1 Migration and the Reconstruction of Identity: the Puerto Rican Example

Justin Daniel
Translated by Eleanor Taylor

In one of her recent works, Clara Rodriguez highlighted one of the many paradoxes which characterize the situation of Puerto Rican immigrants in the US. They are largely absent from the front line of battles over welfare state reforms, the urban school system or victims of property speculation. More political objects than political subjects, they are kept at a distance from the ‘American dream’ despite the right to American citizenship conceded to nationals of the former Spanish colony in 1917. Until recently Puerto Ricans have attracted little attention. This somewhat disillusioned observation has its basis in the academic world: specialized literature has dwelt only briefly on the sometimes cruel experience of Puerto Rican immigration to the US. It is true that attention has been concentrated on the study of socio-economic determinants and the political foundations of migratory flows to the detriment, perhaps, of the examination of the processes of adaptation and recomposition of identity in the American context. It should perhaps be added that the numerous debates and studies triggered by the massive departure of Puerto Ricans for the US are only paralleled by the strength of the prejudices which support them,
or the weakness of the theoretical frameworks which inspire them.

In other words, the knowledge we have of the Puerto Rican minority in the US remains patchy. The contrast with the relatively fruitful analyses carried out under the banner of the new Puerto Rican historiography is striking: by dedicating itself over the last few years to the detailed exploration of the cultural landscape; the social and economic structures which give rise to it; and to the conflicts arising from the dynamics of the social forces which have filled the historical scene, this historiography has contributed to the substantial renewal of the study of Puerto Rican society. It has allowed the uncovering of whole sections of a historical reality which had been neglected until then. This is the case in particular both for the culture of marginalized sectors of society, historically excluded, and for their battles and strategies for self-affirmation in a colonial context of subordination and dependence. On the other hand, many of the questions directly linked to the experience of the Puerto Rican immigrant minority in the US remain unanswered and difficult to approach, given the lack of sufficient detailed studies. What are the consequences of the incessant population movement between the island and the North American continent over the last 50 years? Should the concept of Puerto Rican cultural identity be extended beyond the island’s limits, to the emigrant community in New York and on the East Coast of the US, for example, by taking into consideration the powerful interaction resulting from the meeting with the black minority, nationals of other Caribbean countries and Latin America? In short, how are the different Puerto Rican identities in the US formed and reformed?

In order to attempt to respond – in part, given the scale of the problems raised – to these questions,