



# The Politics of Puerto Rican University Students (Lilas Latin American Monograph)

*Arthur Liebman*

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In the 1960s, when students everywhere were coming alive politically, and when the Latin American student activist in particular became as archetypal of radicalism as the Latin American dictator was of repression, Puerto Rican students remained strangely silent. With the exception of FUPI, a radical student group with only a small following, student political behavior conformed to that of Puerto Rican society in general—center to conservative.

Historically, Puerto Rico has been economically and politically dominated first by Spain and then by the United States. But unlike other colonial dependencies in Latin America, Puerto Rico has never rebelled. Puerto Rican politics centers on the status issue—independence, statehood, or association for the island. But no legendary victories, no heroic defeats offer a battle cry for nationalists, leftists, and *independistas*. Overwhelming foreign influence in the Church, the schools, the economy, and eventually the mass media deprived the island of any strong indigenous institutions that might foster nationalism. Militancy lies outside the mainstream of Puerto Rican tradition.

Against this historical and cultural backdrop, Arthur Liebman closely examines the social background and political activity of students at the Rio Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico. Based on personal interviews with students, faculty, and administrators, as well as on a survey of the student body, his study reveals the strength of political inheritance among university students in Puerto Rico. The student left is small and weak largely because the left of the parents' generation is small and weak. To date, Puerto Rican students have been the children of their parents and of their society.

Within a university that emphasizes practicality, the nonmilitant majority of the students study education, business, engineering, and medicine, being trained to participate in and to reap the rewards of the status quo. Student leftists, in the minority, generally study history, economics, sociology, and law—fields that open wider perspectives on their society and its problems and offer no immediate guarantee of its benefits. Brighter, less religious, and more dissatisfied with their role as a student, the student leftists stand apart from their cohort at the University of Puerto Rico. Like their adult counterparts, they are an anomaly in an acquisitive, relatively conservative society.

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