Citizens v. Clients: Working Women and Colonial Reform in Puerto Rico and Belize, 1932–45*

ANNE S. MACPHERSON

Abstract. Marked differences in mid-twentieth-century reformers’ approaches to politically active working women in Belize and Puerto Rico help to explain the emergence of colonial hegemony in the latter, and the rise of mass nationalism in the former. Reformers in both colonies were concerned with working women, but whereas British and Belizean reformers treated them as sexually and politically disordered, and aimed to transform them from militant wage-earners to clients of state social services, US and Puerto Rican reformers treated them as voting citizens with legitimate roles in the economy and labour movement. Although racialised moralism was not absent in Puerto Rico, the populism of colonial reform there helped cement a renegotiated colonial compact, while the non-populist character of reform in Belize – and the wider British Caribbean – alienated working women from the colonial state.

Introduction

In 1940 the British parliament passed the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, providing an unprecedented £55 million to fund economic and social development empire-wide. Simultaneously, the Colonial Office released the recommendations of the West India Royal Commission (WIRC), which had just toured Britain’s Caribbean colonies to investigate the causes of major labour disturbances that had swept the region since the mid-1930s. The Commission, like the Act, emphasised ‘development and welfare’ aid within

Anne S. Macpherson is Assistant Professor in the History Department at SUNY College at Brockport.

* The author extends her thanks to the JLAS anonymous reviewers, to Sidney Mintz for his comments on an earlier version of this essay at the ‘Comparing Empires’ conference in November 2000 at Johns Hopkins University, and to Francisco Scarano, for the example of his passion for Puerto Rican history.

1 The 1940 Act provided for £5.5 million per year for ten years, an amount more than doubled to £120 million over ten years in the 1945 Development and Welfare Act. See Annette Baker Fox, Freedom and Welfare in the Caribbean: A Colonial Dilemma (New York, 1949), p. 93. For recent analysis of these events see Frederick Cooper, Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 67–73,
a framework of limited, controlled political change. This programme of reform was intended to negotiate a popular colonial compact, one that would address labour demands, but also contain them within an imperial/middle class-led project that placed capitalist 'development' before political independence. Such a compact was coming into existence in Puerto Rico in the 1940s, through an alliance between Roosevelt’s New Dealers and Luis Muñoz Marín’s Popular Democratic Party (PPD), which took control of the Puerto Rican legislature in 1940 and the governorship when it became elective in 1948. PPD campaigns explicitly promised social and economic reform to Puerto Rico’s restive labouring masses, while setting the question of the island’s political status to one side. The new colonial compact in Puerto Rico became fully institutionalised in 1952 after a popular vote in favour of Commonwealth, a moment when mass nationalism was expanding in the British Caribbean. By 1968, when the PPD first lost the Puerto Rican governorship to the pro-statehood party, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana had become sovereign states. Almost all of Britain’s other Caribbean colonies followed suit, including Belize – formerly British Honduras – in 1981. As compromised by neo-colonialism and global capitalism as such sovereignty has proven to be, these nations have nonetheless developed politically quite differently from Puerto Rico.

The contrasting political fates of Puerto Rico and the British Caribbean stem not only from differing imperial goals and capabilities, and divergent nationalist trajectories, but also from the distinct ways in which colonial reformers and the Caribbean popular classes engaged each other in seeking to resolve the crisis of the 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s working women and men who articulated and acted on their own visions of change were approached rather differently by US and British reformers, and their respective local middle-class allies, and responded in kind. Female labour militancy was a potent force in Caribbean politics in the 1930s, as recent scholarship has increasingly recognised, making the relationship between working women and colonial reformers politically important, but not uniform. In Puerto Rico working women found some common ground with both US and local reformers, forming with them a tense but productive populist alliance. By contrast, in Belize and across the British Caribbean, a century of post-emancipation popular disillusionment with Britain, and deep cultural


3 See for example Rhoda Reddock, Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History (London, 1994).
differences and mistrust between the middle class and masses made common ground unlikely. Working women found the reform project of the 1930s and 1940s to be alienating, and remained outside it, if not actively hostile.

Differences in gendered colonial reform practices, and the responses of working women to such practices, help to explain the success of renegotiated colonialism in Puerto Rico and its failure in the British Caribbean. Reformers in the British Caribbean approached working women and men as racially black and morally different and deficient, as causing promiscuity, illegitimacy, a lack of ‘normal’ family life, juvenile delinquency and overpopulation. As in the aftermath of abolition a century earlier, reform policy was concerned to create the model black working man – steady wage earner, father-provider, now also a responsible trade unionist – but equally to re-form working women as domesticated wives, housewives and mothers. Poor black women were seen as sexually and politically disordered beings who could be reordered only through a state-led change in popular culture that would remove them from the labour force and movement and render them proper housewives and mothers, obedient clients of state social services. They were, in short, objects of, rather than partners in, change.

Puerto Rican reformers, by contrast, approached working women as voters (after 1935), wage earners (albeit secondary ones) with valid claims to labour rights, and on some level as citizens. Although the Puerto Rican liberal elite had long harboured similarly racialised views of Afro-Puerto Rican women, by the 1930s reformers were dealing with a female labour force that was not predominantly black according to official categories, particularly in its most organised sectors (see Table 2). Indeed, both US officials and the island’s liberal elite were invested in a construction of Puerto Rico as ‘whiter’ than neighbouring islands, the latter in a politics of racial purity that cast ‘white’ jíbaras – highland peasant women – as having the potential to save the ‘nation’ from racial degeneracy. This discursive and

4 C. L. R. James, ‘The West Indian Middle Classes,’ in Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings (Westport CT, 1980), pp. 131–40 (originally published in 1962), condemned middle class disdain for the masses as retarding political progress, and located its origins in the period of slavery.


ideological whitening of the Puerto Rican people – which must also be read as a marginalisation of Afro-Puerto Ricans – may have helped to produce a less contemptuous reformist approach than in the British Caribbean. Further research is needed on whether Puerto Rican populist reformers approached Afro-Puerto Rican women differently, or if those women responded less enthusiastically. Race- and class-inflected paternalism certainly was present in Puerto Rican reform, and working women’s fertility became a key site of state intervention in popular culture in the country. But reformers’ clearly lower evaluation of working women’s moral and political worth in the British Caribbean, the result of an unabashed application of the belief in the degeneracy of black female sexuality and motherhood and of a perception of the whole working class as non-white, seems to have produced a less engaged and complex relationship between the colonial reform project and working women than in Puerto Rico. The contrast between clients and citizens, or partners and objects, captures the way that reform in Puerto Rico was populist and wove militant working women into a hegemonic alliance that was both local and imperial, whereas reform in Belize and the British Caribbean was not populist and thus failed to achieve a hegemonic alliance with female workers.

The Belizean case is representative of general British Caribbean patterns in the 1930s and early 1940s. Nowhere did British and middle class colonial reformers, imbued with exclusive constructs of class and race, become popular, even as the colonial state took on an unprecedented social service role in the 1930s. Feminist scholars of the region have confirmed Ken Post’s early observation that Jamaica’s middle class liberals expressed their condescension to the black majority most markedly through the continued reproaches offered to the poor for their sexual license, the ‘proof’ of this being that officially nearly three-quarters of the children born in Jamaica came from partnerships not sanctified by a church ceremony ... Middle class ladies ... in late 1938 began to sponsor mass church weddings of those already living ‘in sin’.

Rhoda Reddock, for example, shows that the Women’s Social Service Club of Jamaica, for two decades after its founding in 1917, pursued colonially-prescribed domesticity and morality for working women. More tellingly, she finds that in Trinidad in the late 1930s and 1940s, British and local reformers

forfeited the allegiance of the important Butlerite labour movement, which did espouse empire loyalty, precisely because reformers could not tolerate the movement’s large female membership and activist tradition. The charity/uplift model embodied in the WIRC Report represented a uniform British view of West Indian problems, and reflected at least several decades of standard middle class reformism across the region.

Nationalist histories in the British Caribbean are far less uniform, particularly with regard to relations between middle class leaders and the working class. Although nationalism is not the focus of this article, it is important to note that nowhere did middle class politicians gain mass support without breaking with the traditions of their class to at least tentatively embrace labour rights and self-government. Norman Manley, for example, moved from economic and welfare work within the colonial framework to a still cautious anti-colonialism through the People’s National Party, in reaction to the Jamaican labour riots of 1938. Even Grantley Adams of Barbados, the least nationalist of the region’s mid-twentieth century leaders, established his connection to the working class by promoting labour rights, although in a highly limited fashion. Franklin Knight argues that Manley’s and Adams’s generation drew on two political currents that existed in some tension with the economic and moral order of empire loyalty – Fabianism and Pan-Africanism. Here Belize’s nationalists were somewhat distinct, drawing mainly on their Irish-American Jesuit education that emphasized social justice and anglophobia. But the Protestantism of Belize’s middle class reformers and their British allies was typical of the entire region, a central part of such reformers’ respectable self-definition, and thus of an identity that did not facilitate populist alliance within the colonial framework.

**Populism, Hegemony and Gender in the Colonial Context**

Latin American historians still tend to describe populism in terms of charismatic leadership, ideological inconsistency, nationalism, and mass support of almost religious force from modern working classes, a list of traits of limited analytical use. Pushing the definition in a more conceptually rigorous

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direction by elaborating on the first and last of those traits, Alan Knight has argued that populism involves an intense reciprocal but flexible relationship between leaders and masses based on ‘deeper sociopolitical relationships and perceptions’. In a similar vein, radical political theorist Ernesto Laclau concluded that populism is characteristic of crises in existing hegemonic blocs during which emerging elites include popular-democratic demands in their new hegemonic projects in order to neutralise potentially revolutionary conflicts. Populism thus becomes the process of ‘interpellation’, or articulating ‘different visions of the world’ in the kind of bond Knight suggests. Certainly colonial reformers in the Caribbean sought to restore social order in the face of mass labour unrest by positioning themselves as spokesmen for the popular classes against the entrenched power of sugar and timber companies. Development, modernisation, and even industrialisation became the new, deceptive language of consensual change.

Laclau’s views on populism lead to the conclusion that any hegemonic project or process must have populist elements to have any chance of success. Jon Beasley-Murray, in analysing these links, defines populism as ‘an attempt to construct a popular cross-class alliance against the dominant power bloc’ that substitutes ‘hegemony for all other understandings of the political’. He finds it logical that Laclau theorised hegemony through the case of Peronist populism, for hegemonic process has been historically most visible in ‘underdeveloped’ regions like Argentina. Beasley-Murray’s suspicions of the concept of hegemony aside, he and Laclau agree on the importance of populism to hegemonic projects and processes. Logically, then, populism is vital to achieving a hegemonic outcome – ‘a dynamic or precarious balance … among contesting forces’ that secures the cultural and political predominance of a particular group – as well as to hegemonic process – the contestation and negotiation of ‘power and meaning’ directed toward such balance. The necessary work undertaken to maintain a populist alliance against challenges from the alternative or oppositional is by

16 Laclau found existing definitions of populism to be ‘empty’, but sought to fill the concept with meaning. See Knight, ‘Populism,’ p. 224.
19 Ibid., pp. 193 and 199.
20 Ibid., p. 199. The visibility of hegemonic process in such contexts, he argues, is due to the ‘failure to achieve infrastructural and political reorganisation’.
21 Florencia Mallon, Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru (Berkeley, 1991), p. 6. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, this definition rejects the equation of hegemony with dominant ideology or consensus.
definition what Raymond Williams called ‘hegemonic work’, which in his view gives specific historical shape to each hegemonic process.22 Colonial reformers had hegemonic intent in both Belize and Puerto Rico, but launched a hegemonic process and achieved a hegemonic outcome only where populist alliance occurred.

Beasley-Murray accepts that populism and hegemony are closely related concepts, but is concerned that Laclau’s ideas, adopted by cultural studies scholars, have allowed for an inadequate analysis of the state and thus have weakened those scholars’ ‘critical purchase against a new right’. Yet his implication that any scholar who uses ‘the theory of hegemony’ is trapped within a politically futile ‘logic of populism’ goes too far; he acknowledges Gramsci’s own strategic thinking in theorising cultural hegemonic work as leading to a popular democratic conquest of the state.23 Laclau may have been less than clear in his analysis of the state, but with the benefit of historical hindsight, the colonial state’s purpose is transparent here: to connect with militant labour in order to control it through a transition toward a capitalism softened by colonial ‘development and welfare’. Beasley-Murray’s distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘the state’ is ultimately too sharp; in both Belize and Puerto Rico colonial states undertook gendered cultural work as part of their hegemonic reform projects.24

Before turning to the relationship of gender to populism and hegemony, the supposedly ‘nationalist’ character of populism must be addressed, for it matches Partha Chatterjee’s insistence that only nationalist projects can be hegemonic. Chatterjee’s rejection of the possibility that the colonial state might have a hegemonic project rests on the fundamental alienness of the colonial state in India, and needs qualification when applied to the Caribbean.25 The mass destruction of indigenous societies between the 1490s and 1790s in the archipelago, and their marginalisation in coastal regions such as Belize, produced radically new societies as well as colonial regimes. Despite profound conflicts within these multi-cultural creolising societies, rooted in the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, peasant-plantation opposition, and associated racism, neither the colonial state nor

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24 Ibid., p. 212. Beasley-Murray’s complaint that ‘populism [i.e. cultural studies] ... substitutes ... the body of Evita for the power of the state’ fails to see that Evita’s body was part of the power of the Peronist state.
white people could ever be as profoundly ‘alien’ in the Caribbean as in India or Africa. Thus Lillian Guerra is quite correct to speak of ‘the hegemony of North American colonialism in Puerto Rico’, not merely as a project but an outcome of both ‘popular-class complicity and continued elite collaboration’. The question of why colonial hegemonic projects failed in the British Caribbean cannot be dismissed as theoretically obvious, but must be answered historically, through an examination of colonial reformers’ gravitation to non-populist politics.

In arguing that one answer to that historical question is the failure of colonial reform in Belize to ‘interpellate’ the world view and lived culture of militant working women, this article moves beyond the assumptions of Gramsci and early Laclau that hegemonic alliance, negotiation, and contestation would be class-based. It is now clear that axes of difference are multiple and historically specific. Populist alliances at the core of hegemonic processes must take place among all effectively mobilised groups in a given historical context. Given overwhelming evidence of female mobilisation in every modern society, of the centrality of gender to modern definitions of race, class, empire and nation, and of the gendered character of modern state power, a closer analysis is needed of the gender politics of populist articulation and hegemonic processes than yet exists. Such work is perhaps particularly needed for colonial contexts, where many nationalist projects constructed cultural difference from the imperial power in gendered terms. This article, then, contributes to theorisations of gender and power in modern colonial societies, as well as to the histories of Belize, Puerto Rico and the wider Caribbean.

**Belize and Puerto Rico**

By the early 1930s Belize and Puerto Rico had significantly similar political economies, as well as comparable rates of female employment, but also

26 Guerra, *Popular Expression*, p. 266. Guerra views 1940 as the culmination of a hegemonic process linking elite and popular forms of nationalism to a new vision of development within the colonial system. While political choices certainly narrowed in that moment, it is probably safer to place the hegemonic outcome slightly later.


manifested critical differences in their trajectories of popular political organisation, colonial perceptions of female labour, and ultimately the relationship between each colonial regime and working women. Although a comparison of Puerto Rico to virtually any British Caribbean colony of this period would reveal similar parallels and divergences, the Belizean case is particularly useful because both major labour unrest and coherent colonial reform began early there. This not only illuminates the importance of the Caribbean as a laboratory for development and welfare policy across the British empire, but closely matches the timing of unrest and reform in Puerto Rico.

Both Belize and Puerto Rico were low-wage largely non-industrial economies controlled by foreign corporations, with Belize dominated by timber extraction, Puerto Rico by sugar, tobacco and needlework. Labour in both colonies – as across the British Caribbean – was predominantly fully or semi-proletarianised, breeding similar resentments against local estate owners and foreign corporations. Both colonies were controlled politically by outsiders, Belize through the system of crown colony rule that abolished legislative elections and instead placed power in the hands of appointed legislative and executive councils, which were stacked with timber interests, and the British-appointed governor. Similarly, the veto authority of the US-appointed governor, the US congress, and the US president severely compromised the power of Puerto Rico’s elected legislature. Puerto Rico’s competitive system of party politics, however, marked a sharp difference from Belize; working class men had been enfranchised soon after the US takeover, while working women were fully enfranchised by 1935. Britain ended crown colony rule by meeting middle class demands for a partly elected legislature in 1935, but deployed property restrictions to exclude working men and women – who in Belize had claimed citizen rights – from the franchise.29

As Table I shows, state data collection in both colonies recorded women’s significant presence in the labour force, and the numbers very probably would have been higher had women’s activities in the informal sector been fully accounted for. The gap of almost eight percentage points in the overall female labour force participation rates (LFPRs) in each colony is less significant than the similarity of the Belize and Stann Creek District rates to the overall Puerto Rican rate. Most labour unrest in the period under review took place in those two districts, and most colonial reform efforts were directed towards them. Women in Belize’s other districts, who officially had dramatically lower LFPRs, were largely untouched by the reform project until

Table 1. Female Labour Force Participation Rates in Belize and Puerto Rico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belize: % of females in gainful employment</th>
<th>Puerto Rico: % of females age 10 and over in paid employment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1931 (age 15+)</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colony</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belize District</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stann Creek District</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: 1931 Census of British Honduras, pp. 7, 13–17 and Tables 6 and 12 (the percentages are based on my own calculations and are higher than those listed in the census); West India Census 1946, Part E: Census of Population of British Honduras, pp. xxxi and 24, and Table 36.

after World War II, and certainly did not enter into a populist articulation with colonial reformers. Unfortunately the data does not specify Belize Town’s female LFPR for comparison with San Juan’s, but a strong majority of paid domestics, laundresses, female teachers and government workers were located in Belize Town. In short, paid labour and/or petty commodity production (produce, baked goods) were central to the survival and identities of working class women in both colonies, many of whom were heads of households. Differences in LFPRs for each colony are in effect minor, and are insignificant for explaining the success of the colonial hegemonic project in Puerto Rico, its failure in Belize.

Working women were militant and visible in the labour unrest of the 1930s in both colonies, though their specific kinds of labour, and the extent of labour organisation, seem to have shaped the ways in which they were

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30 In 1931 this category included all females aged 15 and over except those who were students, retired, ‘unoccupied’, or engaged in ‘home duties’. In 1946 this category included all females 10 and over who were wage-earners, apprentices, employers, own account workers (farmers, dressmakers, laundresses, peddlers), unpaid helpers and the unemployed. Females engaged in ‘home duties’ represented 52.8% of the total female population in 1931, and 64.3% of females over 10 in 1946. These statistics undoubtedly failed to capture the full extent of women’s income-earning activities.

31 After 1930, Puerto Rican censuses do not break down occupational statistics by race.
Table 2. Belizean and Puerto Rican Population by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colony</th>
<th>Belize Town</th>
<th>Stann Creek Town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>38.42</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>31.08</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>16.98</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garifuna</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>5.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asiatic</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: West India Census 1946, Part E: Census of Population of British Honduras, p. xiv (Table A), p. 6 (Table 14).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Puerto Rico</th>
<th>1899</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>65.52</td>
<td>72.99</td>
<td>74.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulatto</td>
<td>29.98</td>
<td>23.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


politically active. In Puerto Rico many women laboured as tobacco stemmers, cigar machine operatives and needleworkers, either at home or in sweatshops. Many of them, particularly tobacco stemmers, had been active in the Socialist Party and its union, the Federación Libre de Trabajadores (FLT) since the 1910s, and had struggled for female suffrage in the 1920s. By the 1930s those two pillars of the Puerto Rican left were shadows of their former selves but female worker militancy was expanding, now armed with the vote. Thus, female labour militancy in the period under review included


33 No racial classification was done for the 1931 British Honduras census.

34 The ‘mixed’ category included both mulattos and mestizos. ‘They were widely distributed. In the Cayo and Northern Districts it is believed that these persons were chiefly of mixed Indian and Spanish descent, while in Belize and Stann Creek they were chiefly of mixed European and African descent’. (p. xv)
striking and voting Socialist, as well as protest marches and rallies. In Belize, by contrast, most working women were in domestic service or subsistence farming combined with seasonal citrus wage labour; their militancy was expressed not through striking their own employers, but through marches, rallies, petitions, rioting and forcing men to strike. Moreover, labour organisation was not legalised in Belize until the early 1940s, so that working women’s militancy in the 1930s was riskier than in Puerto Rico, less grounded in a continuous history of labour organisation and a terrain of party and union institutions, and deprived of the vote.

These differences in types of female labour and militancy, as well as the legal and more institutionalised nature of labour organisation in Puerto Rico, probably shaped colonial reformers’ perceptions of and approaches to working women. Most importantly, many Puerto Rican working women laboured in export production; their labour thus had visibility and value (though it was grossly underpaid), and many had collective workplaces where they could organise. These factors may have tempered reformers’ disdain for and fear of rebellious working women, making populist alliance more conceivable.

Such attitudes were undoubtedly reinforced by racial perceptions of militant female labour. Both Puerto Rican and Belizean elites harboured deep anxieties about the presence and potential dangers of black women in their societies, anxieties heightened by the links in imperial culture among blackness, female sexuality and the degeneration of political and social order from the bourgeois patriarchal ideal.35 The same was true of Garifuna women, descendants of African slaves and indigenous Windward Island Caribs.36 As Table 2 shows, Belize Town and Stann Creek Town were dominated by people of black ancestry, categorised as Black, Mixed and Garifuna, far more so than the colony as a whole. Thus, the highest female LFPRs and highest degree of female labour militancy correlated with black ethnicities, reinforcing links in colonial ideology between political and economic disorder, black and mulata female sexual immorality and racial degeneracy.37 Moreover, the concentration of black working women in domestic service in Belize Town

36 Garifuna women, while sometimes admired for their farming, were more usually seen as beasts of burden and culturally primitive. Thomas Gann, a colonial physician and archaeologist, described them as ‘brawny, black, prognathous jawed, woolly headed’ and as ‘the homeliest females on earth’. See his Discoveries and Adventures in Central America (London, 1928), p. 24 and Glories of the Maya (Scribners, 1939), p. 66.
37 In late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, ‘Wealthy white women’s honor was ... premised on the disreputability of poor and Afro-Puerto Rican women ... Women of African descent, particularly those unwilling or unable to “whiten” themselves through dress and behavior, were believed to be inherently disreputable.’ See Findlay, Imposing Decency, p. 25.
confirmed for reformers the relative cultural and economic worthlessness of their labour.

As can be seen in the data on Puerto Rico in Tables 1 and 2, by 1930 only one quarter of the island's population was seen as non-white, so that although black women's LFPRs were higher than white women's, the female labour force was still predominantly white – again according to colonial categories. Moreover, 55.8 per cent of that larger number of white working women was in manufacturing, where the more valuable export production was concentrated, while only 44.5 per cent of the smaller group of black women worked in that sector. Female militancy in that sector, then, was not as racially threatening to Puerto Rican and US reformers as was the case in Belize or other British Caribbean colonies, and a perception of racial similarity may have helped to bridge cultural differences of class, making Puerto Rican leaders more likely to attempt a populist alliance with Puerto Rican workers than their counterparts in the British Caribbean, who emphasised their cultural and political legitimacy by maintaining a clear distance from the black masses. Further research is needed on the labour militancy of black Puerto Rican working women in this period, especially as 44.7 per cent of them worked in domestic service, as compared to 23.2 per cent of white women. Likewise, we need to know more about how Puerto Rican populists approached Afro-Puerto Rican women, and whether racial perceptions affected the strength of populist alliance between these two groups.

Belize is a useful case study of British Caribbean reform for its labour rebellions began early, creating two phases of reform: a local one from 1934–39, and an imperially-mandated one from 1940–45. It thus confirms Frederick Cooper’s view that the creative impetus for British reform policy came from the colonies, not the Colonial Office. It also demonstrates the importance of local dynamics to the success or failure of imperial reform, and of the Caribbean as a laboratory for development and welfare policy within the British Empire. Belize’s trajectory more closely matches Puerto Rico’s, where strikes erupted in 1933, than do those of Jamaica or Barbados, where major labour rebellion occurred later in the 1930s and was addressed...
primarily through the imperial reforms of the Development and Welfare Acts. In Puerto Rico imperial intervention was quick and comprehensive, whereas during the phase of local reform the Governor of Belize could solicit the Colonial Development Fund (CDF), founded in 1929, to pay for export-oriented development projects but not social services. Cooper has rightly labelled ‘development’ and ‘welfare’ as fetishes for the Colonial Office by the late 1930s, terms that served to obfuscate the labour question and to postpone the question of independence. As this article shows, they were also meant to de-feminize that question by making development about labouring men and welfare about domesticated women. The imperial/populist project in Puerto Rico pursued the goals of controlled political evolution and stable capitalist development with a somewhat different gender politics, and quite different results.

**Local Reform in Belize, 1934–39**

The British Empire’s strike wave began in Belize with the March 1934 launching of the Labourers and Unemployed Association (LUA) by Antonio Soberanis Gómez. Local reform also began early, coalescing into a coherent project from November 1934 when Governor Sir Alan Burns arrived. Just as working women were among Soberanis’s first and most militant collaborators, so were middle class women reformers founding allies in Burns’s anti-LUA strategy. This fracturing along class lines echoed previous moments of labour rebellion, which had revealed the creole middle class’s typically British Caribbean distaste for collaboration with the black masses, or nationalist challenge to the colonial authorities. In the 1890s Belize’s small petty bourgeoisie of mixed-ancestry Creoles opted to pursue legislative rights from the British by displaying their empire loyalty, cultural fitness to rule and difference from the working class. Within this project, middle class creole women established public roles as social reformers, notably

43 Cooper, Decolonization, p. 122.
46 Anne Macpherson, ‘Imagining the Colonial Nation: Race, Gender, and Middle Class Politics in Belize, 1888–1898,’ in Karin Rosemblatt, Nancy Appelbaum and Anne Macpherson (eds.), Race and Nation in Modern Latin America (Chapel Hill, 2003).
with the 1920 founding of the Black Cross Nurses by the highly respectable Mrs Vivian Seay, who would become a key ally of Burns from 1934.

Soberanis, a bilingual labourer-barber at home in both creole and mestizo popular culture, gained instant rapport with the multi-ethnic working class, notably creole and Garifuna women. During the movement-building phase of March to September 1934 'quite 50% of Soberanis’s followers were women and they were always more truculent than the men'. Their activism apparently prevented the articulation of a male breadwinner ideology within the LUA, though they developed a clearly independent role only after leading the 1 October 1934 occupation and forced strike of the Belize Estate and Produce Company sawmill yard in Belize Town. As Soberanis’s son recalled, 'It was the women who went there and shut down the sawmill ... Men were afraid to strike ... The women went there with sticks and kitchen utensils, potspoons and kitchen forks.' In December they confirmed Soberanis’s leadership against several dissident male LUA officers. By February 1935 these women had organised the LUA Women’s League and, with legislative elections about to be restored, rejected Vivian Seay’s call for propertyd women to be enfranchised. At a mass meeting chaired by domestic Elfreda Trapp, they voted for womanhood suffrage and articulated a native, citizen identity. Trapp’s sister, market vendor Virginia Stanford, argued that working women were being denied the vote because ‘some of them are afraid of us’.

In short, as Governor Burns began to shape the local reform project, working class women’s militancy was at its peak. Burns quickly elaborated a local development and welfare project specifying the roles that colonial reformers assigned to working women, in relation to men, children, and colonial authority. Not only did this local reform project define men as labourers and women as their domestic helpers, dismissing women’s identities as workers and household heads, but it routinely treated working women and men as objects of state policy, and was at times autocratically

47 Belize Archives, Minute Paper 1666–1934, Report regarding the disturbances in Belize on 1st and 2nd October, 1934. Written by Police Superintendent Matthews, this report is hereafter referred to as Matthews.


49 Author’s interview with Antonio Soberanis Jr., 5 July 1991.

50 Belize Independent, 12 Dec. 1934.

51 Ibid., 15 Feb. 1935.
paternalistic. Burns was utterly intolerant of labour organising: delaying the formation of a Labour Department until 1939, scornful of popular leaders, hounding Soberans in the courts, indifferent to working women’s demands. But Burns did have a constructive programme of reform, which was not limited to distracting men with government relief work, as one observer alleged.\footnote{A Colonial Office envoy criticized Burns for paying relief to men who frequently ‘shirk their responsibilities’ to women and children, a problem he connected to ‘the high percentage of illegitimacy existing in [Belize] town’. Major St. G. Orde-Browne, \textit{Labour Conditions in the West Indies} (London, 1939), p. 200.}

The core of Burns’s development and welfare project was agricultural employment for men – as independent smallholders or as employees on corporate plantations – and social services for their dependent wives and children. Moving families around like chess pieces, Burns hired men for road building, in order to open up new tracts of land and rapidly settle entire families, thus promoting economic diversification and a permanent diminution of the forestry elite’s power. Land settlement began along the new roads in 1935, with rural schools and a mobile health unit provided for the settler families.\footnote{Graham Hurford, ‘The Moyne Commission in British Honduras: Public Opinion and the Policies of the Burns Administration, 1934–1940,’ (M.A. thesis, University of London, 1987), p. 17, finds that from 1935–38 500 male settlers and thus 2,500 people settled the new Belize-Maskall road.} But only men could get direct access to land. Men were also hired to build a sugar refinery and access road, then gaining work as refinery operatives and small cane farmers. Women gained directly only in the Stann Creek Valley, as citrus processing labourers and cassava farmers, but there is no evidence to suggest that this was Burns’s intent.\footnote{The colony’s Labour Department did not even include female citrus workers in its statistics until 1946.} Employment for women was an anomaly in Burns’s local reform project, and its presence in Stann Creek was largely due to gender relations within Garifuna culture, which had long afforded women significant economic independence.\footnote{Virginia Kerns, \textit{Women and the Ancestors: Black Carib Kinship and Ritual} (Urbana, 1983).} The exclusion of women from the emerging labour question certainly limited the populist appeal of local reform.

Burns’s central innovation in social policy was to expand the Infant Welfare League (IWL), a strategy directed quite literally \textit{at} women and children and epitomizing the charity-model origins of colonial welfare. Founded in the late 1920s by British and elite creole women, the IWL had maintained a well-baby clinic in Belize Town at least sporadically. In early 1935 Sir Alan and Lady Burns began a fund to feed schoolchildren, and she started a Thrift Club with 350 IWL clinic mothers, paying them eight per cent interest on
small savings dedicated to Christmas presents for their children. In May 1936 the Burnses visited the Black Cross Nurses’ Baby Exhibition in Stann Creek Town, an extension of the didactic competition held annually since the early 1920s in Belize Town. Soon, through Lady Burns’s and local efforts, a Stann Creek IWU clinic opened. In August the couple toured the Orange Walk hospital with the District Commissioner and his wife, both Creoles, who quickly organised a clinic in Orange Walk Town. Burns budgeted $200 for the Belize Town clinic in 1936, its first government funding and the beginning of incorporating the clinics into the state. His order that every district have a clinic was fulfilled by 1938. That year the Orange Walk IWU briefly ran a satellite clinic in a large Mayan village, and Belize Town’s second clinic opened in the poor Mesopotamia neighbourhood. Generally, government nurses would staff the clinics with fundraising and office support from the wives and daughters of local merchants and officials. In Belize Town the Black Cross Nurses would exhort women to attend the clinics during their home visits. But by 1939 there was little enthusiasm left in the districts among volunteers or mothers, and the heavy demand for clinic resources in Belize Town, as well as a new colony-wide demand for hospital births, represented new pressures on the colonial state and creole middle class, not new popular attachment to them.

The moralism delivered with state services undoubtedly bore some responsibility for this lack of populist articulation. In 1937 the colony’s medical staff expressed some sympathy with women earning a pittance as housemaids and laundresses as being ‘too busy outside their own homes … to breastfeed their infants’, and proposed a day nursery for the children of working mothers. But the doctors also blamed low rates of breastfeeding on some women’s laziness, and pointed out that women’s need to work resulted from ‘the high rate of illegitimacy’. The Black Cross Nurses evinced more sympathy in their 1938 documentation of the appalling living conditions of 35 families, which they presented to the WIRC as evidence of general economic collapse. But those families were ‘poor but respectable’, only

57 The Baby Exhibition routinely weeded out poor sickly children and gave prizes to the healthy infants of British and local middle class couples. Designed to teach proper parenting to the working classes, it remained silent about the material conditions producing high infant mortality, illness and malnourishment.
58 British Honduras Medical Report for the Year 1937; Belize Independent, 6 May, 12 Aug., 9 Dec. 1936, 28 April and 26 June 1937, 22 June 1938.
59 Belize Archives. MC-1677, A Report of the Committee on Nutrition in the Colony of British Honduras (Belize, 1937), pp. 23 and 46. The illegitimacy rate in 1938 was 44.8% (Report on the Vital Statistics of British Honduras for the Year 1938 (Belize, 1939), p. 3.
60 Black Cross Nurses, Compendium of Living Conditions and Dietary Statistics of the Labouring Classes of Belize (Belize, 1938).
four of them female-headed. In presenting a respectable and victimised working class to the commissioners, the nurses ignored single mothers and female unemployment. They were clearly urging women to go to the IWL clinics, and deplored the behaviour of one mother who refused to take her baby there. Theirs was a properly gendered plea to continue Burns’s colonial development and welfare project.

Burns’s gendered reforms extended to the education system, recently condemned by a Jamaican official. Burns could do little to raise the Education Department’s budget, for the Colonial Development Fund would not fund social spending, and the anti-tax forestry elite dominated the legislature. But he did quickly move to implement recommendations concerning manual training, establishing in Belize Town three trades workshops for boys and two church-run domestic science centres where about 80 girls each year learned needlework, cooking, housekeeping and childcare. In colonial ideology boys needed tradesmen’s skills to become responsible family heads, while girls needed those of mothers, and unpaid housewives or underpaid domestics.

Labour critic Luke Kemp pilloried the Belize Town Board – of which Seay was an appointed member from 1933–36 – for co-operating with ‘St Alan’, and claimed that ‘white prejudice is most rampant here among black and blackish citizens’. He condemned Burns’s policies as an open attempt to control the working class: ‘Not one constructive effort for the economic advancement of the working people has been started ... the masses merely get spoonfuls, while the cream goes to the vicious circles.’ When Burns suspended the elected Town Board in 1938 in order to transfer its sanitation responsibilities to the Medical Department, Kemp was incensed at his autocracy, and even Burns’s ‘vicious’ middle class collaborators cried foul. Generally, though, Burns was successful in mobilising middle-class reformers and British funds in his drive to subdue mass politics. The reform project that he captained attempted to do this by appealing to men and women in distinctly gendered ways, but even more by imposing a gendered ideal. His allies were the middle class reformers who expressed and furthered their distance from the masses precisely through their gendered respectability.

Burns had no more loyal partner than Vivian Seay, who proudly received her Member of the British Empire award from him in 1935, and led the

63 For Kemp’s columns quoted here, see Belize Independent, 26 May and 15 Dec. 1937; for Town Board crisis see ibid., 19 Jan. 1938.
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Black Cross Nurses in the annual parade of loyalty to empire and monarchy. The very first funding proposal that Burns sent to London originated with Seay in November 1934, and epitomised the partnership between reformist governor and middle classes. Burns instantly supported her Women’s Land Settlement Scheme, and swiftly submitted to the Colonial Office a plan to settle 500 single mothers on 1000 acres. Anomalous in both Seay’s and Burns’s careers of treating women as dependents rather than family heads or breadwinners, the scheme was also the only one of Burns’s ever rejected in London. Did the Colonial Office already link women to welfare, and thus view any scheme involving them as disqualified from the Colonial Development Fund? Whatever the case, colonial reformers in Belize never tried to include women in the ‘labour question’ again, a fatal flaw in their pursuit of colonial hegemony.

The labour question resurfaced quickly after the 1936 collapse of the LUA, with strikes from 1937–39 and the formation of two new labour organisations by Kemp and Soberanis. Capping this wave of unrest was a 320-woman petition in 1940, precisely demanding women’s land settlement. Claiming relief work in their own right, these women wanted both the health and education services available at the Rockstone Pond settlement, and the employment which in local colonial reform was reserved for men. Local reform had neither changed women’s behaviour nor won their hearts, but it had defeated mass anti-colonial labour politics for the time being.

Imperial Reforms in Belize, 1940–45

World War Two did not halt the implementation of development and welfare policy in Belize or the wider British Caribbean. Under Governor Sir John Hunter (1940–46) political, labour, welfare and education reforms continued apace, expanded now that social welfare and responsible trade unionism had been imperially-mandated and funded. Reform was also fuelled by ongoing popular unrest, with women protesting water shortages as well as petitioning for land settlement. In 1941 the part-appointed, part-elected legislature legalised trade unions, and in 1943 a historic vote by British officials and progressive representatives decriminalised strikes. But by then Soberanis had left for the Panama Canal Zone, and it was not his union that was the first to legally register. Instead, a group of reformist tradesmen, who had supported Burns in the mid-1930s, registered the British Honduras Trade Union in 1943, changing its name to the General Workers Union.

64 Ibid., 28 Nov. 1934; Belize Archives, Minute Paper 1628–1934.
65 The Clarion, 7 and 16 Feb. 1940.
66 Cooper finds that the war did delay implementation in Africa, Decolonization, p. 108.
The Development and Welfare Organisation for the West Indies (DWO), created by the Development and Welfare Act of 1940, immediately recognised the new union as ‘responsible’, in contrast to the ‘demagogic’ anti-colonial unions still active in the region. The GWU and its legislative allies would prove unable to make labour reform the basis of a populist alliance with workers, who remained outside the colonial hegemonic project.

The GWU was far less inclusive of working women than the LUA had been, in keeping with the Labour Department’s complete lack of attention to women in the first half of the 1940s. In 1943 the union excluded women from its minimum wage demands, arguing that women who took men’s jobs were eroding wages, contributing to immorality and crime, becoming unfaithful wives and generally disrespecting constituted authority. As late as 1948 the union had only 183 dues-paying female members, or 7.5% of the membership. Only when nationalists took over the union in 1950 did female membership surge. The union’s focus on skilled male workers was key to its being approved by colonial authorities as responsible. But it seems that the GWU leadership genuinely shared the gender division of reform, seeing working girls’ hope in social improvement and redemption, not labour rights.

This meshed with the way that imperial authorities had defined the ‘problem’ of Caribbean women as low-paid workers. The West India Royal Commission report dealt with working women in its chapter on Social Welfare, where it identified a ‘lack of family life’, attributed it to illegitimacy rates of 60–70 per cent, and rooted illegitimacy in a combination of ‘economic circumstances’ and ‘natural irresponsibility’. The report thus deemed West Indians to be ‘a people whose immature minds too often are ruled by their adult bodies’. The solution would be ‘an organised campaign against the social, moral and economic evils of promiscuity’. Women’s exploitation and demands as labourers, then, could be entirely explained in terms of a disordered black working class sexuality. The Englishman in charge of social welfare policy and funding for the DWO in the West Indies during the war years likewise attributed social problems, and poverty, to the weakness of family organisation, as evidenced by high illegitimacy, low marriage rates, the

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67 Bolland, ‘The Labour Movement,’ pp. 180–3, is thus incorrect in connecting the LUA to the GWU and thus to the nationalist movement which grew out of the GWU.
69 Daily Clarion, 29 June 1943.
70 The total membership of the union was 2422 according to Belize Billboard, 2 May 1948.
71 One GWU leader professed this opinion in the Daily Clarion, 17 April 1943.
low status of women, and the prevalence of households ‘under the control of a woman’. Until such families were eradicated, he believed, no advance in social development, local government, or economic prosperity could occur. By 1946 he understood that many West Indian women preferred what he called ‘loose concubinage’ – a derogatory term for common-law and visiting unions – but insisted that social problems could be solved only by women moving from unskilled wage labour to home-making, and thus forming proper male-headed nuclear households.73 The British and their local allies were still insisting that working men and women must change to match the image of a people deemed fit for self-government, a strategy with little hegemonic potential beyond the middle class.

The expansion of social services in Belize in the early 1940s was substantial, and benefited a significant number of women. There is evidence that women valued these services, but none that such appreciation spurred empire loyalty; indeed the dynamic of expectations exceeding state resources may have fuelled anti-colonialism. One of Hunter’s first acts in 1940 was a survey of poverty among urban women and children, which led him to expand the budget for ‘outdoor relief’ and to revise the Bastardy Ordinance to make men more financially responsible for their illegitimate children. He also strengthened infant welfare clinic services by absorbing them into the Medical Department. From 1941 the clinics provided poor mothers with powdered milk, a boon during wartime price inflation, and by 1944 they had cut Belize City’s clinic babies’ mortality rate to 15 per cent of the colony’s average. Women’s demand for clinic appointments and maternity beds was strong in Belize City.74 Hunter also transformed Vivian Seay from volunteer to civil servant, appointing her Inspector of Midwives in 1941. He backed

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73 Stockdale, Development and Welfare in the West Indies, 1940–42 (London, 1944), p. 52; Development and Welfare in the West Indies, 1943–44, p. 81; T. S. Simey, Welfare and Planning in the West Indies (Oxford, 1946), pp. 14–15, 18, 183. As A. Lynn Bolles has argued, ‘colonial officials compelled researchers from Britain to measure “the weakness of family life”’, resulting in work in the 1950s and 1960s by R. T. Smith and others that established a hierarchy of ‘1) intact nuclear families, 2) common-law marriages, and 3) various forms of domestic arrangements characterised by the absence of a male-head of household’. Bolles replaces these ‘value-laden judgments of previous researchers’ with the useful categories of: ‘1) stable coresidential units (legally married or common-law); 2) visiting relations (the parents of the children who live in separate residences but visit each other on a regular basis); and 3) single women ...’ See Bolles, Sister Jamaica: A Study in Women, Work and Households in Kingston (Lanham MD, 1996), 6–8. R. T. Smith’s more recent work still defines a ‘visiting union’ negatively, as ‘a union which is neither legal nor coresidential’. See Smith, Kinship and class in the West Indies: a genealogical study of Jamaica and Guyana (Cambridge, 1988), 111.

74 British Honduras Medical Report for the Year 1944, p. 3. By 1944 70% of women with newborns used the clinics in Belize City, and half of all city newborns were born in hospital, a feat accomplished by jamming extra beds into the 12-bed ward. Belize Town became Belize City in 1943.
the District Visiting Nurse programme, which took on some of the home-visiting roles of the Black Cross Nurses, and the more successful Rural Health Nurse programme. Begun in 1944, this placed several of the best Black Cross Nurses in rural communities, where women came to prize their skills and leadership. Finally, in 1944 the Social Welfare Department was founded with DWO funding and a tiny staff. It took over the administration of outdoor relief payments, becoming in effect the access point for state welfare for women. Just after the war it began to hire educated women for a major effort in rural home economics, handicrafts, and cottage industries among poor women.

Many of the women who became Social Welfare Department teachers shared Vivian Seay’s view of poor women as objects of reformist action, clients rather than citizens of the state. While the creole middle class was founding the GWU as a responsible trade union, it also was launching a moral campaign in response to the WIRC recommendation. In 1940 the Black Cross Nurses called for a youth curfew to combat ‘lax parenting’. Belize’s clergy and other reformers formed the British Honduras Social Services Council which picked up the curfew demand in 1942, saw it implemented, and campaigned for an institution to reform delinquent girls in 1943–44. The Council also ran Social Uplift Weeks in 1942 and 1943. The latter had the theme ‘The Family and Parental Control’ and involved lectures on prayers, gambling and parenting by clergymen and female reformers. Only the concluding public meeting attracted a crowd, perhaps because it promised the spectacle of a church minister discussing venereal diseases. As one female reformer bitterly commented, the curfew had been ridiculed and denounced ‘by the very people it was most expected to help’. Belize’s popular classes were proving to be not clay in the reformers’ hands, but rather hard-fired, possessing their own historically-formed cultural and political shape.

As popular gratitude failed to emerge, colonial reformers grew resigned and angry. A 1946 report suggested vocational education in the trades and agriculture for boys, but given limited female job opportunities, could only hope that classes in infant welfare, nutrition and cookery would curb the ‘tide’ of female juvenile delinquency. The Education Department’s 1947 report blamed extensive truancy on a ‘lack of normal family life’, ‘parental negligence’, and ‘psychological upsets in children’. Mothers’ ‘carelessness

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75 *British Honduras Medical Report for the Year 1941*, p. 1; Belize Archives, Minute Papers 756 and 1315 of 1952.


77 *Daily Clarion*, 24 Feb. 1940.


79 *Belize Independent*, 2 June 1943.
[and] irresponsibility’ and fathers’ absences were to blame. The Prison Department went further, attributing a perceived rise in youth crime to ‘illegitimacy … and the carefree way so many fathers regard the offspring of these casual unions’, as well as the ‘calamitous upbringing’ offered by single mothers. The language of the Royal Commission had returned in full force – the Belizean labouring masses were still morally disordered and defiant about it, still unfit to be masters of their economic and political destinies. The Social Welfare, Labour, Medical and Education Departments were still sending the message that most Belizeans were wrong as they were, and thus somehow to blame for their own poverty, suffering and powerlessness. The regional DWO maintained the same stance toward the whole West Indian working class.

More important, unlike Puerto Rico, there was no Belizean middle-class group trying to use imperial resources to present the reform agenda to the popular classes on their terms. Indeed, with the eruption of popular nationalism in the early 1950s reformers like Vivian Seay were sidelined and the militant activism of working women again took centre stage. These women’s use of clinics, maternity wards, outdoor relief and community nurses had only intensified their critique of a colonial state that provided too little, too judgmentally. Rather than accepting the reform project’s definition of them as clients of state social services, working women in Belize redefined social services as citizen rights, and labour and labour activism as appropriate for women, and used their new voting power in 1954 to elect young populist nationalists who mobilised their definitions in a broad anti-colonial movement. Only then did gender become a tension within a populist project seeking hegemony in Belize.

**Puerto Rico**

Colonial reformers in Puerto Rico, meanwhile, did integrate working women into their hegemonic project, through a populist alliance that was by its very nature contradictory. They were able to present the reform agenda in popular terms, but could not ultimately meet the democratic demands of the working majority of Puerto Ricans through the programme of industrialisation, corporate tax breaks, emigration, female sterilisation, labour control and colonial accommodation that defined the post-1940 period. The victory of Muñoz Marín’s PPD in 1940 and beyond did not represent the liberation of Puerto Rican working women in gender- and class-specific senses, any more

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81 Dietz, *An Economic History*, chapters 4 and 5.
than it symbolized the political liberation of Puerto Rico. But the founding of the PPD in July 1938 and its historic popular campaign of 1938–40 took place in a way that gave working people a sense of ownership of the movement, and in so doing wooed them away from other parties and neutralised possibilities for a mass anti-colonial movement.

Political conditions for successful populist alliance and colonial hegemony were promising by the late 1930s in Puerto Rico. Crucially important was the fact that the United States had brought tangible if ambivalent improvements in the lives of working class Puerto Ricans since 1898, perhaps particularly women. Certainly US colonial rule had ushered in rapid proletarianisation that impoverished the Puerto Rican masses, but land loss was felt more acutely by the liberal hacendado elite than by its former peons, and women frequently experienced their entry into the workforce as liberating. Elite resentment of US political control also went deeper, particularly because workers found new collective voice in the post-1898 legalisation of unions and the flourishing of a radical labour movement in the FLT and Socialist Party, in which women, particularly tobacco stemmers, were highly organised. The United States also legalised divorce, and in the late 1920s pressured the island legislature to grant suffrage to literate women. While these measures benefited middle class and elite women most, working women were better able to free themselves from abusive marriages, and did finally secure the vote in 1935. These were advances on Spanish colonialism.

Equally important to the success of PPD populism, which linked United States reform and the Puerto Rican masses, was the collective decline of Puerto Rico’s established political parties in the 1930s, and the deaths or incarceration of their leaders by 1939. From 1904–32 the pro-autonomy Union Party of the declining hacendado elite controlled the legislature, although after 1924 it did so in alliance with moderate Republicans. This alliance resisted even restricted female suffrage. The pro-statehood Republican Party controlled the legislature from 1932–40, but only in coalition with the Socialist Party. The Socialists’ broad popular support of the 1910s–20s eroded rapidly as the coalition compromised the party’s labour agenda in favour of access to state power, though the party did successfully press for complete female suffrage. When pro-autonomy forces reconstituted as the Liberal Party in 1932, they made independence party policy, but were internally

82 On divorce see Findlay, Imposing Decency, chapter 4.
divided on what that might mean and how it might be achieved. Stymied in the island legislature, Liberals – especially Muñoz Marín, who had returned from bohemian New York in 1931 and been elected as a Liberal senator in 1932 – were courted by Roosevelt and his New Dealers, a budding alliance that ended temporarily over controversies concerning the National Party in 1936–37. No single party had significant popular support between 1932 and 1940."84

The National Party, founded in 1922 by dissident Unionists and led in the 1930s by lawyer Pedro Albizu Campos, missed its chance to build a mass labour-nationalist coalition during the sugar strikes of 1933–34 by failing to address the realities of landless wage labourers, and perhaps also because of its conservative gender politics. It then turned to violence in pursuit of national liberation from United States colonial rule. Most important in shaping possibilities for populism and colonial hegemony was the February 1936 assassination of the insular police chief by two young Nationalists, who were apprehended and immediately killed at police headquarters. The New Deal–Liberal alliance foundered when Muñoz Marín refused to condemn the assassination without also condemning the police killings. He also broke with the Liberal leader in opposing the Tydings Bill in the US Congress, which would have granted immediate independence to Puerto Rico on very punitive terms, and in advocating a Liberal boycott of the November 1936 elections.85 With the Republican–Socialist coalition re-elected, its leaders in favour with a Washington now focused on repressing the Nationalists, and Muñoz Marín expelled from the Liberal Party, his days as the New Deal’s “golden boy” appeared to be over.86 But his fall from grace necessitated a new alliance, this time with the Puerto Rican people.

Muñoz Marín had demonstrated some tendencies in this direction before, particularly in relation to working women. Born in 1898, he spent much of his youth in the United States, but remained Puerto Rican in his identity and interests. In 1920 he broke with the Union Party, which his father had led, to campaign for the Socialists’ class-based agenda. This position was consistent with the aid he gave to the new Popular Feminist Association of Women Workers of Puerto Rico, the suffrage organisation of FLT-affiliated working women.87 At this time he advocated birth control as a solution to poverty and social disorder, but also participated in a discourse of nostalgia in which jibaras were imagined as sexually willing white girls and loyal hardworking women.

87 Barceló-Miller, ‘Half-hearted Solidarity,’ p. 132. She does not specify what kind of aid he gave.
wives and mothers. His attitudes toward working women combined a certain progressivism with enduring paternalism, a sometimes contradictory amalgam that he brought to the New Deal–Liberal alliance, both in opposition to the Republican–Socialist coalition in the 1930s and once in power in the 1940s.

By the 1930s Puerto Rico's working women had a generation of labour and political mobilisation under their belts. They had entered the labour force en masse, contested the paternalism and conventional sexuality of both union and party in the 1910s, and the class-defined suffragism of elite women in the 1920s. Wage labour was far less novel for Afro-Puerto Rican women, whose particular militancy at the workplace, in union and party, and in suffrage activism needs further investigation. Women's labour militancy in Puerto Rico in the 1930s reached an early peak with the August 1933 strikes of Caguas tobacco strippers and Mayagüez needleworkers. In the latter case, both shop and home needleworkers joined in striking the factory of María Luisa Arcelay, a Republican representative in the island legislature who was elected with the help of elite feminists. Two deaths and dozens of injuries resulted from police firing onto the crowd of strikers. Much of this female militancy took place within the bounds of the Socialist Party and FLT. In the aftermath of the Mayagüez violence, the FLT successfully organised 75 per cent of shop needleworkers, and about 3000 of the 50,000 home needleworkers on the island. Relations between militant women and the Socialist Party seem to have become strained even as the latter pressed for full female suffrage and won many working women's votes in 1936. They disagreed, for example, on the important issue of regulating the home needlework industry.

New Deal policy on this issue, although inconsistent, was well received by militant working women in the mid-1930s; possibilities for colonial hegemony did not depend entirely on local intermediaries. After the 1933 strikes, a debate erupted over what to do about abysmally paid home needleworkers, a debate in which these workers were now able to play at least a minimal role. Only the insular Department of Labor's new Bureau for

92 Silvestrini, 'Women as Workers,' p. 68.
93 The working class shift away from the Socialists and toward the PPD is exemplified in the account of Don Taso Zayas in Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History (New York, 1974), pp. 185–7.
Working Women and Colonial Reform in Puerto Rico and Belize

Women and Children in Industry does not seem to have engaged in this debate. New Dealers, middle class social reformers, and FLT bosses including the female leadership of the Insular Council of Unions of Needleworkers wanted to end home needlework as exploitative and backward, while the Republicans opposed any change in the industry. But homeworkers and their allies among shop workers argued for regulation not banning, displaying a keen sense of a just wage even when they did not define themselves as family breadwinners. They saw their demands met in July 1934 when Washington implemented the National Recovery Act codes for minimum wages in Puerto Rico, but soon experienced a loss of work as contractors sought cheaper labour. In November 1934, suggestively, one third of the 6000-strong unemployed march in Mayagüez consisted of female shop workers who had lost their jobs because of capital’s reaction to the wage codes. The codes were lifted in early 1935, and again needleworkers received plenty of work for the same low rates as before. Working women cannot have been surprised by this employer self-interest; what was more illuminating was how their collective pressure had yielded at least a temporarily supportive response from imperial authorities.

In 1938, the year of the PPD’s formation, the Union of Women Needleworkers, without FLT or Socialist support, voted unanimously in favour of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which would have established minimum wages and maximum hours, and campaigned vigorously for it, holding protests into 1939. Ultimately, the Act was not applied to Puerto Rico, due to the pressure of the governor and the Republicans, and the inactivity of the Socialists and the FLT. Blanca Silvestrini concludes that this defeat paved the way for ‘increased rank-and-file militancy’ and the repudiation of treacherous leaders. But it may also have paved the way for working women’s support of the PPD, which seems to have supported the Act. Félix Muñiz-Mas, who suggests this, also notes that it is unclear when the PPD became wedded to the principle of the male breadwinner. Given female labour militancy in the late 1930s, and the PPD’s grassroots institution-building campaign of 1938–40, it seems likely that the party was more welcoming of working women and

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97 Silvestrini, ‘Women as Workers,’ p. 69.
98 Ibid., pp. 69–71.
their concerns at that time than once power had been secured in the 1940s. This hypothesis certainly fits the pattern of post-victory female exclusion witnessed in most cases of revolutionary and nationalist transitions, including that of Belize.\(^{100}\)

A second policy on which New Dealers and the future PPD leadership were in agreement, and which was appreciated by many working women, was that of expanding access to birth control. Reformers believed that economic recovery and development would require population control, a consensus that would result in Puerto Rico having the highest rate of female sterilisation in the world by the 1970s. But the Machiavellian politics behind this process must not preclude consideration of how many working women welcomed any improvement in their ability to control their fertility. For example, a private clinic that opened in rural Puerto Rico by an American church in 1943 was ‘swamped with women wanting to be sterilized’ after publicity resulting from Catholic protests.\(^{101}\) Notably, the National Party opposed birth control.\(^{102}\) In Belize at this time, working women were being instructed to improve their sexual self-control within the confines of legal marriage, but were offered no access to modern birth control.

Management of a growing network of birth control clinics shifted between private groups and the state during the 1930s. In 1932 a lawyer and his wife founded the Birth Control League of Porto Rico and, with the unofficial support of Governor Beverley, opened clinics in San Juan and Mayagüez, both of which aimed to serve poor women and lasted until 1934.\(^{103}\) In 1934 the federal Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Agency, a New Deal institution, opened 67 birth control clinics island-wide in co-operation with Columbia University’s School of Tropical Medicine. This departure in state function was prompted by the Chardón Plan, the document produced by Roosevelt’s Puerto Rican Policy Commission, and influenced by Muñoz Marín in 1934. Carlos Chardón, Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico and a Liberal, wanted to break the sugar corporations’ control of the island economy and to diversify and industrialise. As the core New Deal document on Puerto Rico, the Chardón Plan defined population control as a precondition for economic prosperity.\(^{104}\) In 1935 the new Puerto Rican Reconstruction Agency took over the clinics but in 1936 its budget was cut and the clinics were shut, having served about 3500 women.\(^{105}\) Into this gap came the

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\(^{101}\) Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp, Colonialism, pp. 135–6.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., pp. 31 and 40.

\(^{103}\) Harriet Presser, La esterilización y el descenso de la fecundidad en Puerto Rico (Berkeley, 1973/4), P. 24.

\(^{104}\) Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp, Colonialism, pp. 35–7; Dietz, Economic History of Puerto Rico, pp. 149–153.

\(^{105}\) Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp, Colonialism, pp. 42–4.
Maternal and Child Health Association, funded by American corporate donor Clarence Gamble, but founded and staffed by Puerto Rican health professionals, social workers, and professors. In 1937 the Association opened 23 birth control clinics and carried out research on success rates of various methods in three communities. It helped to pressure the island’s legislature to decriminalise contraceptive education in 1937, and to make contraceptive education mandatory in all public clinics and hospitals. By 1939 the Association ‘had advised more than five thousand women in 23 clinics’, there were 160 free public birth control clinics island-wide, and female sterilisation had become legal.106

Two features of the 1930s’ clinic systems are relevant to understanding how colonial reformers in Puerto Rico could create a populist alliance with working women within the colonial framework. First, the federal government ran the clinics at the same time that it mandated a minimum wage for home needleworkers in 1934–35, before sterilisation was legalised. Again, US authorities, not just their local allies, must be seen as capable of articulating with militant working women, and as part of the hegemonic alliance that solidified after 1940. Second, the Chardón Plan’s technocratic language of rational economic planning, which continued in the 1940s, seems to have mitigated the enduring class- and race-based moralism that no doubt was practiced at the clinics. In contrast to the West India Royal Commission report, the Chardón Plan claimed that economic prosperity would lead to a higher standard of living and thus to a greater sense of ‘responsibility of the mass of the population’ to have smaller families.107 The rehabilitative element in this discourse was overshadowed by its primary emphasis on reforming the economic context in which the Puerto Rican people found themselves, not on reforming the people, or demanding that they reform themselves. While public clinics seem to have limited their services to married women, there was no blanket condemnation of Puerto Ricans as promiscuous or at moral fault. Technocratic language may thus have led working women to see the colonial state as at least a somewhat reliable ally in a difficult struggle to plan their families.

Muñoz Marín created the PPD as the vehicle for popular democratic demands, presenting himself as more than a reliable ally, indeed as the voice of the suffering masses themselves. As he said on the eve of the 1940 election in a radio address, ‘Believe in yourselves! ... Have faith in your force and power to make justice and secure your children’s future! ... Believe in your own dignity!’108 Research on the PPD has tended to gloss the crucial

106 Ibid., pp. 46–56; Presser, pp. 24–6.
107 Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp, Colonialism, p. 36.
The 1938-40 period with references to the party’s peasant imagery, grassroots popular organizing and setting aside of the status question. It is clear that working class support was crucial to its growth, but the full history of that two-year campaign has yet to be written. The party’s early positions on women’s labour rights and birth control are not well documented, but it did target working women to vote, organize, and fundraise, to dissuade their menfolk from selling their votes, and to distribute El Batey, the party’s free popular newspaper, and it probably supported organised needleworkers’ demands for better wages. The existence of female suffrage, competitive party politics and extensive female labour mobilisation meant that the party had to connect to popular demands and desires, not merely issue instructions and propose schemes as reformers did in Belize.

Felix Muñiz-Mas argues that in the early 1940s, with its hold on power growing and a productive relationship between Muñoz Marín and Rexford Tugwell, Governor and New Dealer, the PPD constructed the female norm as mother and wife, secondary earner but not breadwinner, creating a female political subjectivity that the party could then mobilise. This view tends to underestimate existing female working class subjectivity and agency, which may have had continued leverage within the populist alliance because of the emerging centrality of cheap female labour to the industrial model of development. Indeed, the domestic ideal of the PPD was porous, especially as the party forged an alliance with the new Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT), began to redefine women as cheap and docile factory labour, and quietly sanctioned the continued existence of federally funded birth control clinics. This tension between official rhetoric and reality explains why Muñoz Marín argued that industrialisation would lead to smaller families, but did not speak out in the legislature against the clinics, which by 1947 had provided 10 per cent of the adult female population with birth control information and/or devices. By 1948 seven per cent of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age had been sterilised. The tension also explains why the PPD in the early and mid-1940s praised rural home needleworker as the model of ‘true Puerto Rican womanhood’ even while neglecting their homeworkers’ labour rights and moving to eliminate the industry in favour

112 Gallart, ‘Political Empowerment,’ clearly demonstrates that female PPD activists in the 1950s were able to collectively challenge the anti-democratic practices of the party brass.
113 Presser, Esterilización, p. 28; Margarita Ostolaza Rey, Política sexual en Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras, 1989), p. 75.
of modern factory labour. Whatever their discontents and possible protests within the party, working women did not respond to the gender contradictions at the heart of the populist project in the 1940s by breaking their alliance with the PPD or its deepening colonial compact with the United States. Neither New Deal programmes nor PPD policies denied women’s role in the labour force and island economy, or treated their militancy as a symptom of disordered popular culture or sexuality. Unlike their counterparts in Belize, Puerto Rican working women encountered a populist coalition for colonial reform that was able to grasp at least something of the complexity of their lives as working mothers, and was willing to experiment with policies that would meet female as well as imperial needs.

Citizens v. Clients

Hegemonic alliance does not imply the resolution of tensions or contradictions, but rather their productive containment, as in the populist colonial compact created in Puerto Rico in the 1940s. But such antagonisms can only be productive if they exist within the emerging hegemonic bloc. In Belize and other colonies of the British Caribbean, colonial reform in the 1930s produced conflict among separate actors, not negotiation within a cross-class alliance. The Americans and the Puerto Rican populist liberals were not cleverer than the British or their middle class allies in Belize, but were less confused by a combination of guilt – for the creation of slavery and impoverishment in the Caribbean, and moral judgement – an enduring product of nineteenth century racism. In their experiments as alchemists, mixing development and welfare to create the gold of colonial hegemony, British reformers and their West Indian allies were hampered most by their ‘hortatory and moralistic’ approach to working class men and women, and by making West Indians’ economic – and ultimately their political fate – contingent on ‘their moral rehabilitation’.114 Their failure to connect with working women specifically stemmed from their insistence that women learn to be morally ordered clients of the state – wives, mothers, housewives, not workers or unionists – before they could hope to be citizens of any self-governing polity. The New Dealers and the PPD offered more constructive aid than paternalistic advice, and did not try to drive working women out of the labour movement, though they did seek to subdue both them and it. The British and their allies offered such advice as constructive aid, and scolded women for attending to labour rights rather than to their supposedly degenerate sexualities and families. Ultimately, Muñoz Marín was able to link

114 Holt, The Problem of Freedom, p. 390. Holt’s critique is of the West India Royal Commission report specifically, but can be applied to the entire reform project.
colonial reform to existing popular culture, creating political symbols, rhetoric and policies in which most Puerto Ricans could recognise themselves and their aspirations. This was a successful populist interpellation, aided by the United States' own mixed performance as a coloniser, by the National Party’s weaknesses and decimation, and by the collapse of the Socialist Party and FLT. In Belize, the colonial state and creole middle class could not provide any vehicle for popular self-recognition, only an image of what working people should be and were not. Their failure left the political field open for the young nationalists of the early 1950s who would replicate the PPD's hegemonic trick in Belize, and who – for at least long enough to cement their support – would call upon working women’s proud militancy to fight for the cause, and would promise them jobs, schools and hospitals as the rights of state citizens, not the privileges of state clients. The relationship between militant women and the Belizean nationalists would prove to be just as engaged, contradictory and ambiguous as that between the working women of Puerto Rico and the populist colonial reform project that emerged from the crisis of the 1930s.