy. Community self-governance embraces different sectors and actors without falling into the naive optimism of those who would simply change bad rulers and politicians, or the passive pessimism of those who oppose alternatives at every turn.”

Our greatest hope is that these profound lessons in community self-governance and sustainable conviviality will move many to support the work of Casa Pueblo, and inspire many more to adapt these valuable lessons to their own communities and contexts.

ABOUT THIS TRANSLATION

In January of 2020, Ashwin J. Ravikumar and Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez took a group of twelve Amherst College students to Puerto Rico as part of a course, Climate Change and Social Justice in Puerto Rico. We are professors from different academic backgrounds: Paul is a scholar of Latin American cinema in the Spanish Department, and Ashwin is a political ecologist in the Department of Environmental Studies who works with Indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon. We collaborated to stage this interdisciplinary course out of a shared understanding that culture is central to social and political movements and that in Puerto Rico, an island nation, social and political movements are on the front lines of the climate crisis. With generous financial support from the Amherst College Dean of Faculty, guidance from our Center for Community Engagement, and logistical support from Spanish
Studies Abroad (an Amherst-based provider of study abroad programs in Spain and Latin America), we designed an innovative place-based learning experience aligned with the broad goals of a liberal arts education in the areas of writing, critical thinking, and community engagement.

Because the trip took place before the semester officially began and therefore before students had a chance to get to know one another, we conducted a one-day, pre-departure orientation filled with social icebreakers and logistical information. Amherst College’s Center for Teaching and Learning provided instrumental pedagogical support in designing this orientation workshop. The trip provided more opportunities for the students to learn from each other and from several grassroots organizations that work on alternative models of climate justice, community-based land management, and art for social justice. Our base of operations in San Juan was the University of Sagrado Corazón, an urban oasis of green in the populous Santurce neighborhood of San Juan. Except for two overnight trips, one to Vieques and the other to the town of Adjuntas, each day was designed as a day trip. A student favorite was the visit to Corredor Yaguazo, a community-based land management organization founded in the 1980s by local resident Pedro Carrión. A low-income resident of the area himself, he formed the organization to resist the displacement of the community from the mangrove forest lands that nearby chemical plants wanted to acquire. Corredor Yaguazo now teaches young people how to protect and restore the coastal mangroves of the Ciénaga las Cu-chari-llas Natural Reserve, which plays a crucial role in protecting Puerto Rico from hurricane storm surges. Students learned about the origins of this community-based organization from its founder and planted mangrove saplings.

In San Juan, staff from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santurce took us on a walking tour of the neighboring community, Alto del Cabro where residents worked with artists to create murals celebrating the community’s connection to its immediate
urban environment and the adjacent Condado lagoon. Also in San Juan, the G-8, Inc. (Group of The Eight Communities Surrounding the Caño) gave us a tour of Caño Martín Peña, a polluted tidal channel that the organization is working to rehabilitate. G-8, Inc. manages a community land trust, the first of its kind in Puerto Rico, designed to guard against real estate speculators and developers keen to expand San Juan’s financial district into the G-8 area.

All the organizations we visited—including two in Vieques, the Fortín Conde de Mirasol Cultural Center, and the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge—have been busy rebuilding after Hurricane Maria, which devastated the Puerto Rican archipelago in 2017. All are focusing on long-term social and ecological resilience. Among such groups, Casa Pueblo stands out because of its long history and list of accomplishments.

The timing of our visit was fortuitous. Just a month before we visited, the book you are reading had been published in Spanish. We humbly asked Alexis Massol González, the book’s author and a leader of Casa Pueblo, what he thought of the idea of students in the class taking on the translation as a collaborative project. To our surprise, he kindly asked that we follow up with him via email. Soon after our return to Amherst, we conducted a translation mini-workshop with excerpts from the original text. The exercise confirmed both the high quality of students’ translations and their enthusiasm for the project. So, with a sample translation signaling our seriousness of purpose, we reached out to Alexis Massol González, who in turn consulted with the rest of the members of Casa Pueblo. The group enthusiastically accepted the proposal.

Alongside this translation project, students were hard at work developing solidarity projects. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck Massachusetts in March 2020, they were deep in the planning stages of bringing community leaders and artists from Puerto Rico to Western Massachusetts for an event with Holyoke High School, a nearby school with a majority Puerto Rican student body.
Unable to organize in-person events to build solidarity and community between Amherst College students, Holyoke High School students, and Puerto Rican community leaders, we decided to devote the rest of the class to this translation.

As a first step, students worked in pairs to translate approximately two chapters each. The translation teams then exchanged their work to offer feedback and address any inconsistencies between versions. During class time, we discussed concepts and phrases that presented challenges, both in specific parts of the text and in its guiding ideas, generating a glossary of commonly used terms in the process. The students then began the second round of translations, which they turned in at the end of the semester. During summer 2020, we (Ashwin and Paul) edited and polished the students’ second round of translations and translated a new final chapter that Mr. Massol González wrote about the impact of Covid-19 on Casa Pueblo’s many initiatives. Finally, we shared the translation with Casa Pueblo and incorporated their feedback into the final text. In this way, our translation project combines Casa Pueblo’s vision of working towards the common good with the kind of collaborative praxis and emphasis on education that has defined their approach to solving problems.

We feel honored and proud to share this collaborative translation with English-language readers everywhere; and privileged to have done so in collaboration with Beth Bouloukos, Amanda Karby, Dorothy P. Snyder, and the rest of the team at Lever Press, a global leader in born-digital, peer reviewed, open access monograph publishing.

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