

## The Recent Rhetoric Brings Up and Old Question: What is Puerto Rico to the US Empire?

By Jose Atilas

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With a racist, dehumanizing and not-even-funny joke by a featured comedian at a recent Trump rally in New York City, Puerto Rico (PR) entered the US presidential campaign as it often does—unexpectedly, forcibly, and as a result of US internal politics. That same day, Vice President Kamala Harris unveiled her campaign’s “[Building an Opportunity Economy for Puerto Rico](#)” plan in Philadelphia, focusing on economic growth and resilience for PR. This initiative came shortly after an endorsement from Puerto Rican superstar [Bad Bunny](#), joined by other [Puerto Rican figures](#) like Jennifer Lopez and Ricky Martin, who condemned the so-called comedian’s racist remarks.

To fully understand the implications of PR entering the presidential campaign through racialized discourses and proposed economic development policies in which Puerto Ricans did not actively participate, we must recognize how PR has long been represented in the US imperial imagination.

Being a 'floating island of garbage' means being an inanimate collection of discarded objects, moved and displaced by external forces, without purpose or direction, and in need of urgent intervention or removal. The joke becomes less funny when it reveals a specific imperial gaze and years of racial contempt toward PR.

Over 126 years of colonial domination, PR has been made and remade by the US. Both the racist comments and the economic development plan represent two sides of a longstanding colonial representation of PR and other US unincorporated territories.

In this dual pattern, PR is defined as uncivilized, backward, or as “garbage” or framed as desperately needing benevolent assistance. While these approaches are not equal and do not have the same harmful impact, they emerge from a colonial logic in which Puerto Ricans are either racialized and excluded or infantilized and exploited—yet always spoken for. Hence, Puerto Ricans are denied their autonomy and ability to self-govern, excluded from discussions about their future, and rendered passive in a narrative that shapes both policy and public perception.

But [what is PR to the US?](#)

To this day, this question remains one that only the US Congress, the US Supreme Court, American politicians, and academia can effectively answer. This colonial framing has been institutionalized in four major federal laws passed without meaningful consultation with Puerto Ricans, the most recent being the *Puerto Rican Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act* ([PROMESA](#)) of 2016. PROMESA, which also imposed a *Fiscal Oversight and Management Board* (FOMB) onto PR is the US solution to address the Puerto Rican economic crisis, address its \$72 billion public debt, and secure the return of PR to financial and stock markets.

The historical evidence of the dual colonial approach to PR is patented. Since the US invasion of PR in 1898, the archipelago has been cast as an entity in need of “civilization,” a narrative shaped by racial and white superiority. The US justified its control over PR with promises to modernize and Americanize the archipelago, portraying it as backward, incapable of self-governance, and inherently corrupt.

From tossing paper towels at Puerto Ricans after Hurricane María to downplaying the storm’s death toll and withholding disaster recovery funds, Trump and his administration treated PR with open hostility and racial contempt. Recall when Trump told former governor Ricardo Rosselló, “[You’ve thrown our budget a little out of whack](#),” at a press conference days after Hurricane María devastated the archipelago. Or when, in 2019, Trump tweeted that PR was “[one of the most corrupt places on earth](#),” branding the archipelago’s politicians as “either incompetent or corrupt.”

These attitudes echo a longstanding colonial narrative in which the notion of corruption has been used to shape colonial policy and US intervention in PR. These depictions, grounded in Western imperialist logic, have justified policies that extract resources and wealth from PR, subjugating its people in the name of anti-corruption and “progress.”

Nevertheless, not only blatant racial content has defined PR, but also long list of policy and economic intervention that sought to develop the archipelago. The extensive colonial consequences of Americanization and misguided development efforts in PR are striking. PR’s devastating hurricanes, decaying infrastructure, public debt, and socioeconomic crises are not mere coincidences but a result of the social, legal, and political dynamics of colonialism. PR’s perpetual “state of emergency” has enabled the US to consolidate control over Puerto Rican resources under the guise of “emergency” and “aid.” Emergency powers reinforce colonial authority by prioritizing US interests while sidelining Puerto Rican voices. This system is not an accident but a “crisis by design” that sustains US dominance, facilitating the continuous plunder of PR’s assets.

In my book *Crisis by Design: Emergency Powers and Colonial Legality in Puerto Rico* (Stanford University Press), I have shown how emergency powers wielded in colonial contexts are tools for wealth extraction, not empowerment. This has proved devastating in PR, where such powers bolster inequality and exploitative dynamics rather than sovereignty. My book demonstrates how colonial legality and emergency powers have shaped PR’s sociolegal reality, enabled wealth extraction, subjected Puerto Ricans to unequal dynamics of power and exploitation, and undermined collective efforts toward decolonization.

The Harris-Walz platform, with its plan to Build an Opportunity Economy for PR, may aim to reverse this dynamic by positioning PR as a hub for clean energy, biosciences, and manufacturing. However, without confronting the colonial legal structures, this agenda could quickly be subsumed by the mechanisms it aims to challenge. Thus, instead of enabling economic development, it may reproduce the colonial logic of PROMESA, which does not acknowledge the economic harm wrought by colonial policies, nor does it aim to foster self-governance. Instead, it prioritizes Wall Street’s interests and enables further wealth extraction from PR.

The outrage over a political comedian’s comments reflects the dual logic of US colonialism: PR is either rejected as “garbage” or embraced as a tropical paradise in which US citizens can evade taxes and vacation. Nevertheless, both narratives ultimately reinforce US control. These comments—and the heated reactions they provoke—are symptomatic of a deeper, structural relationship.

It is a relationship that has long disregarded Puerto Rican voices, even when Puerto Ricans have resisted US colonialism and attempted to build their own sociopolitical and economic future. As the current polls in the local election show, Puerto Ricans aspire to a fundamental change in the political structures and their colonial entanglements. Hence, to break the cycle of colonial representations, structural controls must be dismantled to achieve genuine self-determination.

That’s nothing to joke about. Puerto Ricans, in all their diversity and contradictions—as with any colonized subjects—aspire to be more than bystanders in their own collective lives and futures. Centering Puerto Rican voices on their path to decolonization, while holding the US accountable for its history of colonial and racial violence, is essential for building a just Puerto Rican future.

**Jose Atilés** is author of *Crisis by Design: Emergency Powers and Colonial Legality in Puerto Rico* (forthcoming from Stanford University Press) and Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and affiliate of the College of Law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Contact: Jose Atilés [jatiles@illinois.edu](mailto:jatiles@illinois.edu), 217-552-3682

Stanford publicist: Bridget Kinsella, [bridgetkinsella@stanford.edu](mailto:bridgetkinsella@stanford.edu), 510-465-3853