



Centro Journal

ISSN: 1538-6279

centro-journal@hunter.cuny.edu

The City University of New York

Estados Unidos

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The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Emergence of El
Comité

Centro Journal, vol. XXI, núm. 2, 2009, pp. 109-141

The City University of New York

New York, Estados Unidos

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Operation: Move-In



TODAY'S SEVERELY GENTRIFIED HOUSING ENVIRONMENT IN MANHATTAN'S UPPER WEST SIDE

obscures the history of resistance by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African Americans to New York City's "West Side Urban Renewal" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The activists of "Operation Move-In," the West Side's contentious housing movement of 1970, sustained a militant squatters' campaign that opposed the removal of thousands of low-income, mostly minority tenants from their homes. Though the collaboration between real estate developers, banks, and city administrative agencies gradually succeeded in massive displacement of working class residents, the squatters of Operation Move-In reduced the immediate impact of gentrification policies by taking possession of buildings earmarked for destruction and by negotiating a higher percentage of units for low-income tenants in high-rise developments. From the squatters' movement emerged El Comité, one of the main organizations of the Puerto Rican Left throughout the 1970s.¹

The experience of Operation Move-In demonstrates the partial effectiveness of sustained, organized protest that used disruptive tactics, persuasive mobilizing frames, and broad alliances to assert community-based power and force concessions from elites. The history of the formation and early stages of politicization of El Comité, as an outgrowth of that movement, illustrates how a radical political perspective developed organically among predominantly working-class Puerto Rican activists, rather than as a product of *a priori* ideology. Among the multiple factors that contributed to political consciousness and activism in the period were the intersecting experiences of national identity, race, and class of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

Introduction

"We had just come out of the park. It was a hot summer day, and we wanted to drink a beer," recalled Pedro Rentas as he and several others talked about the origins of El Comité in a recent interview in Puerto Rico.² On a June afternoon in 1970, a group of young men in their early 20s, all Puerto Rican except for one Dominican, gathered to play softball at a local sandlot in Manhattan's Upper West Side. Upon emerging from the field and trying to collect beer money to quench their thirst, they began calling on neighborhood residents to chip in for their cause. "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!" (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

In the summer of 1970 the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a densely populated, ethnically diverse, mainly working-class area. Russians, Irish, Italians, and African Americans lived in close proximity to the newest arrivals—Puerto Ricans who fled growing unemployment in Puerto Rico a decade or two earlier and, in lesser numbers, Dominicans who left the Dominican Republic following the U.S. military invasion in 1965 and subsequent liberalization of U.S. immigration policy (Lyford 1968). At the western border along West End Avenue and sparsely interspersed within the two-square-mile area, more affluent newcomers (mainly professionals) had begun to inhabit the area through investment incentives offered by the city's Department of Real Estate (Wilson 1987: 37). 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.

We felt like...this is too much money. At that time a beer cost us a quarter.... So we stopped the ice cream truck and bought ice cream for all the kids. It was marvelous, right? I mean, everybody just came down. We must have bought something like 80 or 90 ice creams that day. And everybody had a great time.... So we did it again the following week. (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

As the story is told by El Comité's founders, the softball players were inspired by the excitement and satisfaction they felt in this one small collective act. They decided to do something more:

We cleaned up this little basketball court in the lot. Some guy loaned us a movie, we borrowed a projector, and someone gave us light. On Friday night everybody came down to see the movie, *Planet of the Apes*, even the Gringos. You know, at the corner it was Puerto Ricans. But further up it was middle-class Gringos. They came down, and they really enjoyed it. (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

The softball players were not part of any social action or political movement. Several were armed services veterans; one worked in an automobile factory and another at a steel plant; others were unemployed laborers. Another, Marine Corps veteran Federico Lora, had recently enrolled in an architectural program at Pratt Institute upon returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam. The friends had not discussed politics and had no political aspirations. However, within a short span of several months, they squatted in a storefront on Columbus Avenue and West 88th Street and became principal agitators for housing rights in their neighborhood. Joined first by companions and friends and gradually by other activists, they called themselves El Comité. By the end of one year, the group identified with the struggle for independence in Puerto Rico and democratization and revolutionary movements throughout the Caribbean and Latin America and deepened its involvement in campaigns for quality housing, education, and employment and against police brutality in New York City.³

Adopting the symbolic dress of black berets worn by other young militants of their time, they were often mistaken for the Young Lords in these early days. But, though the Puerto Rican independence groups at the time shared similar beliefs, El Comité chose to remain separate from the Young Lords and the others, and distinguished itself as a distinct political force in several neighborhoods and

work sites and through the pages of its first bi-weekly newspaper, *Unidad Latina*. The structural and historical factors discussed below—including the economic and social conditions Puerto Rican migrants faced in New York, the domestic and international political environment, and the growth of the pro-independence movement—indicate how class, race, and ethnicity intersected in El Comité’s process of radicalization.⁴

THOUGH THE PUERTO RICAN INDEPENDENCE GROUPS AT THE TIME SHARED SIMILAR BELIEFS, EL COMITÉ CHOSE TO REMAIN SEPARATE FROM THE YOUNG LORDS AND THE OTHERS, AND DISTINGUISHED ITSELF AS A DISTINCT POLITICAL FORCE IN SEVERAL NEIGHBORHOODS AND WORK SITES AND THROUGH THE PAGES OF ITS FIRST BI-WEEKLY NEWSPAPER, *UNIDAD LATINA*:

Puerto Ricans and New York’s Political Economy: 1960s

The U.S. economy boomed in the post-World War II period through the early 1970s until a combination of national and international conditions began to impede economic growth and reverse the rising standard of living attained by some sectors of U.S. workers (Harrison and Bluestone 1990). But prosperity at the height of growth and suffering at the depths of recession were not shared in common by U.S. workers. Despite the 1960s “War on Poverty” and affirmative action legislation, by 1974 one-third of all Puerto Rican families lived below the poverty line (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976: 47).

Locally, New York City’s transition from a manufacture- to a service-based economy was experienced by minority workers as economic contraction. Simultaneously with a massive outflow of Whites to the suburbs, New York City lost 500,000 jobs in the 1960s and 1970s, most in the manufacturing sector (Ross and Trachte 2006: 108). In the 1960s alone, the percentage of the Puerto Rican workforce that was employed in manufacturing dropped from 55 percent to 41 percent (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976: 52). Though office jobs increased slightly, the housing shortage encouraged some large corporations

to leave the city and discouraged others from locating their headquarters in Manhattan. Workers took what was available in the low-paying service sectors, as waiters, kitchen help, porters, and hospital workers, and in light industry sweatshops. Through the 1970s, the unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans was twice the overall rate of unemployment in New York City (Torres 1995: 62).⁵

Puerto Rican workers' experience in New York City was similar to that of African Americans. Both were excluded from the private unionized sectors that had negotiated job security and career ladders through collective bargaining. This was especially true in the construction trades, where White immigrant workers and their descendants, aided by union leaders, blocked union entry and opposed affirmative action programs by aligning with the Nixon administration against the more liberal policy proposals of Mayor Lindsay. To make matters worse, the encroaching fiscal crisis threatened to disproportionately harm recently hired minorities in the public sector and residents who depended most on public health care, education, and welfare programs.

By the late 1960s, housing deterioration in neighborhoods inhabited by low-income residents had become critical. The federally subsidized high-rise public housing projects built in the 1950s under the direction of Robert Moses had failed the city's poor. Neighborhoods were nearly destroyed when sites were cleared for public housing construction. With few small businesses and low-rise buildings remaining, the areas surrounding the projects spiraled downward. Still, the need for housing was great. Though the projects were chronically undermaintained, thousands of applicants lingered for years on waiting lists for entry to the projects.

Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and long-time African-American residents occupied the worst of the city's public and non-public housing stock, even in the less-segregated neighborhoods of the West Side:

The larger and poorer the family unit, the less living space it has, and the more dilapidated the housing. In one typically overcrowded sector of the West Side, for instance, 62 percent of the Negroes (sic) and 42 percent of the Spanish (sic) lived in one or two rooms.... [O]f those Spanish families in one- or two-room apartments, 68 percent had one or more children. (Lyford 1968: 6)

In the case of Puerto Ricans in particular, reduced access to public subsidized housing coincided with the massive exodus of jobs in manufacturing and light industries from New York City during the 1960s (Sánchez 1989: 40).

Many of the crumbling buildings in the West Side had been constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as single-family homes and were converted in the mid-1900s to rooming houses by absentee landlords. The city collaborated in the West Side's rapid increase in population density by approving, time after time, zoning changes for the subdivision of larger apartments into smaller units. Interspersed between these buildings were private tenements, public housing units, abandoned buildings, and some owner-occupied brownstones. The plumbing, heating, and electrical systems in hundreds of city- and privately owned buildings were antiquated. Residents were frustrated by frequent power outages triggered simply by turning on a toaster at the same time a fan recycled hot, stale air; many families lived without functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. Epidemic rat infestation and lead poisoning threatened the health of children who were already underserved by resource-strained health providers in poor neighborhoods.



*El Comité members: Federico, Carmen, Nancy, Cano, Nelson (circa 1971).
Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.*



*El Comité office on Columbus Avenue and W. 88 Street (circa 1971).
Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.*

School conditions for most African American and Puerto Rican children were equally dismal by the time the first Puerto Rican, Joseph Monserrat, was appointed President of the New York City Board of Education in 1969. The schools they attended were the most densely populated. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling and the persistent national myth that segregation was a southern problem, racial segregation in education worsened in the New York region in the 1960s (and is even more acute today) (Gittell and Hevesi 1969; Orfield et al. 1997). In disproportionate numbers, minority students were tracked into special education programs as early as the first grade and, if they did not drop out, often ended up in vocational rather than academic high schools.

Though Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided federal funds to schools with large numbers of children who were poor and/or not fluent in English, the children needing those resources most did not benefit because the funds were used to provide regular instructional services that were financed by local funds in other schools. “Puerto Ricans were thought of not as people but as ‘the Puerto Rican problem,’ as welfare recipients;” and students whose primary language was other than English were “barred from meaningful participation in education programs” (Monserrat n.d.). Between 1960 and 1970, the high school dropout rate hovered around thirty percent for Puerto Rican students and twenty-five percent for African Americans, while it remained under ten percent for Whites (Monserrat n.d.).⁶

In 1960 the median income of Puerto Rican and African American families was approximately 60 and 70 percent, respectively, that of Whites; by 1970 the gap widened to 53 percent for Puerto Ricans and 69 percent for African Americans.⁷ Though African Americans made greater inroads into the public sector as civil servants, both groups were the first and worst hit by the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. They paid the highest rents for the worst housing and were stuck in the poorest schools. A few Puerto Ricans entered mainstream politics, especially under liberal city administrations. But, as a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report in 1976 observed, Puerto Rican appointees or elected officials were unable to improve the socioeconomic profile of Puerto Ricans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1976).

Political Protest in New York: 1960s

Political protest in New York City in the 1960s was, in broad terms, structurally conditioned by the contradictions engendered by national economic expansion and the impact of capital outflows from inner cities to outlying suburbs: on the one hand, economic growth, rising incomes, and low unemployment for some sectors; on the other hand, embedded poverty, poor services, high unemployment, and police repression for others, predominantly minorities. Although in the early 1960s, especially after the death of Malcolm X, New York was not a principal location for civil rights movement activity, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) remained active in Harlem and Brooklyn and, among other things, raised the profile of police brutality against minority youth. When a Black youth was killed by an off-duty officer in 1964, police arrested CORE’s leaders at a protest rally in Harlem. Five nights of riots followed the arrests, during which fifteen Blacks were shot by police (one fatally) and 116 people were injured (Lader 1979: 158–9). For the next few years, spontaneous riots and organized rallies occurred in several communities in response to incidents of police brutality.⁸

The first half of the decade is also well known for tenant rent strikes. Mobilization for Youth, CORE, Harlem Tenants’ Council, Metropolitan Council on Housing, University Settlement, and Puertorriqueños Unidos led or supported rent strikes and distributed information on tenants’ rights throughout the city. Although strikes were frequent, tenant militancy was difficult to sustain (Schwartz 1986: 10–1). Tenant actions resulted in few reforms and did not stop the spread of slums or significantly increase the supply of desirable public housing. By the late 1960s, tenant councils and advocates wanted to explore more aggressive solutions to the escalating housing crisis.

Labor activism was prevalent as well. On January 1, 1966, the first day of Mayor Lindsay’s tenure, the Transit Workers’ Union and Amalgamated Transit Union began a twelve-day strike for higher wages and better work environments. In some

instances, job actions by municipal unions exposed a growing rift between White union members and minorities interested in job access and education reform. The strike of the United Federation of Teachers in 1968 drew a clear line of hostility between the union on one side and the parents and other activists in minority-dominant districts on the other side who wanted Board of Education power decentralized into local community school boards where parents could have greater input into education policy and school conditions.

Indeed, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political environment in New York City was volatile. The writings of Malcolm X, the southern-based civil rights movement, the ideas of affirmative action, and the emerging Black Panthers' platform of community control spread through minority communities and coincided with students demanding open admissions to the City University system, insisting on the incorporation of Puerto Rican and Black Studies programs, and protesting the Vietnam War. When activists from Harlem and the Upper West Side joined forces with Columbia University students to protest the war and to condemn Columbia's proposal for a new gymnasium in Morningside Park, alarms rang throughout the city and especially in the offices of the New York City School Board. In April 1968 police forcibly and violently removed hundreds of students from the buildings they had taken over on campus (Melendez 2003: 75–6).⁹ Expressing concern for “escalating rebellion” among “radical fringes” in the schools, the School Board directed its faculty to attend workshops on how to control unrest, walkouts, and school takeovers (Montserrat n.d.). Internal discussions between the Board and the High School Principals' Association focused on developing strategies to “isolate militants”(Montserrat n.d.). Fearing spontaneous youth reactions, New York City schools were shut down the day after four student anti-war protesters were killed by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University in May 1970.

Puerto Rican Activism

In this environment, two significant but distinct radical movements of Puerto Rican activists attempted to draw Puerto Ricans in New York City into contentious political action. With the goal of recruiting Puerto Ricans in the U.S. to the independence movement, the recently established branch of the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI) held neighborhood meetings to discuss Puerto Rico's colonial status and sponsored street gatherings commemorating historic occasions of nationalist rebellion. MPI believed that Puerto Ricans in the U.S. should make the anti-colonial movement their political priority.

Meanwhile, a very different Puerto Rican movement emerged. In 1967, the Young Lords of Chicago, under the leadership of Cha Cha Jimenez, transformed from a street gang to a militant political action group seeking 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 students to Old Westbury. There, Melendez met Jimenez, initiating a network of communication between New York activists and the more organized Chicago group. In 1969, a newly formed East Coast chapter of the Young Lords Organization exploded onto the scene in New York City, denouncing poor housing, inadequate health care and sanitation services, and inferior schools in East Harlem (Melendez 2003).

THOUGH THE YOUNG LORDS WERE NOT PRIMARY ACTORS IN THE WEST SIDE HOUSING MOVEMENT THAT ERUPTED IN 1970, NO DOUBT THEY EXPANDED NETWORKS OF COMMUNICATION AND CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO THE GROWING ACCEPTANCE BY PUERTO RICANS AND DOMINICANS OF CONTENTIOUS PROTEST AS EFFECTIVE POLITICAL ACTION.

Two years prior to the famous “Garbage Offensive” led by the Young Lords in East Harlem, Mayor Lindsay had convened a conference of Puerto Rican community groups, asking for recommendations to improve living conditions in Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Despite several proposals made by the groups, the Lindsay Administration pursued no progressive policy measures.¹⁰ Frustrated with routine political avenues and skeptical of the Lindsay Administration’s avowed commitment to reform, the Young Lords felt compelled to act. By their own accounts, the garbage protest was designed to show local residents that bold community action designed to disrupt business as usual was needed to force the city to act on just demands:

[A]rmed with large brooms, the Lords and some volunteers swept the street and stockpiled large quantities of garbage.... [W]e started to sweep the garbage into the streets, particularly around the bus stops and the center of Second and Third Avenues, near 106th, 111th, 116th, and 118th Streets.... [T]he garbage formed a five-foot-high wall across the six lanes of Third Avenue, causing an unexpected traffic jam. Some drivers cursed and screamed at the piles of garbage and at us. Others nodded their heads and blew the horns of their cars.... The only choice we had was confrontational politics.... (Melendez 2003: 102-5)

Through the media attention garnered by this and similarly disruptive actions over the next two years, the Young Lords dramatically raised the profile of Puerto Rican grievances in New York City (Sánchez 2007: 204-7). The group’s militancy influenced many activists just around the time a revitalized housing movement



Operation Move-In Headquarters on Columbus Avenue near W. 90th Street (circa 1971). Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.



Squatters' respond to 'urban removal' at Site 30: ¡Basta Ya! We Won't Move! (circa 1971). Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.

on the West Side chose squatting as its strategy for confronting the city and private slumlords. Though the Young Lords were not primary actors in the West Side housing movement that erupted in 1970, no doubt they expanded networks of communication and contributed greatly to the growing acceptance by Puerto Ricans and Dominicans of contentious protest as effective political action. On the West Side of Manhattan, it was the city's disregard for the needs of low-income residents in the urban renewal zones that provoked confrontation.

Urban "Renewal" or "Removal"?

Following World War II, the demand for a federal response to housing shortages and urban decay made by a broad coalition of progressive political forces and organized labor led to the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which stated that every American deserves a "decent home and a suitable living environment" (Lang and Sohmer 2000). However, the implementation of the Act, under Title I, proved controversial in the nation's cities as federal funds were used mainly for "slum clearance" (Lang and Sohmer 2000; Davies 1966). Federal legislation in 1954 revised and expanded federal housing support to include urban renewal projects that

combined demolition and new construction with neighborhood conservation and renovation rather than complete neighborhood demolition.

New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. established the Urban Renewal Board to oversee a pilot project in the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) that ran from West 87th to West 97th Streets between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue (Davies 1966: 112). As approved in 1959, the project was to build 7,800 low- and high-rise, public and private housing units, of which 1,000 (approximately 13 percent) would be reserved for low-income, 4,200 for middle-income, and 2,600 for upper-income residents. The plan was derived as a compromise between the Urban Renewal Board and the Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, which represented seventeen tenant and neighborhood groups in the WSURA and had negotiated an increase in the number of units earmarked for low- and middle-income residents.

However, in 1962 the Puerto Rican Citizen's Housing Committee, comprised of five Puerto Ricans who had worked in city agencies, and formed to study the impact of the plan, concluded that no less than 30 percent of the 7,800 housing units (2,340 units) should be reserved for low-income occupants and that minimal demolition and relocation of area residents should occur. Though the Committee was not a grassroots organization with representatives from affected neighborhoods, its position was widely publicized by local newspapers and tenant advocates. Under the leadership of Father Henry Browne of St. Gregory's Church, Strycker's Bay agreed with the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee that the WSURA should designate 30 percent of new units for low-income families, that new construction should cause minimal neighborhood disruption, and that the city should make a greater commitment to rehabilitating existing housing for working class residents.¹¹ These demands became the goals of the housing movement in the ensuing years.

THE CITY'S DISMAL RECORD OF
DISLOCATION WAS EVIDENCED,
AS WELL, BY THE EARLIER
LINCOLN CENTER PROJECT,
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ABLE TO RETURN TO THE AREA.



El Comité and other Operation Move-In members march on Amsterdam Avenue to Anti-Vietnam War Rally at City College (circa 1971). Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.



Operation Move-In families march to a rally (circa 1971). Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.

The WSURA plan had no provision to renovate salvageable, abandoned buildings for tenants living in inferior housing.¹² It envisioned redevelopment through the demolition of thousands of housing units, the building of mostly high-rise subsidized apartments, and tax incentives to banks and private investors to construct market-rate housing. Rather than admitting that low-income residents would not have access to the new housing, the city promised that families removed from selected sites for the duration of repairs would be welcomed back to their neighborhoods.

The main premise of “urban renewal” was that new and improved housing, occupied by no more than 30 percent low-income families along with a majority of upper- and middle-income families paying income-adjusted rents, would stabilize communities and invigorate the local economy. But West Side residents’ prior experience with Title I cast doubt that the city would honor its commitment to reserve even 30 percent of new housing stock for low-income, displaced residents. Earlier in the decade, 4,000 residential units had been demolished from West 97th to West 100th Street, between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenues (the Park West Village Development); and, despite promises to the contrary, the majority of displaced residents could not afford the rents in the newly constructed

buildings. The city's dismal record of dislocation was evidenced, as well, by the earlier Lincoln Center project, where development was primarily nonresidential and uprooted families (Puerto Rican, in large numbers) had not been able to return to the area.¹³ The city insisted that all known, eligible residents were given the opportunity to apply for the new housing if they could afford the rent—the operative principles being “eligibility” and “affordability.” The federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970 redefined subsidy guidelines by increasing the percentage of income public housing tenants were required to pay which, together with higher-than-expected rents, kept families who relied on Section 8 out of the new housing developments.¹⁴

In the West Side and Morningside Heights areas, where many buildings were slated for demolition, the city had ignored tenants' grievances for years or, at best, had assigned insufficient numbers of inspectors to issue fines to unresponsive slumlords. “Urban removal,” as it was dubbed by local activists, increased racial and class segregation rather than integration by forcing long-time tenants out of salvageable buildings and relocating them to inferior housing in the outer boroughs. Those who remained in overcrowded and often unsafe tenements gleaned no hope from redevelopment plans.

Adding to the disillusionment with “urban removal” was the appearance of collusion between private developers and Puerto Rican political or anti-poverty agency leaders, particularly Herman Badillo, Ramón Vélez, and Amy Betances, who denied the deleterious impact of “urban renewal” on low-income, minority communities.¹⁵ In 1962 Badillo was appointed Commissioner of the newly formed Department of Housing Relocation. As Commissioner until 1965 and Bronx Borough President from 1965 to 1970, he worked with real estate developers on an agenda of urban revitalization that vulnerable residents of Manhattan viewed as gentrification:

As part of an overall plan by the government to keep both industry and the professional, administrative and managerial classes in the city, certain communities in Manhattan were selected to undergo a complete structural overhaul, and racial and class transformation.... Families were uprooted to make way for communities designed to attract professionals.... [L]ess than 10 percent [of uprooted families] were 'granted' their rights to a home in the newly built apartments.... Badillo operated not in defense of working class interests, but in defense of large corporations who [did not want to] lose their skilled employees to suburban jobs.¹⁶

As community activist Dorothy Pitman Hughes commented in the documentary film, *Break and Enter*, working-class residents paid—in taxes and blood—for the War in Vietnam and for a national space exploration program while the City colluded behind their backs with private investors and real estate speculators.¹⁷

West Side Squatters' Movement: “Operation Move-In”

The squatters' movement in Manhattan's Upper West Side and Morningside Heights erupted in the spring of 1970 when groups of residents seized and claimed possession of vacant buildings. Although the initial move-ins were more spontaneous than part of a deliberately planned strategy of an organized movement, anger and frustration over the city's housing plan had been swelling for some months. Institutional political processes had not produced positive results. When a young boy, Jimmy Santos, died from carbon monoxide poisoning in a first-floor apartment

on West 106th Street, protest escalated. On the evening following the funeral street march held for the child, local anti-poverty and tenant advocate groups helped several dozen families break into nine sealed buildings designated for demolition on and around Columbus Avenue and the West 80s in the West Side Urban Renewal Area.¹⁸ While squatters moved at night with crowbars to peel off the seals covering doors and windows, supporters cheered on the streets as furniture was moved with ropes through windows from the Santos residence into one of the closed buildings.

For years, tenants and advocates pleaded and negotiated with the city to alter its urban renewal plan. Now, residents forced negotiations by occupying buildings slated for demolition or abandoned. As word of the action spread that month and the next, more families—mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican—joined “Operation Move-In.” Other local residents, together with veteran tenant and community agencies, mobilized support for the defiant tactics. The formal organizations and institutions in the area, including Community Action, Inc., the Mid-West Side Community Corp., and several churches provided material and moral support for the actions:

There was documentation of the vast amount of dislocation that had already occurred in that neighborhood and the reality that very few people had actually been able to return, despite all the struggle. That became the theme—that the city made these promises and we're going to hold them to it. So squatting was a logical development at a certain point, especially given the tenor of the times. The students were taking over the campuses in protest of the invasion of Cambodia; Jackson State and Kent State hit—Spring of 1970. The country was in ferment. Only a year and a half earlier we had the Columbia student takeovers and other student protests. Taking these buildings was almost the natural thing to do. (Tom Gogan, 3/24/07)

Initially the city threatened the squatters with forced eviction and sent squads of maintenance workers to apartments and buildings not yet occupied to break fixtures, remove stoves, refrigerators and sinks, and wreck electrical wiring to deter further move-ins.¹⁹ But the squatters refused to vacate the apartments. Two weeks after the initial occupations, the city reversed course, saying squatters would be allowed to stay temporarily, but no further actions would be tolerated. New locks were put in, and some fixtures were replaced. Operation Move-In, however, was in full swing.

In June 1970 the softball players who organized Friday night movies at the local sandlot joined the squatters by breaking the lock and prying open the door of a vacant storefront:

I remember one of you guys came up with the idea of a storefront, because Operation Move-In was already functioning. They had taken over apartments. And we knew that the storefront [on Columbus and 88th Street] was empty. We moved in on a weekend and began to clean it up. (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

From the moment they took the storefront, neighborhood residents stopped in to meet the new group. Luis Ithier, for example, was curious:

The day they broke into the storefront, I was coming from Under the Stairs [a local bar]. I'm hearing this commotion in front of the storefront. I knew all these guys. I thought it was going to be something like a social club. Many of the guys thought so too—Israel, Archie, John, Cuba, Cubita—to be quite honest. (Luis Ithier, 3/18/06)

The group that squatted at 588 Columbus Avenue had no clear political agenda other than a vague idea that “the people” were justified in taking direct action against the political establishment to control their own destiny.²⁰ They were moved by the bravery of the families confronting the tactical police squads sent by the city when a building was taken and went as a group to each site to help defend the occupations.

Nobody took over the storefront so that we could become a political organization. People were squatting. There was a lot of territory open to take.... We ourselves, our families, were affected by the housing situation and by Operation Move-In. Once we took the storefront, as squatters ourselves, we became part of that movement. But initially it was not organized. (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

Within several weeks of opening, thirty or more individuals, calling themselves El Comité, began meeting daily at the storefront to strategize about how to sustain the housing movement. The definition of “the people” seemed evident: it meant the poor, struggling families in their community who were mainly Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American.²¹ But it did not include Puerto Ricans in city government who the activists believed had betrayed the community by advocating the interests of banks and real estate speculators.

While many individuals and groups who joined Operation Move-In were from the neighborhood, others were not. El Comité wanted to ensure that families who had already been moved out of the neighborhood or expected to be removed would have priority access to apartments in buildings that were taken over as well as to new public housing:

We went to a meeting between Operation Move-In and Strycker's Bay. The thing was that people from the West Side, people we knew, had been moved out. They were sent to the Bronx, Long Island, wherever. And some of the people coming in had nothing to do with the West Side. The West Side was Puerto Rican, Irish, and a lot of Russians. In fact, the building in front of El Comité was the old Russian Embassy. So Federico spoke at that meeting. And we asked, 'Who guarantees that whoever gets an apartment in these spaces is from here?' We started getting apartments for the people who used to live here. We brought them back. (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

The influence El Comité garnered quickly among veteran activists and local residents was likely attributable to its neighborhood roots and vocal insistence that the movement should benefit needy residents before newcomers. The members and their families lived in West Side tenements and projects. Some had children who attended local schools. They tended to be older than the students from Columbia and the Young Lords from the other side of town and matured, in some cases, by their military experience. Federico Lora emerged as an articulate and confident spokesperson and, before long, a respected community leader. Ana Juarbe, a long-time resident of the West Side and secretary at Columbia University when she became involved with the squatters, recalled her first impression of El Comité:

We used to have women's groups as squatters on W. 111th Street.... I was in awe of these articulate, strong, intelligent, leadership roles. The way they carried themselves.... I really wasn't political...but, my goodness, all these Latinos were like a breath of fresh air. They were so untraditional; they weren't ghetto. When there were takeovers, all kinds of people would come on the scene. I remember asking, 'Who are these people?' That's the first time I saw the people from El Comité. (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06)

Motivated by the desire to protect the interests of local residents previously displaced or awaiting eviction, El Comité became a principal force within Operation Move-In:

We decided we wanted to confront the housing situation in a more organized fashion.... [W]e started planning which buildings should be taken over, which families should go here or there. We became more organized, rather than spontaneous. (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

One account of tenant movement history in New York City makes exactly that point about the West Side squatters:

Ad hoc move-ins occurred on West 15th Street in Greenwich Village (sic) and on 111th and 122nd Streets.... But squatting became more systematic on West 87th Street and along Columbus Avenue, where buildings awaited luxury conversion or demolition for middle-income high rises as part of the West Side Urban Renewal. At night, blacks and Puerto Ricans, prying open boarded-up entrances and rigging makeshift living arrangements, presented the city with a fait accompli—either recognize their 'ownership' or evict whole families in front of press photographers. Eventually, the Columbus Avenue Operation Move-In claimed one hundred participating families... (and) were supported by elaborate networks....²² (Schwartz 1986: 23)

Actually, the West Side squatters grew to over 200 families on the night of July 25, 1970, when 54 families, including 120 children, occupied two privately owned buildings earmarked for demolition on Amsterdam Avenue and West 112th Street in Morningside Heights.²³ The two buildings and four others were scheduled for demolition to make way for a luxury nursing home to be built by Morningside, Inc., a non-profit corporation connected to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.²⁴ Six hundred residents had been evicted from the six buildings. Operation Move-In, of which El Comité was now a part, provided the organizers of the action with a waiting list of families living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions and interested in squatting. Student organizers went door-to-door visiting families in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood to mobilize those willing to move into the buildings. The morning following the takeover, the squatters and supporters greeted churchgoers with news of the occupation. Though St. John the Divine, sitting directly across from the buildings, officially denounced the occupation at the Sunday service, out of the church walked "Episcopalians for the Poor," pledging their support for the action.²⁵

For the next few weeks, students in the "Urban Brigade," mainly Latinos from Columbia University and Barnard College, and community activists met with

squatters in the occupied buildings and mobilized support throughout the West Side. Forty-seven community organizations citywide endorsed the actions.²⁶ On the Sunday morning a week after the occupation, Father David García, a radical priest from the Lower East Side, led a sidewalk Mass with squatters and supporters.

Lindsay would not move against those takeovers because of the community support. Do you think he would have hesitated if the community opposed this? No way. How would that have looked to the constituents he wanted to appeal to? It was a very strong, very liberal (except the newcomers) area. Don't forget, Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented the district; Bella Abzug became Congresswoman in 1971; there were huge anti-war rallies there in the late '60s. When poor people, working class people, people of color took direct action, a lot of people said, 'Yeah, ok, we have to support them.' This was not the Upper East Side. (Tom Gogan, 3/24/07)

For nearly ten years, Morningside, Inc. tried to repossess the two occupied buildings through the courts, until Judge Bruce Wright threw the case out in 1979, and eventually turned the buildings over to the city.²⁷ The squatters obtained leases from the city (and eventually ownership) to apartments in those two buildings, making it the first successful “squat” up to that point on private property.

In the remaining months of 1970 and well into 1971, El Comité's members attended meetings and rallies at St. Gregory's Church where Federico Lora often spoke. Activists joined door-to-door leafleting to rally residents to resist displacement. Manuel Ortiz led the occupation of a building on West 100th St. and West End Avenue (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06). Members appeared at every public opportunity to confront Betances, Badillo, and other city planners about the abuse of low-income, minority residents. Badillo was jeered by crowds as “*otro pillo*” (another thief). When pressed to produce the list of families living in the South Bronx who had been removed from the West Side, Badillo claimed the list had been misplaced or lost.²⁸ In response, on a fall afternoon in 1970, El Comité members informed the police precincts on West 82nd Street and West 100th Street that they planned a march to the Urban Renewal Office located near their Columbus Avenue storefront. While several hundred people waited outside, spokespersons entered the office and asked the site manager to request a meeting with Badillo on their behalf.

When Badillo refused to meet, El Comité escalated the confrontation by disrupting the flow of commercial traffic. On a Friday in October at 4:30 p.m., the time when food delivery trucks came over the Triboro Bridge and down Columbus Avenue, protesters blocked the streets to prevent the trucks from passing. The action was repeated for several consecutive weeks, without police intervention; but Badillo never met with the group. In order to stop further demolitions planned for the Mitchell-Lama development, the movement stepped up the scale of building occupations by moving more families into vacant apartments and targeting the Mitchell-Lama development sites (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06).

The Mitchell-Lama program, begun in the 1950s, provided city and state mortgage, tax, and rent subsidies to developers who agreed to rent completed units to moderate-income earners. As in the Lincoln Center area, most of the families removed from the West Side to make way for high-rise buildings were low-income and could not expect to afford the new apartments. Occupancy rules

for the one- and two-bedroom apartments limited the numbers of persons per apartment, thereby further disqualifying many families. Operation Move-In wanted the city's assurance that it would support the position of Strycker's Bay and the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee, by reserving at least 30 percent of the Mitchell-Lama units for low-income residents previously removed or to be removed to make way for the development. "Site 30" of the Mitchell-Lama sites, on the west side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, was chosen for the takeover.

Directly across the street, on the east side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, squatters who had previously entered a completed but vacant Mitchell-Lama building, referred to as "Site 20," were removed by police after several weeks. Occupancy by accepted Mitchell-Lama applicants was apparently delayed six months until March 1971 because of the takeover. According to one of the original Mitchell-Lama residents, Barbra Minch, the new residents were split in their reaction to the squatters' actions (Barbra Minch, 2/19/07). When the squatters at Site 30 sought support from the new residents in Site 20, the residents' meeting, held to decide whether to hear the squatters' position, erupted into a physical fight between supporters and opponents.

It was not the first time conflicts arose between residents excluded from development plans and newcomers who benefited from subsidized units created by urban redevelopment. But when the occupation of Site 30 elicited the agreement with the city that 30 percent of Mitchell-Lama units still to be built would be guaranteed to low-income families, it seemed that the squatters had won another round. The city agreed to construct an additional 946 low-income and 1,117 middle-income units in the West Side Urban Renewal Area but also vowed to evict future squatters from vacant buildings.²⁹

We were able to get many families into the buildings we took over on 87th Street, many of whom are still there. We stopped demolition for Mitchell-Lama on Site 30 until the city agreed to meet the quota that 30 percent of all units would be reserved for low-income applicants. (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

Despite its verbal agreement, however, the city managed to reduce the proportion of low-income occupancy in Mitchell-Lama residences to well below the promised quota. According to Minch, one manipulative tactic on the city's part was to seek and accept applicants (such as law students) whose long-term projected income far exceeded low-income eligibility guidelines. Another tactic, according to Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado, was setting eligibility rules that many displaced residents could not meet (Ortiz and Collado, 4/13/06). For example, a family of seven exceeded the occupancy limit for most of the new units. On the other end, a single person was eligible only for the few studios but not for one-bedroom apartments. Also, the city played carrot-and-stick. They conceded more favorable terms for the Mitchell-Lama site, and some buildings were transferred to squatters' control or ownership. Dozens of families were permitted to renovate, and rents remained stabilized. Many squatters, however, were taken out by city police. In November 1970 thirty individuals were removed from a building on West 87th Street and arrested (including Pedro Rentas of El Comité) by fifty members of the Tactical Patrol Force. The city said the squatters violated the agreement that no more families would move into buildings earmarked for demolition.³⁰ However, demonstrators maintained that the building had not been sealed by the city because one old tenant remained and, therefore, squatters had not violated the agreement.

There were other counterattacks as well. The urban renewal plan created schisms not only in the Upper West Side but throughout the city between those who believed the plan's opponents were justified and those who detested them. *New York Times* journalist David Shipler obtained the assessment of an unidentified representative of the real estate industry and local landlord:

Puerto Ricans are not completely civilized—don't quote me—how can a landlord have those people?³¹

The “brownstoners” in the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), many of whom were new owner-renovators and middle- and upper-income professionals, viewed the squatters' movement as a threat that would reduce the area to “a racially segregated slum.”³² The group gained the attention of Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio, Housing and Development Administrator Albert Walsh, and Relocation Commissioner Earl Rawlins by vowing to oppose any urban renewal plans that included subsidized housing for the poor. In its lawsuit to stop subsidized housing altogether, CONTINUE cited the “tipping” theory that too many poor people of color would exacerbate white flight and disinvestments. Though the lawsuit eventually failed, CONTINUE delayed and ultimately discouraged the city from building further publicly subsidized housing on the West Side. The luxury rental building built on the former Site 30 in the 1980s reduced to 20 percent the total number of units set aside for “low- to moderate-income residents... ‘self-subsidized’ by the rents from the rest of the building....”³³

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Ironically, in the long-run segregation occurred, though not the type feared by CONTINUE. The city's concessions to the housing movement gave activists partial but short-lived victories, effectively demobilizing the movement and paving the way for the gradual, wholesale gentrification of the West Side. In the wake of an institutionalized plan that catered to private developers and ignored the housing needs of the working class in New York City, segregation in the form of class and racial gentrification is firmly established and evident throughout the West Side (and Manhattan) today.

Still, the power potential and short-term achievement of Operation Move-In lay in the risks taken by men and women, some quite young, who led their own parents and siblings by the hand through dark hallways in the night, who for the moment withdrew their consent to allow the city to control their destiny. The opportunities for broadening the movement beyond the initial takeovers, in a more coordinated and strategic fashion, derived from two factors: first, the prior Lincoln Center area development exposed the deleterious impact of "urban renewal," damaging the credibility of political elites who extolled the virtues of the plan as win-win; second, the liberal mayoral administration vacillated on using police force as a response to illegal occupations.

The movement also benefited from the broad network of support developed by advocacy organizations and influential allies. Illustrating the effectiveness of networking by successful social movements, future Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, State Assemblyman Albert Blumenthal, and State Senator Manfred Ohrenstein publicly denounced the city's urban renewal plans. Frequently shouting "power to the people," movement participants were energized as well by the alliances made with students, youth activists, and organizations around the city.³⁴ Occupied buildings were designated as "liberated zones." The most successful were those that were cleaned out and set up with a community kitchen to accommodate people in apartments with no refrigerators or sinks because of the city rip-outs (Collado, 4/13/06).

The grassroots organizations such as El Comité and advocates such as Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council did not initiate the movement. One participant observed, however, that "El Comité's impact on housing was tremendous. For a time, we got poor, working people back into the community" (Nancy Colón, 4/15/06). Former members of El Comité, friends, and veterans of Operation Move-In still reside in the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights urban renewal areas, representing the last stronghold of subsidized renters or co-op owners of city-transferred properties in the area (Collado, 4/15/06; Martell 6/18/04). Among the 19,000 working-class families displaced by "urban removal" in Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s are activists who continue to struggle against gentrification and for decent housing, health care, and education in areas such as Williamsburg and the South Bronx.³⁵

Clearly, no sustained victory for working class neighborhoods anywhere in Manhattan today may be claimed. Tenant mobilization in Operation Move-In subsided as the police became more aggressive and opportunities to expand the movement diminished. The compromises made with the squatters ultimately did not hold the city accountable for deceiving displaced families with the promise that they would be able to return to their neighborhood to live in decent housing. By the time luxury housing was constructed on Site 30 of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, many of the organizations and activists of Operation Move-In had dissipated and dispersed.

While the housing movement's success may have been limited, its impact on El Comité was far-reaching. The tenuous and partial nature of victory affirmed the group's critical perspective, along with the idea that people can launch formidable challenges to an oppressive system. The victories as well as the losses energized, rather than demobilized, El Comité.

The struggle against urban renewal was never going to be won. But it created an urgent sense of need for community education and long-term organizing. (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06)

El Comité became recognized on the West Side as a principled group, independent of elected leaders and anti-poverty agencies, with no hidden agenda or desire for acclaim. The group increased its contacts around the city, especially in the Lower East Side and the South Bronx, and among students who supported the squatters. They found that creating alliances and gaining institutional support from churches, storeowners, politicians, and students had been vital to negotiating the city's moratorium on evictions and restraint in arrests of squatters and supporters; but they remained cautious about blanket trust of advocates.

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The squatters' movement also added to the sense of momentum and change throughout the neighborhood. In her personal account, Esperanza Martell described the mood on the Upper West Side:

The West Side was a hotbed of struggle. All along the streets and avenues groups were setting up storefronts in vacant buildings.... There were lots of creative groups working with the community...a women's center run by white radical feminists... Asians... [called] "Chickens Come Home to Roost," a popular karate school [that] trained women and people of color in self-defense, ...the Nueva Canción cultural center featuring Latin American protest music, [and] a community newspaper and food shop run by hippies. Even the middle class was opening their brownstones for political activities. (Martell 1998: 179-80)

Because a large concentration of Puerto Ricans lived and participated in the squatters' movement on the West Side, the Puerto Rican flag was a common sight on the windows of some of the buildings. It is not unusual in the multiethnic New York environment to see flags of countries of origin displayed, especially to symbolize pride in an accomplishment of the home country or to celebrate heritage. But the symbolism of the Puerto Rican flag was political as well. The message was one of defiance and empowerment, and El Comité embraced the movement:

At the time I was working at an architectural firm downtown and José Torres had published a column about Puerto Ricans, "Seeing Red," and I read the column. At my job where drafts were made, you could enlarge things. So I enlarged the column on thick paper. We posted it in front of the storefront, and people began to read about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans.... That's how we came about. It had nothing to do with some of those things I read about. (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)³⁶

Within several months of their formation, the group consciously set out to learn more about Puerto Rico's revolutionary movement and the conditions that produced mass migration to the United States. Their venture produced the transformation from community to Puerto Rican nationalist organization, which found further expression in a Latin American identity closely aligned with the struggles of other national minorities in the United States and democratic and revolutionary movements throughout Latin America and the world.

Colonialism, Migration, and Nationalism as Factors of Political Radicalization

The majority of men and women who formed El Comité or joined in its first two years either arrived in New York as young children with their families between the 1940s and 1960s or were born here of working-class, immigrant parents. Most came from rural areas outside of old colonial towns, such as Ponce and Mayagüez, or from emerging urban centers near San Juan, such as Bayamón. Some had families who were sympathetic to the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico; others did not but struggled with questions about their place in U.S. society while growing up in New York City. Nelson Gómez, a former construction worker and the oldest member of El Comité, remembered his affiliation with the Nationalists as a child in Puerto Rico: "I was influenced by the barber in Mayagüez who used to talk about Don Pedro. I posted signs for the Nationalists in my town" (Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06). Frank Vergara, who joined in 1972, recalled:

I used to tell people in El Comité I'm in the movement because of my mother and grandmother.... They came here when Truman ordered the liquidation of the Nationalist Party. Why? Because my grandmother was an organizer, and they were fleeing for their lives. (Frank Vergara, 9/4/04)³⁷

Pedro Rentas, an automobile factory worker in Tarrytown when he joined El Comité, described himself as "a stone [firm] nationalist." His mother lived in Ponce at the time of the 1937 Massacre and was one of the women who sewed hats for the Nationalists.

She always talked about that. When she found out I was getting involved, she got scared, really scared. She knew what happened down there [in Ponce]. People got hurt. (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

Politics was not prevalent in the childhood experience of Carmen Martell, who described herself as apolitical growing up in New York City. She came to New York from Bayamón in 1952 at the age of eight with her sister and mother, and lived in single-room-occupancy dwellings with her aunt during her initial years in Manhattan. Her mother found employment in a plastics factory. For Carmen and other Puerto Rican children, the first few years in public schools were very difficult because they did not speak English but were not allowed to communicate even among themselves in Spanish. In eighth grade, “as a person of color” she was tracked into a secretarial school, Central Commercial High School (now Norman Thomas) rather than an academic school. Her interest in Puerto Rico developed when her cousin and anti-war activist, Esperanza Martell, brought her to MPI activities.

Maria Collado had a similar school experience. Her father spoke to her in Spanish as a child because he felt she and her siblings would certainly learn English in school but should also retain their original language.

Unfortunately for me, when I went to public school not speaking English, they treated me like a dummy. There were no bilingual programs that embraced different cultures and nationalities, and I was placed in a special class for ‘los dummies.’ I caught on to the language quickly of course, but it kind of stayed with me always that I was stupid and had to prove myself. (Maria Collado, 8/2/04)



*El Comité and Operation Move-In march to a rally (circa 1971).
Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.*



Young west side activist Roberto (wearing beret) handling bull horn (circa 1971). Photograph by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.

As a child in South Ozone Park, Jaime Suárez' closest friends were African American, and he was drawn to the Black Power movement that introduced him to Malcolm X's *Autobiography*. After moving to Holtsville, Long Island, as a teenager, Suárez chose college over Vietnam at his brother's insistence. At Suffolk Community College in Brentwood, Long Island, he met one of the Young Lords who was distributing the newspaper *Pa'lante*, and then met a member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP, formerly MPI) who was an instructor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Apart from the mobilizations taking place in the city around independence and quality-of-life issues, similar stirrings were occurring in the heavily Puerto Rican-populated Brentwood:

The 60s created an environment where people just started reacting to their conditions and started doing something

about them. [In Brentwood] you didn't have political movements like El Comité or the Young Lords. But people started dealing with their problems, feeling like we have a right to do this. There was a Puerto Rican cultural center that brought the community together. It wasn't politically motivated at first; but by 1970-71, it became political around the issue of police brutality.... [Activists] started challenging the authorities.... There were also individuals who had been involved in the Nationalist Party who...began to get involved in education issues.... So in mycase, I was influenced by nationalism and by community and was involved politically for about two years before joining El Comité. (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06)

Placing U.S.-led repression of the Nationalists in Puerto Rico and migration in the historical context of McCarthy-era efforts to hush dissent from all quarters, Army veteran Luis Ithier captured the concerns of his parents' generation:

You have to remember that our parents came here during repression of the independence movement in the 1950s when everybody was getting killed or imprisoned. No matter what, if you thought freedom in your mind, you were jailed. They sent the militia and everything else. That dissuaded a whole lot of people who had nationalistic feelings from expressing them. Even here in the U.S., nationalism was a bad word because you remembered what happened to the nationalists in Washington. (Luis Ithier, 3/18/06)

The common thread running through these and other stories is the indignation and sense of empowerment individuals gained from their exposure, however acquired, to the cause of Puerto Rican independence. No doubt, cultural nationalism was (and is) strong among Puerto Ricans in the United States; and it was strengthened by the air bridge between Puerto Rico and the United States, enabling an ongoing attachment to the land of origin that did not exist for most European immigrants. However, the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico added a distinctive dimension to Puerto Rican *political* identity, the extent of which is still little understood in the larger society. The independence movement in New York in the 1960s and 1970s provided the main path for Puerto Ricans to understand their history and heritage, especially in an educational system where teaching professionals and textbooks ignored or misrepresented the relationship between Puerto Rico and “the mainland.” The colonial legacy discredited the school-book story of U.S. democracy and the belief in Wilsonian ideals as the basis for U.S. conduct in the world (González 2000; Guzmán 1980; Melendez 2003).

THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT IN NEW YORK IN THE 1960S AND 1970S PROVIDED THE MAIN PATH FOR PUERTO RICANS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR HISTORY AND HERITAGE, ESPECIALLY IN AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WHERE TEACHING PROFESSIONALS AND TEXTBOOKS IGNORED OR MISREPRESENTED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUERTO RICO AND “THE MAINLAND.”

By the summer of 1970 Federico Lora was recognized as one of El Comité’s leaders and an effective organizer on the West Side. Many former members attribute their association with El Comité and radical politics to his influence. After attending a rally where he learned about Albizu Campos, Lora, an avid reader, decided to study Puerto Rico’s history. He made his first visit to Puerto Rico that same year with Orlando Colón, traveling around the island and learning about the independence movement. Based on their report to El Comité after the trip, and on the material conditions and influences participants encountered personally and collectively up to that point, the organization established that it was “foremost, an independence organization” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04).



Forum on repression in Puerto Rico (circa mid 1970s). From left: Irwin Silver (Guardian, newspaper), unidentified panelist, El Comité first secretary Federico Lora, trade unionist Federico Cintrón-Fiallo. Photographer unknown. Photograph courtesy of author.

At some point, we wanted to do more than get fair housing and education and eliminate the rats. We wanted to free Puerto Rico.... Between the moment we opened that front door to the moment we realized we were talking about freeing Puerto Rico, it was no more than a year....We talked about being Puerto Ricans and what that means in this country. (Maria Collado, 3/18/06)

Carmen Martell did not immediately join El Comité because she wanted to learn more about the various organizations. MPI contributed greatly to her awareness of the political struggle in Puerto Rico and the colonial context of migration. But she also felt distanced culturally from the island-based speakers she met at MPI presentations. Frank Vergara, from the Lower East Side, was also drawn to El Comité:

I was on the staff of *El Frente Unido* and once a month one of the organizations would talk to the staff. I saw how the people from El Comité behaved, and I found a real affinity with their way of being...down to earth, real clear, real humble, but smart.... Before long, I ended up in a study group. When I was asked to join, I was like, thank you. That's when we started to have a real presence in education on the Lower East Side. (Frank Vergara, 9/3/04)

The Young Lords attempted to recruit members of El Comité, inviting them to their meetings and trying to persuade them to become a Lords' chapter. The Lords were respected for their militancy, and several early El Comité members credit the Lords as their political inspiration. But El Comité wanted to maintain its independence. Its members tended to be older than the Lords and accustomed to different social behaviors. Most important, by early 1971 the Lords had become

interested primarily in Puerto Rico's liberation, and El Comité's members remained deeply entrenched in local community struggles:

We always kept that link with the community. Most of the people who supported us didn't support independence. But they liked us because we were part of the struggles in the community. We were able to deal with the issues that affected the community, without bringing in Puerto Rico. (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

Though they did not merge, the two groups found many occasions to work together. The first was the Puerto Rican Day Parade on June 13, 1971. Together with MPI, the Young Lords and El Comité objected to the parade appearing as a spectacle of Puerto Rican compliance with the institutions of oppression. They devised a plan to "take the front" at its starting point on Fifth Avenue and 59th Street, thereby thrusting into the spotlight the colonial question and the conditions of working-class minority residents in the city.³⁸ The *New York Times* reported that, as approximately 800 to 1500 unarmed demonstrators marched to the head of the parade, "about 125 helmeted policemen pursued them, swinging clubs...and ran up and down the avenue and along the side streets grabbing the fleeing demonstrators." Noel Colón of El Comité was among the twenty participants arrested for "inciting a riot."

El Frente Unido was a different type of collaboration between the Young Lords, MPI, the Puerto Rican Students' Union, El Pueblo del Vladic from the Lower East Side, Resistencia Puertorriqueña, and El Comité, to raise the issue of colonialism and urge support for independence. Rather than the disruptive, symbolic action taken at the parade, El Frente held educational forums in neighborhoods throughout the city and on college campuses (Frank Vergara, 9/3/04). This was El Comité's first sustained undertaking beyond the West Side and provided a means through which new members were recruited and political involvement expanded, especially in education issues. Within one year, El Comité had become one of the three main Puerto Rican independence organizations in New York, characterizing itself as part of the "revolutionary left" until its demise in 1984.

Conclusion

For years prior to 1970, tenants and their advocates in the Lincoln Center and Upper West Side areas urged the city to stop displacing thousands of families under the guise of "urban renewal" and to devise a plan instead to upgrade slum housing conditions for low-income residents. Only when hundreds of families on the West Side defied the city and private property owners by squatting in vacant buildings and cultivated the support of various social sectors and institutions were limited compromises reached.

El Comité's political development was conditioned both by the negative elite responses to the demand for quality, affordable housing as well as by the minor victories achieved through spontaneous and planned resistance. The reaction of city government to the squatters' movement reinforced the understanding that elected and appointed officials, Puerto Rican or not, did not represent their communities and that the excluded and powerless would have to represent themselves. El Comité provided leadership to that movement as mobilizers, coordinators, and negotiators. The anti-system mobilizing frames utilized by the movement resonated with Latinos and other sectors whose cynicism and distrust of

elites was rooted in a history of broken promises, economic hardship, and social and political marginalization.

Moreover, particularly in minority communities and on college campuses, people were motivated as well by the idea that militant “Third World” movements were needed to reverse discriminatory employment, education, and housing policies and to demand a non-imperialistic foreign policy. The politics that articulated the intersection of racial and class oppression in local, national, and international arenas, though never consolidated into one movement, nurtured an affinity with the people of Latin America, Africa, and Asia:

Though there is a long history of organizing by leftists of color (García 1994; Kelley 1990; Yoneda 1983), the third-World left of the late 1960s and 1970s was perhaps its most consolidated expression. Inspired by anticolonial revolutions, the US third-world left was an outgrowth of the black, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, American Indian and Asian American power movements, all of which were antiracist and fairly nationalist. (Pulido 2004: 764)

A qualitative leap in political awareness that occurs at a moment in time is difficult to capture. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the civil rights and anti-war movements claimed the attention of many young activists. As the civil rights movement ebbed, the college campus provided the intellectual environment for scores of students that stimulated critical thinking about political and social injustice, racial oppression, and imperialism. For many young minorities in New York City, both on and off college campuses, anti-poverty and affirmative action programs helped to elevate the sense of entitlement as well as frustration with the limited positive outcomes of these programs. Some of the period’s activists turned to Democratic Party politics or continued to work with community agencies, funded by city, state, or federal government, to implement service programs. Others, including El Comité, sought to answer the question of how subordinate sectors acquire meaningful power and fundamental change within a system that is structurally and institutionally designed to prevent such change.

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CITY, AND BY THE POLITICIZED
ENVIRONMENT OF THE PERIOD.

While early members of El Comité may have become aware of Puerto Rico's colonial dilemma through individual experiences, their living conditions and experience with racial categorization, discrimination, and exploitation were shared. El Comité's initial political identity was forged by national origin, family history, the racialized and class-based inequality encountered in New York City, and by the politicized environment of the period. As the group studied the history of Puerto Rico, the experience of Puerto Ricans (and others) in the U.S., as well as Marxist political theory, they questioned the limited access to good jobs, the difficulties of joining and organizing unions, the divergent impact of the encroaching fiscal crisis on New York's working class-communities, and U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico and around the world.

As more activists drifted into the storefront, political action moved beyond housing and Puerto Rico to other local, national, and international struggles. El Comité approached demands for fairness and inclusion as struggles for democratic rights, in which opponents and potential allies were identified and tactics often modeled those of the housing movement. The most significant outcome of El Comité's early political activism in Operation Move-In was its collective evolution from spontaneous reactor to conscious political actor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Lenny Markovitz, Ken Erickson, Frances Fox Piven, Sherrie Baver, and Andrés Torres for their support for, and extensive assistance on, my doctoral dissertation, from which this essay was drawn. Thanks, also, to Tom Gogan, a former tenant advocate and supporter of the squatters in the Upper West Side, for distinguishing the various organizations and key players in the housing movement, and for his careful reading of drafts of this essay. The comments of three anonymous readers were also very helpful in finalizing the essay. Most important, my thanks to former members and friends of El Comité, especially Carmen Martell, for their support of this project and belief that sharing their experiences and analysis enriches the historical record and contributes to the arsenal of knowledge available to new generations of activists and scholars.

NOTES

¹ El Comité, formed in 1970, changed its name to El Comité-MINP in 1975.

While this essay speaks only to its origins and early activism, my doctoral dissertation (Muzio 2008) analyzes the decade-long activism of the organization.

² Interviews with several founding members were held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on June 18, 2004.

³ *Unidad Latina*, vol. 1 no. 2, March 25–April 8, 1971; vol. 2 no. 3, April 9–April 23, 1971.

⁴ In March 1971, approximately eight months after forming, El Comité distributed the first issue of its bi-weekly newsletter, *Unidad Latina*, which routinely contained articles addressing local issues as well as the struggle for independence in Puerto Rican and other Latin American democratic and revolutionary movements. Reflecting its transition to a Marxist-Leninist organization, its deepening critique of capitalism, and its emphasis on organizing workers, in 1975 El Comité-MINP changed the name of its main newsletter to *Obreros en Marcha*.

⁵ Cited from Torres (1988).

⁶ New York City Board of Education Profiles reported dropout rates of students with “Spanish surnames.” The U.S. Census Bureau used a similar category for “Americans with Spanish surnames.” Immigrants from Spain, Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latin Americans of varied ancestry were grouped in these categories.

⁷ Figures are compiled based on median family incomes reported in Torres (1995: 63).

⁸ Extensive media coverage is available in the *New York Times* on the participants in demonstrations, police and mayoral reactions, and the intervention of the FBI in the mid-1960s in New York City.

⁹ *New York Times* articles on Columbia building takeovers by students on May 1, 5, 7, 22, and 23, 1968.

¹⁰ Mayor Lindsay is quoted as saying, “The aspirations of the Puerto Rican community are just, and their fulfillment is imperative. See “Puerto Ricans Lay Inaction to Mayor,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1967.

¹¹ Father Browne has been described as “a personality reminiscent of the Hollywood stereotype of the waterfront priest” (Davies 1966: 134).

¹² See “Squatters Cast Doubt on Housing Plans,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1970.

¹³ The Lincoln Center redevelopment was spearheaded in 1955 by Robert Moses, then chair of the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance. Prior to redevelopment, the Lincoln Square area of the Upper West Side was the site used for filming *West Side Story*.

¹⁴ See “Lindsay Assails Nixon on Housing,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1970.

¹⁵ Vélez was head of the anti-poverty agency, Hunts Point Multi-Service Center; Amy Betances managed the urban renewal office on the Upper West Side. In 1970 Badillo became the first Puerto Rican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, from the 21st District in the Bronx. He ran three times in Democratic Party primaries for mayor, served as Deputy Mayor for Koch’s first term, joined Republican Party tickets in 1993, and ran against Mayor Bloomberg in the Republican Party primary in 2001.

¹⁶ *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1, no. 20, September 1976: 8–9.

¹⁷ Also known as *Rompiendo Puertas*, the film can be viewed at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, City University of New York.

¹⁸ See “Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1970.

¹⁹ Stunning visuals of City mechanics wrecking good facilities in apartments, as well as police removing handcuffed squatters, including middle-aged women, are captured in the documentary, *Break and Enter (Rompiendo Puertas)*.

²⁰ *Unidad Latina*, vol. 3 no. 12, December 22, 1973.

²¹ *Unidad Latina*, vol. 3 no. 12, December 22, 1973.

²² The reference to “West 15th Street in Greenwich Village” appears in the original text; however, since West 15th Street lies just beyond Village boundaries in Chelsea, it is possible the author meant West 13th Street where, in fact, takeovers also occurred, or inadvertently referred to the occupied building at 233 West 15th Street as located in Greenwich Village.

²³ See “Squatter Movement Grows as Housing Protest Tactic,” “Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side,” and “Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking,” in *New York Times*, July 22, July 26, and August 1, 1970, respectively.

²⁴ According to a *New York Times* report, “Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side,” July 26, 1970, the Episcopal Diocese owned eight buildings on the block, including the six to be demolished to make way for Morningside House (eventually built on one of the Diocese’s sites in the Bronx). The pastor of the Cathedral sat on the Board of Directors of Morningside, Inc.

²⁵ Tom Gogan, who was present for these events, noted that “Episcopalians for the

Poor” included Marie Runyon, now a ninety-plus-year-old member of the well-known anti-Iraq war group, “Grannies for Peace.”

²⁶ See “Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1970.

²⁷ See “For Squatters, Rent-Free Life Is Solution To High Costs.” *New York Times*, March 25, 1980. It appears that the other Morningside buildings were acquired by Amsterdam House, which completed a major expansion in 1998.

²⁸ This claim was repeated in five separate interviews: by several founders in Puerto Rico; by Luis Ithier and Carmen Martell; by Manny Ortiz; by Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado; and by Tom Gogan.

²⁹ See “Squatters Asked to Pay City Rents,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1971.

³⁰ See “Police Arrest 32 at Squatter Site,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1970.

³¹ See “Shortage of Housing,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1970.

³² See “Segregated Slum ‘Threat’ Fought on West Side,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1970.

³³ See “About Real Estate; 2 Luxury Rentals Extend Columbus Ave. Renewal,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1986.

³⁴ See footage in documentary film, *Break and Enter (Rompiendo Puertas)*.

³⁵ The media coverage of President Carter’s visit to the South Bronx on October 6, 1977, spotlighted the issue of urban housing decay and poverty with Katrina-like shock for at least several weeks following the visit. The *New York Times* called the area around Charlotte St. “a national symbol of what is wrong with urban America.” See Lee Dembart, “Carter Takes ‘Sobering’ Trip to South Bronx; Finds Hope,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1977.

³⁶ Here, Lora refers to Juan González’ mischaracterization of El Comité: “By early 1970, some young Dominicans, following the example of Puerto Ricans who founded the Young Lords, started their own radical organization. It was called El Comité and it spearheaded a large tenant squatters’ movement on the Upper West Side against New York’s new urban renewal program....” (2000: 125). González, a founding member of the Young Lords, wrote that Dominicans were “more aware of politics than the average Puerto Rican or Mexican” and that the “upheavals of the post-Trujillo era had turned Dominicans into the most radical group of Spanish-speaking immigrants in U.S. History...” (2000: 125). This, despite the fact that El Comité was comprised almost entirely of Puerto Ricans, displayed the Puerto Rican flag above its storefront door, collaborated with the Young Lords on numerous occasions (such as the 1971 Puerto Rican Day Parade), and changed its name to El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño in 1975. Another founding member of the Young Lords, Pablo Guzmán (1980) wrote that El Comité was one of the three Puerto Rican organizations of the period. It is possible González’ error stems from the fact that Dominicans did participate in the squatters’ movement and Lora, the only Dominican in El Comité, was a leading figure. In any case, the mischaracterization points to the dearth of studies of Puerto Rican radical politics in the period.

³⁷ While presumably some migrants believed they would be subjected to less harassment in the U.S., it is difficult to say whether that would have been the case had they continued to be as politically active in the U.S. as they had been on the island. Two factors suggest otherwise: first was the repressive political environment created by the Smith Act and McCarthy years. Second was the FBI’s COINTELPRO, which targeted activists of the revived pro-independence movement in the 1970s in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

³⁸ *Unidad Latina*, vol. 1 no. 7, June 10–24, 1971.

³⁹ “19 Police Injured at Parade Here: 20 Arrested as Puerto Rican Groups Interrupt March in Protest Over Status,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1971.

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