CHAPTER 1

HOW AN ANTI-MINING STRUGGLE GAVE SHAPE TO OUR COMMUNITY


A word without action is empty, an action without words is blind, and both actions and words are dead without the spirit of the community.

—NASA Project, Toribio, Cauca, Colombia
THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

The term *community* is one of the most used in the social sciences. It refers to a particular relationship between a social group and a territory. Community is a word that evokes multiple ideas. It can be defined as a group of people that live in a defined geographic space and share common interests, traditions, customs, history, and identity. Communities create a sense of belonging by sharing experiences of everyday life, conflicts and struggles, and by seeking to satisfy their needs and resolve their problems together. José Luis Saballos Velásquez, in his 2016 doctoral thesis at the University of the Basque Country, defines life in community as “a collective act of solidarity, cooperation, and fraternity between people, propagated through the continuous cultivation of attitudes and behaviors including empathy, reciprocity, trust, and warmth. Community is, then, an important space for the flourishing of the most noble human values and the common good.” We can also reference the definition proposed by the social psychologist Dr. Maritza Montero: “a community is a social group that is constantly transforming and evolving; it creates feelings of belonging and identity through interpersonal relations and reinforces its members’ awareness of themselves as a group in unity and social potential.”

COMMUNITY: THE STARTING POINT FOR OUR WORK

Casa Pueblo began as an arts and culture initiative to stop a mining proposal in the municipalities of Adjuntas, Utuado, Lares, Jayuya, and Ponce. We held our first Arts and Culture Workshop in 1980 in Adjuntas, and in so doing, joined a far-reaching environmental movement that had been growing since the 1960s and that provided a basis for our defense of non-renewable natural resources. In essence, the Arts and Culture Workshop connected the fight against mining with a larger national strategy, using local community organizing as a starting point. With the support, solidarity, and fighting spirit of a wide range of groups like Misión Industrial,
Movimiento Pro Independencia, Partido Independentista Puertorriqueno, Vanguardia Popular, and the Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña, among others, we successfully stopped mining from ruining our environment and our livelihoods. In the process, we planted the seeds for what people began to call Casa Pueblo, after the old house in the town center where we set up headquarters in 1985.

Three major events led to the creation of the Workshop. The first was a successful struggle to remove asbestos in all public schools in Adjuntas. Two of the founders of the Workshop began their work as community leaders in this struggle: Tinti Deyá and Noemilda Vélez, the president and vice president, respectively, of the local teachers’ federation. The second was the formation of a local committee to support the removal of the U.S. Navy from Vieques. Two young people from Adjuntas, Lourdes Torres and María Jiménez, joined the Workshop through this struggle. Third, we had friends in Adjuntas who were genuinely interested in coming together to address the needs of our community, including leaders like Josie Ballester who represented key local constituencies. Then, on August 31, 1980, a national issue was added to the first two: the headlines of the newspaper El Mundo announced that the government had approved plans for U.S. mining companies to start exploiting an estimated $5 billion in copper, gold, and silver resources in Puerto Rico.

At first, it seemed that the decision was final, that it would be impossible to overturn. After all, the government had already approved open-pit mining at seventeen sites in Adjuntas, Utuado, Lares, Jayuya, and Ponce; the Planning Board marked 37,000 acres of land for this purpose; and the multinational companies AMAX and Kennecott owned the land in and around the two main deposits, in Calá Abajo and Piedra Hueca, along with land purchases for a refinery and a foundry by the coast in Guayanilla.

The original core group of anti-mining activists included students, teachers, workers, and two engineers. The group’s diverse
expertise and educational backgrounds helped us to analyze the mining proposal from both a scientific and a political perspective, and to develop an appropriate strategy to better confront it. The group identified the underlying issue as environmental colonialism, whereby a few capitalist companies from the United States take over and profit from our raw materials, leaving us with nothing but environmental destruction. Can you imagine your landscape reduced into a giant mound of rubble, with no mountains, birds, flowers, or rivers? Choosing the group’s name generated an intense debate. The choice was not easy. Some preferred to call it the Anti-mining Committee. Others wanted a name that centered our anti-imperialist stance. Still others wanted a name that would be more inclusive to wide sectors of the local community. After several meetings, the organization was named The Arts and Culture Workshop of Adjuntas. Our areas of focus from the start were to address people’s necessities, advocate for human rights, fight displacement, preserve the integrity of our water and land, and to articulate an alternative development model based on community self-governance.

A PATRIOT JOINS THE CAUSE
For our first public activity as a Workshop, on April 19, 1981, we decided to recover what we called the Sun of Adjuntas, an Indigenous monolith marked with petroglyphs, and place it in the public plaza as a historic monument to our Taíno heritage. Indigenous dancers from Jayuya participated in the event, a group of local youths unveiled the monument, and there was live music. About 300 people attended, and the event was a resounding success. Before the activities, we had an enriching experience with the poet and Puerto Rican nationalist and patriot, Juan Antonio Corretjer, a well-known poet and opponent of U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico. Before the Workshop was formed, the Puerto Rican Socialist League, which Corretjer helped lead, had its own anti-mining
chapter in Adjuntas. In fact, some members of the League joined our group; don Juan and doña Consuela, his wife and fellow leader in the League, frequented our town. They were not strangers to the residents of Adjuntas, nor to the local police. Soon, the two would become key members of our organization.

For the unveiling of the monolith, don Juan had been invited as a speaker, along with Luis F. Camacho, then-president of the Bar Association, and Dr. Ricardo Alegría, founder of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Unfortunately, a few days before the event, Alegría and Camacho had to cancel, leaving only the poet to speak at the event. Having just one voice at an event involving so many individuals and groups presented a problem of balance. After several sometimes bitter internal discussions, we met with don Juan in person. Having patiently heard the arguments of those who believed he should speak and those who believed he should not, Corretjer finally said: “As part of an orchestra, the sound of my words would be very good; but as a soloist, the same sound would be quite bad.”

This was an important learning experience for us, as it reinforced our own vision of collective action. From then on, Corretjer’s wisdom always accompanied us. That lesson, that we are an orchestra, stronger with our multitude of voices, stays with us today. When outside actors try to usurp the community spaces that we have claimed through hard and under-appreciated work, we remember that we represent a collective of voices, and that our community belongs to all of us. Afterwards, in his humble home, the poet and patriot told us that mining doesn’t just generate private profits for U.S. firms without benefiting Puerto Rican workers. The main issue, he argued, was the physical destruction of our national territory and its conversion into a place that is not suitable for collective living. It was a moral and ethical issue of tremendous scale, so much so that the very survival of Puerto Rico as a nation was at stake.
Five months later, we were preparing to hold our first anti-mining rally. We started to work with tremendous confidence and a somewhat distorted view of the town’s level of consciousness about the issue. The first step was to educate ourselves about what mining in our community would entail, and what consequences it would have for the environment and for people. We organized various conferences with scientists and technicians who knew about the topic, like Dr. Tomás Morales Cardona, who brought us technical materials and a very important flyer with the headline *Environmental Colonialism*. Dr. Neftalí García and others who participated in the conference were our first teachers in this process. We had differences with some of them, as is natural. On one hand, they exposed the gravity of the environmental dangers posed by mining. On the other hand, they left the door open to the possibility that mining could be useful to Puerto Rico, whether it became an independent republic or remained a colony, if it was done within certain restrictions.

This created much confusion in the Workshop and in the public at large. We reminded some participants from the neighborhood of Tanamá to feel free to interrupt the speakers to ask if they were for or against the mining. In one talk in the Pellejas neighborhood, two courageous jíbaros, Juan Rivera and Pablo Natal, offered that “Puerto Rico cannot handle mines,” echoing Corretjer. Given the conflicting messages from experts, we decided to educate ourselves. We subscribed to a British scientific magazine about mining. This gave us access to very important technical information about global mining, the fluctuations in the value of minerals, and what mining companies like AMAX and Kennecott were planning to do; all information that was not widely known in Puerto Rico. We also gained access to a bulletin edited by the United States Bureau of Mines. A North American group of ecologists gave us access to a video about environmental destruction in the mines of the Appalachian Mountains, and a Workshop facilitator provided
another video about copper mines in Chile. We purchased the public performance rights to an episode of the popular Tommy Muñiz TV Show in which he presented a magnificent documentary about copper mines in Utah, to use in our education efforts. With the help of some colleagues, we obtained the official documents for previous mining proposals and permits, as well as those being promoted by AMAX and Kennecott at the time. For several months, we studied all this information.

Slowly but surely, we began to form our own political interpretation and our own scientific analysis of mining. Technical terms became part of our regular vocabulary as we learned about porphyry copper, sulfuric material, open-pit mining, chalcocylrites, mine tailings, foundries, and refineries. We learned that the mining proposal called for open-pit mines, enormous craters that could reach a mile in diameter and 2,000 feet in depth, at every one of the seventeen deposits discovered in Puerto Rico. We learned that open mining was the only feasible technique to extract the copper ore mineral, known as porphyry, and that copper, gold, silver, and the other minerals associated with them are dispersed in various places and at different depths, hence the need for open-pit mining. We learned all of this little by little, turning science into an educational instrument and a tool of the struggle. At the end of this learning process, we concluded that open-pit mining was not compatible with our environment, and that it would destroy the fabric of our community. The forests, watersheds, rivers, and people of Puerto Rico, a small island, simply could not withstand mining. Through this educational process we also learned that our campaign aligned with the position of patriots like Corretjer and the wisdom of the jíbaros, the country folk who have farmed and stewarded the lands and waters of Puerto Rico for generations. We adopted the motto Republic or Colony, Zero Mines in Puerto Rico. In other words, whether Puerto Rico remains a colony of the United States or becomes an independent Republic, we would oppose mining. This position became a key element of our own voice.
THE CONCEPT OF “ONE’S OWN VOICE”

The position of the Workshop as summarized in our new motto was supported by the community, but it went against the opinion of practically every major power broker across the Puerto Rican political spectrum. Some pushed for mining along with the continued colonial status of Puerto Rico; others supported mining in the context of Puerto Rican statehood; still others were pro-independence and pro-mining. The takeaway for us was that we needed to learn as much as we could about mining to communicate our position to people with different views on Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Too often, the voice of the community—one’s own voice—is lost when the struggle is handed over to political parties and politicians, no matter how good their intentions. It’s one thing when they are in the opposition, and quite another when they are in power. By rigorously educating ourselves and having a clear message, we have been able to stay true to our own voice, to create our own identity, to write our organization’s own history, lift our self-esteem, and participate enthusiastically in advancing the goals of the community. All of this also helps to break submissive styles of community participation forged under foreign domination and to help people unite in struggle as equals. During this process, foreign domination began to loosen, along with our own colonized ways of relating that pit us against each other. At its core, the locally organized community is a starting point for developing one’s own voice. Having one’s own voice as a self-governing community organization allows us to set our own rules as we struggle and work towards reaching our goals. That voice represents a range of values, positions, and our own norms regulating the group’s conduct. It clarifies our group’s strategy. It provides us with a clear and unambiguous message that guides our freely decided course of action. It breaks dependencies. The concept of one’s own voice avoids confusion among the people and protects community organizations from those who would use their work to advance their own political agendas and personal prestige.
THE PRINCIPLES OF IDENTITY, OPPOSITION, AND TOTALITY

A self-governing community organization that acts in accordance with its own voice enters a natural process of weaving its own identity. Identity is everything that characterizes and distinguishes an individual from others. It distinguishes a person from a group, and a group from another group. It embraces what a person or group does, how they do it, the working styles and beliefs that they deploy, and the history that they write. On the other hand, the principle of opposition refers to clearly identifying the true adversary. It does not confuse those who favor mining in the belief that it would be good for the community with those who push the project forward only for private gain, like the government, politicians, political parties, and mining companies. The struggle is an affirmation of one’s own voice and identity, but it has many adversaries. By clarifying who the adversary is, we can avoid making mistakes when establishing alliances. The principle of totality refers to having a view, not of particular facts, but of the whole situation, including the history and the context of that situation. The mining project was not an isolated issue, it was part of an integral economic development scheme for the whole country called the Plan 2020, which I will be discussing later in the book. The combination of these three principles—identity, opposition, and totality—reinforces good governance, avoids errors, and clarifies doubts. The three go hand in hand; ignoring this fact weakens our capacity for effective action. These three principles have central importance for the sociologist Alain Touraine, who asks: “If one is to fight, should one not know in whose name one is fighting against, and on what grounds?”