

### Review / Reseña

Meléndez-Badillo, Jorell A. *The Lettered Barriada: Workers, Archival Power, and the Politics of Knowledge Production in Puerto Rico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 280 pp.

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Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo's *The Lettered Barriada* is an important intellectual and social history of *obreros ilustrados* ("enlightened workingmen") in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Puerto Rico. Instead of writing a labor history or even social movement history, the author explores how and why some labor leaders—people who many have considered foundational figures—wrote about themselves, their vision of the world, and who they silenced. This change in perspective will be a refreshing approach for those interested in the ideological aspects of labor and social movements.

Meléndez-Badillo builds a world in which *obreros ilustrados* created a worker-centered public sphere out of writings published in newspapers, pamphlets, and books. These items circulated within Puerto Rico and internationally, carrying news of labor actions or approaches to sociological theory, and were read individually and collectively in recently created social study centers. A more traditional labor history approach to these sources would have focused on the ins and outs of the movements discussed in these publications, as well as an engagement with recent trends in labor historiography. Instead, the author turns to the ideological motivations of the *obrero ilustrado*, as well as

its archival power across decades. This, in turn, leads Meléndez-Badillo to use print media to assess how these *obreros ilustrados* “produce[d] knowledge *on behalf* of Puerto Rico’s laboring masses” (28, emphasis mine). This is a structuring element of the argument: that there was a “paternalistic logic” central to the *obrero ilustrado*’s public sphere (31). This was not a politics of radical equality and acceptance on the part of the *obreros ilustrados*. While anxious about their exclusion from the cultural elite, they saw themselves as above the rest and as being on the correct path toward liberation.

The second chapter examines the local and international paths of this public sphere. For Meléndez-Badillo, there were two parallel circuits: one which looked north to the US via relations with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and another in the “Spanish-speaking world” (55). This circulation of print media allowed for Puerto Ricans who may have never left the island to imagine themselves as part of a transnational network. Similar to other parts of Latin America, then, some people organized protests against events happening elsewhere. For example, Meléndez-Badillo calls attention to a meeting in San Juan where *obreros ilustrados* critiqued events in Spain and the Spanish Prime Minister was upset by the meeting (66-68). The final portion of the chapter focuses on the life of Juan Vilar, a Black labor organizer who read broadly, wrote for newspapers, and published several books. To return to the emphasis on archival power, the leaders of the Federación Libre de Trabajadores (FLT) and the Socialist Party seemed less interested in saving copies of Vilar’s books in their archives, perhaps due to his radical politics (76).

Another group of people silenced in the myth of labor history is women. In the third chapter we learn about Juana Colón, a Black ironer and healer from Comerío; Paca Escabí, a Black laundress and member of the Domestic Union No. 11,663; and Luisa Capetillo, internationally known for her writing and politics. The idea is not to provide a full history of each of their lives or to “rescue” them; rather, it is a way of “explor[ing] . . . the multilevel struggles for remembrance that workingwomen waged against the master codes created by *obreros ilustrados* which eventually shaped Puerto Rican labor history” (85). Their actions and their writings were part of a “conscious” effort at “creating counterarchives that had power in the moment in which they were created and still do today” (93). These women were indeed left out of the major labor books of the time, but it is less clear to me whether they were thinking about their writing and actions as part of a counterarchive.

Continuing with the importance of the ideological distance between the *obreros ilustrados* and the rest of working people, the fourth chapter narrates the process by

which some *obreros ilustrados* became politicians. With changes to political representation in Puerto Rico after the Jones Act of 1917, many of the *obreros ilustrados* associated with the FLT and Sociality Party adopted a less radical stance, pushing a line of “industrial peace,” and creating a more bureaucratic organization (117-118). Still, they continued to see themselves as the teachers of the working class and of producing *the* proper analysis of society, which of course would be published in their newspapers and not those produced by other organizations. And although a restructuring of the Socialist Party specified that regional vice presidents must include women, they were still not afforded an equal number of positions as men (122).

The University of Puerto Rico (UPR) and Rafael Alonso Torres are the subjects of the fifth chapter. When the new U.S.-appointed governor looked to Alonso Torres, an “autodidact labor leader turned politician” and “interim president of both the FLT and the Socialist Party” (134), to become the new trustee at the UPR, students organized a strike and demanded Alonso Torres’s resignation. In this case, the *obrero ilustrado* was not quite *ilustrado* enough for the students, and they saw his appointment as an affront to their honor and as the death of culture (144-145). The students did apparently see their movement as part of the student movements happening across Latin America (139). However, I question whether the UPR students may have been somewhat more conservative in their politics, considering the collaboration between students and workers in places like Lima, Peru and Santiago, Chile. If this was the case, what explains that difference? The sixth chapter returns to the labor archive and the creation of a certain view of Puerto Rico’s labor history. Through a close reading of three major books written by key leaders of the movement, Meléndez-Badillo shows how they centered their own stories, silenced women, and pushed race to the sidelines.

Some sections in the book raise questions about how to read and think about sources and language. When discussing Escabí, for instance, Meléndez-Badillo suggests that her use of the male version of words like *compañero* and *hermano* may have been a “subtle act of resistance that eluded the gender binary of her times and, thus, our historical eye” (88). But she may have also simply used the male version as a stand-in for mixed gender audiences which was standard at the time. In analyzing the lack of a discussion on race in Juan Vilar’s writing in the second chapter, Meléndez-Badillo writes that while Vilar may not have “repudiated his blackness” (79), he “reproduced a Westernized positivist logic that sought to de-Africanize the labor movement” (78). These are certainly possibilities. But equally possible is an explanation we find later in the book: “For the FLT’s leadership, the language of class was more effective to deal

with the colonial authorities and the upper classes” (177). In other words, perhaps Vilar’s missing analysis of race was a strategic absence. Of course, there are probably several other possibilities, and we will likely never know the answer.

Other parts of *The Lettered Barriada* made me think about where we find sources. The book is, in a way, an intellectual history of a portion of the public sphere. As such, many of the sources used are print media; the list of newspapers consulted is impressive. But at points I think the focus on a specific source base limited some of the narrative. Indeed, one probably will not find much on the history of non-union workers and strike-breakers (ix-x, 188-189) in the newspapers printed by labor unions and radical organizations because that is not the story they typically wanted to tell. Escabí’s printed paper trail may end in 1905 (89), but people live on beyond newspapers. To be clear, I am not a historian of Puerto Rico and have not researched in Puerto Rican archives. But when I think of the body of scholarship on labor and radical organizations in other parts of Latin America, I think of police records, legal cases, and internal government letters and memos. There are a few moments in *The Lettered Barriada* when these types of documents are used, but only rarely. In police files, for instance, one might find notes on speeches given at rallies, conversations from within meetings, and confiscated flyers and newspapers. The ideas of people who never penned a newspaper article or a pamphlet (or stopped writing for the public) can sometimes be found in those police records, even if censored. Perhaps this type of archival material for Puerto Rico does not exist, in which case the following can be ignored. But as I read, I kept asking myself if limiting the source base to mostly print media also restricted the breadth of political and historical imaginaries covered in the book. Does that inadvertently reproduce some of the historical silences critiqued throughout the book and in the new labor history of Puerto Rico?

This would be a fine book for graduate classes or advanced undergraduates to read and think about how historical narratives are created and reproduced, as well as the role of class, race, and gender in this process. It poses questions about how we do historical research and what questions we ask. At the same time, it will also force us to think about the types of sources we use or chose not to use.