

Review of *Puerto Rico: A National History* by Jorell Meléndez-Badillo

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Meléndez-Badillo, Jorell. *Puerto Rico: A National History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024.

Jorell Meléndez-Badillo's *Puerto Rico: A National History* presents a sweeping narrative that reframes Puerto Rico from a passive colonial subject to a dynamic, persistent nation forged through centuries of resistance. In contrast to the concise focus of his first book, *The Lettered Barriada*, this national history offers a broader temporal and thematic scope that spans from pre-Columbian Taíno societies to Spanish colonial rule, and from the origins of U.S. imperialism to the present day. Throughout the book, Meléndez-Badillo challenges dominant, oversimplified narratives by centering Puerto Rican agency, rebellion, and identity formation. Recognized for his extensive research and efforts, Meléndez-Badillo recently collaborated with Puerto Rican megastar Bad Bunny to help create the world's most streamed album of 2025, *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*.

Meléndez-Badillo's book argues that Puerto Rico has always been a nation on the move. In other words, the Puerto Rican community has been shaped by displacement and colonialism, yet it is defined by its refusal to be erased. This approach allows readers to understand the diaspora that exists across Puerto Rico and the mainland USA – where cultural exchanges between both have defined what it means to be Puerto Rican today. Meléndez-Badillo employed an interdisciplinary approach that includes archaeology, anthropology, and social history to reconstruct this national story. His writing challenges the myth of harmonious racial unity in Puerto Rico and the myth of its passive subjugation to colonial rule. The book highlights moments of rebellion, like the 1511 Taíno Rebellion, various enslaved revolts, the 1868 Lares Uprising, and the mid-twentieth-century nationalist movements, as emblematic of a deep-rooted, continuous push toward self-determination.

Meléendez-Badillo is careful to simultaneously acknowledge the impact of both intranational and interregional developments on Puerto Rico's history. He situates Puerto Rico's shared background of Spanish colonialism within a broader hemispheric context, and then zeroes in on its isolated developments. From a transnational standpoint, he centers the impacts of the Haitian and French revolutions, along with the ongoing independence movements across Latin America. Within this context, you see how Puerto Rico emerged as a space that was deeply entangled in regional debates over freedom, sovereignty, and racial order. During the nineteenth century, these points of contention were largely shaped by the fear of slave revolts and varying aspirations for autonomy. Intranationally, Meléendez-Badillo emphasizes the underacknowledged contributions of people like the privateer Miguel Enríquez and the ongoing struggles against racial, social, and economic inequalities. This balance allows readers to understand the unique social contexts of Puerto Rico and how the surrounding world shaped its trajectory. Altogether, the book underlines the agency of local actors in shaping their own histories.

One of the book's most compelling strengths is its strategic engagement with terminology and narrative framing. Meléendez-Badillo avoids the colonial language that often distorts Puerto Rican history. Instead, he employs terms that also reflects Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean perspectives and broadens the analytical lens through which Puerto Rico's past is understood. The book deftly dismantles the myth of "the Great Puerto Rican Family," a narrative that falsely promotes racial and social harmony. He does so by revealing the legal, economic, and cultural mechanisms of colonial rule that upheld a racially stratified society for centuries. His attention to the relationship between criollos (locally born Spaniards) and peninsulares (Spanish-born elites) also offers a nuanced view of power struggles in the Spanish colonial period. Meléendez-Badillo's research shows how allegiance from the criollos to the Spanish throne was contingent on the

benefits they received from colonial rule, and how they were simultaneously elevated above (and distanced from) Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations.¹ These identities were constructed through legislation and reinforced a hierarchy that excluded the majority from political and economic power. His work also highlights how similar hierarchies were repurposed under U.S. rule to maintain systems of racial and class-based domination.

Meléndez-Badillo is unflinching in his critique of the long-standing exploitation of Puerto Rico. He outlines how both Spain and the U.S. employed legislation to turn Puerto Rico into an export-based economy that served imperial interests. His writing illustrates how colonialism evolved but never disappeared; in fact, Puerto Rico's economic dependence and political subjugation is a pattern that has lasted for over five hundred years. However, as the author underlines, Puerto Rican resistance is a continuity that has persisted over the same half-millennium. He shows the various ways that local actors planned rebellions, preserved values and subverted the colonial rule through extralegal operations. His particular analysis of smuggling echoes Juan Ponce Vázquez's *Islanders and Empire*, for they both reinforce the theme of resistance through everyday economic activity.

While the scholarly rigor of the book is evident, Meléndez-Badillo takes the bold step of incorporating personal reflection—most notably in his discussion of Hurricane María (2017). Some historians might find the anecdote about his grandmother's experience overly subjective, but its inclusion ultimately serves to underscore the human cost of the U.S. government's neglect. His critique of the Trump administration's dismissive response to the disaster adds a powerful contemporary dimension to the historical narrative and shows the continuity of colonial abandonment from the 19th century into the 21st.² If there is any limitation to this ambitious

¹ Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico: A National History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 56.

² Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 192.

work, it may be that its thematic range occasionally moves quickly across eras and actors, risking surface-level treatment of some topics. However, this breadth is arguably necessary for a book that seeks to serve as both a scholarly intervention and a foundational national history.

A final strength of *Puerto Rico: A National History* lies in its insistence that Puerto Rican identity is not monolithic. Meléndez-Badillo successfully recognizes the tensions within Puerto Rican society. This is between those who resist colonial rule and those who embrace it, between elites and the working class, and among various racial and ethnic communities. This recognition strengthens his broader claim that Puerto Rican nationhood is complex, contested, and continually evolving.

In sum, *Puerto Rico: A National History* is an invaluable contribution to Puerto Rican historiography and colonial studies. It bridges the past and present, dismantles simplistic narratives, and reclaims Puerto Rican history for its people. This book will be essential reading for scholars of Latin American and Caribbean history, educators, and anyone seeking to understand the island's enduring struggle for self-determination. Meléndez-Badillo succeeds in his goal: to show that Puerto Rico has always been a nation—not because of political independence, but because of its persistent resistance, memory, and identity.