The Content of Our Character

An Interview with José López

Mike Staudenmaier with Matt Meyer and Dan Berger

One organization which grew out of the revolutionary nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, along the lines discussed by Fred Ho, was the Movimiento Liberation Nacional (MLN)—a group of Puerto Rican and Mexican militants. Centered on fighting for independence for Puerto Rico and reunification of Mexico, the MLN eventually evolved into two separate entities, with the MLN-PR setting up Juan Antonio Corretjer Cultural Centers in U.S. cities with substantial Puerto Rican populations. With their central base in Chicago, the MLN-PR initiated some of the strongest, longest-lasting, and most dedicated community-based organizations in North America, including the award-winning Pedro Albizu Campos High School, a nursery school, an art space, legal and housing offices, and a bakery. One of the first national liberation movements to officially and formally acknowledge the importance of lesbian and gay liberation, they also helped set up an AIDS and health clinic, VIDA/SIDA, which has been seen as a model of patient-centered, grassroots health care. With some leading members of the broader MLN community arrested and charged in the early 1980s with participation in the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), they have been involved in political prisoner support work—now under the leadership of the National Boricua Human Rights Network. But they have also been involved in local electoral work, closely connected to the offices of Congressman Luis Gutiérrez and working with the Latin Agenda. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, they also worked closely with a solidarity organization under their direct control, the Free Puerto Rico Committee (formerly the New Movement). Over these three decades of work, the consistent figure of inspiration, vision, and strategic direction has been José López, the director of the Cultural Center. The following interview, conducted for this book, begins to reveal how the late-1970s orientation toward revolutionary nationalism developed into the vibrant community empowerment model still growing in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood.

Mike Staudenmaier: There's been a historic relationship, within the MLN and before that, between the Puerto Rican and the Chicano movements. What is the relationship between those movements and struggles today? What do you see as the strategic role of Puerto Ricans in shaping the strategic role of Latinos in the era of Obama? And also, how does the issue of immigration fit into this agenda?

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José López: Well, I think that there has been a very long relationship between the Puerto Rican independence movement—it was before the MLN, and even after the MLN—in terms of the Puerto Rican independence movement and the Mexican and the Chicano movements. And we could date this obviously, here in Chicago, to the communities themselves. When the Puerto Ricans began to establish themselves in Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s, one of the places that they came to reside was in South Chicago, where there was a sizeable Mexican community already established in and around the steel mills. And that brought these two groups in the context of each other. But I would also say that there was a connection—a sort of cultural connection—of Puerto Rican people and Mexicans as far back as the 1930s. I say this because Mexican films begin to be introduced into Puerto Rico in the 1930s, and every small town that had a little theater were actually playing Mexican films. They were the only films that were, obviously, in Spanish. The films that were coming from the United States were—even the silent films—obviously dubbed and captioned in English.

In many ways, I would say that the Mexican film industry, and through it the introduction of Mexican music in Puerto Rico, created a climate that helped preserve Spanish in Puerto Rico. It was the popular thing. English had been imposed in the schools in Puerto Rico, and here you have now the beginnings of the mass media, particularly through radio and television, invading Puerto Ricans' popular space. All of a sudden, the Mexican films began to come in and through that also Mexican music.

So you have a very interesting intersection. Also with Puerto Rican, particularly Puerto Rican musicians going to Mexico, appearing in Mexican films (like Rafael Hernandez), and especially for Puerto Ricans who were migrating to the United States—there was already a cultural nexus with Mexico. While people now see that there is a disconnect between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, I think that way before the migration, and even after the migration, this relationship existed. During the migration, it consolidated itself.

A lot of people don't see this connection, but in Chicago it is very important, particularly because there would be large numbers of Puerto Ricans and large numbers of Mexicans, coming together in this city. If we look at what happened here in the late 1960s, as a Puerto Rican movement—an authentic Puerto Rican movement that's organic to the United States—we have the Young Lords and other expressions of dissent and organization. And they were already a beginning to see some relationships between, say, the Chicano demands for bilingual education, the Puerto Rican demands for bilingual education; the intersection at the universities of opening up the universities to Puerto Rican and Mexican students. Obviously, in New York and then in Los Angeles too, you see these two communities rise up. But Chicago became a bridge between those two centers on each coast.

Mike: Because it had both populations?

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José: It had both populations in large numbers. And already you would see, for example, in 1968 when Reverend King, before he died, had convened a Poor People's March, there were contingents of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans gathering in Washington and having discussions about Latino issues.

You begin to develop all those ties during that period. Mexicans in the Southwest already began talking about Puerto Rican independence and the need to support Puerto Rican independence. Puerto Ricans began talking about the land grabs and the urban struggles of Mexican people in Chicago and in other areas.

So there's a history to this that I think informs our relationship.

In the 1970s, with the wholesale U.S. attack on the Puerto Rican independence movement, particularly the armed sector, this relationship between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans deepened. At this time, some people had already been part of an organization that had been created by the Episcopal Church called the Episcopalian Commission on Latino Affairs. There was at attempt, particularly in New York at the central office of the Episcopal Church, to really hold the Episcopal Church responsible to the whole Latino community. The commission was made up of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, grassroots leaders who came from New York and Chicago, from New Mexico and Colorado, from different parts of California, and so on.

Mike: Were the grassroots leaders all identified with the Episcopal Church? Or were they community leaders as well?

José: Some of them, like Grand Jury resister Maria Cueto, were directly involved in the Episcopal Church. Others were not as strongly linked. But the commission brought together this national encounter of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, and the U.S. government, when it began to pursue the attacks on the FALN, saw the Commission as the bridge that connected what they thought to be an international conspiracy of armed struggle—linked from Mexico, to Cuba, to Puerto Rico and the United States. At that moment, they decided to come after Mexican activists and Puerto Rican activists. As a result of those attacks, that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans came together against the Grand Jury, and the MLN was formed as a result of the repression that we were facing at that time.

The MLN was formed as a way to put together a unified face against the political repression of both the Mexican struggle and the Puerto Rican struggle.

When you look at the present reality, one link is to the immigration issue Some Mexican leaders of the immigration struggle, particularly Rudy Lozano, worked with my brother Oscar López Rivera (who is one of the longest-held U.S. political prisoners), and many others. There was a Mexican leftist movement called CASA (Centro de Acción Social y Autónoma), and a whole series of Mexican organizations that emerged in this period. They became very important in Chicago around the struggle for Puerto Rican independence and Mexican human rights.

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But many were also linked to community struggles. One of the most interesting acts of solidarity of Puerto Ricans was to actually house, support, and protect Elvira Arellano at Adalberto United Methodist Church. [Arellano is the president of La Familia Latina Unida, an advocacy group which focuses upon families that could be split up due to draconian deportation laws.] We have been told that the Immigration Naturalization Service (INS) had really almost made it a matter of policy that they were not going to arrest or got after Elvira as long as she was housed in this community. They were afraid of what the Puerto Rican community's reaction would be! I think that says a great deal about the importance of solidarity, and the importance of those historical nexuses that made that solidarity possible. Additionally I would say that solidarity, I believe, is both an ethical issue as well a political one. At the end of the day, we in the Puerto Rican movement have to clearly define the relationship to the sectors that are most oppressed in this society, and one of those sectors is obviously the undocumented.

On a political level, I also think that there is a special importance for a Latino dialogue, which would help to formulate a Latino agenda. But a dialogue has to be based on some concrete acts of solidarity. Solidarity, then, informs this political identity, which I believe "Latinidad" gives to us. I don't think Latinidad is necessarily an identity in which I subsume, or Mexicans (or any Latinos) subsume his or her national identity. It is, rather, the degree to which we link with one another, to work together on common issues and define a common agenda.

And I think that the formulation of a Latino agenda is perhaps one of the most important chapters in the future of the Americas. Many Latin American regimes are now emerging in ways that distance themselves from the practices of neoliberalism and globalization. I think that Latinos in this country have to be able to formulate a vision about what their role is in the body politics of the United States. Therefore, one of the most important demands that have to come out of a Latino agenda in the United States is if we are going to be able to redefine what globalization is. The reality is that we live in a global world that should not be a globalized world. By that I mean that if the United States and the vested interests of the United States want to pursue a politics of Free Trade, and a free flow of goods, then we have to demand that there be a policy and a practice that allows for the free flow of people with dignity. Ultimately, we have to begin to talk about redefining citizenship. And one way in which we have to redefine citizenship is by saying that the rights of people realizing and respecting themselves as human beings has to be seen as a human right—and not just a right that is given to people by governments or national states.

We have seen that the dislocation and the destruction of many of the dependent economies of Latin America has been the cause of a huge influx of immigrants from throughout the region. There is a clear responsibility that the U.S. government has had in creating those practices which have destroyed much of those economies, or that has engendered an economy of total dependence. I would say that we now have to

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think about a politics that says, "If you want these goods and the free flowing of goods, then how do you create a politics that's informed by the free flow of people with dignity?" You have the example of the Portuguese guest workers in Germany thirty years ago, who were literally treated as animals, totally ostracized in Germany. There were something like two million of them. But after the European Union was created, and created a European citizenship, today a Portuguese who goes to Germany enjoys the full rights of German citizenship. And this is accepted as a basic human rights. We have got to start to speak of a citizenship of the Americas, in which people throughout this continent can exist, can move freely, and can be entitled to full benefits of citizenship.

Mike: Probably more than either the Black liberation movement or the white new left, the armed struggle coming from Puerto Rican militants in the 1970s was more sustained and more ambitious. Over the past decade, the Puerto Rican community has relied on nonviolent action—from successful electoral campaigns and organizing within the church to civil disobedience—to push forward a progressive agenda. Comment on the reasons for the changes in tactics and strategy, and discuss the positive and negative aspects of both.

José: Well. I think that there is a politics that emerged in Latin America, which I don't believe has been studied very well. This was the politics of the theology of liberation. The politics of liberation theology proposed in many ways that people organically organize themselves and organically establish and meet their own needs. Through the institution of local churches, the idea was that if there was a problem of health care, or a problem regarding education, people should begin to address those things directly—often taking matters into their own hands.

At the same time, these movements were not going to let society or government get away with a politics of marginalization. I believe that today a lot of what's happening in Latin America was originally articulated as the politics of liberation theology. This is particularly true around the building of parallel institutions.

For example, in a country like Venezuela where you have had some interesting social experiments, at the same time that the government is trying to open up its commitment to social programs there is grassroots organizing that is formed around the concept of missions. Missions are created to meet people's immediate needs. If there's a problem of health, you create a mission *de salud,* or with teaching, you set us a *missiones de educación.* In the case of Venezuela, a lot of Cuban expertise has been brought in to train people to be able to take hold of their own destiny vis-à-vis health care, schooling, etc.

I believe that idea of dual, or parallel, institutions—in which government-sponsored programs are important but, at the same time, you create these organic people's institutions—are key in this current period. But I think that that's also a politics that has deep roots in Latin America, and that is in the practice of the Maroon societies.

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I don't think we spend enough time discussing maroonage, which allowed for small group societies of resistance. Maroon societies, it must be remembered, were made up of more than simply runaway slaves. They also included Indian resistance movements, as well as runaway Europeans who didn't fit into the mold of the dominant colonial society. These communities of resistance met their own needs, created their own institutions, created their own language, created their own music; much of what the Latin Americans' identities that we would today call Mexican or Cuban or Dominican or Brazilian were informed by the practice of Maroon societies.

My contention is that there is a long history of this idea: one foot in and one foot out. How do you negotiate? Many of these Maroon societies would negotiate with the dominant system, and many times even became legal entities within the dominant societies—because they were able to negotiate their own existence. The Kilombos in Brazil, for example, or the Palenques in many parts of North and South America, were about to act in this way. These are all Maroon societies, and they never forgot that they had a commitment to ending slavery, to working with enslaved peoples to help them escape.

What we have tried to do—here in Chicago and in a few places in Puerto Rico—is to find innovative ways of thinking about struggle. We have said: "We can't wait till we create a system that's perfect. Let's look at models of how people self-determine, self-actualize themselves in practices of self-reliance." And I think that some of the things that we have tried to do, without becoming luddites or pretending to escape from the dominant society to form some ideal utopia, is to exist as a pocket of resistance that informs a great deal of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist politics and practice. Whatever spaces are open for us we use to promote things that would help our community's identity, wellbeing, and independence.

This history, that's reflected both in the Maroon societies as well as in the Catholic theology of liberation, informs some of the things that we have done in what I would say is a practice of "one foot in, one foot out." And I think some of the successes that we've been able to build around creating the kinds of institutions that begin to directly serve people's needs are important.

At the same time, we don't believe this is the complete answer for people's problems. What we do believe is that if people could create examples like this in different areas, and people could begin to own their own process of liberation, then we wouldn't be waiting until we were through this whole system to say, "OK, now we've got the power to transform society." We say we can be transformative; we can bring transformative changes in the midst of the daily lives of our people right here, right now. We can bring about substantive changes, reflected around issues of gentrification and other colonial practices which still inform Third World communities within the United States and in Puerto Rico. The struggle against the U.S. Navy, and the island of Vieques, for example, or the various environmental struggles in Puerto Rico, all continue to inform the Puerto Rican reality. And while we can't expect to win victories in all of these cases, we can begin a liberating process.

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Mike: The Puerto Rican independence movement continues to face considerable repression from the U.S. government. Describe what this repression now, looks like including the role of and response to Grand Juries. How does this repression differ for those on the island and those living within the United States?

José: Well, I think, obviously, the most horrific expression of the repression was the murder, the assassination some years ago, of Machetero leader Filiberto Ojeda Ríos. In a cynical way, the FBI murdered Filiberto on the day of the celebration of Puerto Rican 1968 independence from Spain, El Grito de Lares. In addition to that, there has been an obvious and continuous involvement of grand jury repression, since at least 1972. From arrest to assassination, the Puerto Rican people have been terrorized by the United States.

I think that the U.S. government, however, has also had to learn from the Puerto Ricans response. One of the first grand juries, which was convened against a Puerto Rican independentista, which was 1935, was met with widespread resistance. So we're looking at a very, very long and continuous period of resistance and noncollaboration.

Over the past years, we've seen massive uprisings in response to right-wing policies of privatization. There were 200,000 people on the streets in response to calls to privatize the phone company and other key industries. Though the government began to call people terrorists and subversives, the same language that it has used against the independence movement, people kept up the pressure. We also know that there is tremendous complicity between the Puerto Rican police and the FBI; there's always been a very interesting nexus between the two institutions. In the revelations about the murders at Cerro Maravilla—when the police and FBI created a fake independence group, then entrapped and killed young recruits who joined it—we saw clearly just how direct and deadly those repressive policies are.

Mike: What role do the remaining Puerto Rican political prisoners play in the overall agenda for social change? What is the significance of their continued imprisonment? And how will the campaigns to free them differ from the successful campaigns to free their now freed compatriots?

José: Well, I think the first thing is that we always have to look for new ways to reach people. The campaign of the 1970s to free the nationalists (Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda and their compatriots) was different from the campaign to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners in the 1990s. We obviously have to talk about some differences in terms of what sectors are moving, and what sectors we can build alliances with to win hearts and minds. In general, though, there is a question about the symbolism of the prisoners. I was in San Sebastian, my hometown, this summer. The mayor of my town is a member of the Statehood Party—quite anti-independence. And yet he came to a special event to spotlight the case of my brother Oscar López

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Rivera. Some years back, he spoke during one of the most important festivals of San Sebastian, which is El Festival de la Hamaca (the Hammock Festival). When he spoke, he made a very, very interesting observation. He said: "I didn't come here to demand the release of Oscar just because he has been in there for so many years and that's the right thing to do, or for humanitarian reasons, or for legal factors that show that they've been treated differently. I've come here because I believe that while we may differ in terms of our political ideology, the fact is that Puerto Rico needs leaders that have the moral imperative and show the moral leadership, the commitment to principles that Oscar and the other Puerto Rican political prisoners has shown."

In other words, for him, these prisoners stood out as beacons of hope. I found it really interesting that someone who is a member of a political party—the dominant political party—should make an observation like this. Historically I believe that when we speak about moral leadership—whether it's a shaman in an Indigenous society, or a Gandhi or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or even a figure like Che Guevara—these dominate the imagination of people across the world. It's a sign of the integrity that these men and women have displayed, the selflessness, which I believe inspires people. This ethical leadership has made and continues to make a tremendous contribution.

Mike: Finally, could you discuss the strategic alliances made between the Puerto Rican left and other radical movements in the United States? What role does solidarity and working with anti-imperialist North American whites and whites in the peace movement play at this time? And how have your thoughts about and work in coalition changed over the past three decades?

José: I believe that solidarity is probably the most human of human activities, because solidarity is not about what I will gain, but about what someone else will gain because they have been left out or marginalized. To the degree that I am in solidarity with those who are the most marginalized and downtrodden, is the degree that I believe that my humanity has become more evident.

If I were to say what ultimately was the most important thing that makes a human being different from an animal, it would be that human beings transcend simple survival. We transcend survival because we are willing to give up our lives, we are willing to give up everything for other human beings. I don't think any other living thing does that, unless it's a mother trying to protect its offspring. In the human sense, I believe it's a lot more than simple instinct to enable the species to survive. For me, the spirit that helps people beyond survival is the truest act of solidarity.

So solidarity, for me, is an ethical imperative. Over the years, I believe that we—at least those of us who continue to be active in the Puerto Rican independence movement and continue to be active in some of the social movements—have maintained a commitment to free humanity from all the shackles and things that bind us, and make us truly human.

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I would also say, though, that for many years certain sectors of the left did political solidarity to the degree that they would also gain a foothold in trying to define the contours of the Puerto Rican independence movement. And I think that is not solidarity; that is opportunism. I believe that there are still sectors of the U.S. left which continue to exhibit that, and that's unfortunate because it's almost become a cliché: solidarity is not charity. It is not something you give to someone, and it is not something you can take from someone. It is something that you must make a commitment to which is independent from anything that you may benefit from.

There have been many people that I have met over the years who have shown that deep sense of solidarity, and continue to do so to this day. Many are not necessarily in organized groups, some serve as individuals, but they still have a strong sense of this moral imperative that they need to expose U.S. government imperial policies, racist policies, and colonial practices

My take on the Puerto Rican independence movement is that we're going through a major, major change. I don't really know where that change will take us, but I think there are some very interesting possibilities. One of them is that, just as it was in the nineteenth century, we have to go back to the Latin American roots, which defined our anti-colonial movements. I believe then we can begin to talk about an interdependent Puerto Rican world, or Puerto Rican people existing and being part of an interdependent world. I don't believe that nations declare their independence because they want to be isolated; I believe nations declare their independence because they want to be treated with dignity and respect. Just like any human being wants to be treated with dignity and respect, nations also want to be independent because they want to place themselves within the realm of people everywhere who have exercised their right to self-determination and self-actualization.

At the end of the day, there is a question for what this holds not only for Puerto Rico but for the entire world. I believe that we don't yet exist in a postcolonial world; we live in a very colonial world. Much of the world is still defined by neocolonial relationships, and much of it is defined by internal colonialism—as many countries have nationalities within their borders that are still colonial objects. All one has to do is look at is the western part of China, or what is happening in Afghanistan particularly with the Pashtuns. Nobody talks about the Kurds, and their right to self-determination.

I believe that the world is going to change. To the degree that we are able to create a system that ultimately will dignify people, we will live in a better balanced world. In such a world, we can create an interdependent system where the smallest identities of people can be preserved, languages that are disappearing will be encouraged to remain, and people will be able to practice their cultural expressions freely. We can create a world where people are not judged as inferior because of their racial or ethnic makeup. Ultimately, decolonizing efforts must take place all over the world, and Puerto Rico has to be part of that decolonizing effort. When we accomplish this, people will truly then be judged by the content of our character.

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