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The Power of Plena

Roberta L. Singer

*Suenan panderetas,*

La quieran sonar

De mi Puerto Rico

El ritmo nacional

The panderetas sound out,

They want to play

The national rhythm

Of my Puerto Rico.

(Miguel Sierra, New York City)

Whatever’s going on gets into plena.

Marcial Reyes

If you listen closely to plena, you can hear the history and life of the Puerto Rican people during the past century. Plena is called “el periódico cantado” (the sung newspaper) because its lyrics, sung in sharp, ironic tones, often relate local daily news, historical events, gossip, and a host of other themes covering a broad scope of human experience.

Since its beginnings, plena has been used to record, comment upon, and transmit news. But not all plenas are historically significant or expressive of social consciousness. Some are just fun, some are personal, joyful, humorous, or religious. They can just as easily poke fun at a bad dancer as at a bad politician or a man unlucky in love. Some plenas overtly express the singer’s perceptions of his/her social condition or criticize existing policies and

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situations; others are indirect references with hidden or double meanings; and still others have no relationship to news, events, politics, or protest. But whether serious protest or lighthearted fun, plena was once the most commercially successful and popular music genre in Puerto Rico and among Puerto Ricans in New York City. Despite its decrease in commercial popularity it remains a vital cultural expression.

The Birth of Plena

La plena que yo conozco
No es de la China ni del Japón
Porque la plena viene de Ponce
Y es del barrio de San Antón.

The plena that I know
Is not from China or Japan
The plena comes from Ponce
From barrio San Antón.

(Chago Montez)

The plena developed in the last decades of the 1800s, largely from West African-rooted traditions in the sugar-producing areas of Puerto Rico's southern coast, especially in and around the city of Ponce. Economic upheaval had caused the displacement of campesinos (farmers), artisans, sugarcane workers, freed slaves, and others who migrated to the urban centers. Plena emerged out of the interaction of these peoples and their music: traditional and elite, rural and urban, African- and Spanish/European-influenced. These included the West African-derived bomba of the rural coastal regions, Spanish/Arabic-influenced jíbaro music traditions of the mountain farming regions, and urban European-style ballroom dances.

Musical sensibilities and styles from other parts of the Caribbean were injected into this equation starting around the turn of the century. The period following the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean in the mid- to late-1800s resulted in massive movements of former slaves, freedmen, and other workers throughout the region. Migrations to Puerto Rico increased after the island was ceded to the United States in 1898 as a bounty of the Spanish-American War (referred to by Puerto Ricans as a U.S. invasion). Many of the migrants came from English-speaking Caribbean countries such as St. Kitts, Jamaica, St. Thomas, and Barbados. The largest number of these immigrants came to the city of Ponce in the south, where North American capitalists had begun to consolidate the small sugar haciendas owned by Puerto Rican Creole families into huge plantations and mill towns. These workers, primarily freed slaves and their children, joined with Puerto Rican workers, largely those of African and mixed heritage descent but also mountain campesinos displaced from highland farms, to create a substantial labor force.

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1 According to one plenero (performer of plena) who moves back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico in search of work, pleneros are not just musicians. "The plenero has to be a voice of protest. He has to defend his people."

2 Jíbaro is an indigenous term used to identify people from the interior rural mountain regions of Puerto Rico. Jíbaros, also called campesinos, are mainly of Spanish/Moorish ancestry, and the traditions brought by Spanish settlers to the interior regions served as a basis for the formation of the unique cultural expression of the campesinos, whose music developed a distinctive Puerto Rican flavor. For further information, see Singer 1988.
Although to date the birth of plena has not been documented in a great many of its specifics, it seems reasonable to expect that in a context of such economic and cultural fluidity, people, styles, ideas, and cultural forms intersected and mingled. It is likely that in such a mobile situation musicians jammed and explored, bringing their own traditions into new contexts. The “English” sound (very likely the precursor of what came to be known as calypso) caught on with musicians in Ponce, who incorporated it into the music they were playing at the time. The result was plena, a music that was to become the most popular, influential and, for a time, commercially successful music genre in Puerto Rico.

**Bomba y Plena**

Plena is generally linked with bomba in scholarly discussions of Puerto Rican traditional music. There are historical, contemporary, and musical reasons for this connection. Plena’s early roots are thought by many to lie predominantly in bomba, in large part because both share many characteristics and are commonly perceived as distinctly West African-derived Puerto Rican musical genres. In fact, the two names, “bomba y plena,” are often elided in speech as “bombayplena.” Both are social or entertainment genres that use two or three drums of different sizes and pitches playing interlocking or meshing rhythms, both use a solo singer with a choral response, and the lyrics of each relate to the everyday life of people in the community.

Despite these commonalities, there are sharp musical and social distinctions between the two genres that include the type of drum each uses, the nature and importance of the dance, and the verse structure and its content. Bomba drums are barrel-shaped (often they are pickle or dried codfish barrels), which either sit upright on the floor or lie on the floor with the players sitting astride them. Those used in plena—called *panderos* or *panderetas*—are hand-held frame drums.\(^3\) The dance in bomba is as integral to the performance as music—dancers competing with one another and “dialoguing” with the lead drummer. In plena, dance is not such an integral part of the performance, and the dancers do not dialogue with the drummer. Traditional bomba cannot be performed without dance; plena often is. The verse structure of bomba consists of an alternation between solo singer and *coro* (chorus) in a one-line call-and-response pattern. The lead singer presents the textual and melodic theme, upon which he will improvise, and the *coro* sings a fixed response. In plena, there is also a lead singer and a *coro*, but the structure is a four-line solo verse with a two-line *coro* refrain that may be repeated. In bomba, which is more percussive than plena, even the singing is percussive. Plena is much more melodic than bomba, both in the vocal line and in the use of melody instruments such as accordion, harmonica, and guitar. While these melody instruments are not a requirement for a plena ensemble, they are not normally part of the traditional bomba group.

There does not seem to be general agreement as to whether or not the early *pleneros* (performers of plena) were originally *tocadores de bomba* (performers of bomba). This would be a fruitful area for further investigation. What is known is that bomba was a well established

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\(^3\) These drums are often referred to by musicians and community cultural scholars as “Arabic” or Arabic-influenced, referring to the Moorish elements of Spanish tradition.
tradition when plena was emerging, and at that time the contexts for the two genres and their practitioners were, despite varying degrees of overlap, basically different—one rural (bomba), the other primarily urban (plena); one mostly black, the other black, white, and mulatto.4

By the 1920s the basic instrumentation of the traditional plena ensemble and its verse form had become crystallized, and remain fundamentally the same today: four-line verses sung by a soloist; two-line coro response, which may be repeated. The instrument most characteristic of plena is the pandereta (or pandero), a hand-held frame drum similar to a tambourine but without the cymbals. Panderos are of different sizes and pitches; three are needed for a complete plena ensemble. Two supporting drums, called seguidora, provide the rhythmic foundation, and a lead drum, called requinto,5 reinforces and accents portions of the rhythmic structure of the song text as well as taking improvisatory solos. An indispensable part of the plena ensemble is the güiro (scrapped gourd), whose primary role is to play a fixed rhythm but which may also take solos. The traditional ensemble may be rounded out by an accordion or harmonica and sometimes a guitar. Some early plena groups included trumpet, clarinet, or some other wind instrument, testifying to the claim by many musicians that one of the characteristics of plena is its flexibility in absorbing different instruments into the basic ensemble format.6

From Plantation to New York:
The People and Plena Adapt

Myrta se va, Myrta se va
Pa' la América
No volveré, no volveré
De la América.

Myrta is leaving
For America
She won’t return
From America.

Although historically bomba has been associated with rural coastal contexts and plena with coastal mill towns and cities, the reality was more fluid than these distinctions imply. Economic hardship in the 1910s drove large numbers of workers from the coastal villages and towns to the major towns and cities of the island in search of work. Thus plena and, to a lesser degree, bomba became an important part of urban cultural life for working class people in the urban centers of the island such as San Juan, Santurce, Mayagüez, and Ponce.

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4 There is evidence that in the 18th century, bomba was not as strongly rooted in African traditions or as confined to black society as came to be the case in the 19th century. The earliest written account (1798) claims that a drum called “bomba” was used to accompany the dancing of a group of white, mulatto, and black workers; another account cites the presence of both a drum and guitar, also in a racially mixed setting. According to Roberts, it is likely that the dances described in these reports were “re-Africanized” by Haitian slaves brought to Puerto Rico after the Haitian revolution (Roberts 1974:42).

5 Interestingly, the term requinto applies to a string instrument in Spain and in many parts of Latin America.

6 On a recent visit to Puerto Rico I observed informal, spontaneous plena performances taking place at town or saint’s day festivals. In addition to the panderos (from 3 to 7) and güiros (1 to 3), I saw a trumpet in one town, an alto saxophone in another, and a cornet in yet another. The musicians told me: “You play plena with what you’ve got” (or some version thereof).
Fig. 13.1. Informal jam between sets at Casa del Músico, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, 1992.
Instrumentation shows flexibility of plena ensemble format.

Fig. 13.2. Pleneros from New York and Puerto Rico jamming together in Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1993.
Fig. 13.3. Jamming on the beach, Palo Saco, Cataño, Puerto Rico, 1992

Fig. 13.4. ... and the beat goes on. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1992
Work and the life of working people was the subject matter and social context of plena. As wage earners grew in number, plena grew in popularity. Workers formed labor unions, cultural associations, and political parties and, more often than not, each organization—like many barrios—had its own plena group to record and protest their conditions and their struggles for change. Strikes were a frequent theme. Don Rafael Cepeda, Puerto Rico’s patriarch of bomba and plena, tells of a dock-workers strike in San Juan:

They’re on strike at Puerto de Tierra
The dock workers have stood up in protest
Out come the scabs all over the island
The workers, all of them, have stood up in protest.
(In Plena Is Work, Plena Is Song [Rivera and Zeig 1989])

One plena that gained international popularity was “¿Alo? ¿Quien Llama?” (“Hello? Who’s Calling?”), recorded by Mon Rivera with Moncho Leña y Los Ases del Ritmo in 1954. The song, written by Mon’s father Don Ramón Rivera Alers, tells the story of a strike by women pressers in a textile factory in 1933 in the city of Mayagüez, Rivera’s hometown:

Hello? Who’s calling?
What’s going to happen? What’s going on?
The Mamery factory is looking for scabs...
The pressers are saying “No pay, no work.”
The strike has just started, My God, what a mess!

As a result of the migrations of Puerto Ricans from the island to the United States (primarily New York City), first in the 1920s and later at their peak in the decade following World War II—once again stimulated by economic factors—the music of the island was transplanted to New York. The fact that economic woes were not greatly alleviated for Puerto Ricans in New York is clear from a popular plena, “Me dieron layoff” (“They laid me off/what bad luck I have/Tomorrow morning I’ll go to the pawn shop”), by Mon Rivera. This is just one of many that comment upon unemployment and employment hardships in New York and on the island.

The contexts for traditional plena (as well as for other traditional cultural expressions of Puerto Rico such as bomba and jíbaro music) have changed—from sugarcane plantations and mill towns to urban courtyards and streets, to the streets and hometown social clubs of New York City. And because its lyrics reflect and express the people’s contemporary reality, plena adapted to its new environments, remaining a vital, relevant expression. Today, in New York as well as in Puerto Rico, plena is played spontaneously at beaches, local ball games, parks, social clubs, festivals, and other community gathering places and events.

Bomba, on the other hand, is rarely played in New York in the kinds of informal contexts that were traditional on the island. Historically, this has been due in large part to racism. Rooted in West African traditions but forged in the context of a somewhat racially mixed Puerto Rican coastal plantation culture, bomba was perceived by the Creole aristocracy as an African genre. Many tocadores de bomba and culture specialists have stated that bomba was rejected outside of the black community because of an unwillingness to accept African contributions to Puerto Rican culture by the island’s Creole elite. Racism, until the early years of this century, was linked almost exclusively to issues of class.

Plena, on the other hand, was born at a time when people of diverse social and economic classes and ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds were coming together in a context of economic and social upheaval; it was a time when the old aristocratic class structures were
beginning to crumble. Plena was developed and performed by and for workers from these diverse backgrounds. That the music itself had more European-rooted influences made it more accessible to people who were unable or unwilling to understand or relate to the complex African-derived rhythms that characterize bomba.

It is likely that plena's popularity may also have been enhanced by the "portability" of the ensemble, as the _panderetas_ and _güiro_ are easily carried. Additionally, although bomba's lyrics are topical, the one-line call-and-response format does not allow for narrative development as does plena's four-line verse structure. Plena's ability to serve as a vehicle for recording, expressing, and influencing the contemporary reality of the community is a crucial factor in its continuing popularity.

**From Popular Tradition to Commercial Success**

There have been several seminal figures in plena's rise from a traditional, community-based genre to the commercial success that it enjoyed on and off from the late 1920s to the '60s. Canario, César Concepción, Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, and Ismael Rivera are the most significant and influential of these. Through them it is possible to trace not only the history of plena, but also the history of plena's role as a symbol of national identity for different segments of society.

In the late 1920s, RCA Victor, seeking to expand its market to include the Caribbean, capitalized on plena's popularity. It brought Manuel "Canario" Jiménez, a dock worker, merchant marine, and locally popular plena singer, into the recording studio. Canario took the plenas sung in the streets, bars, house parties and neighborhood celebrations, and popularized them beyond their local neighborhoods. Plena's message became popular throughout the island and in New York, where a sizeable Puerto Rican community had already begun to form. Canario retained the traditional plena instrumentation of _panderetas_, accordion, _güiro_, and guitar, and added trumpets.

In the Canario years—1930s-40s—plena remained a music of working class people in the _barrrios_ of Puerto Rico and in New York, to which some of the island's best _pleneros_ had migrated. While plena never ceased being a music of the _barrío_, its popularity expanded in the late 1940s. As class barriers and racial prejudices once again shifted, this time in the context of the island's post-World War II industrializing society, plena gained popularity in the upper levels of society. This was accomplished largely through the work of César Concepción, a well-known ballroom bandleader popular with tourists and the Puerto Rican elite, whose repertory consisted mainly of European and Cuban dance music. Concepción adapted plena to the Latin popular music _orquesta_ that included trumpet and saxophone sections, congas, timbales, _güiro_, bass, and piano. Notably absent from this instrumentation were the _panderetas_—the heart of the plena ensemble.

Concepción's plenas, called "salon plenas," were sanitized versions of the plena from the _barrrios_. But it was perhaps because of this "whitewashing" that plena came to be accepted by the elite. By the end of the 1940s, aided by the increasing influence of the recording industry and radio, plena's popularity and commercial success had spread throughout all levels of society. It had reached salons and ballrooms, gained recognition among the cultural elite, established itself among Puerto Ricans in New York, and set the stage for the emergence of Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, and Ismael Rivera.
These three legends became tremendously popular among poor and working class Puerto Ricans on the island and in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Mon Rivera, an arranger, vocalist, and bandleader, integrated plena into the predominantly Cuban dance repertory of Moncho Leña's band, Los Ases de Ritmo, for which he arranged and performed. Somewhat later, bandleader and percussionist Rafael Cortijo, with his idolized vocalist Ismael Rivera, brought plena back to the barrio in the popular conjunto (small band) format of the time. While Concepción had popularized plena beyond the barrios, his plenas were not accepted on the streets. Cortijo's and Rivera's were. Moreover, this team did what no one had done before: popularized bomba. This was probably more important socially, symbolically, politically than musically.

Among Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo, and Ismael Rivera, Cortijo's influence on contemporary and future generations of musicians was the strongest. His legacy is still felt in plena groups that combine a strong pandero section with the horn sound of his conjunto.

Although he did not leave the same musical legacy as Cortijo, there was something “magical” about the relationship between Ismael Rivera and the Puerto Rican people that transcended the popularity of Mon Rivera and Rafael Cortijo. Photographs of him are still prominently displayed in homes, restaurants, gas stations, bars, and cafeterias in Puerto Rico; women still get teary when they hear one of his ballads; and T-shirts with his likeness are still being made and worn by musicians and fans. One avid fan can be seen around the San Juan area with a giant boom box, singing along to “music minus one” versions of Cortijo/Rivera tunes. Copying even the nonverbal sounds of Rivera, as well as his phrasing and vocal inflection, this aficionado has created a following of his own.

The popularity of these three major figures was to reach its peak in and last throughout the 1950s and into the '60s. They mostly played the Cuban-based forms that dominated the Latin popular music scene in New York since the 1930s (especially son, and later mambo and cha-cha-cha), but their popularization of plena and bomba in the conjunto format was, perhaps, one of their most influential and innovative contributions. This popularization was not a significant factor in the development of salsa — that commercially successful Latin popular music which gained international popularity in the late 1960s—but it can certainly be counted as an important source, affectively if not musically.

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7 The conjunto generally consisted of saxophones, trumpet, bass, piano, congas, timbales, bongos, campana (cowbell), and güiro.

8 The Cuban son, fusing a variety of African- and European-rooted rhythms and styles into an instrumental and vocal dance music, was adopted by musicians in Puerto Rico and also gained an international popularity in the 1920s (under the misnomer rumba), which lasted for decades and led to the mambo craze of the 1950s. The mambo was developed out of the rhythm section of the son and danzón into a popular style in its own right. In New York's predominantly Puerto Rican and Cuban Latino community, mambo took on a distinctly New York flavor and style, laying the foundation for the music that came to be called salsa in the late '60s. Cha-cha-cha was brought to New York in the late 1940s by Cuban charanga orchestras (flutes, violins, rhythm section). The cha-cha-cha was incorporated into the Latin big band repertory which already included mambo; the two became internationally popular in a dance fad that lasted throughout the 1950s. (See Boggs 1992; Murphy 1991; Singer 1982, 1983.)

9 It was the Cuban-based styles as played in New York that formed the primary basis for the development of salsa. The term salsa literally means “sausage” in Spanish; it refers to the kind of feeling musicians put into their performance, such as playing con salsa (“with soul”). Since the late 1960s the word has become a commercial tag for popular Latino music emerging out of the New York Puerto Rican and Cuban music scene. Currently in Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries, salsa is used to identify the popular music styles that derive from their own root traditions while incorporating a range of elements from the New York styles. (See Boggs 1992; Rondón 1980; Singer 1982.)
The majority of Latinos playing popular music in New York at that time were Puerto Rican, although there were many Cubans and a sprinkling of other Latin Americans as well. New York Puerto Ricans had, for the most part, been playing the popular Cuban-based styles since the 1930s. With the exception of the work of Rafael Cortijo, Ismael Rivera, and Mon Rivera, plenas were not normally part of their repertory. It was the Cuban-based styles that formed the main roots of salsa.

In New York, changing and diminishing opportunities and venues for the performance of traditional music, combined with the popularity of commercial music, overshadowed and threatened the vitality of traditional expressive forms. Nonetheless, *jibaro* music, plena and, to a lesser extent, bomba, continued to be part of family celebrations, holidays, and special occasions. The large and powerful Latino identity movements of the late 1960s and '70s, in which Puerto Ricans played a dominant role in New York, brought about a renewed interest in traditional music styles among younger New York Puerto Ricans.

Like most identity movements, the Puerto Rican movement was multifaceted, focusing on social and economic justice and political access, as well as on seeking and reinterpreting the roots of their own culture. Ethnic groups tend to utilize cultural symbols for definitions of their own identity; the use of symbols of tradition renders the past important not for its own sake, but for the continuity and grounding it offers for contemporary existence. Some Puerto Ricans believed that perpetuating their traditional heritage, including playing bomba, plena, and/or *jibaro* music, was the appropriate route. For Puerto Rican *salseros* (salsa musicians), plena, bomba, and *jibaro* music became sources of inspiration. It must be noted, however, that while they were playing primarily Cuban-based styles, for a generation of New York Puerto Rican *salseros* who had grown up with both Cuban and Puerto Rican music, there was no disjuncture: salsa was their music. And, as mentioned, a decade earlier Rafael Cortijo, Ismael Rivera, and Mon Rivera had already established a symbolically powerful, if not wide-spread, precedent for the reinterpretation of Puerto Rican traditional forms in Latin popular music.

In the 1970s, Willie Colón, a popular New York Puerto Rican *salsero*, made a series of highly influential albums that not only reinterpreted traditional forms in salsa format, but featured well-known traditional exponents of the styles. In the early 1970s he recorded two albums with the Puerto Rican *cuatro*\(^\text{10}\) master Yomo Toro, which featured a variety of *jibaro* music forms played in a New York salsa style. In 1975-76 Colón again turned to his roots and made two albums with Mon Rivera, featuring plenas and bombas, also à la New York salsa style. All four of these albums were important because they served to validate the traditional music forms for Puerto Rican youth who were "into" salsa but considered the traditional styles old fashioned and passé. While featuring master traditional artists in salsa recordings or performances did not catch on or become standard in the salsa world, most New York salsa groups include references to or interpretations of plena in their performances.

In the contemporary reality of New York City, the hegemony of Puerto Ricans in the salsa industry is being supplanted by the growing participation of Dominican musicians playing both salsa and *merengue*.\(^\text{11}\) Growing communities of peoples from other areas of Latin America have created an expansion of the Latin popular music scene and the types of music being played. Salsa groups, in response to the needs of more diverse audiences and influenced

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\(^{10}\) The *cuatro* is a 10-string instrument generally associated with *jibaro* music.

\(^{11}\) The Dominican *merengue* is challenging the dominance of salsa in the Latin popular music scene in New York as well as in Puerto Rico, where it is often easier to find *merengue* being played on the radio and in local clubs than it is to find salsa, not to mention plena or *jibaro* music. *Salseros*, who began including *merengue* in their repertory prior to its recent ascendency, continue doing so for audiences of all backgrounds who sustain its popularity.
by an infusion of traditional and popular musics from elsewhere in Latin America, have been adapting forms such as Dominican *merengue* and Colombian *cumbia* to the salsa format.

In addition to the impact of the identity movement on the commercial music scene, there has been renewed interest in traditional music, especially plena, among younger New York Puerto Ricans since the late 1970s. More young people are now participating in informal music-making at the community level, and are organizing intergenerational or predominantly younger groups to perpetuate the traditional styles and to present them to both in-group and more general audiences at folk festivals and concerts. The basic instrumentation of the plena ensemble has been retained, but some groups add conga drums and bass, and may substitute a *cuatro* for the harmonica, accordion, or guitar.

The repertory of these groups includes "standard" plena tunes that have withstood the test of time. Many were written and/or popularized by the Cortijo/Rivera team, or by Mon Rivera, Canario, or other well-known *pleneros*, and have endured because of the powerful influence of the *pleneros* who wrote them and/or because of the story they tell about the Puerto Rican people. Others have endured because they symbolize and recreate a time, place, event, person, condition, or struggle that is invested with meaning in the contemporary reality.

New plenas are also being written. On a visit to Puerto Rico in January 1991, I heard several plenas about the Persian Gulf War (being waged at that time) and others about the plebiscite¹² (being discussed in Congress that month).

In New York, as on the island, new words are being written to old plenas. One, for example, set to the tune of "¿Alo? ¿Quien Llama?" (cited earlier), laments the loss of jobs to computers. New plenas are being written about contemporary conditions, such as one that applauds the participation of women in the traditionally male-dominated domain of plena in New York. Another tells the story of the 1992 Rodney King beating, expressing the pain caused by the institutionalized racism that allows such a thing to happen. New plenas are written on old themes of community, lauding its strengths, or mourning its destruction in the path of "progress."

Born in the working class *barrios* of Puerto Rico a century ago, plena continues to be created and recreated and used as a vehicle to record and comment upon historical and contemporary reality. Plena is so deeply rooted in the everyday lives of its creators and community that it has endured for a century, survived transplantation, and been a source of national pride and identity. *That* is the power of plena.

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¹² Puerto Rico has been successively a protectorate, colony, and commonwealth of the United States since 1898; Puerto Ricans were made citizens in 1917. As has happened several times before, the question of Puerto Rican status was again being discussed in Congress; the options available to the island—pending congressional approval—are statehood, retention of commonwealth status, or independence.
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