The University of Porto Rico: an island beacon

BY MUNA LEE, '12

Porto Rico—that "raft lost at sea," as Luis Muñoz Marín termed it in a mood of disillusion—smallest and most easterly of the Greater Antilles, is about 1,400 miles south and east of New York, some 1,000 miles east of Havana, and nine hundred away from Caracas, Venezuela. The Panama canal lies 1,000 miles to the southwest, and across nearly 3,500 miles of Atlantic is Cadiz, which was for generations the island's principal port of trade. Porto Rico today is not merely a possession of the United States: it is American. The flag floating above the massive walls of El Morro, the skyscrapers along the narrow ancient streets, the fluent English of schoolchild and business man, the volume of northward bound trade, all prove it. Yet, at the same time, Porto Rico of today is still Spanish. Glittering blue and orange tiles that flash from the facades of the alien skyscrapers, haunting overtones in the songs that laborers sing in the canefields and coffee-groves, the Spanish richly flavored with tropical idiom which businessman and schoolchild speaks at home, the proud and frequently evidenced sense of race, all prove it. Porto Rico, in short, is both things, consciously and constantly; and it is the psychological problem of the island—a problem of which the social, economic and educational phases are merely aspects—to reconcile the two. Active in this work of reconciliation, harmonization, and self-integration, is the island's university.

The University of Porto Rico, by virtue of its geographical position and its bi-cultural heritage, holds a unique place, as well as one of immense responsibility. A North American university in a Spanish American environment, its manifest task is to conserve the traditional Spanish culture which is the basis of the Porto Rican mind and temperament, and at the same time to bring to the island the best that can be offered by the United States, which has Porto Rico's future in its keeping. The young university celebrated its twenty-seventh anniversary March 12 of this year—is at the confluence of the two mighty streams, Spanish and Anglo-Saxon, (to employ the customary convenient if inexact nomenclature) which have enriched and reformed our hemisphere; and it must be judged by the manner in which it meets the obligations thereby entailed.

In the first place, the University of Porto Rico has faced its duties to its own people. Its widening influence as a Pan-American institution is due primarily to its close and successful attention to the task closest hand. It wins endorsement from without because it deals successfully with the task within. Porto Rico is densely populated; is remote, in a sense unknown, for instance, to Cuba, with its constant intercourse with the mainland and its numerous steamers; is poor, to a degree almost incredible to those who think of tropical islands as places where the problems of clothing, food and shelter resolve themselves automatically: and yet Porto Rico believes passionately—the adverb is not too strong—in education. After the hurricane which so recently desolated the island, the first spontaneous cry, was, "Don't close our schools!"— and that, though many of the schools were destroyed. Nevertheless, in makeshift structures, in private homes, or frankly out in the open under the shattered trees, classes went on even before rebuilding began. The university, with fallen columns and roofs ripped off and flung over its once beautiful campus, with library books damaged and laboratories dismantled resumed work within a few days. When so much else was necessarily given up in Porto Rico for the time being, education continued as the one necessity the island could not do without. Education is the Porto Rican's door of escape from the economic distress into which he is born; it is his bridge to the world from his tiny sea-girt land; it is his only means of making his existence known to an indifferent universe; and it is the one hope he will never let go.

The university's development during its twenty-seven years of existence has been by leaps and bounds rather than by mechanical propulsion; the development of vigorous eager vitality. The university now consists of the college of liberal arts, education, law, pharmacy, business administration, agriculture and engineering, and the school of tropical medicine. The University of Porto Rico through these units meets local problems, and incidentally, helps show the way to the solution of many problems not merely Hispanic but Pan American in scope. For instance the college of business administration is not theoretically but actually bilingual. Its graduates have a firsthand acquaintance with Spanish American and North American commercial procedure; they are practised in the two dominant languages of our hemisphere; they have become aware of the major difference in national methods. This college functions in Porto Rico in close collaboration with Boston university, and courses may be taken at one institution or the other. The favored procedure is to spend half the time in Boston, the other half in Rio Piedras, at the University of Porto Rico. Similarly, the school of tropical medicine in the few years of its existence has already made a name for itself among the schools of tropical medicine over the world. The only institution of its kind in the tropics under the Stars and Stripes, it is carried on as an integral graduate college of the University of Porto Rico, under the auspices of Columbia university.

The department of home economics of the university has made a systematic study of traditional Spanish and Porto Rican recipes, reducing them to scientific formulae, and has analyzed the food-value of many native vegetables, adapting the instruction in cookery and in other branches to the products of the island. Plantain is prepared in a dozen ways, for instance; the small indigenous egg-plant in as many. The traditional rice-and-chicken becomes protagonist of an interesting "one-piece" dinner. The Porto Rican baby's layette, too—in many ways necessarily different from a northern infant's outfit—has been carefully

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worked out in the sewing classes. Methods of making the island's typical and exquisite drawwork and pillow lace have been scientifically simplified, and new patterns designed with native leaf, vine, and flower as motif. Bulletins embodying these and other features of the work of the department have been widely useful not only in Porto Rico, but have circled the tropic zone of the world, sent in answer to requests from a dozen countries.

Perhaps the most striking example of the university's response to its environment, however, is presented by its department of Spanish studies. The recognition already accorded the young impoverished university, without friends a priori, and without the wealthy and influential alumni whose tangible benefits often make life possible to our modern universities; a school far from other educational centers, and struggling with the difficulties no less inherent than the advantages in its bi-lingual environment, is nothing short of amazing. Newspapers in a dozen countries—such periodicals as The New York Times, The New York World, The New York Herald-Tribune, La Prensa and La Nacion of Buenos Aires, El Diario de la Marina de Habana, and El Sol de Madrid, as well as leading papers in Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Nicaragua and Brazil—have during the past two years commented editorially, at length and with marked appreciation, upon the importance, from the standpoint of international understanding, of the work being done by the University of Porto Rico, working resolutely without becoming disheartened by its material lack. Don Ramon Menendez Pidal, president of the Royal Spanish Academy has commended its work and its program. Publicists and scholars in the two Americas, in Spain, in England, have expressed their interest in what the University of Porto Rico has already accomplished and their recognition of its importance as an intellectual liaison officer between the two cultures which divide the western hemisphere, the Hispanic and the English. Geography, as we have seen, and history, as we can but remember, have given Porto Rico a unique strategic position. Four hundred years ago the Conquistadors recognized and set down in terse Castilian the military importance of the island; and, as the great Spanish daily, El Sol, remarked last year in an editorial on the university, the strategic advantage culturally is no less great for an institution whose predestined purpose would seem to be that of interpreter and mutual friend of the two Americas.

Italian Fascism

accept the legitimacy of criticism would admit the political fallibility and imperfection of the government. The Fascists are, much like the Pope, infallible. Hulingier records for us the argument of a leading Fascist in support of the theory. He argued that a school teacher—and the Fascists are the teachers of Italy—could scarcely hope for success if some one stood in the rear of the room and informed the student that the instructor knew nothing about that of which he spoke. Heckling is a lost art in Italy.

The duty of Parliament is to aid the government. There is no such thing as responsible government in Italy. A quick decision is necessary to political progress. The flood of futile talk in the Italian Chamber of Deputies from 1919 to 1922 was, to Mussolini, proof of the impotence of the government. The latter was without a mandate, for it had no way of discovering the real policy of the House, if indeed it had one. This impasse gave to the people an opportunity, as well as an example, for sloth and laziness.

But hold! says Nitti. "Democracy demands that all viewpoints be heard." "Democracy be damned," answers Mussolini and his Fascists. "It is the ghost of the XIX Century." Democracy has currency only in a population with little gods. It has no compelling, inspirational value. Chuck it! It has never existed, and never will. (Therein shows the influence of Pareto, one of his chief mentors, who taught at the University of Lille when Mussolini was on "his travels." )

What a travesty to assume that all adult males are capable of intelligent participation in government! And as for woman suffrage, it would only add more weaklings to the electorate. Woman must now make him forget it. Her proper place is in the home. Her noblest work is procreation, the production of the superman, who shall dignify Italy by worthy prowess. The only true function of the electorate in government is to approve the governmental policy; and the new reform of 1928 emphasizes that point. The guilds suggest men for the Chamber of Deputies, the Fascist Grand Council selects them, and the electorate approves the list submitted in the election. There is but one list, one alternative to approval except non-voting.

Such is something of the nature of Fascist philosophy. It defines and redefines democracy and the idea of liberty. It marks a pragmatic revolt in politics, one that threatens to set a new value in political science. It is Machtpolitik to assume that Fascism has crushed democracy in Italy is, I believe, erroneous, for democracy, as France and the Anglo-Saxon nations understand it, has never existed in unified Italy. Giolitti was almost as much of a dictator as Mussolini, and all governments have exerted themselves, sometimes unaduly, to remain in power.

See especially Benito Mussolini, My Autobiography.

For a rather one-sided comparison see John Hefly, Pope or Mussolini, ch. 1.

For control over local government, see Lester K. Born, "What is the Potential?" American Political Science Review, XXI, 863-872 (November, 1927); also Paolo Monelli, Top Up.

This terrorism is not restricted to Italy. For the activities of Fascist agents provocateur in France, see E. C. Lindeman, "Fascist Supplicants in the United States," Nation, CXXI, No. 3401, 265-267, (September 10, 1930).

Francesco Nitti (The Younger), Escape, for an account of the suppression of anti-Fascist opinion.

For a favorable account see E. W. Hulingier, The New Fascist State, ch. v; see also Francesco Nitti, "Breakers Ahead for Fascist Italy," New Republic, LXIV, No. 820, (August 20, 1930); also Henry R. Spencer, "Political Developments in Italy," American Political Science Review, XXIII, 159-150, (February, 1929).

For account of Fascist censorship, see George Solden, You Can't Point That.

Hulingier, Supra, 44.

Francesco Nitti, Bolshevism, Fascism and Democracy.


For best account, see Henry R. Spencer, "Political Developments in Italy," American Political Science Review, XXII, 139-150, (February, 1929).