

The Cruellest Storm: 200+ Academics Speak Out for Puerto Rico

The destruction brought by Hurricane Maria has exposed the profound colonial condition of Puerto Rico

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CD Editor's note: The following statement—signed by over two hundred scholars, writers, professors, and experts with close personal and/or academic ties to the island—comes amid the growing humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico following the destruction left by Hurricane Maria earlier this month. The Spanish-language version can be read [here](#).

Introduction

The destruction brought by Hurricane Maria has exposed the profound colonial condition of Puerto Rico, as millions of human beings are faced with a life or death situation. The financial crisis manufactured by American bankers, colonial laws such as PROMESA and the Jones Act that controls maritime space, are legal mechanisms that prevent Puerto Rico's recovery, and even call into question the validity of American citizenship on that island. Given the severity of the situation, political action is necessary.

The State of Facts

Puerto Rico is experiencing a humanitarian crisis as a result of Hurricane Maria, which struck the island on Wednesday, September 20, as a Category Four hurricane. Immediately thereafter, Governor Roselló declared a curfew from dawn to dusk for security reasons. More than a week after the event, hundreds of communities are still flooded, isolated without any food or drinking water, as highways and roads are blocked or destroyed, making communication between towns, neighborhoods and cities impossible. Telephone, internet, drinking water and electricity services have not been re-established in most communities. The weather radar was destroyed as well as the surveillance towers at the San Juan International Airport. There is a public health crisis due to the precarious conditions in hospitals and the threat of epidemics stemming from contaminated water. Cities, towns and neighborhoods outside the metropolitan area have been abandoned, and efforts are concentrated in the San Juan metro area. The western part of the island, for example, lacks minimum services.

The images shared with the world by visibly shaken journalists, television anchors, and meteorologists speak of the human drama caused by the disaster. What is missing from

many of those reports is concrete information of plans and immediate, achievable initiatives to move the country ahead, as well as an ongoing plan. Explanations are necessary for why so many efforts to reach, house, feed and clothe many Puerto Ricans are unsuccessful. The people and the local government need the freedom to make and act on decisions quickly. There is no sensible political analysis of the situation due to such dire absence of communication. The state of precariousness in which the entire population of the island finds itself forces individuals to concentrate all of their strength on survival. Many have already opted to leave the country as the re-opening of the Luis Muñoz Marín airport demonstrated in its first day of service after the hurricane. It is a cruel way of emptying Puerto Rico of its most valuable resource, its people; the potential silencing of any dissident voices in the process is unacceptable. This state of emergency could be used to promote new measures of austerity that will not benefit Puerto Rico, a country already devastated by the financial disaster of an unpayable debt.

The Caribbean has been pummeled by two major hurricanes in the month of September: Irma and Maria. The Virgin Islands, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Dominica, Barbuda, Antigua, Guadeloupe, St. Kitts, and Puerto Rico are geopolitically precarious: physically as islands and politically for their colonial history and status. They were traditionally called “Overseas Provinces” because of their political and economic dependence on a metropolitan mainland. The world has found out in the past few days what our history has always stubbornly made visible to us.

Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. Its political status stems from the U.S. invasion of 1898 and a series of laws that served only to consolidate U.S. control, hindering the possibility of Puerto Rican sovereignty and political emancipation. One such law is the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, or Jones Act, which determines that Puerto Rico’s maritime waters and ports are controlled by U.S. agencies. The limits on shipping imposed by the Jones Act double the cost of consumer goods arriving at our shores, since they curtail the ability of non-U.S. ships and crews to engage in commercial trade with Puerto Rico. The recent legislation, PROMESA (or “promise,” a cynical and injurious acronym for the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), which imposes millions of dollars of accrued debt and stringent austerity measures on Puerto Rico and its inhabitants, is yet to be audited. PROMESA has established a supra governmental body with complete control over finances and the laws and regulations adopted by the PR government. PROMESA represents Congress’ most significant overt act to restate its colonial authority over Puerto Rico in total disregard of democracy, republicanism, and popular sovereignty. Here is where the need to repeal PROMESA and the Jones Act intersect, as both are exercises of colonial power to further the economic and political interest of the metropolis. At this time of humanitarian crisis and dire times for Puerto Rico Washington will not act in the best interest of the people of Puerto Rico by repealing both PROMESA and the Jones Act.

The US citizenship of Puerto Ricans, in this circumstance, is not a privilege, but the branding of a slave. It is a restrictive citizenship subject to the limits imposed by the US Congress without any interpellation of the subject to whom it is imposed. As an American colony, citizenship in this case actually denies Puerto Ricans any of the rights obtained by other regions impacted by the same events in the North American mainland. Citizenship makes us hostages, dispensable entities and victims of calculated charity. It is necessary to repeal the Jones Act, which imposes restrictions on the entry of other vessels to the island, even if their intention is only to offer humanitarian aid. It is necessary to abolish the PROMESA Law, since Puerto Rico cannot be rebuilt on the basis of an unpayable and fraudulent debt. Both laws

condemn the country to an unsustainable economic future that will intensify the exodus of Puerto Ricans from their island.

The manner in which aid delivered to Puerto Rico has been confiscated and controlled by FEMA, along with the refusal to assist Puerto Rico in a manner similar to that offered to mainland localities affected by Hurricane Irma, for example, shapes our interpretation of this event. It subjects the inhabitants of a territory in crisis to the limits of what a federal agency is willing to do, and denies aid that may come from other countries at this critical time. Beyond the paternalism that this implies, it turns Puerto Ricans into hostages of their colonial condition.

While exploiting the physical deprivation Puerto Ricans are experiencing, FEMA's presence also promotes psychological servility. As military uniforms increase and become more visible due to this emergency, a very troubling image is emerging of the Puerto Rican people, under increasingly fragile and precarious conditions. Efforts are delayed for a population that the federal government considers expendable. Rampant indifference is affirmed with lack of solidarity with neighboring towns by preventing other kinds of aid from flowing into and through the island. This situation brings Puerto Ricans down to their knees, at the mercy of the equivocal aid provided by the US, while other humanitarian aid is blocked. Puerto Ricans are placed under peril, endangering the lives of thousands that still have not been reached. The ultimate goal of this federal aid is unknown. Its growing militarization at a time when Puerto Ricans are deprived of the basic means of survival and communication is alarming. It turns this state of emergency into an opportunity for some to thrive financially while hundreds of people die from lack of water, food and medical treatment.

No political or economic reason justifies the death of diabetes patients who do not have the means to keep their insulin cool nor dialysis patients who have seen their treatments interrupted due to lack of electricity. The consequences of this blockade on solidarity could be greater than the victims produced by the hurricane itself. The recent statements by President Trump are unworthy of any president. In the midst of a humanitarian crisis, he demands payment of the credit debt. Immediate actions must be taken. The PROMESA law and the Jones Act must be repealed. This is not the time to invoke the false rights inherent in second-degree citizenship, but to claim the right of every human being to life.

Faced with these facts, we demand:

- The recognition of a state of humanitarian crisis.
- The immediate repeal of the Jones Act (Merchant Marine Act of 1920) for Puerto Rico and the repeal of the PROMESA Law.
- That the aid provided by the federal agencies not be subjected by any conditions that can delay or limit its reach.
- The opening of the ports to all those who wish to show solidarity with the Puerto Rican people.
- The reestablishment of all means of communication across the island.
- Dedicated funds and assistance for the thousands of people without home, water, food, and electricity.

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