

Pa'lante: How the Young Lords Articulated a Radical Latino Political Consciousness

Derek Wakefield¹

Abstract

The Young Lords were a radical Puerto Rican group that established themselves as a potent political force in the early 1970s in urban Puerto Rican barrios. They represented a radical form of Latino consciousness that was often at odds with the more moderate, integration-oriented Hispanic identity that eventually came to represent mainstream Latino politics in the United States. But as they advocated for a radical socialist ideology in line with groups like the Black Panthers and Third World decolonization movements, they also emphasized community service provisions like healthcare, clothing drives, and education reform. Through these efforts, they carved out a form of Latino consciousness that merged radical critiques of capitalism, colonialism, and US treatment of racial minorities and the poor with Puerto Rican revolutionary ideology, support for feminist and anti-racist movements, and a focus on community-oriented political action. By analyzing this group, I connect their ideologies and actions with the construction of an alternative form of panethnicity that is focused primarily on radical critiques as opposed to moderate inclusion.

¹ Postdoctoral Fellow, Emory University Department of Political Science (djwakef@emory.edu)

Latino Identity Formation

The existence and salience of Latino/Hispanic² identity has become taken for granted in American politics as a way to describe a group of voters who are predicted to become the “largest racial or ethnic minority group in the electorate” after 2020 (Cilluffo and Fry 2019). Discussions about “the Latino vote” rest upon the assumed connection between individuals from groups like Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans, and others from Latin America (Barreto and Segura 2014; Calderón 1992; Garcia 2016; Padilla 1984). As a political strategy, the construction of a panethnic identity has arguably been quite successful at leveraging the growing population of Latinos in the United States into political, economic, and social influence for the group (Barreto, Collingwood, and Manzano 2010; García Bedolla 2005; Mora 2014; Valenzuela 2022). However, even today the exact nature of this panethnic identity has remained nebulous (Beltrán 2010). The traits that have been used to describe Latinos and Hispanics in the United States include Spanish-language usage, the immigration experience, an awareness of racial/ethnic difference, political marginalization, and generally lower socioeconomic status (Calderón 1992; Garcia 2016; Hero 1992; Padilla 1984). But for each of these traits, there are those under the panethnic umbrella who do not possess one or more of any given ascribed characteristic.³ Therefore, evaluating the impact of Latino panethnicity in American politics requires a constructivist understanding of identity that treats its eventual

² Throughout this article, I primarily use “Latino” for the purpose of clarity but also use “Hispanic” to describe a more moderate manifestation of panethnic identity.

³ Many American-born Latinos do not speak Spanish; many Mexicans were living in Mexican territory that was annexed by the United States after the Mexican American War, and Puerto Ricans are American citizens; many Latinos are either phenotypically white or Black; and finally, many individual Latinos have attained economic, educational, and political success. See Beltrán (2010) for a more rigorous exploration of Latino diversity.

manifestations as a result of situationally-dependent processes rather than as a natural or foregone conclusion (Chandra 2012; Lee 2008; Sen and Wasow 2016).

A notable example of research addressing the process of cultivating panethnicity is Cristina Mora's book *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (2014). She provides a highly informative historical overview of the development of Hispanic panethnicity as a potent force in a variety of arenas, including civic organizing, government institutions, and Spanish-language media. Her account emphasizes the eventual ascendance of a moderate Hispanic identity that proved amenable to entrenched power structures, particularly the Census Bureau, Spanish-language media, and companies interested in the "Hispanic market," while also remaining connected to grassroots organizations like the National Council of La Raza and Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. However, she also describes the critiques of this process that emanated from a variety of radical organizations including Chicano groups like La Raza Unida and Puerto Rican groups like the Young Lords. These groups expressed unease at the growing incorporation of a moderate Hispanic identity into mainstream American society and emphasized the need for more fundamental critiques of issues like racism, colonialism, and economic marginalization (Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez 2010; Jeffries 2003; Melendez 2005; Ramos-Zayas 2003). Due to her focus on the incorporation of a politically potent – but more moderate and assimilationist – Hispanic identity, Mora necessarily spends less time on these radical voices due to their relative marginality in American politics (Sánchez 2007). In this article, I use Mora's work as a reference point for the emergence and ascendance of a "Hispanic" panethnic identity that emphasizes incorporation into broader American society. But contrarily to this conception of moderate panethnicity, I also argue that many Latino political groups – such as the Young Lords – articulated a radical form of

panethnicity that was centered around self-determination and resistance to American society rather than inclusion within it (Sánchez 2007; Thomas 2010). This alternative conception of panethnicity can also provide an effective lens for understanding the development of more confrontational forms of politics by some Latino activists, whose goals and methods are often quite different than the assimilationist politics pursued by mainstream Hispanic and Latino organizations.

A seminal piece in Latino politics that theorizes alternative forms of panethnicity is Cristina Beltrán's book *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (2010). Her primary contention is that a variety of Latino groups, politicians, and activists have emphasized a discourse about unity among Latinos that, while often effective at achieving programmatic goals and greater political representation, has ignored the existence of diversity and disagreement between many Latino groups. An example of this is feminist issues, which Beltrán argues were sidelined within Latino politics because it threatened images of group cohesion. This resulted in women's issues largely being ignored by Latino organizations, consistent with other research demonstrating the negative effects of intersectional/secondary marginalization within single-identity groups (Crenshaw 1991; Strolovitch 2008).⁴ While the discourses that dominate much of Latino politics continue to emphasize unity and cohesion, this work provides a theoretical basis for a more nuanced and critical understanding of panethnic identity that acknowledges the existence of differences and disagreements between Latinos and

⁴ "Secondary marginalization" refers to the process through which single-identity organizations (e.g. women's movements, ethnic/racial identity groups, LGBT groups, etc.) tend to favor issues emphasized by members who are only marginalized along the group's primary identity (e.g. white women in women's organizations) and to ignore issues that affect secondarily/intersectionally marginalized groups (e.g. Latina women, trans women). See Strolovitch (2008) for theorization and empirical examples of this phenomenon.

within their organizations and social movements. This understanding allows for a theorization of multiple pathways for panethnicity to operate; these include both moderate-assimilationist and radical-confrontational forms of Latino consciousness and political behavior.

Radical Latino Panethnicity and the Young Lords

To develop this theorization of multiple constructions of panethnicity, I focus on the development of a radical Latino panethnic consciousness by a prominent militant Puerto Rican group active during the late 1960s and early 1970s – the Young Lords.⁵ This group is intriguing for addressing questions regarding alternative forms of panethnicity because of their conceptions of Latino consciousness as a global, coalition-oriented project centered around resistance to the structural forces that persistently marginalize not just Puerto Ricans and Latinos, but people of color, Third World nations, and even women of all races (Fernández 2020; Jeffries 2003; Morales 2016; Nelson 2001).⁶ Their most successful acts of resistance focused squarely on issues facing the Puerto Rican community in the United States, and their work is framed around critiquing the negative impact of American policy on the poor and on racial minorities. Their anti-colonial perspective emerges from their linkage of decolonization movements to Puerto Rican independence (Thomas 2010), and their coalitional strategies are demonstrated by them being founding members of the Rainbow Coalition alongside the Black Panthers and the Young

⁵ I primarily focus on the Young Lords in New York City because they were more explicitly engaged in questions of ideology relative to the Chicago branch, and they often disputed with one another (Jeffries 2003; Thomas 2010). However, I also draw on relevant sources about the Young Lords in Chicago as well.

⁶ One fascinating exchange captures this dynamic: in an answer to a question about the women's liberation movement of the 1960s-70s, a Young Lords Party leader acknowledged their shared cause with women ("We say right on to any women who are revolutionaries... they have to deal with the white man... they've got to fight their husbands and their fathers.") but also critiqued the predominantly-white women's movement for failing to acknowledge issues of racism and colonialism (Nelson 2001).

Patriots, a radical militant white organization (Jeffries, Dyson, and Jones 2010; Ogbar 2006). Their support for feminist movements and focus on reproductive justice also presents a notable departure from many other Latino/Hispanic movements emerging at the time, who generally did not focus on issues primarily affecting women (Beltrán 2010; Morales 2016; Nelson 2001).

Most importantly, the Young Lords are notable due to their long-term impact on Puerto Rican politics and Latino radicalism in general despite their organizational ephemerality. In his book *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States* (2007), José Ramón Sánchez claims that while the Young Lords organization was relatively short-lived, they left a huge mark on Puerto Rican politics by providing an example of resistance and power that helped push Puerto Rican issues towards the forefront of national politics, particularly through dramatic public acts of resistance. These acts included taking accumulated garbage left in their barrios into affluent areas of New York City and lighting them on fire, and occupying churches in order to provide medical care and other services to local community members (Melendez 2005; Sánchez 2007). I build upon these previous works by connecting the Young Lords and their conception of radical Puerto Rican politics with constructions of radical Latino panethnicity. In doing so, I argue that the Young Lords articulated a form of Latino panethnic consciousness that was often at odds with the more moderate and assimilationist Hispanic identity that became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s (Mora 2014; Thomas 2010). Furthermore, this strand of panethnicity may be seen as just one manifestation of a broader radical Latino consciousness that emerged among other groups like the Chicano movement and the 2006 pro-immigrant protests (Klor de Alva 2017; Zepeda-Millán 2017). Therefore, analyzing the Young Lords helps expand our knowledge of the organizational, ideological, and political tradition of Latino radicalism in the United States.

Methodological Approach: Political Process Model

The methodological approach⁷ I adopt is largely inspired by Doug McAdam's Political Process Model because of its utility in explaining the genesis and cultivation of insurgent political social movements (Armato and Caren 2002; Caren 2007; McAdam 1982). First, I will analyze the pre-existing mobilizing structures that informed the Young Lords, especially the long-running traditions of Puerto Rican nationalism and previous efforts at incorporating Puerto Ricans into the political system like the NYC Mayor's Advisory Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs (MACPRA) and the unique impact of East Harlem's Congressman Vito Marcantonio. In particular, I draw upon Lorrin Thomas's book *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City* (2010) which provides an extensive historical overview of these topics along with discussions of the politics of "recognition" pursued by Puerto Ricans, including the Young Lords, throughout the 20th century. Subsequent sections will detail the ideology, behavior, and impact of the Young Lords. I will evaluate the political opportunities the Young Lords produced, focusing on their emergence as a community-oriented political force. I will also describe the role of framing processes and contentious repertoires, such as their public displays of rebellion and the articulation of radical, anti-colonial, feminist ideology, due to their ability to explain long-term shifts in ideology and movement strategies. Throughout this analysis, I will focus primarily on connecting these components to the eventual synthesis of a radical Latino identity that situates Puerto Ricans and other Latinos as coequal with and/or oppositional to, rather than participants within, mainstream United States society. To do this, I also draw upon José Ramón Sánchez's (2007) theorization of power as a dance

⁷ Note that in this draft, I have yet to conduct any archival analysis and am relying on secondary sources. As I will detail at the end of this draft, future archival research connecting primary sources to my arguments will be crucial for developing this paper beyond pre-existing literature.

between those in the mainstream and those on the margins, where “power” is defined as having the interest of another group.⁸ This conception of power is helpful for delineating the disagreements and differences between moderate (Hispanic) and radical (Latino) panethnicity within American politics by identifying the structure that determines the “moves” available to each group while retaining the possibility for exercises of agency – either through assimilation, alienation, or resistance.

Moderate Promises, Radical Critiques: Puerto Rican History and Nationalism

Before analyzing the Young Lords directly, I present the pre-existing mobilizing structures from Puerto Rican history and Puerto Rican urban politics. The story of large-scale Puerto Rican politics in the United States begins with the island’s acquisition in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, with Puerto Ricans being extended full American citizenship after the passage of the Jones Act of 1917 (Thomas 2010). The discourses surrounding this legislation provide a snapshot of the precarious and often patronizing position taken by the United States towards its new colonial subjects, which was reflected in documents labelling Puerto Ricans a “mongrel” race due to the intermixing of European, African, and indigenous lineages (ibid). This discourse coincided with rising levels of racism and xenophobia in America at the time,⁹ and

⁸ A comprehensive explanation of Sánchez’s theory is beyond the scope of this article. The most crucial insight from his metaphor of power as a dance is that power does not exist simply in having “things” i.e., economic power, nor in cultural or even political power. Instead, power emerges from having the interest of other parties. Due to the history of white supremacy and capitalism in America, these sources of power tend to emerge from already-privileged groups like majority-white society, the affluent, and mainstream culture. However, groups that gain the interest of others (Sánchez uses the Civil Rights movement and the commercial success of hip-hop as an example of power gained by Blacks) are able to then translate this interest into more sustained influence. He argues that Puerto Ricans have historically failed to gain such interest, with the Young Lords as a notable exception.

⁹ Examples of this include President Wilson’s segregation of federal agencies, and legislation in 1920 placing great restrictions on immigration. Importantly, however, the 1920 immigration law

reflected disagreements within American political thought regarding the role of “diversity” – i.e. the status of people of color – in American democracy (Bateman 2019). These disagreements revealed the tensions between what Rogers Smith calls the “multiple traditions” in America, which include liberal egalitarianism, republicanism, and ascriptive (i.e. racist and sexist) Americanism (Smith 1993). While Puerto Ricans were extended full legal citizenship, this extension arguably became a false guarantee of full recognition as Americans in light of persistent discrimination and marginalization (Thomas 2010). Such critiques of American treatment of Puerto Ricans, both on the island and the mainland, persisted up to, during, and beyond the time of the Young Lords. They also present a key formulation of radical Latino resistance by demonstrating the precarious, unequal position of Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups within the United States.

These critical perspectives also played a key role during the many Puerto Rican nationalist and independence movements which emerged at various times throughout the 20th century. They framed their desire for independence and self-determination for Puerto Ricans by emphasizing the disjuncture between the promises of American liberalism and the reality of American colonialism on the island and its poor treatment of migrants (Thomas 2010). These unmet liberal promises included the expansion of the social welfare state during the New Deal and support for decolonization movements post-World War 2; contrarily, the realities of American treatment entailed exploitation of Puerto Rican labor by American companies, the presence of numerous military bases on the island, and the harsh treatment of Puerto Rican

did not restrict migration from the Western Hemisphere, meaning that Puerto Rican migration rates were unaffected by the law (Thomas 2010).

protesters both on the island and the mainland.¹⁰ These movements emphasized the disjointedness of American ideals of liberty and equality with the country's possession of colonial holdings and lack of equal treatment for Puerto Ricans and other racial minority groups. Emphases on these contradictions between American liberalism and ascriptivism (Smith 1993) were used frequently by many Puerto Rican nationalist groups, including the Young Lords. These critiques play a crucial role in the articulation of a radical Latino consciousness by framing American liberalism as a set of promises that, while achievable for many upwardly mobile Latinos, remain out of reach for many others. While individual Puerto Ricans may gain power for themselves by bolstering their education, achieving professional status, and pursuing assimilation, these moves fail to fundamentally change the marginal position of many other Puerto Ricans and Latinos within American society (Ramos-Zayas 2003, 2003; Sánchez 2007). These moderate and radical strategies demonstrate the variety of possibilities for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos and provide an effective backdrop for analyzing the pre-existing organizations that would have preceded the Young Lords.

Competing Radical and Moderate Visions: Congressman Marcantonio and MACPRA

To historically situate the eventual emergence of the Young Lords, I firstly analyze preexisting groups and important individuals who articulated both liberal and radical visions of Puerto Rican politics. Two historically powerful actors that strived to represent Puerto Rican

¹⁰ The island protests included nationalist (most prominently led by Pedro Albizu Campos), socialist movements, and anti-military demonstrations (Melendez 2005; Thomas 2010). Similarly, protests on the mainland included strikes by cigar-makers in 1919, acts of violence like the attempted assassination of President Truman in 1950 and an armed attack in the House chamber in the U.S. Capitol in 1954 that wounded five members of Congress, and other forms of protest by the Young Lords and other groups (Sánchez 2007; Thomas 2010)

politics in New York City exemplify this interplay. These examples show both the benefits and potential dangers for radical and moderate strategies at seeking power.

On the radical side, East Harlem's member of Congress Vito Marcantonio identified explicitly with leftist and socialist causes and established himself as a representative of the Puerto Rican community in the city (Sánchez 2007; Thomas 2010). He cultivated an extensive network of mutual support through service provision in return for political support amongst Puerto Rican communities in New York City from the 1930s through the 1950s. He also supported nationalist causes, most explicitly by visiting the island and legally representing nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos after he was arrested in connection with protests on the island that became violent (ibid). While he was eventually delegitimized due to his socialist ties during McCarthyism, he remained one of the staunchest advocates for Puerto Ricans in the national government (ibid). His linkage of the political and economic marginalization of Puerto Ricans with a critique of American imperialism may well have been a template for the future radical ideologies of the Young Lords. However, his eventual downfall due to his association with socialist politics is mirrored in the issues eventually faced by the Young Lords and their connections to militant radicalism.

An example of moderate accommodation that engaged in similar service work but had quite different political goals and ideologies compared to Marcantonio is the New York City Mayor's Advisory Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs (MACPRA). This organization was created largely due to fears of Puerto Rican radicalism in the midst of the Cold War, and was arguably formed to directly cut into the support of Marcantonio (Sánchez 2007). While MACPRA included both liberal professionals and Puerto Rican elites, the Puerto Ricans who participated were disproportionately moderate/professionals themselves – a trend which recurred

throughout efforts to incorporate Puerto Ricans into city politics (Aponte-Parés 1998). Both Sánchez (2007) and Thomas (2010) argue that these organizations, while generally effective at providing important services, treated the majority of working-class and poor Puerto Ricans as patients to be managed rather than as co-equals deserving of recognition and respect. And while MACPRA provided a significant number of resources and services to Puerto Ricans for a while, this support eventually dried up as the threat of Puerto Rican radicalism also receded (Sánchez 2007). This dynamic illustrates the possible gains of gaining mainstream interest, whereby threats of radicalism within the Puerto Rican community motivate moderate efforts by dominant political institutions at accommodation and incorporation (ibid). However, it also shows the potential limits of this strategy, as the very successes of attention and incorporation can reduce the external pressures that produced that same mainstream support. Such tensions between mainstream attention and indigenous organization show both the benefits and pitfalls of moderate strategies of inclusion, a tightrope that the Young Lords also navigated during their rise to prominence.

From Gangsters to Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Young Lords

During the 1960s and 1970s, radical militant groups exploded onto the American political landscape. The Black Panthers are generally seen as the “vanguard” party of radical militant movements articulating critiques of American treatment of racial minorities and advocating for militant, often violent responses to issues like police brutality, poverty, lack of ethnic education, and persistent political marginalization of people of color (Rhodes 2017). The Young Lords were heavily inspired by the Black Panthers and from the substrates of Puerto Rican urban politics in the United States (Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez 2010). Along with the militant white group the Young Patriots, the Black Panthers and the Young Lords founded the “Rainbow

Coalition” and supported one another throughout their numerous political actions (Jeffries, Dyson, and Jones 2010; NCCCC 1970a). The rise of these groups provided numerous political opportunities for historically marginalized groups and provided a blueprint for a new form of radical politics that eschewed moderate goals of inclusion. Around this same time, the Chicano movement was mobilizing around issues facing Mexican Americans in the Southwest and elsewhere (Klor de Alva 2017; Rodriguez 1998). While their goals and methods were closer to that of the Civil Rights movement than the more militant Black Panthers, they also presented Spanish-speaking minority groups around the United States with an example of Latino-led resistance to American society.

The Young Lords began in the late 1950s as one of many street gangs in Puerto Rican barrios in Chicago, but eventually became one of the most nationally prominent radical Puerto Rican organizations in American history (Jeffries 2003; Melendez 2005; Sánchez 2007). Much of what we know about the Young Lords today comes from their political magazine *Pa'lante*, which in Spanish is a contraction of the phrase “straight ahead/to the front” (*para adalante*). Their shift towards political organizing occurred in the late 1960s as many of the gang’s members began connecting personal experiences, such as racial discrimination and economic marginalization they faced on a daily basis as Puerto Ricans in urban ghettos, with structural and ideological critiques of broader systems like capitalism, colonialism, and American foreign policy during the Cold War (Pa'lante 1970d). At an early stage, they adopted many of the aesthetics of the Black Panthers with their own twists, such as purple berets and a “military cool” style (Negrón-Muntaner 2015). Other chapters began sprouting up in other cities with large Puerto Rican populations, with New York City’s chapter soon taking the lead for the entire organization. The NYC chapter argued that the founding Chicago members were not disciplined

or politically oriented enough and decided to create a new organization, which they called the Young Lords Party (Pa'lante 1970i). While the Chicago chapter continued to engage in political activism as well, a large portion of the ideological literature, media engagement, and leadership would come from the NYC branch.

The Radical Ideology of the Young Lords Party

At this stage of the organization's history,¹¹ the Young Lords engaged in a mixture of ideological development, education, and community service provision. The Young Lords had two main organizational ideologies: Puerto Rican nationalism and radical internationalist socialism. From Puerto Rican nationalism, they drew upon a long history of resistance to Spanish and American control of the island, arguing that the Puerto Rican people – both on the island and the mainland – constituted a nation that was being consistently oppressed as a colony (Young Lords Party 1970). Revolutionaries like Pedro Albizu Campos and Lolita Lebron appeared frequently in the party's newspaper *Pa'lante*, and educating Puerto Ricans about this history of resistance and revolution was one of the main goals of the Young Lords (Pa'lante 1970d). This framing of Puerto Ricans as a colonized population was a crucial framing device for linking the struggles of Puerto Ricans in the United States with other communities of color in the U.S. (including Chicanos, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans) and Third World populations like those in Latin America, China and Vietnam.

¹¹ In the latter years of the organization (after they changed their name to the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, PRRWO), the group was specifically focused on Maoist-Marxist-Leninist ideology and organizing workers as a revolutionary vanguard (PRRWO 1972). I spend more time on the earlier group because they engaged more explicitly with questions of Latino consciousness and engaged more with community services provisions; this time is generally seen as the high point of the organization (Jeffries 2003).

However, much of the Young Lords' ideology was a synthesis of multiple ideologies, including populism, feminism, and anti-racism, that were only infrequently combined amongst other revolutionary nationalist organizations. They critiqued previous Puerto Rican nationalist movements for their overreliance on liberal leadership rather than class-based, community-oriented political action (Pa'lante 1970a). Additionally, they explicitly supported feminist movements emerging at the time and pushed against sexism and gendered divisions of labor within their ranks. While they had some initial issues addressing issues of machismo and homophobia, the Young Lords had many women in leadership positions and explicitly supported issues like reproductive justice and gender equality. Their focus on fighting for community medical rights, for example, often centered on access to legal and safe abortions (Nelson 2001). Furthermore, they adopted language that emphasized the social construction of gender¹² in order to critique gender roles that they argued constrained both men and women, such as by arguing that men should be more emotional and perform more domestic tasks, while women should be less submissive and should exercise their leadership skills (Young Lords Party 1970). Lastly, the Young Lords explicitly targeted racism within the Puerto Rican community, which they asserted was both moral and a necessity because of the large racial diversity within the population. But far from absolving themselves of racism or simply blaming it on white prejudice, a central frame they undertook was to recognize the structural origins of racism, to admit and attack their own internalized racist beliefs, and to acknowledge that most white people (especially the poor) should not be blamed for what the Lords saw as a distraction tactic by the rich capitalist class

¹² They argued that the only difference between men and women are biological – “women have a womb and ovaries and make eggs, and men manufacture sperm” – and that any further gendered differences are the result of social processes. Furthermore, they argued these processes pushed men into performing “machismo” and women into submissiveness, with damaging consequences for both groups (Young Lords Party 1970).

(ibid). By linking these ideologies under one organization, they connected anti-racist and feminist ideologies with anti-capitalist, people-driven struggle, arguing that coalitions between the poor, working class, and student class¹³ – regardless of race and gender – was a crucial step towards collective liberation (Guzmán 1970).¹⁴ Through this framing, they connected their local struggles with the internationalist socialist movement.

This connection is a crucial component for drawing a distinction between moderate and radical forms of panethnic consciousness. The moderate form of panethnicity that was only just starting to be formulated at the time of the Young Lords focused on incorporating Latinos into American society, with the expectation that the group would eventually assimilate like previous ethnic immigrant groups; this was often called the “Juan Q. Citizen” image of Puerto Rican-ness (Thomas 2010). The Young Lords pushed back strongly on these efforts, arguing that inclusion within American capitalist society would forestall more radical efforts at structural change, and that even successful Puerto Rican and Latino individuals would find themselves continually marginalized despite their successes (Pa’lante 1970f).¹⁵ While moderate panethnicity emphasizes inclusion and integration within American society (Mora 2014), radical conceptions of

¹³ Within these classes, generating solidarity between the lumpen (permanently unemployable) and workers was the most important step, since these groups were often pitted against one another despite their many similarities (many lumpen were formerly workers who were laid off or disabled by dangerous conditions). A similar dynamic connected many of the workers and students, since most Puerto Rican students were the children of workers.

¹⁴ In the same article, Young Lords department head Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán pushes against viewing their struggle as one against “white folk” because assuming that all white people are the problem forecloses any possibility of coalitions. While he acknowledges that most rich capitalists are white men and recognizes that many white people will oppose their movement, he points to examples like the Young Patriots to show that radical whites can and should be a part of their revolutionary socialist coalition as well.

¹⁵ Examples of this rhetoric includes the following quotes: “Why no [Puerto Rican] capitalism? Don’t ever think you’ll compete with General Motors” (Pa’lante 1970f), “Why don’t we have the same rights that [whites] have?... So what if we were born here. That’s like a cat being born in a stable and calling himself a horse.” (Pa’lante 1970b)

panethnicity connect the struggles of Latino groups in the United States to critiques of more global structures like capitalism and imperialism. This conception of panethnicity, reflected in the Young Lords' support for Third World decolonization movements, connects the Latino population in the United States to other populations worldwide that are marginalized by global capitalist structures (Guzmán 1970). From this conception, Latino panethnicity then becomes a framing device to critique not just the unequal treatment of Latinos in the United States, but the broader structural forces that produce and perpetuate that unequal treatment. This allows for a politicized panethnic identity that, while still connected to Latino identity, has additional traction in generating coalitions with other groups and articulating demands for structural changes rather than just inclusion and citizenship within the American mainstream.

Community-Oriented Political Action

In addition to the ideological focus of much of Young Lords' materials, the group also spent a significant amount of time on community activism and service provision. Their efforts were initially focused on the immediate issues faced by Puerto Rican communities in urban slums, which included police brutality, lack of medical and sanitation services, poverty, drug addiction, decaying homes, and lack of proper education and childcare (Enck-Wanzer, Morales, and Oliver-Velez 2010). The three most prominent examples of their activism were the "Garbage Offensive," the "The People's Church," their "Ten-Point Plan" for reforming the NYC hospital system, and their support for reproductive justice.

The Garbage Offensive

In the "Garbage Offensive," the Young Lords participated in previous community efforts to protest sanitation but added their own spark, gaining massive attention in the process. For

years, residents of the Puerto Rican barrios in NYC had decried the lack of garbage collection and had often taken their trash and dumped it in more affluent, majority-white neighborhoods nearby. The Young Lords lent their assistance and then some – they firstly lit the huge piles of garbage on fire, and then barricaded the streets to prevent passage without their approval.¹⁶ This generated a huge media firestorm and presented the Young Lords with their first big public victory (Young Lords Organization 1969). It also showed the potential for disruption and confrontation to provide success, both for the organization and for the community they represented, although such action generally did not result in long-term change (Sánchez 2007). The broad reach of the offensive also relied upon the made-for-TV image of garbage burning in the middle of New York City; only efforts that had such media-friendly frames were effective at generating broader interest in Puerto Rican issues (ibid).

The People's Church

“The People’s Church” was a more long-term set of efforts centered around pressuring local churches within the community to open their spaces for community services like hot breakfast, childcare, and education in the ideology of the Young Lords. They targeted a church in the center of the Puerto Rican barrio that the Young Lords claimed took resources from the community but maintained a rigid, hierarchical structure that rarely took into account the needs of the mostly poor Puerto Rican population in the area (NCCCC 1970c).¹⁷ For several weeks in November and December of 1969, members of the Young Lords attended service and requested

¹⁶ During these protests, a Young Lord was arrested under dubious charges (he was accused of burglary for having a screwdriver on his person). Roughly three hundred Young Lords marched on the police station and were able to free their imprisoned member without violence.

¹⁷ NCCCC refers to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, the largest partnership of Christian churches and faith groups in the United States.

to speak but were never recognized. After one of these encounters, police officers hidden in the crowd violently accosted members of the Young Lords, resulting in numerous arrests and hospitalizations (ibid). In response, two weeks later the Young Lords forcefully occupied the church and began providing childcare, clothes, and hot breakfasts for members of the community from within the building. After several days, police officers broke down barricades and arrested all of the members involved.

Roughly a year later, a member of the Young Lords died under suspicious circumstances in an infamous local prison, sparking further desire for action. In response, in October of 1970 the Young Lords repeated their occupation of the church but this time brandished firearms during their actions (NCCCC 1970b). While a tense standoff with police followed, they were still able to provide hot breakfast, clothes, and childcare to the community. Additionally, when it appeared that a violent confrontation was inevitable, the Young Lords hatched an ingenious plan that leveraged their status within the community – they disassembled their firearms, distributed them amongst local community members, and slowly smuggled the weapons out of the church (Sánchez 2007).¹⁸ Once there were no more weapons in their possession, the Young Lords surrendered to police and were arrested without any deaths. While these actions were a huge escalation both in scale and threat of violence, they succeeded in gaining the attention of large national religious organizations. These groups, after seeking testimony from the Young Lords leadership, were quite amenable to the critiques and demands of the organization, which included arguments related to Christ’s revolutionary nature, the need for Christianity to support

¹⁸ One account detailed how “old ladies” strapped gun parts to their legs and hid them beneath their skirts. Once the guns had left the church, the Young Lords were then able to reassemble them and maintain their arsenal.

the poor, and the Young Lords' reluctance to use violence (NCCCC 1970b).¹⁹ A similar action by the Chicago branch of the Young Lords, who occupied a local seminary in their community, resulted in a massive (if temporary) monetary grant by Protestant congregations for low-income housing, a health clinic, and a law office (Cardoza 2018; Jeffries 2003). Although these efforts did not result in long-term structural changes, they arguably represented the high-point of media exposure and mainstream influence for the organization (Sánchez 2007). They also showed that a commitment to fighting for the community can become a powerful framing device both for the organization and Puerto Rican community, and for gaining support from outside sources (Jeffries 2003).

The 10-Point Plan

A third set of general efforts that the Young Lords focused on was hospital reforms and reproductive justice. They framed these efforts in a broader context of human rights and justice, arguing that “drug addiction, inadequate housing, inferior medical services [and forced sterilization] all contribute to the slow killing off of our people” (Pa'lante 1970e). Their demands were summarized in the 10-Point plan they publicized in *Pa'lante*, which included support for medical services that were self-determined and community-oriented, publicly supported healthcare, and education on a variety of health-related issues including door-to-door visits and regular inspections of residential hazards like pests and decay (Young Lords Organization 1970). While they never engaged in the same headline-topping displays of outward resistance as the

¹⁹ One Lord argued that “If Christ were alive today, he would be a Young Lord.” The reluctance of their turn to violence was justified by arguing that the threat of violence was necessary to gain community services; this was likely taken much more credibly because nobody was killed in the encounter despite the firearms involved, and the only major violence was committed by the police (NCCCC 1970b).

Garbage Offensive or People's Church, they organized the majority-Puerto Rican and Black hospital workers. Together with the Black Panthers, they also occupied unused floors of hospitals in order to provide healthcare and tuberculosis tests with the assistance of sympathetic doctors (Pa'lante 1970g). Their framing of these efforts was to directly attack the capitalistic underpinnings of American healthcare. They critiqued the rationing of life-saving medicine for those who could afford it, as the hospitals that primarily served the Puerto Rican community were under-resourced and staffed by trainees and doctors with poor records (Pa'lante 1970c). The most egregious example of this mistreatment was the death of the first Puerto Rican woman to seek a legal abortion in New York because the doctor conducting the procedure administered a medication that interacted fatally with a previously diagnosed heart condition; the Young Lords claimed that the doctor had simply not read what was on her file (Pa'lante 1970e). Another example was the lack of preventative efforts taken to combat tuberculosis. After seizing a truck filled with TB testing kits, the Young Lords found that more than a third of those they tested from the barrio were positive for the disease (Pa'lante 1970h). They claimed that many of these poor health outcomes could have been prevented with adequate medical care, and that because healthcare was motivated by profit, most Puerto Ricans could not afford such services.

Abortions Under Community Control

Another medical issue that the Young Lords pushed to the forefront was reproductive justice (Nelson 2001). As previously mentioned, despite laws protecting the legal right to abortion in New York state, the lack of sanitary or well-staffed facilities meant that many Puerto Rican women seeking an abortion would be risking their lives. Furthermore, many of these services were heavily rationed despite large demand – one statistic claimed that only three abortions were performed daily, with a backlog of over three hundred requests that meant many

women would either have more dangerous late-term abortions or be unable to have one at all (Pa'lante 1970e). Another issue facing Puerto Ricans was a history of coerced sterilization on the island and mainland propagated by the US government and medical service providers. Fearing the growth of Puerto Rican populations, efforts were undertaken to encourage permanent sterilization as the preferred contraceptive amongst Puerto Rican communities. Furthermore, Puerto Rican women were often used as test subjects for new forms of contraception, many of which had hugely adverse long-term consequences and were subsequently never officially approved (Nelson 2001). These histories of coerced sterilization and contraceptive testing were major points of contention for the Young Lords, who argued that such policies constituted a slow genocide of the Puerto Rican population. By advocating for community control of abortions, the Young Lords staked out a simultaneously feminist and nationalist policy agenda that dovetailed with their other efforts at addressing sexism and other gender issues. While organizations based on Latino panethnicity have not always been amenable to such agendas (Beltrán 2010), the Young Lords demonstrated that a radical Latino consciousness can – and arguably should – reflect an awareness of feminist issues and reproductive justice.

Discussion

These community service projects played a crucial role in how the Young Lords framed their organizational mission. While they emphasized ideology and education throughout their efforts, they also acknowledged that engagement with the community on issues that matter on a day-to-day basis were crucial for the success of their educational goals (Guzmán 1970).

Additionally, their emphasis on serving the community over ideological purity (at least before their transition into an explicitly Maoist-Marxist-Leninist organization) arguably facilitated both their ability to connect with the broader Puerto Rican community and their engagement with the

American media. While they advocated militancy for self-defense purposes, they never engaged in the same form of unprovoked violence propagated by previous Puerto Rican nationalist groups or other militant groups like the Black Panthers. However, this lack of aggression was often criticized by the future manifestations of the Young Lords like the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Worker's Organization (PRRWO), and a lack of explicit aggression did not stop efforts by the FBI and COINTELPRO to infiltrate and delegitimize the organization (Sánchez 2007). With all of that being said, the long-term impact of the Young Lords would likely be much different if they were associated with large-scale violence rather than community service provision, even if such community service happened with the looming threat of firearms. And neither of these strategies produced an organization with long-term impact – after shifting their organizational focus towards an explicit focus on “correct” Communist ideology as the PRRWO, the group experienced massive demoralization and ceased to exist within a few years (Jeffries 2003; Sánchez 2007). Although ephemeral, the Young Lords presented Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and America at large with an image of Latino resistance that shows both the power and limitations of such strategies.

Conclusion:

These arguments regarding the articulation of multiple Latino/Hispanic panethnicities should not be taken as a critique of the salience, importance, or utility of these identities. A vibrant and rapidly growing literature in Latino politics demonstrates the transformative capacity of Latino panethnicity, both for Latinos and American politics in general (Barreto, Collingwood, and Manzano 2010; Barreto and Segura 2014; Cruz 2010; García Bedolla 2005; Meier 2008; Mora 2014; Valenzuela 2022; Zepeda-Millán 2017). However, I agree with Beltrán's (2010) contentions that a focus on a single, unified conception of panethnic identification runs the risk

of essentializing the experiences of certain groups over others within the very organizations that have the power to advocate for all people and groups who may fit under the panethnic umbrella (Strolovitch 2008).

These acknowledgements of diversity and difference between Latinos in the United States has been a crucial framing for many important pieces of research in Latino politics (García Bedolla 2005; Pérez 2015; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016). This perspective can help scholars adopt a more nuanced view of Latino politics that acknowledges both the general trends within Latino populations, such as support for Democrats and pro-immigration policies, while also understanding the behavior and ideologies of conservative Latinos who are often not described by these aggregate descriptions (Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018). This research also contributes to a growing awareness within studies of identity and race/ethnic politics that identity is often a dependent variable and should be treated as an outcome as often as it is seen as an explanatory factor (Egan 2019; Mora 2014; Nix and Qian 2015; Valenzuela 2022).

Finally, this work provides a historical example of the multiple strategies of Latino panethnic construction and identity construction in general. The Young Lords emerged at a particular historical time, when militancy and radicalism seemed ascendant within many communities of color (Jeffries, Dyson, and Jones 2010). Although the Young Lords reached national prominence for only a few years, they played a major role in the development of an alternative form of Puerto Rican politics that pushed back against trends towards inclusion and moderation (Sánchez 2007). Existing in historical space, it would be difficult to consider counterfactuals regarding a Puerto Rican or Latino politics without such radical voices, and it must be acknowledged that the dominant form of Hispanic panethnicity that emerged after the Young Lords had faded away represented a much more moderate vision that provided greater

opportunities for upward mobility and inclusion for many Latinos in the United States (Mora 2014).

Still, the images, ideologies, and legacy of the Young Lords continue to represent a moment for Puerto Rican sovereignty and power that deserves attention within American history and studies of Puerto Rican and Latino politics (Jeffries 2003; Negrón-Muntaner 2015; Sánchez 2007; Thomas 2010). They show the potential for a radical Latino consciousness that continually critiques the unequal treatment of Latinos within the United States, which is continually reflected in issues like the mistreatment of undocumented immigrants and the lack of aid for Puerto Rico in the wake of devastating natural disasters. Such radical critiques may not always coexist peacefully with more moderate inclusion-oriented efforts, but perhaps both are necessary for Latinos to gain fair treatment and recognition.

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