

## Introduction

### *Puerto Rican Radical Politics in the 1970s*

In the summer of 1970, a spontaneous squatters' movement known as "Operation Move-In" erupted on Manhattan's Upper West Side in opposition to New York City's urban renewal plans. For nearly two years, a loose-knit coalition comprised mainly of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American tenants fought displacement and gentrification by occupying buildings and rallying in the streets. The support they received from local churches, tenant advocates, students, and sympathetic politicians helped to sustain the prolonged resistance to the policies of redevelopment that had already removed thousands of families from other city neighborhoods.

In the subsequent decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the alliance between real estate developers, banks, and city agencies ultimately succeeded in eliminating affordable housing on the Upper West Side. But in the 1970s the squatters of Operation Move-In reduced the impact of "urban removal" by halting the demolition of some buildings, negotiating the transfer of ownership of others from the city to local tenants, and obtaining the city's commitment to reserve a higher percentage of units in new developments for low-income tenants. From that movement emerged a community action collective, *El Comité*, which several years later became *El Comité-MINP* (*Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*, Puerto Rican National Left Movement), one of the most enduring, revolutionary organizations of the Puerto Rican left in the United States.

For over a decade, from 1970 until the early 1980s, El Comité played a key role in grassroots campaigns that grew directly out of people's experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination and class inequality. Its activists initiated, participated in, and led mobilizations to expand democratic rights—understood as access to good jobs, quality housing, education, and health care. Often using disruptive tactics, they opposed the removal of low-income families from zones earmarked for urban redevelopment, fought to democratize school boards, and pressed for policies that were more responsive to children ill-served by a discriminatory and underfunded education system. They pushed for Latino/a representation in the media and, together with African Americans, demanded jobs on construction sites where the city and union bosses chose to ignore federal affirmative action guidelines. The protests extended from East Harlem, where a community coalition refused to allow the closing of a hospital, to suburban Old Westbury, where students shut down a college campus to defend the progressive policies that were under attack by opponents of those policies. Coming on the heels of the civil rights' gains of the 1960s, these democratic rights' struggles of the 1970s put political elites on the defensive against claims of discrimination and attracted mainstream allies concerned about inequality and social and environmental injustice.

As they engaged in community activism in their early years, the members of El Comité grappled with difficult questions about their political beliefs and goals. What were the fundamental political interests of Puerto Ricans residing in the United States? What were the long-term objectives of their activism? In their first newspaper, *Unidad Latina*, they frequently wrote about their shared conditions with Blacks and other minorities in the United States, but also called for Puerto Rico's liberation from U.S. colonial rule and identified with the struggles of other Latin Americans. How should the organization relate to the struggles of other minorities in the United States and the independence movement in Puerto Rico? Other groups of the Puerto Rican Left were asking the same questions, and answering in distinct ways.<sup>1</sup>

With a strong nationalist inclination but unresolved ideological and political questions, in 1973 El Comité announced in *Unidad Latina* its start of a "two-year period of transformation to develop a 'political' organization clearly identified with Puerto Rico's struggle for national liberation."<sup>2</sup> However, the intense political studies and internal debates during that period yielded a more complex result. At its Formative Assembly in 1975, El Comité announced its transition to a Marxist-Leninist organization with the long-term objective of contributing to a socialist movement in the United States. It changed its name to El Comité-MINP and adopted a structure then known to the Left

as a cadre organization. For the duration of its political life, its revolutionary ideals were manifested in a political program designed to "defend the interests of Puerto Ricans in this country and integrate them into the class struggle," to form alliances with other "oppressed minorities," and to engage in dialogue with the broader U.S. Left.<sup>3</sup>

Although it had come to view Puerto Ricans living in the United States as part of the multinational U.S. working class, El Comité-MINP's support for Puerto Rico's independence remained central to its political commitments. Often in alliance with other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left, it worked to secure the release of Puerto Rican nationalists imprisoned in U.S. jails, sponsored forums in New York and other cities on Puerto Rico's colonial status, and mobilized against the U.S. naval occupation of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Understanding U.S. colonialism as one of many links in the chain of U.S. exploits in Latin American, African, and Asian countries, El Comité united with other groups to support resistance movements in these regions and to oppose the U.S. blockade against Cuba.

In tracing the origins, evolution, achievements, and challenges of the protest politics of El Comité-MINP, this book recovers a little-known chapter in the history of Puerto Ricans, along with others, fighting for social, political, and economic justice in New York and for deeper structural change in the United States. The members of El Comité, and the broader movements of which they were a part, embraced the idea that lasting social change would require constant pressures "from below"—from organized workers, students, and progressive allies—against racism, sexism, and unequal economic and political relations of power. Building those movements required an ideology that resonated in their communities and inspired organized political action. It called for making adjustments in political strategies as the economic and political landscape shifted in New York and the nation over the course of the decade. It also meant setting aside individual aspirations and accepting personal risk, especially in light of government surveillance and disruption, of which the organizations of the Puerto Rican Left were well aware.

Like similar organizations of the period, El Comité rejected the dominant narrative that the United States was a champion of democracy at home and abroad and provided equal opportunities for upward mobility and a political system accessible to all. Its activists came to believe that vast inequality in wealth and power as it existed in the United States depended on the subjugation and control of working people, with the most oppressive treatment reserved for U.S. minorities and the people of nations in the global south. The counterhegemonic narrative of El Comité, like that of the organizations known at the time as the

Third World Left, denounced oppression and proposed that class, race, and gender liberation was possible through a revolutionary movement for a new society built on the principles of social justice and cooperation.

In some instances, the protest movements in which El Comité was involved achieved meaningful reforms; in others, the gains were limited or less tangible. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, El Comité-MINP was important not only because it coordinated and led protests but because it challenged elite explanations for asymmetrical power relations. It critiqued the exploitative relations of capitalism and imperialism, and the racial and gender oppression that reproduced the inequities in the economic system. Through the years, El Comité built collective spirit and momentum for social change, which profoundly impacted its members and those who, though not members, were drawn into political action by its efforts. Its revolutionary expectations at the time may have been imbued with idealism, but its political practice was deeply rooted in the communities it came from and aligned with the aspirations of millions of people in the United States for a more egalitarian world.

### Puerto Rican Radical Activism

As early as the first large wave of migration from Puerto Rico in the 1920s, Puerto Ricans in New York were involved in workplace and community organizing, in efforts to support the liberation of Puerto Rico from U.S. colonial occupation, and in socialist politics.<sup>4</sup> In the decade following the Great Migration of 1940 to 1964, when nearly one-third of Puerto Rico's population left for the United States, Puerto Rican participation in socialist-oriented political organizations grew in numbers and influence. Some among the Puerto Rican Left were students or intellectuals. Others were workers—employed and unemployed—whose experiences as first- or second-generation immigrants from a U.S. colony, as racialized minorities and low-paid, underemployed workers, led them to question the dominant pluralist narrative about U.S. society.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that Puerto Ricans were politically homogenous or united in a leftist orientation in New York. Some sought to incorporate into Democratic Party politics, and by 1970 several had achieved prominence through local Democratic Party clubs, attained leadership positions in antipoverty programs, especially in the South Bronx, and even held elected office. In 1970, Herman Badillo from the Bronx became the first Puerto Rican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Characterizing the progress made by Puerto Ricans in mainstream party politics as “a pluralist story,” José Cruz proposes

that, despite ongoing ethnic discrimination, Puerto Ricans “have achieved incorporation in ad hoc political bodies, within the municipal bureaucracy and administration, within labor unions and political parties, and at the municipal, state, and congressional levels.”<sup>6</sup> In another study, Cruz notes that some political leaders tried to improve their constituents' electoral clout by forming groups organized around ethnic identity.<sup>7</sup>

However, the idea that these inroads in political institutions translated into political power is highly debatable. Despite the fact that some Puerto Ricans entered mainstream politics, especially under liberal city administrations, in 1976 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics concluded that Puerto Rican appointees or elected officials were unable to improve the socioeconomic profile of Puerto Ricans.<sup>8</sup> The pluralist success story is further contradicted by voter registration rolls and turnout that show that many “stateside” Puerto Ricans remained outside of formal, institutional political processes for most of the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> The Puerto Rican Left (like many other groups in the 1970s) shared the view that electoral politics did not provide a viable path to meaningful reform or structural change.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, while the pluralist theory of Puerto Rican political activism exudes optimism over achievements in the electoral arena, a contrasting narrative that Puerto Ricans were passive and uninterested in political participation is also mistaken. Edgardo Meléndez captures the activism of Puerto Ricans in New York dating back to the 1920s, '30s, and '40s:

Contrary to widespread views of Puerto Ricans as lacking organizational and leadership capabilities, this was not an apathetic, disorganized, and marginal community in need of leadership. As [Bernardo] Vega and others have elaborated, this was a vibrant, well-organized and politically militant community. The community was represented by radical and militant workers, artisans, merchants, intellectuals, and professionals. There were many community and political organizations, many of them espousing radical ideas and independence.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding low institutional participation, protest politics was on the rise in New York's Puerto Rican communities in the 1960s and continued throughout the remaining decades of the twentieth century. As recent studies illustrate, Puerto Rican and Black activists, understanding their shared conditions and mutual interests, often came together to demand recognition and enforcement of their civil rights. For example, Milagros Denis-Rosario talks about the

convergence of African American and Puerto Rican civil rights advocacy in the efforts of the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the United Bronx Parents (UBP) to rally Blacks and Puerto Ricans against discrimination in education, among other things:

The African American civil rights struggle influenced many aspects of the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Documents from several organizations such as the United Bronx Parents Association (UBP) are clear testimony of how Puerto Ricans' grassroots groups adapted and introduced the Civil Rights lexicon to their institutions. The founders of UBP understood that discipline and cross-racial coalitions were crucial to battle discrimination and achieve social justice. Unquestionably, Boricuas realized that they were not alone in this fight.<sup>12</sup>

In more radical quarters, the resurgence of a U.S.-based movement in support of independence for Puerto Rico played a key role in exposing the civil rights and "Black Power" generation to the idea that colonial rule could and should be resisted.<sup>13</sup> By the 1960s and '70s, the challenge to U.S. colonial rule posed by nationalist organizations was sufficiently formidable for the FBI to subject them to constant surveillance and harassment through its covert counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO.

One of the principal organizations of the pro-independence movement was the *Movimiento Pro-Independencia* (MPI, Pro-Independence Movement). MPI was formed in Puerto Rico in 1959 by nationalists who scattered in the aftermath of the decline of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico or were disillusioned with what they viewed as the religiosity of the Nationalist Party even before its decline.<sup>14</sup> The newly formed MPI, heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution, embraced socialist ideals but differed from the *Partido Socialista* (Socialist Party) in Puerto Rico that in earlier decades was allied with the American Federation of Labor in the United States and supported statehood rather than independence.<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s, MPI established a branch in the United States to generate support for independence and recruit Puerto Ricans to the movement. MPI's national leadership was headquartered in Puerto Rico, while the leadership of its U.S. branch was headquartered in New York. In 1971, with a large student base, MPI held a founding assembly as a political party in Puerto Rico, changing its name to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). In the 1960s and 1970s, first MPI and then PSP held meetings in

neighborhoods throughout New York City to talk about Puerto Rico's colonial status and sponsored street rallies commemorating key historic rebellions of nationalists against U.S. occupation.

Meanwhile, a very different Puerto Rican movement emerged. In 1967, the Young Lords of Chicago, inspired by the Black Panther Party and led by José "Cha Cha" Jiménez, transformed itself from a street gang to a militant political action group fighting for community control in their neighborhoods. Nearly two years later, East Harlem activist and SUNY College at Old Westbury student Mickey Melendez drove to Chicago with a college admissions officer to recruit Latino/a students to Old Westbury.<sup>16</sup> There Melendez met Jiménez for the first time, initiating a network of communication between New York activists and the more organized Chicago group. In 1969, the newly formed East Coast chapter of the Young Lords Organization exploded onto the scene in New York, denouncing poor housing, inadequate health care and sanitation services, and inferior schools in East Harlem. From 1969 to 1971, the Young Lords staged highly visible actions in the streets of East Harlem to protest education, housing, and sanitation conditions.<sup>17</sup>

By the time El Comité formed on the West Side of Manhattan in 1970, the more militant protests of the Young Lords had already begun to subside. In 1971 the Young Lords decided that their political priority was the liberation of Puerto Rico, which eventually led to a split in its ranks and the formation by some of its members of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO). But in 1970 the actions of the Young Lords, the forums held by the pro-independence groups, and the protests against the Vietnam War added to the sense that popular power was on the rise and helped to galvanize Puerto Ricans into radical political action.<sup>18</sup> On Manhattan's East Side, in *El Barrio*, it was poor sanitation services that triggered political protest; on the West Side, it was the city's disregard for low-income residents in the urban renewal zones that sparked resistance.

### Narrow Readings of the Puerto Rican Left

There has been little analysis of El Comité's politics of resistance and revolutionary perspective despite over a decade of community and workplace activism, collaboration with radical groups across the country and internationally, and the publishing of dozens of newspapers and position papers. As Rodriguez-Morazzani noted back in 1998: "[The Puerto Rican organizations of the Left]

have not left a clear record of what they accomplished or the impact they had" on Puerto Ricans in the United States, on their own lives, on other oppressed groups, and on the North American Left.<sup>19</sup>

In the absence of this record, until recently, two misconceptions about the Puerto Rican Left have prevailed in studies of Puerto Rican political activism and radical movements in the United States. First is the idea found in studies of the radical Left of the 1960s and '70s that the Puerto Rican Left was interested almost exclusively in building support for the independence movement in Puerto Rico and that this political nationalism did not correspond to the economic and social interests of the Puerto Rican diaspora.<sup>20</sup> One scholar's sweeping claim that Puerto Rican radical groups were "using local issues to rally Puerto Ricans behind the cause of independence" is somewhat misleading.<sup>21</sup> No doubt the Puerto Rican Left worked to galvanize support for independence. But, especially as it relates to El Comité, a reductionist view ignores the role that many Puerto Ricans on the Left played in advancing civil rights and community and workplace reforms, in forming coalitions against U.S. foreign policies, and in advocating a social justice agenda in the United States. A related misconception is that the "New Left" of the 1970s, unlike their forbearers of the 1930s, did not try to organize within the working class. Treating the U.S. "New Left" as a homogenous whole misses entirely the role of the community-focused Third World Left and, in the case of El Comité, its working-class origins and the roots it retained throughout the decade.<sup>22</sup>

More recently, studies of the Young Lords Party that emphasize its local impact, diverse composition, and interaction with the Black Panther Party and other radical activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s have helped to redress the more narrow interpretations of Puerto Rican political activism. Lorrin Thomas finds, for example, that "at the level of radical activism, ties between African American and Puerto Rican youth were stronger than they had ever been by 1970. Young Lords and other Puerto Rican militants organized and socialized not just with Black Panther Party members . . . but also with militant black cultural leaders like Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets."<sup>23</sup> Darrel Wanzer-Serrano develops his thesis on the Young Lords as a representation of "decoloniality," or delinking from Eurocentrism.<sup>24</sup> New interest in the aims and beliefs of the Puerto Rican Left has been aided, also, by the three-museum exhibit in New York in the summer of 2015 showcasing photographs and artifacts of the Young Lords of New York in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Still, studies of urban protest and radical movements that view the Puerto Rican Left solely through the activism of the Young Lords are also incomplete. Matthew Gandy rightly places the Young Lords at the center of early 1970s

struggles for environmental justice in their "garbage offensive" in East Harlem, but assumes that Latino radical activism ended in New York when the Young Lords faded.<sup>25</sup> José Ramón Sánchez credits the Young Lords as the main group in the period to actualize a power potential because of its effective use of "mediated politics," meaning that the Young Lords grasped the reach and power of militant tactics designed to gain media attention.<sup>26</sup> The claim is not without merit. Though in existence for less than three years before it split and some of its members formed PRRWO, the Young Lords' confrontational tactics in New York City garnered extensive popular and media attention and inspired others to become politically active. Bearing in mind the Young Lords' influence, the history of the El Comité as an integral part of the radical tradition of Puerto Ricans in the United States and the Third World Left adds to the understanding of the scope and significance of protest politics in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup>

### Ideological Inspirations

In the late 1960s and early '70s, some sectors of the U.S. population believed that institutional racism and inequality had been adequately addressed by civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs. But communities of color—or national minorities, in the language of the period—continued to face police brutality, mass displacement under urban renewal plans, inferior and unresponsive schools, high unemployment, and fewer job opportunities due to exclusionary practices. In Black, Chicano, Native American, Asian, and Puerto Rican communities, young people resisted the entrenched power relations they identified as reproducing racism, ethnic discrimination, and economic marginalization. The Cuban Revolution, the Black Power movement that arose in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and anticolonial, democratization, and revolutionary movements abroad inspired activists and elevated the sense that radical social change was on the horizon. The organizations they formed launched militant, grassroots challenges to oppressive conditions in their communities and workplaces, fought to expand civil rights, and coordinated solidarity networks to oppose Cold War politics and support international liberation movements.<sup>28</sup>

These revolutionary, and in many cases nationalist, organizations saw community-based activism as a principal form of resistance—to take the conditions of life out of the hands of absentee landlords, school boards that favored an intolerable status quo, and government officials unresponsive to the need for adequate services and fair treatment.<sup>29</sup> They rallied people around the idea

that economic and political inequality was based in racial hierarchies as well as class relations with political agendas that ranged from protesting police brutality to supporting liberation movements abroad. Collectively, they were known as the Third World Left, with a membership that mainly (but not entirely) shared a racial or ethnic identity as a "minority" group in the United States with origins in the global south.

During the same period that the organizations of the Third World Left developed, similar groups embracing socialist principles also formed in cities around the country, comprised mainly of white students and intellectuals who had admired the mass mobilizations of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or whose own political activism had begun in the university-based anti-war movement.<sup>30</sup> With few ties between the white-dominant organizations and minority communities, the anti-imperialist solidarity networks and mobilizations around national issues were the main arenas in which whites and national minorities of the Left interacted.<sup>31</sup> In the mid-1970s, some of the groups on the Left began a dialogue with each other geared toward eventually forming a new political party they hoped would unite small groups and raise working-class consciousness and support for socialism. Believing that a viable socialist movement would not grow spontaneously from the multitude of local struggles, they agreed to share their political experiences and seek ways to coordinate their work. In Max Elbaum's terms, this "new communist movement" had become disillusioned with the prospects for meaningful change through formal, institutional means.<sup>32</sup> They viewed existing "communist parties" as either too removed from popular movements and steeped in theoretical dogma or too entrenched in reform struggles within existing institutions like trade unions with no vision for more fundamental change. Collectively, they called themselves the "anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist party building trend," which brought together organizations from across the Left.<sup>33</sup> El Comité-MINP was part of the party-building conversations that brought together the Third World and white radicals of the period.

### *Counternarratives*

The organizations of the Third World left were organized mainly along racial or ethnic lines. But shared racial or ethnic identity, or even shared material conditions, does not explain the formation of groups that reject the dominant pluralist narrative about political incorporation. An ideological counternarrative must be in play.

Ideology, as defined by Swedish Marxist Göran Therborn, is the set of ideas people hold that are drawn both from everyday life as well as from

institutionalized and intellectual doctrines that inform social and political behavior.<sup>34</sup> Maintaining the hegemony of the pluralist doctrine by suppressing and repressing countervailing ideas and alternatives is the ongoing project of dominant political, economic, and ideological institutions.<sup>35</sup> The rearticulation of ideas (a counterhegemonic ideology) becomes a tool of resistance to subordination. For groups with few resources and no control over the institutions that manufacture consent—like schools, media, and mainstream political parties—collective environments must exist or be created where "common sense" interpretations of reality can interact with specialized (expert, intellectual, or ideological) interpretations to develop alternative perspectives on power relations and plans of action that challenge those relations.<sup>36</sup> The interaction between political experience and intellectual reflection on that experience, in historically specific conditions, helps explain how countervailing ideas and a newly constructed political identity become articulated in corresponding forms of organization and resistance.

This discourse on ideological hegemony-counterhegemony is rooted in the early twentieth-century writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Extending Marx's analysis of the hegemonic rule of the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies, Gramsci argued that organic, counterhegemonic movements in the cultural arena, as well as political and economic spheres, were essential in order to challenge the dominant, elite-led conceptions of life as it is and that permeate the dominant institutions of society. Gramsci emphasized the role of organic intellectuals in social change, who can inform and be informed by political practice; that is, the role of theory in developing a revolutionary political practice:

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an élite of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people "specialised" in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried.<sup>37</sup>

Applying the Gramscian framework to the interaction between politics and culture, J. Patrice McSherry theorizes that the New Song Movement (*la*

*Nueva Canción Chilena*) in Chile of the 1960s and '70s was instrumental "in uniting people in common cause," for democratization in Chile, by articulating through music a counternarrative that denounced the status quo, encapsulated the aspirations of the masses, and inspired people to pursue the political changes that spoke to those aspirations. McSherry contends that, as the New Song Movement ascended in Chile, it "represented a rising challenge to the hegemonic conception of life in Chile. Culture became an arena of political contestation and hegemonic-counterhegemonic struggle. . . ." <sup>38</sup>

The Gramscian framework has also been useful in analyzing new social movements. William Carroll and R.S. Ratner explain Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" as rooted in the "practical need for subordinate groups to move beyond a defensive understanding of their immediate interests, to create their own *hegemonic* conception of the 'general interest,' capable of guiding a transformative politics."<sup>39</sup> They argue that contemporary social movements that advocate for "globalization from below" are "agents of counterhegemony in their organized dissent to the existing order."<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the successful movement for democratization in Chile that culminated in the election of Salvador Allende in 1970, the narratives of social movements that oppose neoliberal globalization are, as of yet, mostly ones of potential. Their significance, for example in relation to climate change and environmental justice, is in the momentum and fierce political contestations they have fueled around the world.

Gramsci's recognition of class dominance and contestation in all spheres of social life is a useful framework for thinking about the rise of counterhegemonic movements in communities of color, in response to the intersections of race and class oppression and in contrast to the traditional workplace-based politics of the Left. In the United States in the late 1960s, the liberal coalitions that had embraced the Civil Rights Movement could not deliver on promises of economic fairness and expanded political space in the face of powerful interests that did not share redistributive goals. Even before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the emerging Black Power movement began to articulate an ideological challenge to the dominant pluralist doctrine of inclusion. Asserting that asymmetrical power relations could not be redressed through routine political processes, Stokely Carmichael (later named Kwame Turé) and Charles Hamilton urged Blacks to organize themselves within their communities and form independent political organizations if they wanted to improve their socioeconomic conditions and acquire political power in the United States. The white power structure would not voluntarily accede to the demands of an unorganized community; and well-intentioned white liberals who were steeped in white-skin privilege could neither understand the manifestations

of racial oppression nor secure racial and class power transformations without Black self-organization.<sup>41</sup> The significance of the Black Power movement was not merely that it considered mobilization based on racial identity a precondition for political incorporation. Rather, the essential aspect of the doctrine of self-determination was that it brought into focus that institutionalized racism reinforced domination and oppression.

The racially specific organizational forms and ideology of Black Nationalism were integrated with a class analysis that rejected the idea that political power could be acquired by joining, and trying to reform, mainstream political parties or by vying for the spoils of social programs. It maintained instead that the political party system in the United States was designed to "manage conflict" and was not interested in altering the imbalance of power in social structures and institutions.<sup>42</sup> The Black Panther Party's call for community control of the means of production in its Ten-Point Program bared the systemic critique that distinguished it from many of the participants and reformist goals of the Civil Rights Movement and from the ethnic identity groups that sought higher voter turnout.

Many of the nationalist and revolutionary organizations of the Third World Left were rooted in this political perspective, though each of them devised political agendas that corresponded to their communities' unique experiences and grievances. In her comparative study of Black, Chicano, and Japanese organizations in California in the 1970s, Laura Pulido talks about the different ways race and class interacted for each of those groups and produced distinctive forms of resistance, in contrast to the white-dominant Left:

Given their political histories, these activists were unwilling to privilege race or class, and they developed ideologies that reflected how the two intersected to create unique historical experiences. The insistence on addressing both race and class equally is a primary distinction between white and third-world left organizations.<sup>43</sup>

Addressing the most salient issues in their respective communities, each group pursued distinct political programs. Pulido observes that the Black Panther Party stressed community control and self-defense; the Chicano organization *El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo* (CASA) promoted labor organizing, immigration reform, and cultural identity; and the Asian group East Wind emphasized community service, gang intervention, solidarity work, and multi-national party-building. The Thirteen-Point Program of the Young Lords Party of New York paralleled the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party in

demanding community control over police, health services, churches, schools, and housing; opposing capitalism; and calling for a socialist society. The Young Lords added the demands to free political prisoners and end colonialism in Puerto Rico.

### El Comité-MINP's Political Path

The movements and ideological counternarratives that inspired the Third World Left shaped the radical politics and revolutionary ideals of El Comité. In the chapters that follow, I contextualize El Comité's political path by considering the factors that shaped its formation, its ideological and political evolution, and the impact of changing structural conditions in New York, the nation, and the world on its approach to political organizing and protest in the 1970s. Chapter 2 locates the origins of El Comité in the conditions that led to Operation Move-In, including the national political economy, the harsh conditions Puerto Ricans families faced since migrating to New York, and the political movements of the period. I present El Comité's role in the Squatters Movement and show how activists used disruptive tactics effectively to redress the city's disregard for their claims. Interwoven in my account of Operation Move-In are the stories of the early activists who recall the personal and political circumstances and influences that drew them into political activism.

Chapter 3 explores the interaction of colonialism, migration, and nationalism that moved El Comité to support liberation for Puerto Rico, almost simultaneously with its formation. The colonial-structured industrialization in Puerto Rico that fueled mass migration to the United States in the 1940s and '50s, the repression of the nationalist movement during the same period, and the activities of the New York-based independence movement were among the multiple factors that politicized Puerto Ricans in New York and led to El Comité's collaboration with other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left as early as 1971. In combination, Chapters 2 and 3 show that El Comité's initial political identity was forged by national origin, family history, the racial and class inequality in New York, and the politicized local and national environment.

Chapter 4 presents the democratic rights' campaigns in which El Comité became immersed in the first half of the 1970s and its transition in the same period from an informal collective to a Marxist-Leninist political organization. Using an array of historical archives and first-hand accounts, I reconstruct the movements for parent empowerment in the Lower East Side and bilingual education in the Upper West Side; the boardroom takeovers at Channel

13 against media exclusion of Latinos; and the workers' mobilizations that fought for democratic unions and decent jobs. The chapter also explores the organic dynamic of the collective in El Comité's radicalization and transition to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization, and the range of issues the members confronted, including what it meant to be a revolutionary, how to overcome sexism, and how to sustain a physical presence with few resources.

In Chapter 5, I turn to El Comité's local activism and revolutionary politics in the second half of the 1970s. The importance given to incorporating women into political action is illustrated by the example of the Latin Women's Collective, formed by members of El Comité, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the *Movimiento Popular Dominicano*, and unaffiliated activists. The prolonged campaigns of the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital and the student activists at SUNY Old Westbury yielded important victories. However, beginning in 1975, New York City's worst fiscal crisis, together with more conservative electoral coalitions, national recession, and economic restructuring, intensified competition for scarce resources, constrained local and state budgetary prerogatives, and negatively impacted the national discourse on entitlements and rights. Many progressives and radicals in New York were forced to shift their agenda from the democratic rights' demands of earlier years to protests against severe budget cuts and racial scapegoating. But, by the late 1970s, militant protests were more difficult to launch and sustain.

Chapter 6 focuses on El Comité's solidarity with Puerto Rico over the course of the decade, and its dialogue with the U.S. Left in its later years about building a national revolutionary party. Regarding solidarity work, although the differences between the groups of the Puerto Rican Left sometimes provoked heated debates, they worked closely together to free political prisoners, to oppose the U.S. naval occupation of Vieques, and to get the United Nations Decolonization Committee to condemn colonial rule in Puerto Rico. On party-building, I examine the unique contribution El Comité made to the dialogue within the U.S. Left with its proposal to establish "Centers for Communication, Cooperation and Collaboration."

Chapter 7 looks at the political and organizational dilemmas that contributed to the demise of El Comité-MINP in the early 1980s. In addition to the resurgence of conservative politics in the nation, government surveillance in the 1970s had pushed some of the Left organizations inward, which was exacerbated by an organizational form that inhibited the types of discussions that were needed to assess the changing environment. The frenetic pace of multiple endeavors exhausted activists and discouraged organization-wide reflections on their accumulated political experience. In short, El Comité was affected to some degree by all of these conditions and ultimately could not survive.



The book concludes with reflections on the significance of El Comité-MINP in the 1970s and how the politics of their youth shaped the lives of its members. What I hope to convey above all is that El Comité achieved its greatest success when it stayed close to the people it meant to serve, and that dedicated, politically active individuals achieved meaningful social change and spread counterhegemonic ideas that nurtured collective action for social justice.

## Operation Move-In and the Making of a Political Movement

"We had just come out of the park. It was a hot summer day, and we wanted to drink a beer," recalled Pedro Rentas, a retired Teamsters Union activist who lives in Puerto Rico.<sup>1</sup> On a June afternoon in 1970, a group of young men in their early twenties, all Puerto Rican except for one Dominican, gathered to play softball at a Central Park sandlot in Manhattan's Upper West Side. They left the field thirsty and began calling on neighborhood residents to chip in for their beer money. "Someone started with, 'Hey, I got a dollar.' Here's two, then three. We started horsing around, and people from the windows started throwing us money. Before you knew it, we had almost \$100!"

In the summer of 1970 the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a densely populated, ethnically diverse, predominantly working-class area. Russian, Polish, Irish, and Italian ethnics and African Americans lived in close proximity to the newest arrivals—Puerto Ricans, who had fled growing unemployment in Puerto Rico a decade or two earlier, and, in lesser numbers, Dominicans who had left the Dominican Republic following the U.S. military invasion in 1965 and subsequent liberalization of U.S. immigration policy.<sup>2</sup> On the western border of the Upper West Side, along West End Avenue and sparsely interspersed within the two-square-mile neighborhood, more affluent newcomers (mainly professionals) had been lured to the area by investment incentives offered by New York City's Department of Real Estate.<sup>3</sup> In the throes of summer's heat, with little air conditioning and no elevators in the five- and six-story tenements, neighborhood residents leaned out of their windows or relaxed on stoops while children played on sidewalks and under the fire hydrants.