

**SLEEPING ON THE ASHES:
SLUM CLEARANCE IN HAVANA IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTION, 1930-65**

by

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University of Pittsburgh, 2016

This dissertation examines the relationship between poor, informally housed communities and the state in Havana, Cuba, from 1930 to 1965, before and after the first socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere. It challenges the notion of a “great divide” between Republic and Revolution by tracing contentious interactions between technocrats, politicians, and financial elites on one hand, and mobilized, mostly-Afro-descended tenants and shantytown residents on the other hand. The dynamics of housing inequality in Havana not only reflected existing socio-racial hierarchies but also produced and reconfigured them in ways that have not been systematically researched. As the urban poor resisted evictions, they utilized the legal and political systems to draw their neighborhoods into contact with the welfare state. Not merely co-opted by politicians, tenants and shantytown residents claimed housing as a citizenship right and played a decisive role in centralizing and expanding state institutions before and after the 1959 Revolution.

Far from giving the urban poor free rein over their destinies, however, their tight relationships with the Cuban state impelled officials to implement new policies drawn from abroad. Public debates over slum clearance reinforced the social-scientific discourse of a “culture of poverty” in ways that ultimately blended with the incipient socialist system. This discourse was embedded in the most beneficial interventions of the revolutionary welfare state but in ways

that perpetuated racism and social exclusion. By the early 1960s, then, slum policy in Havana represented a dynamic interaction between residents, social scientists, and state bureaucrats. The urban poor shaped the Revolution, even as the Revolution sought to manage them.

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My engagement with issues of poverty, racial inequality, and international politics probably has roots in the lives of my grandparents, who told me to do good for others. From an early age, I understood that social justice would make my family more proud than money.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

These are capitalists of misery ... who, according to the constitution, are as Cuban as any others, with equal rights and duties, but who, in reality, are more Cuban than anyone, because they have more problems, more misery, more hunger, more sickness, and more abandonment than anyone!

—Pablo de la Torriente Brau, 1935.¹

When we got to Las Yaguas, a crowd gathered around us. Seeing it, [Police Chief] Ameijeiras said, ‘Let’s organize a committee here so we can help the Revolution together.’ A voice called out from the audience, ‘More than we have already?’

—Alexis García, 1969.²

As a US citizen whose acquaintances included government officials on both sides of the Florida Straits, John L. Stowers commanded some influence—and in 1940, he turned it to the Havana metropolitan area’s eastern edge. Urban passersby could catch hints of Stowers’ wealth in the heart of Havana, where an upscale shop bore his name.³ Yet at the city’s periphery, where he sought to clear several hundred zinc, palm, and scrap-wood shacks from land he had purchased

¹ All translations are mine, except where noted. Pablo de la Torriente Brau, “La escuela publica en Fernando Poo,” *Ahora*, February 13, 1935.

² Alexis García is a pseudonym for one of Oscar Lewis’ resident informants, in accordance with requests from the University of Illinois. Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 95.

³ “Visite la Casa ‘STOWERS,’” *El Mundo*, May 31, 1934, 21.

in an area called La Hata, circumstances were different. Stowers' land had been "overrun by squatters," reported US Embassy officials.⁴

In facing this particular problem, Stowers was not alone. As he worked through municipal courts with support from the US embassy, another US property owner, Walter Ebenezer Dickenson, filed the latest in what would ultimately be 26 years of legal claims through which he hoped to regain possession of land to which he held title.⁵ Several miles south of Havana's new capitol, Cosme de la Torriente, a wealthy Cuban lawyer who served as Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations, joined scores of Cuban title-holders and hundreds of Cuban landlords in seeking to remove poor people from their respective properties.⁶ From the presidential palace, US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista echoed these claims in 1952 and proclaimed the need to eliminate impoverished shantytowns from Havana. Slum clearance, he said, was for the cultural benefit of Havana's poor, and for the good of the Cuban nation.⁷

Yet to the chagrin of Stowers, de la Torriente, and Dickenson, little came of their efforts. In the face of political mobilization, legal maneuvers, and street protests, their eviction attempts were frustrated. The shacks remained. In the meantime, the land de la Torriente had purchased grew famous for the actions of people he called "indigents." Inspired by its maze of palm-bark huts, it was given a new name, Las Yaguas, which appeared on no property title. Residents were active, daring, and organized. Frequently speaking to the national press, Rufino González, a black man, was the shantytown's locally designated "mayor."

⁴ La Hata is referred to alternatively as "La Hata" and "La Jata," because of its US owner. I refer to the neighborhood as La Hata, which is the official name in the present day. Albert Nufer to the Secretary of State, 1 May 1947, RG59/837.52/5-247, United States National Archive (hereafter USNA).

⁵ "Interesado el Ministro Pardo Jiménez. Pretende resolver el desahucio én Quemados," *El Sol*, May 7, 1955, 1.

⁶ See chapters 3 and 5.

⁷ See Batista's comments in Enrique Pizzi de Porras, "Quiero que todos los cubanos vivan la vida digna a que tienen derecho," *Bohemia*, April 27, 1952, Supplement, 8-11.

Then, in 1963, four years after an unlikely group of radical guerrilla fighters had taken hold of the levers of state power and two years after Fidel Castro had declared Cuba to be home to the first socialist system in the Western Hemisphere, Las Yaguas was eradicated. With their possessions loaded into trucks, their shacks demolished, their community divided, residents were moved into modern, concrete houses equipped with new furniture and running water and set in seven new subdivisions on the outskirts of the city. There, they were connected to social workers who promised cultural redemption and to institutions that promised political incorporation. Shantytown residents, a state publication boldly declared, “are Cubans too.”⁸

What twists and turns marked this unlikely path between John Stowers, a wealthy foreigner, Rufino González, a black shantytown mayor of humble circumstances, and Fidel Castro, leader of the Cuban Revolution? What conflicts? Existing historiography offers few clues. Within several decades, slum clearance in Havana was transformed from a gold-plated aspiration of moneyed foreigners to a celebrated reform of an incipient socialist welfare state, all against a backdrop of popular mobilization. Yet the specific contingencies of this transformation, its continuities and ruptures, have not been systematically researched.

Existing scholarship on housing in Cuba has confronted a wider problem in twentieth-century Cuban historiography—what Pérez-Stable calls the “great divide” separating the Republic from the Revolution.⁹ Because of its geopolitical significance, its radicalization, and the efforts of government leaders to delineate the new system from the old, the Revolution has found in the Republic its most reliable foil. Studies of the Republic are more than mere studies, then, since claims about the republican past are often implicitly linked to the Revolution’s

⁸ Gustavo Aguirre, “También son cubanos,” *INRA* 1, no. 3 (1960): 36-37.

⁹ Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, xi.

achievements.¹⁰ In this comparative framework, it is difficult to overstate the emphasis on urban poverty as a problem left unresolved by the Republic. The lack of studies addressing Cuban shantytowns is linked to the widespread belief that the 1959 Revolution eliminated them. As historians of Cuba have argued in other cases, “nonissues are not for study,” and shantytown housing ran true to form.¹¹ In 1987 several Cuban scholars declared “the eradication of poverty” on the island.¹² And as Castro explained in 1986, “we have no shantytowns here.”¹³

From the 1930s into the mid-1960s and beyond, however, shantytowns were numerous and visible in Havana, and they shaped the culture and politics of the nation. This dissertation studies their evolving place in the wider socio-political structures of the Republic and the early years of the Revolution, addressing several questions. First, how widespread was political mobilization in shantytowns? How successful? What explains its successes and failures? Second, what factors underlay the drive to clear slums from Havana, both in theory and in practice? And how did these factors change according to time, place, and actor? Finally, why has this history been relegated to the dustbin of the late Republic? Why, to put it differently, has shantytown resistance not been celebrated as a component of revolutionary activism?

Answers, I suggest, require an analysis of the deep, multi-layered connections shantytown residents built with the Cuban state and with a variety of political actors. These connections ranged from spheres that were intimately local to ones that were nearly global in scale. They began with ballots, since neighborhood residents had direct influence on local

¹⁰ De la Fuente makes this point with regard to race relations in Cuba. See de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² Luis Rodríguez and Carriazo Moreno, *Erradicación de pobreza*.

¹³ The context for Castro’s remarks was a discussion of doctors working in “zones that do not have the best material conditions,” but which were not “shantytowns.” In Spanish: “*El médico de la familia empieza a ser una realidad ya ... que están trabajando en las zonas que pudiéramos decir que no tienen las mejores condiciones materiales de vida, las mejores condiciones de vivienda; están trabajando en antiguas zonas obreras—que no son barrios de indigentes, no tenemos barrios de indigentes aquí; no son villas miseria, no tenemos villas miseria—están trabajando en aquellas zonas donde más lo necesita la población, y están trabajando con resultados excelentes.*” Fidel Castro, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” December 2, 1986, in Castro, “Discursos e intervenciones.”

politics through their votes. Yet shantytowns could wield political power in other ways, too, frequently appearing as sensationalized emblems of poverty and discrimination on Cuba's competitive national political stage. In court battles, meanwhile, they made contact with the legal apparatus, where judges interpreted the precepts of Cuba's progressive 1940 constitution and, for better or worse, made them real. Cuba's slum policies carried weight in the realm of international relations as well, where postwar imperatives for national "development" swept across the hemisphere, spreading unfettered optimism that the webs of social conflict that surrounded informal housing should and could be solved.

On each level, shantytown residents connected to the state in different ways, and the strength of those connections determined their ability to lay claim to the basic rights of citizenship. Yet they also drew them into collaboration with the politicians of the Republic, linking their success to the fortunes of governing officials, and redefining their protests according to the scientific language of the Cuban state. To scrutinize the place of shantytowns in the Republic, therefore, requires a deeper look at the history of these collaborations, which implies that shantytowns were integral, rather than marginal to the institutions of the republican state. This, in turn, implies that the slum policies of 1959 did not come without precedent. Mediating the time and space between John Stowers, Rufino González, and Fidel Castro was the halting, contested expansion of the Cuban welfare state, a process that spilled across geopolitical boundaries and into a time of revolution.

At a time when the future of Cuba's socialist project is under as much discussion as its past, particularly as it relates to urban poverty, this dissertation does not set out to expose the failures of revolutionary egalitarianism, or, alternatively, to justify the rise of Castro's

government uncritically.¹⁴ Its aim is neither to sensationalize nor sanitize the vast inequality of the republican period. Rather it seeks to show the ways that each of these metanarratives leaves crucial aspects of the history of Havana's poor untold. The narrative below does not take for granted a stark division between pre-and post-1959 Cuba and instead explores the specific ways that this division became significant. In certain crucial respects, this project reveals that, for all the changes that took place, the basic dilemmas of informal housing in the Republic and the Revolution are not so very different—a finding that may offer clarity for analysts of the present. Tracing shantytowns from their respective origins until the early 1960s, I attempt to tell a comprehensive history, by examining complicated processes of state formation, social science research, economic development, socialist reform, and revolution, as they intersected with the lived experiences and collective action of poor people in bounded geographies throughout the city.

¹⁴ On urban poverty, see Espino Prieto, "Introductory Note: The Social Mobility Perspective"; Martín and Núñez, "Geography and Habitat"; Rodríguez, *Los marginales*; Torres Zayas, *Relación barrio-juego abakuá*; Espino Prieto, *Políticas de atención a la pobreza*.

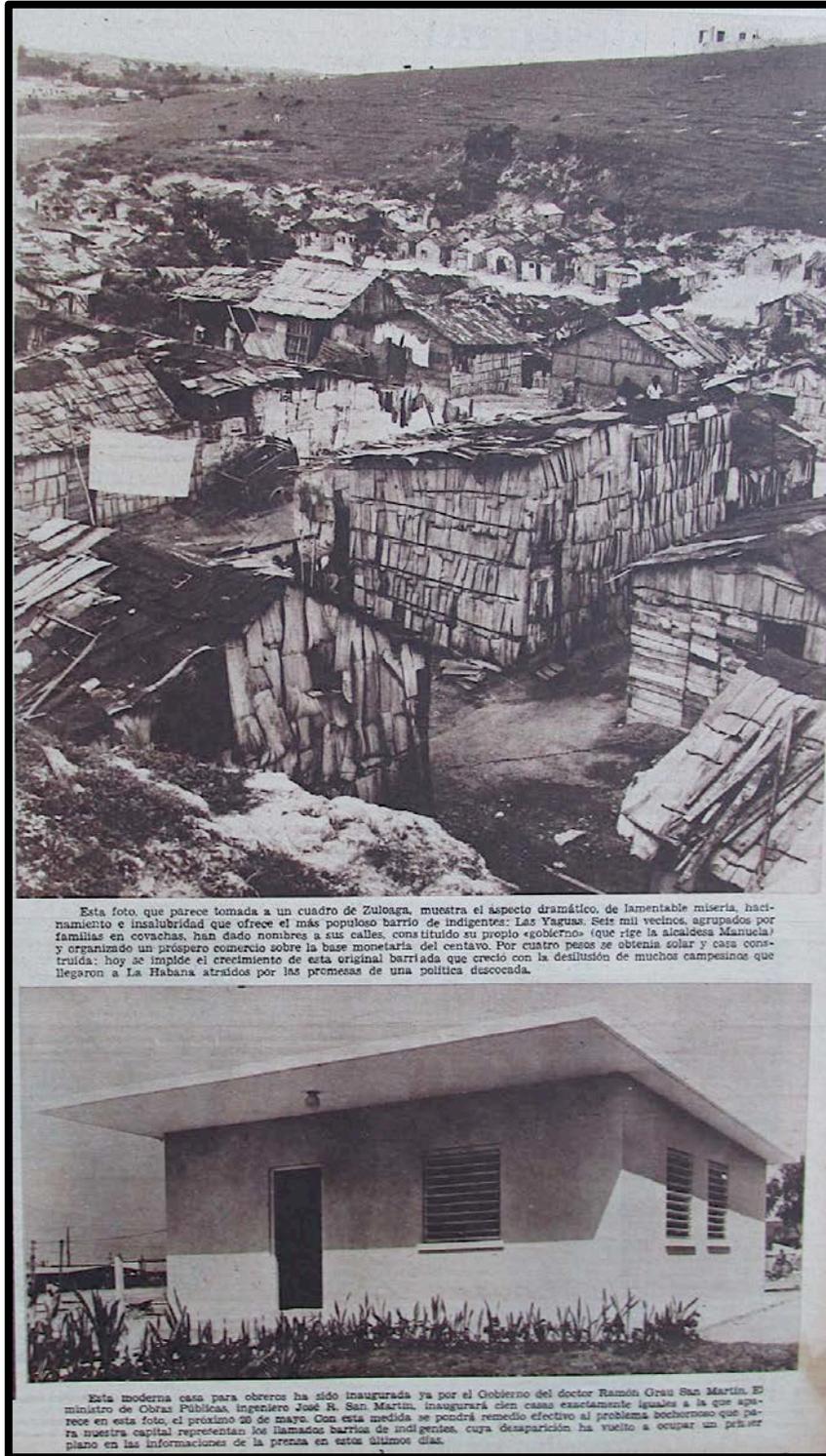


Figure 1. Las Yaguas juxtaposed against the partially completed public housing project known as the Barrio Obrero (Worker's Neighborhood) in 1947.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Las Yaguas en vías de desaparecer," *Diario de la Marina Magazine Ilustrada*, March 13, 1947, 7.

1.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The chapters that follow address the relationship between Havana's urban poor and the Cuban state during slightly more than three decades, from 1930 to 1965. The chapters overlap each other chronologically, often spanning presidential administrations and other shifts without engaging them directly. To begin, I therefore offer a brief synthesis of Cuban socio-political dynamics during the late Republic and early Revolution.

The label “neocolony” could accurately describe Cuba in relation to the US during the first decades of the twentieth century, even as universal male suffrage fueled intense political contests. Following Cuba's Independence War, the occupying US military imposed an amendment in the national constitution of 1901, granting the neighbor to the North unlimited powers to intervene in Cuban politics. As US capital extended its reach across the island, US officials invoked the Platt Amendment on multiple occasions to justify military occupation. Following prosperity in the early 1920s, the so-called “Plattist system” gave rise by the end of the decade to a democratically elected but increasingly authoritarian president, Gerardo Machado, whose administration confronted a collapsing economy by veering between gradual reform and brutal repression, ultimately suspending elections and constitutional guarantees.¹⁶ My study of shantytown settlements in Havana begins during this time.

¹⁶ The US accepted the amendment's abrogation upon Carlos Mendieta's assumption of the presidency. On the Plattist system, see Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 11-53; Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 145-209.

Although Cuba's dependence on US trade relations would continue until the 1960s, the label "neocolony" becomes less convincing after Machado's fall in 1933, when a self-proclaimed revolutionary government with radical popular backing unilaterally revoked the Platt Amendment. Backed by a mobilized coalition of labor organizations, anarchists, students, and peasants, and initially supported by a successful barracks revolt in which low-ranking officers seized control of the military, President Ramón Grau San Martín's 100-day government enacted a dizzying series of populist reforms. Among other things, this new government set agrarian reform as a priority while protecting labor rights.¹⁷

The revolutionary experiment did not last. Withdrawing his support from Grau, Fulgencio Batista, a young, mulatto, previously unknown sergeant-turned-army-commander, courted US backing as he led the brutal repression of mobilized but often-disorganized labor protest. Many within the traditional oligarchy sought his support in returning to the old status quo. Carefully courting both sides, from 1934 to 1940 Batista allowed unpopular, regressive measures to be carried out by a series of more or less pliant presidents linked to traditional elites, but at the same time he supported the consolidation of the labor movement through Cuba's Communist Party.¹⁸

Under Batista, then, frictions between order and revolution were increasingly institutionalized. Beginning in 1937, the *de facto* head of state sought to gain popular support by legislating on many of the social reforms of Grau's government through a three-year *Plan Trienal*. A central component was the Sugar Coordination Act, which imposed the state as a

¹⁷ The collapse of the government in 1933 has sometimes been labeled a "failed" or "incomplete" revolution. For a discussion of debates over the meaning of the 1933 Revolution, see Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 10-13; On labor, see Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 41.

On dependence, see Henrique Cardoso and Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, vii-xxv.

¹⁸ The communists were not a major part of Grau's 100-day government. Farber, *Revolution and Reaction*, 68; Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 42.

mediator in labor disputes and price negotiations in the all-important sugar sector. Eddy Chibás, who was aligned with Grau's opposing Auténtico party, highlighted the paradox of Batista's rule: "How is it possible," he asked, "that the maximum champion of ... order can become the supreme *leader* of a socialist project?" Batista offered an explanation, and a new vision for the state: "Some want to see in me a simple defender of order," he said. "But what do they understand by order? Because my conception of it has more to do with architecture than policing."¹⁹

The culmination of Batista's populist turn was the 1940 promulgation of a new constitution, drafted with input from the political opposition and openly debated by representatives from diverse social sectors. The document spelled out extensive social rights and democratic freedoms—a constitution that, according to one historian, was "one of the most liberal and progressive ever written in the American hemisphere."²⁰ Among other things, it codified housing as a citizenship right and a state responsibility.²¹ The subsequent 1940 presidential election, bitterly fought between two of the key figures of the brief 100-day government, Grau and Batista, was among the most open in Cuban history, and both sides competed for the votes of the urban poor. While Grau claimed to represent Cuba's most progressive reformers, Batista openly incorporated the Communist Party into his coalition, crisscrossing the country with rallies that were attended by "the Negro race and the underprivileged."²² Still, Batista was no communist, and his electoral coalition included many politicians from the old oligarchy as well.

¹⁹ For an analysis of Batista as "The Architect of the Cuban State," see Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 149-176; Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 85. Quotation from "El Coronel Batista expone al Dr. José Rivero," *Diario de la Marina*, December 20, 1937, in Cuba, *Plan de reconstrucción económico-social*, 18; Eddy Chibás, "El plan trienal," *Luz*, August 2, 1937.

²⁰ Farber, *Revolution and Reaction*, 94.

²¹ Jesse Horst, "Shantytown Revolution," 703.

²² Milton Patterson Thompson to George Messersmith, 17 June 1940, RG 84/800, USNA.

During the next two decades, politicians from across the political spectrum competed for the mantle of “revolution.” Winning the election in 1940, Batista served a four-year term; his coalition subsequently lost to Grau’s Auténtico party in 1944, though Batista did not run himself. The Auténtico party continued to rule until 1952, though it faced serious opposition when a more progressive splinter group bolted to form the Ortodoxo party in 1947. Fidel Castro began his political career with ties to this group. Running against Auténticos and Ortodoxos in 1952, Batista seized power once again, this time by force in an army-backed coup, after critical elements of his coalition defected before scheduled elections. Despite the polarizing nature of Cuban politics in these years, however, scholars have argued these political cleavages did not correspond to social ones, or to left- or right- wing ideologies. Grau and Batista each represented cross-class, cross-race coalitions with popular and elite support. Each claimed to represent the 1940 constitution, and the struggle between them, not between right and left, defined the Cuban political system until 1958.²³

Underlying these political dynamics was a growing social malaise. Despite increasing popular participation in Cuba’s political system following 1933, for many Cubans the prosperity of the 1920s never returned. Economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago estimates that prior to 1931, employment rates in Cuba “were similar to...full-employment economies in the West,” while, by contrast, from 1931 to 1957, rates “were similar to less-developed countries seriously affected by unemployment.”²⁴ Employment in the traditional export sector stagnated, while new industries, like construction, grew steadily but failed to keep pace with population growth. Many new jobs were located in the capital city, Havana, which grew steadily in terms of its absolute and relative population, as well as its economic weight. In the absence of robust economic growth, the

²³ Szulc, *Fidel*, 168-219; Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 173; Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 99.

²⁴ Mesa-Lago, *The Labor Force*, 28.

political system and the public sector became increasingly important as avenues for economic redistribution—and with resources that far surpassed the countryside, Havana became the epicenter of political contests.

During the late Republic, then, Havana became a site where the stakes to what David Harvey calls the “right to the city” took on new proportions.²⁵ With housing increasingly scarce at a time of expansive new formal citizenship rights, the state’s obligation to address urban poverty emerged as a key point of contention. As shantytowns produced strong confrontations among residents, land titleholders, and the state, the neighborhoods became focal points for wider debates about the meanings of citizenship.

As these debates played out on the national political stage during 1940-58, government policy slowly shifted away from the popular classes, even as politicians maintained close alliances with organized labor. After the Auténticos came to power in 1944, communist influence among labor waned. In 1947, Carlos Prio, from within Grau’s cabinet, led a purge of the party leadership, following a broad Latin American pattern. Prio was strongly anti-communist as president from 1948 to 1952, a stance that Batista retained during the 1950s as he tightened Cuba’s military ties to the United States. Exacerbating this shift, Batista declined to allow free elections during the 1950s, even while he claimed to have restored the 1940 constitution to its full force.²⁶

Meanwhile, beneath this authoritarian veneer, the institutions of Cuban government expanded, with a significant impact on the housing sector. Pérez-Stable writes that in the 1950s Cuban leaders were slowly moving towards a new development model—one that aligned closely

²⁵ David Harvey, “The Right to the City”; Mesa-Lago. *The Labor Force*, 28; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 101-102, 119-123.

²⁶ Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 25-34.

with postwar hemispheric trends. Foreign investment and growth beyond traditional export sectors grew, even as economic policy continued to favor sugar oligarchs. Modernization and development expanded, even as structural unemployment festered. In the meantime, government officials undertook new, centralized initiatives to deal with nagging problems like shantytowns, while urban poverty remained severe. In sum, even as a nascent developmentalist state was increasingly evident, Cuban society remained mired in the frustrating contradictions of dependent economic relations—and many blamed the political system.²⁷

Concerned by rising discontent, Batista's government stifled all opposition, leading to increasingly radical protest. Commanding a US-backed military that was bent on eliminating communism, he successfully contained demonstrations in the capital, suppressing a major urban uprising in 1958. Meanwhile, however, on the Eastern side of the island, a small band of rebels captured increasing attention in Cuba and beyond. Born out of a failed military operation on July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro's July 26th Movement gained popular support in the mountainous regions of Oriente, where Batista's corrupt, demoralized army failed to control them. In 1958, as the embattled dictator faced defections from all sides, eventually including elements within the US government, Fidel Castro emerged as the most powerful opposition leader on the island. On January 1, 1959, Batista fled, and the army surrendered to the rebels, leaving Castro and his guerrilla fighters to take control of the state.²⁸

From its first days the Revolution emphasized the radical, progressive, nationalist values common to political reformers at the time, but it was not initially communist. Through escalating trade confrontations in 1960, US and Cuban leaders grew mutually disenchanted, eventually engaging in open confrontation in the failed US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. In

²⁷ Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 34-35; Also see Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 445-477.

²⁸ See Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 58-65, 125-139; Domínguez, "The Batista Regime in Cuba."

April, Castro openly declared the Cuban Revolution to be socialist, paving the way for close ties to the Soviet Union.²⁹ By 1962 the US banned most Cuban imports; formal diplomatic relations were suspended until 2016. In the meantime, as Cuban officials publicly addressed urban poverty and built housing to replace a number of shantytowns across the island, many saw the urban poor as key beneficiaries of the new system. Yet their history prior to 1959 and after remains largely unstudied.

1.2 CUBAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The politics of urban space have received limited scholarly attention in Cuba. Scholarship on the Republic has frequently discussed the importance of Havana's popular classes in the instability of the 1950s and the radicalization of the 1959 Revolution, but attention to popular mobilization is generally limited to student radicals and an institutionalized "working class."³⁰ Housing scholarship on Cuba has offered descriptive accounts of shantytown neighborhoods, but ignored their political activism.³¹ Dating back to the Republic, scholars have discounted political engagement from shantytowns as a product of co-optation by politicians—a trend that reflects

²⁹ Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 80.

³⁰ For an overview of historiographical debates on the role of the working class in the 1959 Revolution, see Farber, *Revolution and Reaction*, 14-27; and Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution*, 112-36. On the concept of "Working Class Revolution," see Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics*, 277-284. Other authors highlight broader social dynamics, while still noting the role of Cuba's *clases populares* in generating social instability and radicalization. For example, see Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 7; Guerra, "To Condemn the Revolution is to Condemn Christ," 94; Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*, 450-53; Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 230-31. Jorge Ibarra takes a wider approach, emphasizing the role of social inequality in generating the 1959 Revolution. Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution*, 161-74; Other authors follow similar lines. See del Toro González, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 111-130.

³¹ On shantytowns, see Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 77-84, 190-91, 259-61; On popular housing and the working class during the Republic, see Scarpaci, Segre and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 51-130; Vega Vega, *Comentarios a la ley general de la vivienda*; Segre, *La vivienda en Cuba*; García Vázquez, *Aspectos del planeamiento*; Fernández Núñez, *La vivienda en Cuba*; Del Toro, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 111-30, 257-68; Luis Padrón, *¡Qué república era aquella!*, 276-279.

For recent works on Cuba that explore the complex relationship between architecture and governance without addressing shantytowns, see Hyde, *Constitutional Modernism*; Loomis, *Revolution of Forms*.

scholarship beyond Cuba, and whose merits I discuss in further detail below.³² Furthermore, discussions of slum clearance have overwhelmingly focused on the early years of the Revolution, offering little sense of antecedents or continuities.³³

A major exception to the dearth of scholarship surrounding Cuban shantytowns is the well-documented story of Las Yaguas in the immediate aftermath of 1959, a neighborhood that serves, in Roy's terms, as Cuba's "metonymic slum."³⁴ As such, it functions as an idea as much as a place, a simplistic rhetorical stand-in for diverse, multifaceted conflicts elsewhere in the city. Despite their thoroughness in studying events within the neighborhood, studies of Las Yaguas have been conducted in what Fischer calls "the present tense," more concerned with the neighborhood's abstract cultural, social or political meaning than to the particular ways that it was shaped by political networks and state policies.³⁵ Situating the story of Las Yaguas in a history of shantytowns across Havana, and with attention to its interaction with wider structural dynamics, I attempt a different kind of study here.

This dissertation engages seriously with state policy before 1959, contributing to a growing body of scholarship that has focused on the autonomy of domestic policy makers, without losing sight of Cuba's dependent position in the world economic system.³⁶ Once discounted as dead letter, the Constitution of 1940 has received new attention for the important

³² This critique is frequent among the abovementioned works, and is leveled more generally by Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, 179, 190. Also see note 49 below.

³³ On the roots and outcomes of Revolutionary Cuba's urban policy, see Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy"; Hamberg, *Under Construction*; Acosta and Hardoy, *Reforma urbana en Cuba*; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 131-167, 196-233.

³⁴ Roy, "Slumdog Cities," 223-238. On Las Yaguas, see Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*; Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*; García Alonso, *Manuela*; Calderón, *Amparo*. Other works published from the Lewis project did not focus directly on Las Yaguas residents. Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Women*; Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Neighbors*.

³⁵ Fischer, "A Century in the Present Tense," 9-67.

³⁶ Whitney, *State and Revolution*; Dominguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*; Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*; Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*.

Along with this trend has come a more general reengagement with controversial republican figures. See Frank Argote-Freyre, *Fulgencio Batista*; Ilan Elrich, *Eduardo Chibás*.

ways it structured social life and local activism.³⁷ For Havana's urban poor it often served as a rallying point in claims for expanded citizenship rights, on issues ranging from property to housing conditions, employment, and rent prices. The result in this case, however, is not merely a new argument for tipping the scales of pre- and post-revolutionary comparison one way or the other. To put it differently, the Republic's gain is not the Revolution's loss, and vice-versa. Rather, the Revolution is an outcome of the Republic—though not the only one possible. Not a comparison of two distinct periods, this work joins a new wave of scholarship in questioning the precise meaning of 1959 as a “great divide.”³⁸

In doing so it also joins scholarship seeking to reassess the 1959 Revolution. New work has revealed that the process of toppling the Batista dictatorship had wider origins than the insurrection in the Sierra Maestra, and that urban opposition to the regime was extensive.³⁹ Other studies have shown that popular mobilization had a deep impact on the early policies of the Revolution.⁴⁰ This dissertation does not examine opposition to the Batista regime, either in the Sierra Maestra or in the Havana underground. Instead it highlights the ways that the policies of the early Revolution evolved from the republican state itself, which was subjected to many of the same popular pressures scholars have identified after 1959. And while the new regime restructured some aspects of the housing sector in radical ways, I suggest that post-1959

³⁷ Documenting congressional failures to implement legislation upholding the Constitution, as well as inconsistencies in the document itself, are Farber, *Revolution and Reaction*, 92-98; Ameringer, *The Cuban Democratic Experience*, 14; Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 36.

However, other authors have begun to highlight the enduring and concrete applications of the 1940 Constitution beyond the intentions of its framers. Sarah Arvey's recent study of constitutional reforms surrounding marriage law documents the ways women employed the Constitution in unforeseen ways for their benefit, illustrating “the gulf between rather lofty ideas ... propounded by the legislators who enacted it and its meaning and enforcement in everyday life.” Arvey “Making the Immoral Moral,” 658. Also see de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 209-222; Hyde, *Constitutional Modernism*, 1-39.

³⁸ Alejandro de la Fuente has analyzed this trend in Cuban historiography. See de la Fuente “*La ventolera*.” For examples of works challenging the “great divide,” see Lambe, “A Century of Work.”

De la Fuente notes similarities with earlier revisionist scholarship on the Mexican Revolution. In terms of urban history, this project draws from several works on Mexico. See Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens*; Johns, *The City of Mexico*; Diane Davis, *Urban Leviathan*; Eckstein, *The Poverty of Revolution*.

³⁹ Sweig, *Inside the Urban Underground*; Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*.

⁴⁰ Guerra, *Visions of Power*.

shantytown policy only makes sense when its evolution is considered across these sharp political breaks.

In addressing Havana's urban poor, this dissertation also speaks to a growing body of work on the history and legacy of racial divisions and discrimination in Cuba, undertaken by scholars both on and off the island.⁴¹ Like this dissertation, work on race has highlighted forms of popular mobilization beyond organized labor. Still, despite its success in dismantling silence around ongoing racial discrimination, this scholarship has generally focused on the actions of a limited number of self-identified "black activists," leaving aside other forms of political activism from a significantly larger Afro-descended population. Despite its enduring political salience and visibility, race by itself was often not a determinative organizational cleavage for poor, dark skinned Cubans.⁴² Moreover the focus on self-identified black activists has meant that studies of race have paid little attention to social categories, like urban poverty, that overlapped with race in both scientific and popular discourse.

This study therefore pays attention to race but de-centers explicit black activism as a lens of analysis. For scientists of the Republic, shantytown housing was a discrete category of difference in its own right, and it was a key issue around which Afro-descended Cubans made claims, even if they did not do so in expressly racial terms.⁴³ By widening the frame of analysis to encompass urban poverty, discriminatory practices that affected Afro-descendants in Havana's housing market become clearer. In examining housing, I draw from research on the US, which

⁴¹ On race, see de la Fuente, *A Nation For All*; Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*; Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*. On the Republic specifically, see Pappademos, *Black Political Activists*; Guridy, *Forging Diaspora*; Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*. For an example of growing attention to the topic within Cuba, see Rodríguez, et al., *Las relaciones raciales*.

⁴² De la Fuente works against this trend by juxtaposing racial ideology with indices of social inequality, including housing. De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*.

⁴³ For an overview of eugenics and social science in Cuba and ways scientific categories shaped popular mobilization, see Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*; On similar processes regarding criminology in Mexico City, see Picatto, *City of Suspects*; For an overview of the eugenics movement in Latin America, see Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*. For an analysis of biotypology as it related to government policies towards the urban poor in Mexico from 1920-1960 see Alexandra Minna Stern, "From Mestizophilia to Biotypology"; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*.

has explored the roles of suburbanization, and technocratic, political, financial, and local interests, in generating systematic racial exclusions.⁴⁴ Studies on Latin American residential patterns have not revealed similar indices of segregation.⁴⁵ Although Cuba was no exception, its close collaboration with US planners meant that some mechanisms of segregation in the US, like the mortgages insured by Federal Housing Administration, operated with similar effects, especially towards the broader category of the urban poor.

1.3 CORE ARGUMENTS

The history of Havana shantytowns therefore cuts across a number of trends in the historiography of Cuba. Looking beyond conflicts that were explicitly framed around class or race, I examine the mechanisms through which housing inequality was produced in contentious interactions between planners, politicians, and financial elites on one hand, and mobilized tenants and shantytowns residents on the other, most of whom were Afro-descendants. As the urban poor resisted eviction efforts, they employed political activism and legal mobilization in ways that drew them directly into contact with the institutions of the republican welfare state. By no means coming to a halt in 1959, the dynamics of these interactions were fundamental in shaping the trajectory of the early Revolution.

Tracing these dynamics, I find that popular housing from Republic to Revolution did not merely reflect existing socio-racial hierarchies, but rather produced and reconfigured them in ways that have not been fully understood. Instead of being merely “co-opted” by politicians, I

⁴⁴ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; Bristol, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

⁴⁵ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 194-215; Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 273-4. Also see Fischer, “Quase Pretos de Tão Pobres?”

argue that by claiming housing as a citizenship right, shantytown residents played a decisive role in centralizing and expanding state institutions prior to 1959, ultimately shaping the policies of the early Revolution.⁴⁶ The impact that these residents had on government practices came not through external attacks on the republican system, but rather from within. Residents used the radical potential of the legal system to nullify property claims from the wealthy and used the language of state officials and the 1940 Constitution to negotiate and defend against slum clearance. While the policies of the revolutionary government appeared to spring from nowhere, in fact they evolved from the contested and negotiated policies of governments past.

Far from giving shantytown residents free rein over their own destinies, however, their tight relationship to the Cuban state impelled officials to adapt and implement recommendations from several internationally prominent scientific trends. Throughout the twentieth century, urban planners across the Western Hemisphere drew from two competing theses regarding urban poverty. Some planners argued that structural economic and spatial reforms could make slums disappear, while others joined social scientists to advocate targeted medical and cultural interventions to “improve” slum residents directly. The Cuban Revolution and the subsequent clearance of Las Yaguas came at a unique international moment, when these trends became deeply intertwined. I argue that, by articulating their resistance to arbitrary government slum clearances through a language of contention that emphasized the state’s obligation to provide for the urban poor, shantytown residents successfully remained in the city for years. By publicizing this language of resistance so widely, however, they pressured officials to intervene in their neighborhoods in other ways, leading core tenets of these theses to become policy. Ultimately,

⁴⁶ There is a wide body of scholarship on citizenship, most of which I do not engage with in this dissertation. I find that during the conflicts analyzed below, the urban poor rarely used the word “citizenship.” Yet they frequently demanded social rights from the government, highlighting laws and symbols of the nation for leverage. I therefore use the term citizenship as a category of analysis, to describe the institutionalized relationships between poor people and the Cuban state. On citizenship, see Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship*, 31-53; Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*, 306-315; Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*.

public debates over slum clearance reinforced the social-scientific discourse of a “culture of poverty” in ways that blended with the incipient socialist system. This discourse was embedded in the most significant and beneficial interventions of the revolutionary welfare state, in ways that disguised but perpetuated racism and inequality.

To some extent, then, the dissertation takes up a well-established agenda in uncovering the “agency” of subaltern residents of Havana, for whom many assumed passivity to be the norm—but it also focuses on the specific, patterned ways in which that agency was channeled and limited.⁴⁷ Shantytown residents shaped the evolution of Havana’s urban institutions indelibly, but they did so through the institutions of the powerful, and the resulting configurations did not appear exactly as they wished. Their activism emerged in the early 1930s as a product of insurgent property claims, at a time when economic collapse led thousands of poor people to occupy land illegally. As they established institutionalized relationships to protect these claims, and secure additional rights based on expanded social legislation, their actions were sufficient to win *de facto* (and occasionally *de jure*) rights to occupy land. At the same time, officials formulated policies according to the categories of analysis and channels of power inherent to the Cuban political system. By 1959, slum policy in Havana represented a dynamic interaction between residents on one hand and the conceptual frameworks of social scientists, utilized selectively by politicians and state bureaucrats on the other hand. The urban poor shaped the Revolution, even as the Revolution sought to manage them.

⁴⁷ On agency, see Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*.

1.4 WIDER SIGNIFICANCE

These arguments have implications beyond Cuba, where scholarship on urban poverty and housing has been more extensive. Because of Cuba's unique place in twentieth-century geopolitics and the success of the revolutionary government in combatting many indicators of poverty, comprehensive studies devoted to urban planning and the development of welfare states in Latin America have treated Revolutionary Cuba as a counterfactual diagnosis for other nations. In the process, they devote limited, if any, discussion to the specific ways that Cuba may have resembled or differed from them.⁴⁸ Beyond Cuba, meanwhile, scholarship from the left has often discounted shantytown protest as generally ineffective, or as being co-opted by capitalist elites, since it did little to alter the structures of the wider system.⁴⁹ Yet the story of Havana shantytowns demonstrates that the widely heralded achievements of the Cuban Revolution with regard to slum clearance were made possible by institutional reforms undertaken within the capitalist system. Furthermore, continued negotiation remained necessary within a socialist system in order to make those reforms a reality.

⁴⁸ For example, in their ambitious interpretation of labor movements in a number of Latin American nations, Collier and Collier do not mention Republican Cuba, writing only, "the Cuban Revolution dramatically posed the possibility that a socialist experiment could survive in the Western Hemisphere, producing an immediate impact on the political goals of the left in many Latin American countries." Similarly, Francis Violich devotes little attention to pre-revolutionary planning in Cuba, concluding of Revolutionary Cuba that "clearly ... we find the scale and purposefulness of planning at the national level that is needed to control metropolitan growth in all Latin American countries." Meanwhile, in her study of poor neighborhoods in Mexico City, Eckstein notes that, in Cuba, "the lower socioeconomic stratum is not subject to the same degradation. ... Mainly because the Cuban state identifies above all with proletariat interests state power is used for different ends." See Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*; Violich, *Urban Planning for Latin America*, 112; Eckstein, *The Poverty of Revolution*, 218.

This tendency is part of a larger one, identified by Centeno and López-Alves, in which a focus on "grand theory" substitutes for more locally specific conclusions. See Centeno and López-Alves, "Introduction," 3-23.

⁴⁹ Velasco makes a similar point about scholarship that has discounted the potential of urban popular mobilization to effect change. See Velasco, "A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote," 667. Castells, for example notes the limited potential of urban protest to challenge the political order. Auyero is similarly unimpressed by the potential for reform evidenced by Peronist networks in Argentine shantytowns. "For many shantytown dwellers," he writes, "Peronism is not a heretical voice...but a promise of food that holds no one responsible for its scarcity." See Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, 175-214; Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*, 204. Collier, *Squatters and Oligarchs*, 55-82.

A pioneering figure in debates over urban marginality, Oscar Lewis exemplified wider tendencies to treat Cuba as categorically separate from the rest of the hemisphere. Lewis' thesis that the poor lived according to patterns inherent to a "culture" or "subculture of poverty," set the terms of debate for scholarship on urban inequality for years to come.⁵⁰ Along similar lines, during the 1960s, the "marginality school" dominated policy initiatives across Latin America, in some cases seeking to address conditions of urban poverty, in which they perceived fertile ground for revolutionary movements akin to Cuba's to expand.⁵¹ By the 1970s, however, Lewis' conclusions on the "culture of poverty" were heavily criticized and roundly discredited. Jannice Perlman argued compellingly that favela residents in Rio de Janeiro were "not marginal," and that Lewis' brand of marginality was a "myth." In a parallel vein, Manuel Castells criticized the marginality school for linking together disparate components of marginality and failing to recognize the ways that shantytown residents were interconnected with broad social, political, and economic structures.⁵²

These criticisms coincided with a wider critique of technocratic interventions in urban policy, characterized by a growing skepticism of centralized state action. In the US, Jane Jacobs led a "revolt" against planners and technocrats, catalyzing a "transatlantic collapse of urban renewal" across the North Atlantic.⁵³ Meanwhile, critiques of the "marginality school" in Latin America led to a similar push in favor of autonomous local control over informal areas.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ On the importance of marginality in urban history as a field, see Armus and Lear, "The Trajectory of Latin American Urban History."

⁵¹ Murphy, "In and Out of the Margins," 69.

⁵² Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality*; Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*.

⁵³ Jacobs, *The Death and Life*; Caro, *The Power Broker*; Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse*. On a reassessment of Moses see Jackson and Ballon eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City*; On the contextualization of urban renewal, see Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 54.

⁵⁴ For a synthesis of earlier technocratic trends, see Violich, *Urban Planning for Latin America*. Critiquing centralized relocation plans is Turner, *Housing by People*; For studies of urban renewal programs in Latin America, see Holston, *The Modernist City*; Meade, "Civilizing" Rio; Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

Yet this trend had consequences that were not intended by many of these authors. Similar arguments resonated deeply among neoliberal policy makers, who sought to blend local autonomy with the expansion of free market principles.⁵⁵ By this view, titling land, and opening it for sale on the market, had the potential to liberate “entrepreneurial” shantytown residents from anachronistic state interventions. Subsequent research has persuasively questioned the extent to which titling alone can counteract spatial inequality, yet the conclusions of these scholars continue to permeate international initiatives towards informal communities.⁵⁶

In more recent work, Ananya Roy reframes these issues, advocating a lens of “urban informality,” which, in her rendering, is not a fixed category but rather requires historical grounding and contingency. In these terms, “urban informality ... is not reduced to the bounded space of the slum,” writes Roy. “Instead it is a mode of the production of space that connects the seemingly separated geographies of slum and suburb.”⁵⁷ A number of studies in the past decade have taken up a similar conceptual framework in a rich and growing body of scholarship focused on rigorously interrogating historically embedded conditions of urban marginality as they were produced in conjunction with political, economic, and legal imperatives.⁵⁸ Brodwyn Fischer’s groundbreaking study of urban poverty and citizenship in Vargas-era Rio de Janeiro centers its analysis on the ways that shantytown residents constructed their citizenship by claiming rights where none were clearly given—battles conducted in the uneven spaces left by the contradictory

For more recent work on modernism and politics, see Healy, *Ruins of the New Argentina*; Other studies addressing urban renewal programs in the Caribbean are Derby, *The Dictator’s Seduction*, 66-108; Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*.
⁵⁵ See de Soto, *The Other Path*; On the convergence of left- and right-wing ideologies in urban planning, see Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 11.

⁵⁶ For a critique of de Soto, see Bromley, “Power Property, and Poverty,” 271-288.

⁵⁷ Roy, “Slumdog Cities,” 233.

⁵⁸ For a historiographical summary of urban informality see Roy and AlSayyad, *Urban Informality*, 7-32. Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*; Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*; Javier Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics*; Edward Murphy, *For a Proper Home*; Bryan McCann, *Hard Times*; Velasco, *Barrio Rising*; Fischer, McCann, and Auyero, eds., *Cities From Scratch*.

expansion of wider legal structures.⁵⁹ This literature emphasizes the ways that the urban poor engaged with the legal and political systems, both within and beyond their formal conventions, insisting that actions from beyond those conventions were crucial to understanding processes at their core. James Holston writes of “insurgent citizenship,” which “sustains the regime of differentiated citizenship,” but also creates “the conditions of its subversion.”⁶⁰ Alejandro Velasco labels “institutional and extra-institutional mobilization” in Caracas as “an essential element of democratic life in Latin America.”⁶¹ “In becoming insurgent homeowners,” writes Edward Murphy of Santiago, Chile, “former squatters have helped to transform the state. Yet they have also been ensnared within its web.”⁶²

Closely aligned with this literature, this dissertation builds on it in several ways. I join Murphy in analyzing the official rhetoric of marginality as it was challenged, reshaped, and reinforced by local mobilization. I analyze the actions of the government’s poorest constituents for their impact on the utopian visions of planners and state officials. In Cuba, this meeting went beyond the judicial system relatively early. Whereas Fischer notes that during the 1950s, Brazilian courts emerged as the foremost battlegrounds in a wave of property disputes, Havana’s shantytown residents fought against relocations from institutions of health and social welfare instead.⁶³ Unlike in Rio de Janeiro, and partly as the result of Cuba’s liberal Constitution of 1940 and the strength of its populist compact, I find that by the early 1940s, legal avenues to evicting squatter neighborhoods had often become dead ends. Far from granting permanent land security to residents, however, these entanglements led to legislation, which shifted debates about slum clearance to the political system. As a result, officials launched national slum clearance

⁵⁹ Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*, 8.

⁶⁰ James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*, 9.

⁶¹ Velasco, “A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote,” 668.

⁶² Murphy, *For a Proper Home*, 6.

⁶³ Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*, 271.

initiatives earlier than in Brazil. This study therefore focuses on the evolution of these initiatives, which synthesized knowledge from the bureaucracies of health and urban planning—a synthesis that was strengthened by the undemocratic regime of Fulgencio Batista and briefly expanded by the revolutionary government in the years after 1959.

This combination of nationalist populism, urban planning, social science, and authoritarian control produced slum initiatives that were, in some respects, uniquely Cuban. Studies in Latin America have focused on urban informality as a field of conflict for questions of citizenship related to law, electoral politics, and land titling. This study demonstrates that such conflicts also shaped national institutions of social welfare and planning. In Cuba, these institutions ultimately limited the potential for insurgent property claims. At the same time, however, they opened avenues for more expansive sorts of claims to be made on the Cuban state—a potential that was realized for Las Yaguas residents in the early years of the Revolution.

1.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In constructing these arguments, my dissertation connects multiple lines of inquiry with the theme of urban poverty in Havana. In the first chapter I trace instances of land invasion by poor squatters in Greater Havana from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. By putting these occupations in conversation with republican politics and a patchwork of agrarian reform legislation, I argue that contentious mobilization revealed radical interpretations of the legal system, and resulted in *de facto* legal permanence for poor squatters in the capital. Yet this permanence impelled the government to take on a more active role in managing and relocating the poor.

To examine this role, the second chapter focuses on Las Yaguas, Havana's most famous shantytown. Covering the period from 1930 to 1950, I argue that the elite status of Las Yaguas title-holders allowed them to enact legislation that effectively shifted the terms of debate from one of property rights to one about the meaning of urban citizenship. In response, residents publicly connected their resistance against relocation to the state's obligation to provide for the urban poor, making relocation virtually impossible for elected officials. At the same time, they ensured the continued involvement of medical professionals in the neighborhood.

The third chapter examines the evolution of social science that undergirded the state's approach to these confrontations, including anthropology, eugenics, and urban planning. I argue that urban planning initiatives became deeply entangled with the conclusions of anthropology and eugenics before 1959 under the rubric of national development, ultimately leading the revolutionary government to link its slum clearance initiatives to social workers and the "culture of poverty" thesis. These initiatives were explicitly de-racialized, and yet overlapped with longstanding prejudices against Afro-descendants.

These prejudices, along with debates about shantytown housing, were amplified by the dynamics of Havana's wider housing market. The fourth chapter examines the politics of rent control and private investment in Havana from 1939-1963. I trace the emergence of rent legislation and examine its effectiveness through the analysis of occupancy disputes, which brought poor tenants to Havana courts. Contrary to previous scholarship, I argue that rent controls were strong in practice. Precisely because of their strength, however, politicians promoted additional policies that strengthened the role of private investors in the housing market outside the rental system in ways that coalesced with social and racial discrimination. Amid

debates about deficient housing in the capital, shantytowns became important points of reference to highlight state failure.

In the final chapter, I return to Las Yaguas, to trace the neighborhood's unlikely survival during Batista's slum clearance program in the 1950s, until its subsequent eradication by the revolutionary government in 1963. I argue that the revolutionary government's treatment of Las Yaguas at once reflected the success of resident mobilization on one hand and the continuity of negative assumptions linked to the "culture of poverty" thesis on the other hand.

1.6 A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The vocabulary employed to describe urban areas where residents face challenges associated with some combination of precariousness, illegality, crime, impoverishment, deficient infrastructure, and marginality, is often imprecise, and always embedded in contested social and historical processes. In contrast to recent studies authored by the UN and World Bank, I generally follow Alan Gilbert in avoiding the term "slum," due to its pejorative connotations and lack of specificity.⁶⁴ As the title of my dissertation suggests, however, I find it useful to deploy the term when discussing "slum clearance," or other historically specific circumstances, where the term's general, pejorative nature is precisely the point.

This dissertation faces an additional challenge in accurately translating the words of historical actors from Spanish to English. During the period of my study, the term most often employed by historical actors to describe poor, informal urban neighborhoods was "*barrio de*

⁶⁴ Gilbert, "The Return of the Slum."

indigentes,” a highly loaded term, literally translated to “neighborhood of indigents.” I explain the origins and connotations of this term at length in Chapter 4. Elsewhere in the dissertation, I translate this term to “shantytown” for clarity, a word that I also use as an analytical category in my own writing. I understand it to mean a poor, urban area, where residents had constructed most of the homes and lacked title to the land.

In the case of rental dwellings, the Spanish vocabulary during the period under study was diverse and not entirely consistent. *Solar*, for example, was a racialized term used to indicate an overcrowded tenement house.⁶⁵ Yet the term lacks a precise definition, and was often used interchangeably with *cuartería*, *casa de vecindad*, *ciudadela*, and other terms. For clarity, in translation and in my own writing, I generally refer to these types of dwellings interchangeably as “tenements.”

1.7 A NOTE ON GEOGRAPHY

During the republican period, Greater Havana included the separate municipalities of Havana, Marianao, Guanabacoa, Regla, Santa Maria del Rosario, and Santiago de las Vegas. Each had their own mayor and city council, with some control over housing policy. In 1965 the government created a Metropolitan Administration of Havana for the larger urban area and reorganized local jurisdictions.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ De la Fuente writes, “The identification of *solares* as black spaces was a construct aimed at excluding the poorest from the city’s geography and society, a cultural validation of social hierarchies.” De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 114.

⁶⁶ Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 170-71.

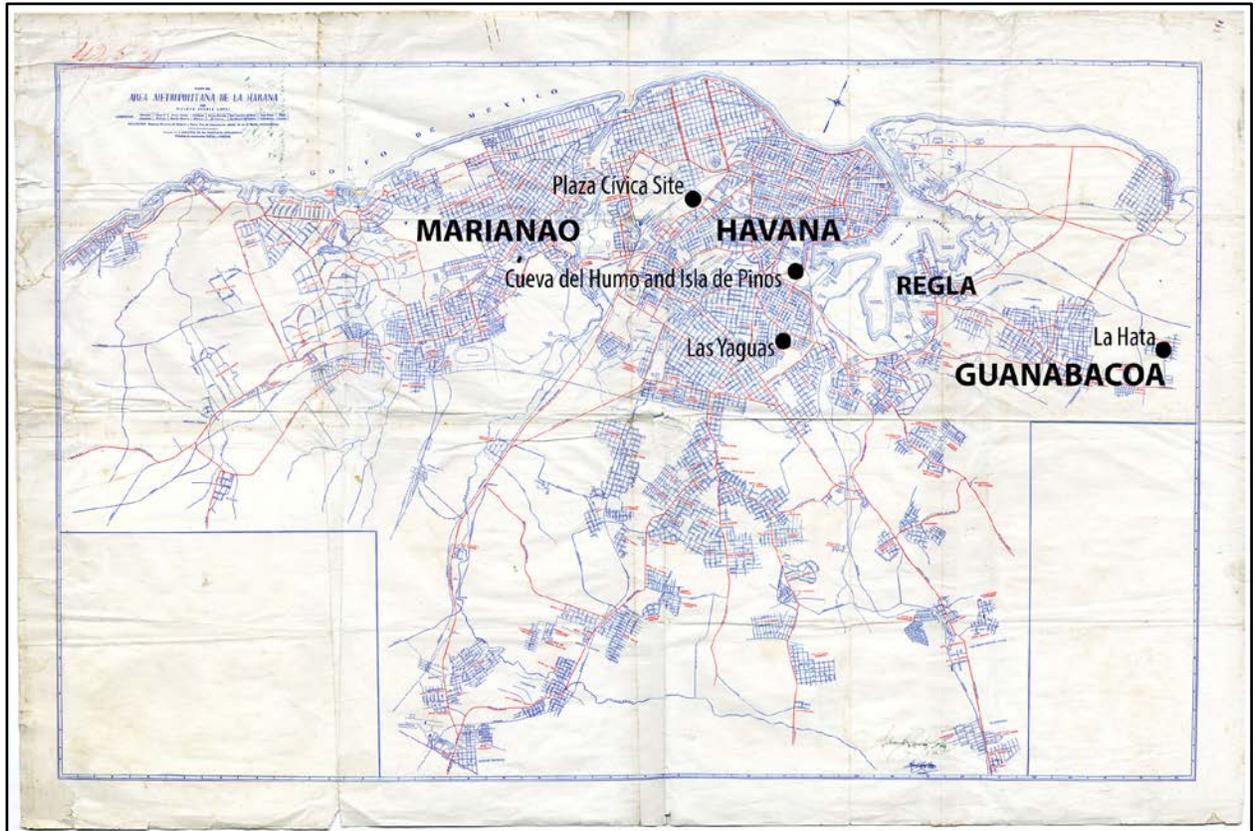


Figure 2: Selected municipalities and shantytowns in Greater Havana.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Text added; Área metropolitana de la Habana, n.d. (c. 1950), Mapoteca, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (hereafter ANC).

2.0 “THE PROBLEM OF LA HATA”: AGRARIAN REFORM AND URBAN INFORMALITY IN HAVANA, 1930-1947

“Our lands, which are ours because they belong to the Cuban state...”

Peasant literature, Realengo 18.⁶⁸

Until they threatened to take the land, Santiago Cutiño kept quiet. For several years, talk passed from hut to hut that a sugar company had purchased sections of the Zabala and Ceballos *realengo*.⁶⁹ Fences were raised, and land-clearing fires burned. Finally faced with threats of eviction, Cutiño and his neighbors took action. With their work disrupted in the hilly lands that surrounded the Sagua de Tánamo Municipality in Oriente Province, they went to the municipal courthouse.⁷⁰

On August 28, 1923, Cutiño and nine other residents sued for property damages to land that, by all accounts, they did not own. “The undersigned, residents of the Realengo ‘Zabala y Ceballos,’” they wrote, “notify you that *Atlantic Frutera y Azucarera de Cuba* believes itself the owner of these lands, attacking and evicting us.”⁷¹ Despite what may have seemed a mismatch between Cutiño's band and the wealthy international company they opposed, company

⁶⁸ “*Boletín*” from peasants in Realengo 18, quoted in de la Torriente Brau, “Realengo 18,” 154.

⁶⁹ Explained below, a *realengo* was a type of Spanish colonial land grant.

⁷⁰ Declaración de Bernardo Marrón y Laurencio, 31 August 1923, Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC, 8.

⁷¹ Esteban Angel Rosa to Juez Municipal, 28 August 1923 Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC, 3.

representatives were called to the courthouse. There they claimed that the damages had been minimal, not on the areas occupied by families they deemed “squatters,” and that the company had purchased land titles through appropriate channels.⁷² Meanwhile, one by one, Cutiño's neighbors testified as well, many without knowing how to sign their name. As they gathered before the clerk, they repeated a single assertion: “it has always been said that this land belongs to the state.”⁷³

In the decades that followed, claims of state-owned lands would be repeated hundreds of times across Cuba. These claims were often ignored, as titleholders pushed peasants away discreetly, thoughtlessly, and at times brutally, leaving men, women and children without shelter or recourse. Yet at other times, Cuba's poor wielded the name of their government with surprising effectiveness. Two decades after Cutiño's case had been resolved, residents of La Hata, an obscure suburb of the Havana metropolitan area, joined other neighborhoods to echo the poor *orientales* in their assertion. “In the name of 500 families,” a neighborhood association reported to the press, “we express that these lands correspond to the state, and that certain elements aim to usurp them through legalistic means. This is a theft, and it should be stopped by the government and punished by laws.”⁷⁴

In Santiago Cutiño's case, after more than a year of court proceedings, the judge ruled against him, finding that the company had broken no laws in the limited incursions it had made.⁷⁵ Cutiño's legal activism would not be in vain, however. In the process of trying the case, company officials defensively stated that, despite evidence to the contrary, no eviction

⁷² Comparecencia del Acusado Administrador de Compañía Atlántica Frutera y Azucarera de Cuba, 31 August 1923, Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaría de la Presidencia, ANC, 17.

⁷³ Declaración de Juan Bautista, 31 August 1923, Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaría de la Presidencia, ANC, 11.

⁷⁴ “Piden de nuevo al gobierno los vecinos de la Jata, que actúe para evitar varios desalojos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 1, 1944, 1.

⁷⁵ Acta y Sentencia, 20 November 1923, Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaría de la Presidencia, ANC, 42.

proceedings had been initiated.⁷⁶ Poor squatters would retain possession of the Zabala and Ceballos *realengo* until the area was collectivized in the 1960s.⁷⁷

Arguments about the Cuban welfare state during the Republic have had little to say about men like Santiago Cutiño, the men and women of La Hata, or the specific dynamics of land tenure for the poor.⁷⁸ Those few studies that have examined land legislation closely have concluded that the enforcement of land laws in Cuba led to higher rates of possession for poor people than indicated by land titles.⁷⁹ Generally seen as a rural issue, however, no study has examined the implications of agrarian land laws on Havana. Yet a history of La Hata and other shantytowns in Havana raises questions. On what basis did these neighborhoods claim that they occupied state lands? How much leverage did they gain from these claims? And what did the property rights of Havana's poor reveal about urban citizenship more broadly?

This chapter examines the evolution of land laws during the decades following the 1933 Revolution and how poor people in Havana put them to use. While the chapter discusses laws that applied to rural land, it only treats rural land disputes in relation to the capital. I argue that official norms of urban citizenship during the 1930s were narrow, but that by claiming a place in the city, poor people pushed for more expansive, inclusive possibilities. Their status as Cubans, they insisted, gave them rights to state lands in Havana. Whether ideological or practical, these

⁷⁶ Comparecencia del Acusado Administrador de Compañía Atlántica Frutera y Azucarera de Cuba, 31 August 1923, Legajo 60, Expediente 19, Secretaría de la Presidencia, ANC, 17.

⁷⁷ "Miles de caballerías de tierra tiene el gobierno en Sagua de Tánamo que ahora mismo podía repartirlas entre los campesinos," *Noticias de Hoy*, May 9, 1950, 6; Rafael Sánchez Alebré, "Sagua de Tánamo: Ciudades que surgen a una nueva vida," *Bohemia*, February 21, 1964.

⁷⁸ By contrast, the study of agrarian reform in Latin America has produced an extensive body of work, which I do not engage with here. See, for example, Catherine LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1830-1936* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1986), especially chapter seven.

⁷⁹ For example, in an investigation of a conflict in rural Oriente over land known as "Realengo 18," the authors conclude that "*En alguna medida...la falta de definición legal que caracterizó estas tierras durante todo el periodo republicano fue un éxito para los residentes, que al parecer lograron permanecer en esas tierras y cultivarlas.*" De la Fuente and Meriño Fuentes, "Vigilar en las tierras del estado," 224.

Other authors who have paid significant attention to land legislation are Suárez Rivas, *Los días iguales*; Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 423-463. Also see Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 162-173.

claims implied a different version of urban citizenship than the one proposed by officials.⁸⁰ As poor people moved into the capital, they claimed these rights based on a legal framework that was designed for the countryside, not the city, and in most cases the results left them without legal title. Often, however, these claims were politically compelling enough to stall eviction proceedings—and in some cases to do even more. In mobilizing for permanent rights to the city, then, the rural migrants who became the urban poor revealed, and in some cases made real, a radical “insurgent” interpretation of the role of the Cuban state in the capital. Nevertheless, for many poor Cubans this interpretation remained unfulfilled, resulting in widespread informality.

The chapter begins with an overview of migration to the capital in the late 1920s and early 1930s, followed by an analysis of new state initiatives to manage and exclude poor people. It continues by examining the ways that the urban poor constructed a more expansive vision for Havana. The next section examines state lands in Cuban law and the evolution of land reform during the 1930s. Next, the chapter examines the law in practice through a selection of urban land disputes in the 1940s, finally exploring the radical possibilities revealed by the case of La Hata.

2.1 THE CITY OF REPARTOS

The urban poverty that emerged in early 1930s Havana was unprecedented in its scope and radical in its political potential. In a nation where sugar was king, new forms of urban industrial

⁸⁰ Here, I borrow the concept of “insurgent citizenship” from James Holston. “Citizenship,” he writes, “is...much more than a formal political institution. Its lived history develops in tensions between conflicting productions of social life as it both motivates struggles for inclusion and equality and sustains deep and common desires for exclusion.” Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship*, 22.

and manufacturing employment expanded in the 1920s as Havana grew in leaps and bounds. Between 1919 and 1931, the city's population doubled. 18 percent of all Cubans now shared a city with their national elected leaders, up from 13 percent a decade before.⁸¹ As the government constructed a new national capitol in almost perfect likeness to the United States', press reports theorized that the poor were "intoxicated by the lights of the great metropolitan capital."⁸² The bright lights cast long shadows, however, as the global economic collapse of 1929 hit the city. Between 1929 and 1933, sugar production dropped 60 percent.⁸³ Rural laborers were discharged from company-owned land, often losing housing and other benefits.⁸⁴ In 1930, observers reported, "bands of hungry countrymen are marching towards cities in search of food and employment."⁸⁵ A 1934 report noted "an interminable exodus," as rural families moved to cities to become "a grave social problem."⁸⁶

Grave social problems indeed awaited these new *habaneros*. The housing situation was even worse than what could be expected from population growth or paralyzed construction. With tenants unable to pay, landlords refused to rent, and significant numbers of houses were left deliberately unoccupied at the very moment when new arrivals sought housing. In December 1931, *El Mundo* reported 14,000 vacant homes in the Havana Central District, many of which had been so for more than two years. "Unoccupied houses...[are] found in the busiest and most central streets of the city," it claimed, and evictions were surpassing 70,000 annually. As property owners fell into bankruptcy or defaulted on their mortgages, their properties were sold

⁸¹ Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 120.

⁸² "Turbas de antillanos viven como indigentes en la parte vieja de la capital de Cuba," *El Crisol*, September 29, 1934, 1, 6.

⁸³ Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 58.

⁸⁴ McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*, 137, 142, 199-201; de la Fuente and Meriño Fuentes, "Vigilar en las tierras del estado," 215; Dyer, "Urbanism in Cuba," 224-33.

⁸⁵ Edward Reed, "Confidential Dispatch," 5 August 1930, RG84/326, USNA.

⁸⁶ "Los campesinos sin pan y sin viviendas, en éxodo interminable, doloroso y cruel se encuentran en nuestra capital muy desesperados," *El Crisol*, May 11, 1934, 1, 6.

at “auctions that no one attends.”⁸⁷ Between 1927 and 1933, the Havana’s Center of Urban Property reported a 70 percent drop in rental payments across the city.⁸⁸ Houses in Havana were left vacant, or impossibly overcrowded—and masses of poor people had no housing at all.

With rental units unavailable, desperate people moved to informal encampments in Havana’s *repartos*—peripheral subdivisions away from the built city. Far beyond the dense city center, infrastructure was frequently lacking.⁸⁹ In Marianao, an editorial noted, “in hygiene, cleanliness and beautification it is as if the city government had been created yesterday.”⁹⁰ Neighborhood associations complained about “loose animals, especially goats, who swarm around that neighborhood offering a shameful spectacle,” as rural and urban life blended together.⁹¹ Insufficient trash pickup in expanding areas fueled worries of sickness.⁹²

Such concerns were the product of changing times, and they would lead to new forms of governance. With masses of newly unemployed Cubans housed precariously, but within view of national politicians, the elements for increased popular political participation were now in place. As government officials sought to manage economic collapse, Havana became a theater for mass politics. The urban poor were on the scene.

⁸⁷ “Las estadísticas acusan 70,000 desahucios al año, y las casas desalquiladas pasan de 14,000,” *El Mundo*, December 19, 1931, 1, 2.

⁸⁸ Raúl de Cardenas, “Exposición que dirige al Congreso de la República el Centro de la Propiedad Urbana de la Habana sobre el Proyecto de Ley de Alquileres,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, March 1939, 12.

⁸⁹ On underserved subdivisions, see Chapter 5. Among the fastest growing areas of the capital were the southern, inland neighborhoods of Arroyo Apolo and Arroyo Naranjo, areas that were barely urbanized. The municipalities of Guanabacoa and Marianao grew disproportionately as well. Cuba, *Censo 1943*, 825-6.

⁹⁰ “Aumento de la población en Marianao,” *El Sol*, October 24, 1931, 1.

⁹¹ “Velando por el Reparto ‘La Serafina,’” *El Sol*, January 23, 1932, 1.

⁹² “Razonable queja de algunas familias,” *El Sol*, Mayo 14, 1932, 1.

2.2 PUBLIC WELFARE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

As radical protests swept across the country, urban officials responded by blending repression with social assistance. They enacted these measures seeking to bend the capital's residents to their own elite vision of what citizenship should entail. Police subdued protesters, and, where possible, deported poor foreigners. Meanwhile, officials offered basic assistance to citizens in need. In the process, they forcefully imposed norms for order, construction, cleanliness, and work discipline. When these visions of capital life proved unsustainable, officials sought to exclude poor Cuban citizens from Havana, just like the foreigners they sent away. In the construction of Machado's welfare state, then, officials sketched the boundaries of urban citizenship narrowly.

In February 1931, Machado's administration created a "Central District," subject to laws distinct from the rest of the Republic, placing control over the logistical functions and policing of the capital in the hands of military officers appointed by the president.⁹³ Within the district, police repressed protests as disorder broke out among the poor.⁹⁴ In April 1932, observers reported unruly bands of poor people attacking "each other with blows, sticks and rocks," noting injuries as police used firearms "to quell a disturbance created by indigents in an obscure section" of Havana.⁹⁵ In another section of the city, food kitchens that had been set up by the Spanish consulate to serve unemployed Spanish citizens reported "a serious alteration of

⁹³ Harry Guggenheim to the Secretary of State, 17 February 1931, RG84/810.1/569, USNA.

⁹⁴ Rolando Rodríguez, *Rebelión en la República*, 175-227; Whitney, *State and Revolution*, 81-100.

⁹⁵ Edward Reed to the Secretary of State, April 1932, RG84/800/1155, USNA, 33; "Dispersó esta madrugada la policía a un crecido grupo de indigentes que se atacó," *El Mundo*, April 28, 1932, 1.

order.”⁹⁶ One writer observed a large group of unemployed men organize a protest “that was dissolved by clubbing from the police.”⁹⁷

Amid protest, officials sought to preserve the city as a space of order and prosperity, which led them to remove as many poor, disorderly people as possible. In 1931, Machado claimed that recent “disturbance comes from other peoples ...directed by hidden foreign powers and developed in Cuba.”⁹⁸ The message was popular, since many perceived Spanish workers to be taking jobs from Cubans. An editorial in *El Sol* argued that insolvent “foreigners ...have ‘skipped the line’ [and] crashed on our shores...to compete with our nationals.”⁹⁹ Meanwhile, heavily racialized debates led to the forced deportation of black Haitian and West Indian laborers from eastern Cuba.¹⁰⁰ In 1934, a report complained about black Antillean indigents in the capital as well. Lamenting their “African instincts,” exemplified by “fetishism and witchcraft,” the reporter hoped that they could be “sent to the nations from which they have come.”¹⁰¹ By 1935 it would become illegal to be foreign and “indigent” at the same time.¹⁰²

Stoking nationalist fires, the government soon enacted measures to resettle and repatriate poor Spanish immigrants from Havana. Throughout the 1930s poor people were also repatriated

⁹⁶ “Ordenes enérgicas a la policía para reprimir cualquier intento de alteración en esta capital,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, May 14, 1931, 1.

⁹⁷ “También en la Habana, los desocupados formulan sus quejas por el hambre que sufren,” *El Sol*, June 20, 1931, 1.

⁹⁸ Gerardo Machado, “Al pueblo de Cuba,” *El Mundo*, February 3, 1931.

⁹⁹ “El problema del desempleo,” *El Sol*, April 4, 1931, 1.

¹⁰⁰ For a summary of debates about race and immigration, see Chomsky, “Barbados or Canada?,” 415-462.

¹⁰¹ “Turbas de antillanos viven como indigentes en la parte vieja de la capital de Cuba,” *El Crisol*, Sept 29, 1934, 1, 6.

¹⁰² Law Decree no. 52 of May 1935 reportedly stated that no foreigner could live in Cuba in a state of indigence. Many shantytown residents had foreign origins and were simply naturalized or forgotten, however. For example, Manuela, of Mexican origin, claims to have turned in her documents to be naturalized during Machado’s presidency. The documents were never returned, and she lived without proof of identity, but she said that no one bothered her. In another case, a Mexican-born man was held at a government run indigent camp without difficulty in 1936. See Alonso, *Manuela*, 235; Acta, 10 August 1936, Legajo 1129, Expediente 4, Audiencia de la Habana, ANC; B. Martínez, “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 8; “Cinco mil extranjeros indigentes no tiene carnet,” *Alerta*, November 25, 1940, 9.

to Puerto Rico, China, Mexico, and elsewhere, usually from eastern Cuba.¹⁰³ Little has been written about Spanish repatriations, however, which took place from Havana. From 1931-1932, several thousand Spanish “indigents” were rounded up into camps, where they were fed and housed as they awaited transport to Iberia. The Ministry of Governance oversaw camps at Tiscornia in Casa Blanca and at La Purísima in the central Atarés neighborhood, near growing informal encampments.¹⁰⁴ By the mid 1930s, religious organizations established camps to house unemployed Spanish as well.¹⁰⁵ These moves were mostly voluntary, although Machado’s officials at La Purísima sometimes used deportation as a threat.¹⁰⁶ The Spanish government funded some repatriations, but they were more often sponsored by elite Spanish clubs in Cuba.¹⁰⁷

Premised on its benefit to nationals, the exclusion of foreigners had important implications for the relationship between poor Cubans and the state. By linking deportation with urban poverty, government officials acknowledged a basic obligation to manage the destitute citizens they claimed as their own.¹⁰⁸ On June 16, 1931, in the midst of the Spanish deportations, President Machado introduced a decree, later backed by Congress, which established a “National Committee for the Feeding and Defense of the Unemployed.”¹⁰⁹ The committee would be funded

¹⁰³ On repatriations from Oriente, see: “Repatriación de haitianos,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 9, 1931, 8; “El crucero ‘Patria’ inicio en Oriente la repatriación de antillanos ‘sin trabajo,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 6, 31; “Los indigentes portorriqueños serán repatriados a bordo de un transporte norteamericano,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, August 18, 1931, 1.

In other cases, the port was unlisted: “Se trata de repatriar a su país dos mil asiáticos que viven en la indigencia,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 28, 1931, 3; “Repatriarán a los mexicanos desempleados,” *Alerta*, May 13, 1936, 16.

¹⁰⁴ “Se esta estudiando la forma de albergar a los desocupados,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, June 17, 1931, 1; “Ingresaron ayer en Tiscornia 180 familias hispanas que se hallan en la indigencia. Y hoy ingresaron cien más para completar el número dispuesto,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, May 19, 1931, 2; “Oficiales del ejercito dirigen la preparación de alojamiento y comida a los sin trabajo. Mas de tres mil obreros españoles tendrán albergue en el mercado ‘La Purísima,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, June 26, 1931, 1; “El Secretario de Sanidad, R. Barahona, estuvo en el campamento de Tiscornia,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, June 24, 1931, 1.

¹⁰⁵ These included a camp called, “Asilo Evangelina,” and “el Ejército de Salvación.” See “Ecos de Atarés,” *Alerta*, May 23, 1936, 13. Edward Reed to the Secretary of State, “General Conditions Report,” 7 June 1932, RG84/800/1203, USNA, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Even the CNOC called the Spanish deportations actions “that the unemployed themselves were demanding.” La asamblea de las luchas y organización de los desocupados, n.d. 1/8:7/2.1/10-13, Fondo Obrero, Instituto de Historia de Cuba (hereafter IHC). On threats of deportation, see Edward Reed, “General Conditions Report,” 5 May 1933, RG84/800/1606, USNA, 18.

¹⁰⁷ “Por los españoles indigentes,” *El Sol*, August 22, 1931, 1; “Dificultad en el reembarque de inmigrantes,” *El Mundo*, November 4, 1931, 5.

¹⁰⁸ “Los cubanos sin trabajo recibirán alojamiento en el mercado ‘La Purísima,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 4, 1931, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Edward Reed, “General Conditions Report,” 8 November 1932 RG84/800/1421, USNA, 19-20.

by money drawn from the salaries of public employees, and later came to be known simply as the “indigents fund.”¹¹⁰ In spite of some criticism, this was a key initiative in the early public welfare state in Cuba and would be referenced for decades.¹¹¹ We hope to combat “public begging, and impede people ... from ... building shacks at certain places,” stated officials.¹¹²

The fund was used to forcibly clear informal encampments from around the city and house citizens in the same shelter used to hold deported Spanish “indigents”—although not all the Spanish had yet been deported. A building designed for 1,000 people, the shelter offered a variety of services. Men slept on cots on the bottom floor, while another floor was established for women and small children, and another area for single women. The camp had a medical staff, washing facilities, and offered food.¹¹³ It also imposed strict discipline on residents, who were expected to work, behave well, be “clean, shaved, and bathed,” remain in the camp unless authorized, and “obey and comply in whatever order they might receive.” Denying that the poor were prisoners, officials stated that residents could leave—but only on the condition that they find appropriate housing or abandon the capital.¹¹⁴ By 1932, residents from the camp were put to work paving streets.¹¹⁵

Given the scale of poverty in Havana, these measures were small. As it became clear that a more permanent solution was needed, officials built indigent camps on work farms outside the city, where they hoped to relocate the poor from the central camps so they could help feed the

¹¹⁰ Cuba, *Ley y decretos creando un comité*.

¹¹¹ Critics of the fund saw it as a way to divide the labor movement. The CNOc claimed responsibility for its passage, even as it denounced corrupt management of the fund. See “Algunos maestros no quieren contribuir al fondo para los que se hallan sin trabajo,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 12, 1931; La asamblea de las luchas y organización de los desocupados, n.d., 1/8:7/2.1/10-13, Fondo Obrero, IHC.

¹¹² “Ropas y carnets para indigentes de ‘La Purísima,’” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 9.

¹¹³ “Esta madrugada quedaron alojados en el edificio de ‘La Purísima,’ todos los indigentes de la ciudad,” *El Mundo*, December 22, 1931, 2.

¹¹⁴ “Ropas y carnets para indigentes de ‘La Purísima,’” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 9.

¹¹⁵ “Trabajo a desocupados en el bacheo. Están trabajando dos cuadrillas en las reparaciones de las calles,” *El Mundo*, April 24, 1932, 5.

capital's prison population.¹¹⁶ On April 10, 1933, officials announced the opening of “General Machado Colony” near the outlying town of Bauta to utilize the labor of hundreds of indigents from La Purísima.¹¹⁷ As the government dealt with growing numbers of poor people in the capital, it therefore took responsibility for their wellbeing. Yet as poverty in the city outstripped the capacity of the state to manage it, a critical component of new welfare initiatives was to discipline and exclude those who could not meet official expectations for life in the capital.

As life in the camp at La Purísima revealed, official expectations for urban life were high. Underlying Machado’s methods towards the poor was his government’s modern, civilized vision for Havana’s future. In 1930, officials publicized their own embodiment of this vision, a comprehensive new industrial and public housing development in the peripheral, partially urbanized subdivision of Boyeros, where thousands of new arrivals had made their homes. Project supporters explained that they hoped “to better the condition of the Cuban worker.” At the new neighborhood, they claimed, workers would achieve “cultural improvement” through night schools, and “physical conservation” with clean houses, “elegant promenades,” and a hospital.¹¹⁸ “What was a fourth-rate backwater has been miraculously transformed into a lively, laughing modern population,” explained an article in a government-sponsored publication.

¹¹⁶ Officials considered efforts to balance the country’s urban and rural populations through the 1930s, with little result. In 1938, the US State Department reported on discussions with the Secretary of Agriculture, who stated, “The problem of getting these Cubans back on the land is going to be a serious one. [And] it would be manifestly impossible to induce [them] to leave large centers of population, where they are, at present being cared for, to a certain extent, at least, by the Government.” See Butler Wright, “Secretary of Agriculture’s plan to provide work for laborers during the ‘dead season,’” 20 January 1938, RG84/850.4/460, USNA; “Ropas y carnets para indigentes de ‘La Purísima,’” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 9.

¹¹⁷ Edward Reed, “General Conditions Report,” 5 May 1933, RG84/800/1606, USNA, 17-18.

¹¹⁸ The Lutgardita project had less than 350 houses. It was the first public housing project initiated by the national government since it constructed the original 950 homes of the Pogolotti neighborhood in Marianao in 1910. Echeverría, *Plan de construcción*, 2. On the Pogolotti neighborhood, see Marchiori, *Dino Pogolotti*; Quoted from “Nuestros propósitos,” *Lutgardita*, February 1, 1930, 1-2.

“Rancho Boyeros woke up and General Machado rested.”¹¹⁹ Named for Machado's mother, the Lutgardita neighborhood included everything that officials expected from urban citizens.¹²⁰

The planners of Lutgardita projected their high hopes onto the surrounding city. The “picturesque and well tended” housing project was hailed as a triumph and a symbol of progress by the government that built it.¹²¹ Noting the success of shelters for the poor in other parts of the capital, pro-government reports noted the high approval rates for the president and Cuba's unusual success in dealing with urban poverty.¹²² “Havana is the first capital in the world to free itself of the painful spectacle of those conquered and beaten down by unemployment,” noted a press report. “This Christmas *el habanero* will not experience the remorse of enjoying himself in the face of misery.”¹²³

As government officials sought to structure the capital city according to Lutgardita's utopian dreams, however, they would come up short. Well-constructed though they may have been, the small collection of homes were virtually insignificant amidst the waves of private, often informal constructions that comprised Havana's rapid expansion. Still, the homes were not without effect. Emblematic of the narrow, formal boundaries of urban citizenship, their meaning would be transformed in ways that officials could not expect.

¹¹⁹ “El milagro de una transformación,” *Lutgardita*, February 1, 1930, 13.

¹²⁰ “Lutgardita Morales,” *Lutgardita*, February 1, 1930, 4.

¹²¹ “Lutgardita,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, October 25, 1931, 16.

¹²² “Tendrá el pintor Domingo Ramos su casa en el Reparto ‘Lutgardita,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, January 21, 1932, 2.

¹²³ “Parece que a los menesterosos les agrada mas la vida nómada de bohemio que la del asilo,” *El País*, December 22, 1931, 14.

2.3 RIGHTS TO THE CITY

As Machado's officials articulated visions of a modern, elite Havana in Lutgardita, masses of poor Cubans responded by reformulating it into visions of their own. While officials saw the primary role of the state as the regulation and exclusion of deviant behavior, poor people throughout the capital articulated another option for their government. In confronting the utopian expectations of Machado's welfare state, many believed that they had the right to stay in the capital—and that, as citizens, the resources of the Cuban state should help them. Since they made these claims without formal property rights, however, they sought to construct them.

They did so on the shaky, incomplete framework that state officials had built to regulate their behavior. The minimal public housing and social welfare measures begun under Machado highlighted an expanded set of commitments taken up by the Cuban state. As a backdrop to the intensified political protests, however, these projects exposed the state's inability to fulfill those commitments in specific, concrete ways. Sites allocated for public housing and welfare came to be centers of political activism, where poor men and women publicized their demands for state assistance. As the government collapsed, these demands intensified.

Demands for a place in the city often took the form of disobeying orders from officials. As Machado's government removed poor Cuban citizens from Havana to rural work camps in 1933, for example, affected residents protested furiously. The US State Department noted official complaints that a “construction gang, consisting of able-bodied indigents who had been cared for by the Government for two years because of their inability to find employment, had shown its ingratitude by deserting when asked to work for its own benefit.”¹²⁴ As similar

¹²⁴ Edward Reed, “General Conditions Report,” 5 May 1933, RG84/800/1606, USNA, 17-18.

measures continued following Machado's fall, a 1934 report similarly noted that most workers "have disappeared from the 'La Purísima' encampment upon finding out they would be brought to the work farm to labor."¹²⁵ The health ministry sought to evict other families who remained in the centrally located camp that same year, leading residents to form commissions to protest the order.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, visitors to the camp's food shelter complained of harsh treatment and that "they do not receive meat."¹²⁷

Nor did problems end there. Those who were successfully relocated to rural camps chafed against harsh discipline and often deserted. In one instance, a belligerent worker known as "el Indio Bravo" attacked camp soldiers around mealtime and tried "to make the rest of the indigents rebel." After being arrested, el Indio Bravo disappeared from custody, only to appear more than a year later on the other side of the city, in Regla.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, residents of Pogolotti, a public housing project built in Marianao during the 1910s, used their status as recipients of state housing to demand infrastructural improvements and to protest against their required monthly payments.¹²⁹ The city, residents concluded, was theirs too.

Mass protests brought Machado's government to collapse in 1933, leading poor people to expand their insurgent claims. As a provisional, left wing government suspended most evictions, vacant houses and lands were occupied all across the city. In Old Havana, scores of "beggars and other indigents" partially burned and occupied the *Heraldo de Cuba* newspaper building.¹³⁰ In

¹²⁵ "Desalojados," *El Crisol*, September 22, 1934; "Pensionados por sanidad niños indigentes y 30 ancianos de un asilo," *El Crisol*, Mayo 1934, 13.

¹²⁶ The evictions reportedly affected 400 families. "Sanidad los arroja del campamento de pobres 'La Purísima,'" *El Crisol*, May 31, 1934, 1, 6.

¹²⁷ "Noticias de la ciudad," *El País*, January 30, 1935, 15.

¹²⁸ Acta, 9 May 1936, Legajo 1002, Expediente 6, Audiencia de la Habana, ANC; Declaración de Antonio Seigle y Comezañas, 21 May 1936, Legajo 1002, Expediente 6, Audiencia de la Habana, ANC. Note that the "Legajo 1002" is written on the document while "Legajo 1102" is referenced in the finding aid.

¹²⁹ Luis Bay Sevilla "Por que la barriada obrera de Pogolotti fue un fracaso," *Arquitectura*, January 1941, 34; "El barrio obrero," *El Sol*, June 3, 1933, 1.

¹³⁰ Jefferson Caffery, "Weekly Summary," 11 May 1935, RG84/800/3249, USNA.

Puentes Grandes, poor people constructed shacks in an area known as Aldecoa, given that the property owner had abandoned the land.¹³¹ Residents of Playa Viriato in Marianao called their land a “popular conquest ... obtained from the struggle against the dictatorship as sole patrimony of the poor classes of the population.”¹³² Residents in Guanabacoa echoed a common claim: “In the period following the overthrow of the *Machadista* tyranny, numerous unemployed families built homes there.”¹³³ New arrivals built on other vacant land in Guanabacoa, on the edges of Regla, in Marianao, and throughout Havana. Sometimes against protests by titleholders, organized bands of squatters covered urban lands with self-built shacks, forming communities, which the press deemed neighborhoods of “unemployed,” “indigents,” or “*llega y pón*” (arrive and build).

Conditions in these settlements were harsh, but in a time of crisis their benefits were real. For one resident, who had enjoyed a relatively privileged life as a domestic worker for wealthy families before the economic crisis, moving to an improvised neighborhood was a way to acquire stability. “It’s true; they had to carry all the water to the house, and the floor was dirt ...but they could make the house more spacious and they didn’t have to pay rent. ... It was without the anguish of maybe that very day being thrown out into the street.”¹³⁴ Another resident reported that in order to not have “their furniture in the street, well, they started to build the huts.”¹³⁵ As officials sought to eliminate shacks, people across the city built more. To stay, they declared by their actions, was their right.

¹³¹ “Desalojan a cuatro familias en el barrio de ‘Aldecoa,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 25, 1940, 1, 6.

¹³² “Fue agredido el presidente de pequeños propietarios de la playa libre ‘Viriato,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 9, 1940, 1, 6.

¹³³ “Denunciado un nuevo caso de desalojo en finca de Guanabacoa,” *Noticias de Hoy*, July 30 1941, 7.

¹³⁴ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 163.

¹³⁵ In a collection of 72 responses to the survey question, why did you move to a shantytown, money, rent, or fear of eviction was included in nearly every response. “Household Survey,” Box 140, Folder 40, Oscar Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives (hereafter UIA).

In response to elite visions for the future of Havana, then, poor people in the city expressed alternative, insurgent claims. While officials sought to exclude and regulate the urban poor in accordance with plans for a modern, prosperous capital, those same poor people demanded their own space within that vision. Targeting the specific sites where Machado's welfare state had left its mark, these people claimed land and benefits from the Cuban state.

As new governments took up an expanded set of issues related to the social welfare of poor citizens following 1933, these claims expanded apace. By the end of the decade, a set of claims with particularly radical implications would come from an unlikely place. Hundreds of residents built shacks near an Independence War monument at La Hata in Guanabacoa, a settlement that went unnoticed in the national press for being at the far eastern edge of metropolitan Havana.¹³⁶ There, as the government outlined plans for agrarian reform in rural areas, residents responded with their own interpretation of the matter. The lands of La Hata, they claimed, had been ceded to them generations ago by the Spanish. Now, they said, they belonged to the Cuban state.¹³⁷

2.4 STATE LANDS IN CUBAN LAW

As a site for these claims, La Hata was unlikely because it destabilized prevailing notions of rural and urban. In the early 1930s it was not at all clear that debates over state lands would have an impact on Havana's poor. The 1933 Revolution brought agrarian reform into the political foreground, but debates on the matter universally centered on rural areas like Sagua de Tánamo,

¹³⁶ "Ermita de La Hata," *La Publicidad*, September 10, 1932, 3; "Metamorfosis de nuestra población," *La Publicidad*, October 23, 1936, 2; "¿Un Barrio o Reparto de Indigentes?" *La Publicidad*, May 28, 1937, 1.

¹³⁷ "Piden de nuevo al gobierno los vecinos de la Jata, que actúe para evitar varios desalojos" *Noticias de Hoy*, March 1, 1944, 1.

where men like Santiago Cutiño waged battles across generations. It was only after the fact that residents of urban shantytowns would find ways to utilize these debates, yet their consequences for Havana were potentially far reaching. In claiming that their lands belonged to the state, poor *habaneros* joined a set of conflicts that had roots in the first days of Spanish settlement, an issue that, according to a 1939 study, “has given headaches to every generation of officials that has tried to govern Cuba.”¹³⁸ Dating back to the sixteenth century, government officials distributed lands without precision, leading to heated conflicts and increasingly complex, overlapping claims. In an age of mass urban politics, these claims would grow more complicated still.

The full legal history of land regulations in Cuba falls beyond the scope of this dissertation, but pertinent issues can be briefly summarized in two types of state land: *mercedes* and *realengos*. *Mercedes* were colonial lands granted in usufruct—that is, rights to use without title—by city councils well into the eighteenth century. These rights were passed down to the heirs of the grantee—but rather than being divided among the heirs, they were held in common, as *haciendas comuneras*. As generations passed, no one could develop portions of these *haciendas comuneras* without consensus among the partners, even as the state technically retained ownership of the land. Overlapping these claims, an entirely different set of Spanish authorities distributed other lands, known as royal lands, or *realengos*. Because it often cost more to make arrangements to purchase titles than the lands were worth, many people simply settled on them without formalizing their possession.¹³⁹ From the outset, then, lands held as both *mercedes* and *realengos* led to widespread uncertainty and conflict.

Two key developments in the nineteenth century altered the situation. First, in 1819, royal officials enacted several pieces of legislation to grant full ownership of *mercedes* to those

¹³⁸ Corbitt, “Mercedes and Realengos,” 263.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 263-69.

in possession of them and established procedures for the division of *haciendas comuneras*. Through this same legislation, those who resided on *realengos* without title could gain full ownership of their lands by proving they had lived there for more than 40 years. (Other sources, including Cuba's Communist Party, later claimed ownership rights based on 25 or 30 years.)¹⁴⁰ A second key development occurred in 1877 in the midst of Cuba's independence wars. As the Ten-Years War wound to a close, the Spanish government distributed *realengos* to those who had remained loyal to the Crown, as well as to revolutionaries whom they pardoned.

Far from resolving uncertainty over land in Cuba, the combination of these measures did the opposite. As peasants gradually occupied *realengos* across the island, and as entrepreneurs purchased titles to them from the state, "not even the government officials could always say that a given piece of land was not privately owned, or that part of it did not pertain to one of the still undivided *mercedes*."¹⁴¹ Finding out, moreover, could be costly. The 1939 study noted many cases of litigation between "prescriptive rights" to the land, based on 40 years possession, against "paper rights" based on title, a situation that had led to "squatter sovereignty" in Cuba.¹⁴² So it was in Realengo 18 in Oriente, where the Spanish had granted land to peasants, even as three separate companies later purchased title to the same land from the state. Litigation ensued for decades.¹⁴³ Similarly complicated was a dispute between José San Miguel and the Warner Sugar Corporation in 1937, over mortgage payments to lands of unknown size. Despite the fact that the company had held title to the land for more than a decade, the purchase could not be completed

¹⁴⁰ Nelson states squatters could acquire title under Spanish law "if they can prove they have lived there for 30 years." Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 163; Corbitt, "Mercedes and Realengos," 277.

¹⁴¹ Corbitt, "Mercedes and Realengos," 280.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 269.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 281.

because “both the sellers and the buyer knew that a large number of caballerías had been lost to squatters and others and that for such reason it was impossible to determine the exact area.”¹⁴⁴

In claiming that their lands belonged to the state, then, residents of La Hata and other informally occupied areas of the Havana metropolitan area invoked an entangled, ambiguous legal framework, where arcane decrees, regulations, inheritances, and purchases left lawyers and squatters equally confused. Yet it was precisely the type of ambiguity that could yield significant results given the right amount of political pressure. And in the 1930s, poor people in Cuba could generate political pressure in spades.

The 1933 Revolution gave new impulse to longstanding demands for comprehensive agrarian reform, which ultimately highlighted the role of the state in urban land disputes. From Grau’s rise to the presidency in 1933, through the promulgation of the 1940 Constitution, momentum for agrarian reform accelerated along two lines. First, reformers sought to catalogue and distribute titles to state lands where ownership was in doubt. Second, they sought to prevent the eviction of poor peasants in cases where title disputes could not be definitively resolved. Politicians enacted decrees and legislation along both lines, but in general were more successful along the second than the first. In practice, reforms protected many families from eviction, even as it left them plagued by housing insecurity resulting from lingering title disputes. The result was a system in which sustained political mobilization was often required for land security.

During the 1920s and early 30s prominent figures highlighted the need for land reform, but the government did not pass substantial measures.¹⁴⁵ After his sudden rise to the presidency, Grau tacitly approved many land occupations, and even distributed properties held by officials

¹⁴⁴ In what company representatives later called a “very weak attempt,” a frustrated lawyer later determined that such a survey was “legally impossible.” E.F. Porter to the US Embassy, 7 April 1937, RG84/852/8592, USNA.

¹⁴⁵ See Guerra y Sánchez, *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean*; “Cuban Press on the Events of the Day,” *Havana Post*, May 8, 1927.

from the Machado regime to “indigent rural families.”¹⁴⁶ The government also suspended all evictions, and enacted decrees on agrarian reform.¹⁴⁷ In May 1934, President Carlos Mendieta continued along these lines, passing measures to distribute rural homesteads to “indigents.”¹⁴⁸ Even US Embassy officials concurred with such measures, warning in 1934 that a “grave situation” would develop in the absence of land reform.¹⁴⁹ After the influential 1935 study by the Foreign Policy Association concluded that agrarian reform was a necessity, the matter became one of consensus.¹⁵⁰

These measures ran parallel to other measures affecting urban tenants.¹⁵¹ In most cities, municipal taxes were in arrears across the island, and mayors were largely unable to arbitrate property disputes.¹⁵² Yet rural conflict also generated interest in the capital for its own sake. As Batista and the army controlled the more radical elements of the 1933 Revolution, leading to Grau's ouster, politicized reports reached the national press of the land dispute at Realengo 18 in Oriente, where peasants under threat of forcible eviction claimed to be occupying state lands. The publicity of the case was such that the Minister of Justice personally travelled to the remote lands to negotiate with residents. Speaking to *Diario de la Marina*, he denounced the peasants for creating “a communist state” but he also stalled eviction proceedings.¹⁵³ The Realengo 18 dispute generated solidarity strikes among Communists and labor organizers in Havana.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁶ Samuel Dickenson, “Distribution of Agricultural Land to Cuban Farmers,” 15 January 1934, RG84/852/351, USNA.

¹⁴⁷ Horace Dickenson to Freeman Mathews, 17 December 1933, RG84/800/850, USNA.

¹⁴⁸ Freeman Mathews, “Establishment of Cuban ‘Homesteads,’” 10 May 1934, RG84/852/429, USNA.

¹⁴⁹ Jefferson Caffery, “Homesteads for Indigent Natives and the Sugar Preferential,” RG84/852/630, USNA; Coert du Bois, “Recovery of Cuban Government Lands,” 8 October 1937, RG84/852/17, USNA.

¹⁵⁰ Foreign Policy Association, *Problems of the New Cuba*, 472-83.

¹⁵¹ From October 1933, reports in *El Sol* indicated that evictions from rental units were virtually paralyzed. See “Sobre los lanzamientos,” *El Sol*, December 9, 1933; Summary of Legislative Decrees, 25 October 1933, RG84/804.4/191, USNA.

¹⁵² Sumner Welles to Secretary of State, 25 Oct 1933, RG84/804.4/193, USNA.

¹⁵³ “‘Todos los días ocupan nuevas fincas’, dice el Secretario de Justicia al hablar del asunto,” *Diario de la Marina*, November 30, 1934.

¹⁵⁴ Jefferson Caffery, “Land Dispute in Oriente Province,” 13 November 1934, RG84/852/1870, USNA.

Amid these efforts, the issue of state lands—the quantity of which was unclear—was a key variable. In March 1935, Mendieta signed a decree establishing procedures and offering incentives to successful denunciations of unlawful usurpation of state lands.¹⁵⁵ In 1936, a senate committee publicly presented draft legislation for the partition of state lands.¹⁵⁶ By June 1936, the House of Representatives had established a committee for agrarian reform as well, and by October, a draft for a new constitution included provisions to allow the government to expropriate land at will, for “social interest.”¹⁵⁷ In 1937, these proposals gained traction as Batista announced a set of reforms known as the Plan Trienal, allying with communists and seeking to strengthen his populist credentials. Along with the passage of a number of temporary decrees, President Laredo Bru signed a law in December 1937 establishing measures to survey and reclaim state lands.¹⁵⁸ The measure created a commission to assess which lands belonged to the Cuban state, and for the “repossession, parceling, division, colonization, and development” of those lands.¹⁵⁹

A wide range of reactions greeted the law. Many celebrated it as an initiative in support of the rural poor, while one US lawyer called it “a move towards social revolution, modeled after the Mexican pattern.”¹⁶⁰ In a country where there were very few vacant lands, and many titles overlapped or used vague measurements, a more common response was uncertainty. Ironically, critics worried that the state might use its authority to overturn the proscriptive rights of established landowners, based on 40 years occupancy. Of course, these were the same rights claimed by many so-called squatters. Meanwhile, US Embassy officials noted “the fear of land

¹⁵⁵ Freeman Matthews to the Secretary of State, 2 April 1933, RG84/852/3021, USNA; Coert du Bois, “Recovery of Cuban Government Lands,” 8 October 1937, RG84/852/17, USNA.

¹⁵⁶ Freeman Matthews to the Secretary of State, “Suggested Cuban Agrarian Policy,” 22 May 1936, RG84/850.1/6282, USNA.

¹⁵⁷ H.F.M, Memorandum Draft Constitution, 15 October 1936, RG 84/801.1/7453, USNA.

¹⁵⁸ Willard Bealac to Secretary of State, “Recover of Cuban Government Lands,” 21 December 1937, RG84/852/375, USNA.

¹⁵⁹ Harold Towell, “The New Cuban Land Law,” 6 January 1938, RG84/852/57, USNA, 1.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

confiscation from rightful proprietors,” indicating that they were prepared to support claims by US citizens.¹⁶¹ For his part, Batista played up hopes and fears of radical reform, announcing to the press, “within ten years there will be in Cuba very little land that is not the property of Cubans.”¹⁶² Speaking to US officials, however, Batista denied that the government would confiscate land whose title was in order.¹⁶³

All told, supporters and detractors of the measure agreed on a fundamental fact about the law: its impact depended greatly on how it was interpreted and implemented. In establishing a legal framework with which to assess and repossess state lands, the national government cleared space for itself at the center of occupancy disputes. By creating a legal mechanism with which to distribute confiscated lands to poor Cuban citizens it indicated a likely direction that it might pursue in such disputes. However, the law made no stipulation about how it might resolve conflict between occupants with titles against those who had proscriptive rights based on possession. Nor did it spell out any form of compensation in cases where legitimate claims overlapped. While the law gave the state the power to answer such questions, it was up to government officials to take the initiative to do so. Whatever it said on paper, the law was only as powerful as the political will behind it.¹⁶⁴

The 1940 Constitution gave the measure firm backing. A proposed article to limit *latifundia* generated heated debate in the assembly, which initially proposed the establishment of “a progressive tax on land” for large land tracts.¹⁶⁵ Yet a number of delegates complained that this amounted to expropriation. When others, including Communists Blas Roca and Juan

¹⁶¹ US State Department to J. Butler Wright, 15 February 1938, RG84/852/233, USNA; Harold Tewell, “The New Cuban Land Law,” 6 January 1938, RG84/852/59, USNA, 5, 18.

¹⁶² Harold Tewell, “The New Cuban Land Law,” 6 January 1938, RG84/852/59, USNA, 6.

¹⁶³ J. Butler Wright to Secretary of State, “Interpretation of Law for the Division of Land,” 14 March 1938, RG84/852/615, USNA.

¹⁶⁴ Harold Tewell, “The New Cuban Land Law,” 6 January 1938, RG84/852/59, USNA, 7-27.

¹⁶⁵ Article 90 of the Constitution, from Lazcano y Mazon, *Constitución de Cuba*, 568-71.

Marinello, proposed to strengthen the amendment with the wording “to return land to the Cuban state,” another group, including Eusebio Mujal, countered that land should be returned “to Cubans.”¹⁶⁶ “If Marx were present,” exclaimed a delegate, “he could happily sign this amendment.”¹⁶⁷ Though Marinello assured the assembly that the amendment was consistent with “a modern democracy,” its strongest form was rejected in favor of Mujal's wording that the land be returned “to Cubans.” Nevertheless, the amendment requiring the breakup of large landholdings passed. In theory, then, by 1940, new legislation highlighted the state’s role to settle land disputes that had plagued Cuba since the early days of the colony. In practice, however, follow-through would be difficult.

Reinforcing these agrarian reform measures was a flurry of legislation and decrees enacted to limit evictions from rural land. Following Grau’s decrees in the early 1930s, Congress discussed legislation to limit the eviction of peasants.¹⁶⁸ Much of the issue was resolved in 1937 with the passage of the Sugar Coordination Act, which guaranteed land security to peasants who productively cultivated sugarcane.¹⁶⁹ Ultimately, legislation prohibiting rural evictions failed to pass Congress, but Batista nonetheless enacted it as a decree.¹⁷⁰ After the decree was declared unconstitutional, Grau decreed new legislation suspending the eviction of peasants on state lands, naming the residents of Realengo 18 in Oriente specifically.¹⁷¹ In 1948 Congress passed new comprehensive legislation protecting non-sugar producing peasants.¹⁷² Evictions continued in

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 568-71.

¹⁶⁷ José Manuel Cortina, quoted from Ibid, 573.

¹⁶⁸ “Solo los cubanos pueden adquirir el dominio de tierras. Un proyecto de ley del Dr. Suárez Rivas,” *El Crisol*, May 23, 1936; “Protección contra los desalojos en masa de los campesinos cubanos. La usurpación de terrenos del estado ha de terminar,” *El Crisol*, March 17, 1937.

¹⁶⁹ Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 433-34.

¹⁷⁰ Suárez Rivas, *Los días iguales*, 98-99.

¹⁷¹ Cuba, *Ley de Alquileros*, 26-27.

¹⁷² It was not until 1951 that legislation was passed to provide regular funds for the expropriation of contested land. Suárez Rivas, *Los días iguales*, 99; Diario de Sesiones del Consejo Consultivo, July 1953, Legajo 888, Expediente 2, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

some cases, however.¹⁷³ By the early 1950s, therefore, even as many Cuban peasants had not achieved title to their lands, many eviction proceedings remained in limbo.

Cuban officials made the state's obligations to resolve land disputes clear in an environment where popular legitimacy became key to successful governance. By establishing measures to catalogue and distribute state lands to peasants, and by suspending many evictions in cases of uncertainty, the legal system offered new and radical possibilities to Havana's urban poor. At the same time, these laws had not been written with them in mind, and how they would be implemented was far from clear. It would therefore be left up to the urban poor to seek political channels with which to use new legal reforms to their advantage.

2.5 LAND WARS

Informal land occupation in Havana was limited compared to cities like Rio de Janeiro, but it still represented a significant portion of the city.¹⁷⁴ Accurate accounting is difficult, however. The most centrally located shantytowns of the time were occupied before 1933 in the vicinity of the Atarés Castle near Old Havana. Holding several hundred people each during the *Machadato*, by the 1950s between 6,000-10,000 people lived in these three central neighborhoods just miles from the capitol.¹⁷⁵ Other neighborhoods were spread around the city, ranging from a few

¹⁷³ Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 435.

¹⁷⁴ In 1950, for example, approximately 14 percent of Rio de Janeiro's population lived in officially recognized shantytowns. While it is clear that a greater percentage of residents in Rio de Janeiro lived on informal land than in Havana, comparisons to the rest of Latin America during these years are more complicated. The percentage is calculated from Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*, 22, 65. Also see Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, 178.

¹⁷⁵ Enrique Andino, "Estudio sobre los llamados barrios de indigentes: Su solución científica por el urbanismo," *Revista Municipal y de Intereses Económicos*, May-June 1938, 66; Fernando Alloza, "Seis Mil personas viven hacinadas en las chozas de Las Yaguas," *Información*, March 2, 1947, 49; Herminio Portell-Vila, "De como viven los habaneros pobres," *Bohemia*, December 9, 1951, 66.

scattered shacks to areas of more than 1,000 residents. An informant involved with a government food distribution network recalls that there were 16 shantytown neighborhoods registered throughout greater Havana by the end of the 1930s, though there were likely more. The first systematic effort to catalogue shantytowns identified 21 in 1951; in the 1950s, it is possible there were more than 36 neighborhoods. A report from Havana's College of Architects estimated that five percent of the municipal population lived in these areas in 1950, or upwards of 50,000 people.¹⁷⁶ In each case, however, these estimates did not include legal, underserviced subdivisions or tenements, which were far more numerous (Chapter 5).

There was never a comprehensive effort to claim that these neighborhoods occupied state lands, although such claims would have been logical given the ambiguities of the land reform legislation. Such claims instead emerged organically, through trial and error, when residents demonstrated through their actions the belief that Havana was a city in which they had the right to live. With some exceptions, informal neighborhoods were not linked to each other, except by the government agencies that sought to manage them. Discussed in chapter 3, the Communist Party networked among shantytowns and advocated for many of them in property disputes, but it did not articulate generalized demands for land distribution in urban areas.¹⁷⁷ Instead claims of state lands arose defensively, on a case-by-case basis, as residents and their allies resisted

¹⁷⁶ The problem with these calculations is that the term "*barrio de indigentes*" often referred to informal land status, not housing conditions. Thus, estimates from the 1950s exclude some underserviced, legalized subdivisions, even if such distinctions were not always obvious to observers. Along these lines, Fulgencio Batista claimed optimistically to have eliminated 70 percent of urban shantytowns by moving 25,000 people, which would place the total number of shantytown residents in the early 1950s at approximately 36,000. For broader conclusions about the city's housing stock, see Chapter 5. Statistics from: Herminio Portell-Vila, "De como viven los habaneros pobres," *Bohemia*, December 9, 1951, 66; R.M. Connell, "Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba," 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA, 4; Batista, *Piedras y leyes*, 316; Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 58.

¹⁷⁷ The communist party did not address urban shantytowns collectively as an issue for land reform. This is not surprising, given the communist's theoretical orientation, which was rooted in Frederick Engels' work on housing. Engels viewed urban crowding as a physical manifestation of a social issue, namely labor, not a theoretical problem in itself. In two decades of issues of *Fundamentos*, a Cuban Communist publication devoted to theoretical issues, no article appeared on shantytowns. In practice, however, communists were active in applying the laws they supported for rural peasants to urban land disputes, something demonstrated by their attention to the issue in their daily publication, *Noticias de Hoy*. On Engels, see Chapter 4.

titleholders who sought to remove them. Gradually, residents and neighborhood organizations across the city included such claims in a repertoire of contention with which they fought against eviction.

It did not take a great deal of creativity to see that agrarian reform measures could apply to Havana.¹⁷⁸ In 1939, President Laredo Bru appointed the former Secretary of Agriculture and confidant of Batista, Amadeo López Castro, as a “special delegate to the President of the Republic for the distribution of land.”¹⁷⁹ Soon after, Batista and López made several trips to Oriente where they distributed land titles to poor residents on state lands, which attracted notice in the capital.¹⁸⁰ Later, just outside Havana, peasants near the Mariel port received land titles under the program. And at the Santa Fé beach, “almost within sight of the capital,” squatters occupied *realengo* lands as would-be purchasers squabbled over its title. Later, as the courts definitively ruled that the land belonged to the state, they sold their rights to developers.¹⁸¹

Meanwhile, the utility of the agrarian reform program gradually became clear in other urban disputes. In the aftermath of the rapid migrations and settlement of the early 1930s, titleholders, tenants, and squatters sought to secure their land rights. As politicians sought to appease mobilized voters, poor people worked actively to stretch political connections into material gains. Occupants seeking protection often took their claims to municipal authorities first, who in many cases permitted settlement without much concern for absent titleholders. When not actively permitted, settlements were at least tolerated in the absence of protest, and often backed by the municipality later. Shacks in Marianao were, according to residents, “being

¹⁷⁸ Until the 1950s, the laws in question generally applied to any “non-urbanized plot [*finca rústica*,]” which included much of greater Havana, in some cases lands that were quite central.

¹⁷⁹ Edward Lawton to Secretary of State, 23 March 1939, RG84/852/1803, USNA.

¹⁸⁰ Corbitt, “Mercedes and Realengos,” 283-85.

¹⁸¹ “La Audiencia de la Habana ratifica con un segundo falla que la playa de ‘Santa Fe’ pertenece al estado,” *El Crisol*, May 29, 1936, 1; Corbitt, “Mercedes and Realengos,” 282.

occupied by another number of families who assure that they were authorized by then mayor of Marianao Ortelio Alpízar.”¹⁸² In Havana, residents of Las Yaguas appealed to the Mayor for approval of the settlement prior to 1933 (see chapter 3). In Guanabacoa, the mayor approved several settlements, with support of the city council.¹⁸³

Appeals to municipal governments could lead to overlapping jurisdictions or other uncertainty, and by 1940 numerous cases were in dispute. In August 1937, for example, the mayor of Guanabacoa reported being visited by “a commission of humble residents from this municipality regarding the acquisition and distribution of ... land lots.” The mayor supposedly informed them that they would have to research who the title owners might be, but that if none appeared, the residents’ rights would be respected, provided they “prove their status as solemn, poor Cuban citizens.” After an investigation revealed that the “lands were not registered in the Municipality of Guanabacoa,” the mayor provided a guarantee that, as he put it, no property owners had appeared at that point.¹⁸⁴

The mayor's statement was given as testimony to investigators from the adjacent municipality of Regla, where it turned out that the land was in fact titled, and it is likely that he had initially been more permissive than he let on. A judge in Regla ruled soon after that the titleholders should retain ownership, and a number of residents were presented with eviction notices. Yet possession of the land remained in dispute. In 1938, the titleholders sent a curtly worded letter to the Guanabacoa mayor accusing him of being “perfectly aware of the problem arising from the occupation of lands” and of encouraging mobilizations by the squatters. The owners complained that, while they had agreed to sell titles to many of the affected residents,

¹⁸² Fiscal del Audiencia to Juez del Audiencia, 20 November 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 1.

¹⁸³ Actas Capitulares del Ayuntamiento de Guanabacoa, 27 March 1941, Archivo del Museo Municipal de Guanabacoa (hereafter AMMG), 166.

¹⁸⁴ Dr. Rafael Rodríguez Álvarez to G. García Pedroso, 17 August 1937, Legajo 3, Expediente 85, Gobierno Municipal de Guanabacoa (Neocolonia), Departamento de Gobernación, AMMG.

“those occupants are constantly bothered” by organizers who should have been evicted, who “are arranging to celebrate on the next September fourth,” rewarding “vagrants.”¹⁸⁵ The political savvy of the residents was evidenced in the date of their celebration: September fourth, the anniversary of Batista’s 1933 barracks coup and a date that they chose as the name for their neighborhood as well.

By December 1940, residents of the *reparto* “September Fourth” reportedly claimed that its lands “belong to the municipality, others to the state, and so on.” The titleholders published a desperate plea to the city council demanding that they be recognized as owners, complete with a history of the land’s ownership dating back to the nineteenth century.¹⁸⁶ It is unclear how the *reparto* “September Fourth” fared in later years, although documents from the 1940s and 50s reveal that the same property owners continued to develop and parcel portions of the land for residential use.¹⁸⁷ What is clear, however, is that, amid the legal wrangling around the 1940 Constitution, poor squatters found themselves in positions where political mobilization combined with claims about state lands had the potential to yield material results in terms of settlement rights—at least temporarily.

In the periods leading up to and following the promulgation of the 1940 Constitution land disputes intensified. Many informally housed residents emulated those from “September Fourth,” by claiming to occupy state lands. Communist activists, who were heavily involved in similar rural disputes, generally assisted in formulating or reporting these claims, although the depth of their involvement is usually unclear. At Aldecoa, for example, a writer in the Communist journal *Noticias de Hoy* claimed that, “for a long time poor Cuban families constructed their houses in

¹⁸⁵ Luis de Villers to Alcalde Municipal de Guanabacoa, 31 August 1938, Documentos pre-clasificados, AMMG.

¹⁸⁶ “Se dirigen al presidente del ayuntamiento los propietarios de los terrenos ‘La Unión;’ Exponen sus derechos como verdaderos dueños,” *La Publicidad*, December 2, 1940, 1, 4.

¹⁸⁷ *La Unión*, 1955, (without number), Documentos pre-clasificados, AMMG.

this area which is solely property of the Cuban state.”¹⁸⁸ Telegrams to Batista from multiple labor unions seem to have put the eviction on hold.¹⁸⁹ In Guanabacoa, reports from settlers at Gasómetro, Camaco, and Potosí noted “unjustified evictions and exclusions by individuals who have no right over these lands, property of the state.”¹⁹⁰ Guanabo residents claimed that “these lands ... belong to us by natural law. They were left to us by the Spanish, our ancestors.”¹⁹¹ In these last two cases, claims were backed by evidence of 19th-century Spanish land grants, while other cases required more creativity. Residents of shacks constructed on clearly titled land in Marianao, “especially those who have their houses on the straight line towards the street,” claimed that their lands “belong to that street and not to the company, unless it has proved that it has the right to them.”¹⁹² In 1951, reporting that electoral agents had destroyed his shack because he refused to affiliate with the Auténtico party, a resident of centrally located Vedado stated defensively “that these lands belong to the state,” despite the fact that the land was not in dispute.¹⁹³

It is unclear that any of these cases resulted in definitive titling for residents, or even prompted attention from officials involved in agrarian reform efforts. In most cases where evidence is available, the best residents could hope for was a judicial stalemate, which allowed them to stay where they were but left them short of permanent title. During court proceedings on one of Havana’s central shantytowns, Las Yaguas, for example, neighborhood representatives made claims that could have led to a review of land titles according to laws on state lands.

¹⁸⁸ “Desalojan a cuatro familias en el barrio de ‘Aldecoa,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 25, 1940, 1, 6.

¹⁸⁹ Months later, the neighborhood was still intact. At some point at least some of the site came to be used as a reformatory. On the neighborhood intact: “Aclara la sección nac. de desocupados de la CTC el reparto de tarjetas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 27, 1940, 3. On a nearby reformatory called “Aldecoa”: “Se esfuman más de 60 millones del fondo de desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 23, 1952, 1.

¹⁹⁰ “Denunciado un nuevo caso de desalojo en finca de Guanabacoa,” *Noticias de Hoy*, July 30, 1941, 7.

¹⁹¹ Agustín Tamargo, “Edificarán la primera escuela del gobierno de Grau en un nuevo terreno cedido al estado,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 18, 1944, 1, 8.

¹⁹² Policía Judicial to Presidente de la Sala, 10 Feb 1945, Legajo 260, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 6.

¹⁹³ “Destruyen sus casas a dos obreros por no acceder a afiliarse al PRC,” *Alerta*, October 18, 1951, 1, 8.

Neighborhood advocates published the results of deep archival research in *El País*, finding that Las Yaguas' lands "were never fenced," and were later confiscated by the Spanish during the late nineteenth century because of the revolutionary activities of their owners. "If the state can recover those lands," the report concluded, "the problem of 'Las Yaguas' may find a solution."¹⁹⁴ Residents added to these claims by invoking their ownership of the land on the basis of meeting residency requirements, which they believed "granted rights to the residents of a piece of non-urbanized land that was occupied by 25 residents for more than 25 years and not demanded by the so-called property owners." By the mid-1940s, they believed they had sufficient time.¹⁹⁵ There is no evidence that these arguments ever made it into court, however. The residents of Las Yaguas never received title to their land, nor is there evidence that the state studied the possibility of expropriation.

The result was a situation of informality—one where eviction proved difficult, while titles remained elusive and residents insecure. Throughout the 1930s, titleholders for Las Yaguas repeatedly sued for eviction. Whether judges dismissed these suits on the basis that the lands might belong to the state or on some other basis, or whether politicians merely left eviction rulings unenforced, is not always clear, but the neighborhood continued to grow.¹⁹⁶ In one of these cases, the judge dismissed the suit on a technicality, ruling that since squatters occupied the land prior to the date of the contract on which the suit was based, the contract had never existed (Chapter 3).¹⁹⁷ In a 1955 case tried between a titleholder and residents in a different neighborhood, a judge ruled against eviction on a similar basis, arguing that the residents had

¹⁹⁴ "En Las Yaguas hacen rogativas 4,000 vecinos," *El País*, September 25, 1944, 1, 6.

¹⁹⁵ MD, EB Interview with FA, 4 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 1, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 56.

¹⁹⁶ Some residents reported rumors that early court decisions favored residents. I have not found additional mention of this trial in coverage of the eviction trial in the same court in 1944. García Alonso, *Manuela*, 213.

¹⁹⁷ "Declarado sin lugar el desahucio del barrio de indigentes de Las Yaguas," *El Mundo*, September 28, 1944.

lived on the land prior to the sale of the title, rendering the sale invalid.¹⁹⁸ These rulings were sufficient to stay eviction suits, which may have been unenforceable in any case due to presidential decrees. They did nothing to resolve the status of the land for residents, however. Based on available evidence, claims of state land often played little role in court.

Yet the claims were not made without purpose. By declaring themselves occupants of state lands, residents invoked a legitimate legal framework through which to demand rights to the city from elected officials—and the results spoke for themselves. A 1949 editorial in *Alerta* claimed that many property owners had seen their lands “practically invalidated” by shantytowns.¹⁹⁹ A 1950 report from the US State Department noted that the eviction of shantytowns was “a tedious process,” and that owners opted to persuade squatters to leave “by paying them small amounts for their houses” rather than go to court.²⁰⁰ The claim of state lands therefore served urban shantytowns as a rallying point—one whose maximum legal potential was rarely fulfilled, but which could draw the attention of political allies and stall eviction proceedings. In demanding to stay in their homes, shantytown residents invoked their rights as citizens by way of a legal framework whose applicability was not fully clear. Meanwhile, titleholders remained without land and residents remained without title.

The worry that these land claims instilled in titleholders is clear by the lengths to which they went to sign rental contracts with occupants—contracts that pushed eviction proceedings into a different legal category. By establishing rental contracts, titleholders gained written acknowledgment of their ownership and could sometimes secure rulings of eviction—although rent laws had complications of their own (Chapter 5). In many Havana shantytowns residents did

¹⁹⁸ “Rechazada la demanda de desahucio. Triunfaron los vecinos de Quemados en el pleito con Walter Ebenezer Dickenson,” *El Sol*, August 27, 1955, 1.

¹⁹⁹ “Otra vez los indigentes,” *Alerta*, September 16, 1949, 4.

²⁰⁰ R.M. Connell, “Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba,” 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA, 4.

not pay rent to titleholders.²⁰¹ Amid trial proceedings at Las Yaguas, for example, residents claimed that titleholders offered bribes to several of them to sign a false rental contract, in order to sue on that basis.²⁰² In a different neighborhood, a lawyer from a railroad company brought a suit before the Urgency Court in 1944, claiming that squatters had overrun their property in Marianao “without consent,” threatening “fatal personal consequences and subsequent damages to the company.”²⁰³ Not impressed, the investigating officer found similar houses built “with permission from the mentioned company, which has extended contracts ... for which they pay one peso monthly.” “One arrives at the conclusion,” he continued, “that the protest of the company is due to the fact that the residents do not pay the monthly peso.”²⁰⁴ Meanwhile, at Finca Requena, part of a large conjunction of squatter neighborhoods near the current Plaza de la Revolución, poor families allegedly sub-rented their shacks from tenants who had signed contracts with titleholders. When the tenants deliberately ceased to pay, a judge ordered the neighborhood evicted.²⁰⁵

When such evictions were carried out, poor families were precipitously displaced, a threat that loomed over all poor, informally housed *habaneros*. Arriving at Finca Requena with court officials on February 12, 1945, police proceeded to “destroy all of the homes, without exception, to the surprise of the residents who energetically protested.” A “large quantity” of poor people were cast out into the city to find lodging.²⁰⁶ Meanwhile, in other cases where residents had no title, they were left vulnerable to incursions of a less official variety. At Playa

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁰² MD, EB Interview of FA, 4 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 1, Papers, UIUC Archives, 56.

²⁰³ Fiscal del Audiencia to Juez del Audiencia, 20 November 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 1.

²⁰⁴ The judge quickly ruled against the company, though appeals continued. Fiscal del Audiencia to Juez del Audiencia, 20 November 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 1; Sentencia, 25 February 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 8; Fiscal del Audiencia to Juez del Audiencia, 20 April 1945, Legajo 274, Expediente 30, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

²⁰⁵ “Violento desalojo en la Finca la Requena. Acusan directamente al procurador E. López,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 13, 1945, 1,3.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 1,3.

Viriato in Marianao, where an estimated 600 people had constructed homes, private guards allegedly attacked and injured a leader from a neighborhood association, prompting protest.²⁰⁷ At Aldecoa, residents were reportedly told that if they refused to leave “their shacks, they would light them in flames.”²⁰⁸ Later, 20 policemen removed four families from the neighborhood, even as politicians were disputing the eviction.²⁰⁹ In Marianao, shacks were destroyed in the midst of conflict between municipal and national authorities over whether such destruction was permissible.²¹⁰ As residents protested another impending eviction, the owners allegedly responded by hiring an off-duty policeman who was “charged with evicting the residents, creating through him true disorder.”²¹¹

In sum, as poor people redefined the boundaries of urban citizenship by claiming the city as theirs, one strategy they used was to claim that they occupied state lands. By invoking legal reforms initiated by the 1933 Revolution, they nearly always failed to gain formal property rights. Yet in many cases, they secured a precarious, enduring place in Havana. Framing the Finca Requena eviction as an affront to the legal reforms of the past decade, a Communist politician condemned the move as “being the same as those carried out in earlier times when the laws did not guarantee the respect, consideration, and protection that citizens deserve.”²¹² In part, he was right, since recent reforms had given many squatters in Havana leverage with which to claim rights to their land. Yet the eviction was a reminder that these were contested, insurgent

²⁰⁷ “Intervendrá el presidente en el pretendido desalojo de la playa libre ‘Viriato,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 16, 1940, 7.

²⁰⁸ “Quieren desalojar a los indigentes del Reparto Aldecoa,” *El Crisol*, August 31, 1940, 8; “Amenazadas con ser desalojadas varias familias,” *El Crisol*, September 23, 1940, 8; “Piden intervención de Batista en el desalojo de ‘Aldecoa,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 26, 1940; “Esta anunciado para el martes otro injusto desalojo de familias en el barrio de desocupados de ‘Aldecoa,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 29 1940, 1.

²⁰⁹ “Desalojan a cuatro familias en el barrio de ‘Aldecoa,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 25, 1940, 1, 6.

²¹⁰ “Mientras se negaba la entrada en la playa ‘Viriato’ a los ediles de Marianao, destruían las casas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, June 8, 1941, 7.

²¹¹ “Vecinos de ‘La Requena’ piden a Batista que actué contra el desalojo de varias familias,” *Noticias de Hoy*, July 9, 1944, 8.

²¹² “Violento desalojo en la Finca la Requena. Acusan directamente al procurador E. López,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 13, 1945, 1,3.

claims, which sought to interpret existing legal frameworks in the interest of the poor. For most, the rights they afforded were significant but incomplete.

2.6 THE PROBLEM OF LA HATA

By 1940, La Hata embodied the incomplete promises of Cuban legal reform. Built without title on hilly lands on the far eastern edge of metropolitan Havana, the neighborhood was in many ways typical of the numerous poor, informal settlements scattered around the capital. Its difficulty in carving out a space there would be typical as well. Yet by the end of the decade, the mobilization of neighborhood residents revealed the potential for poor Cuban citizens to gain property rights from the Cuban state. In the process, residents of La Hata made real the promises that had previously only been imagined by the informally housed, urban poor.

Residents built the shacks of La Hata during the early 1930s, adjacent to a well-known Independence War monument, with approval from the municipal government. By the 1940s, approximately 500 families occupied the land, making it one of the largest informal settlements in the city. By 1941, as in many other neighborhoods, a titleholder claimed ownership of the land. In protesting this claim, residents sought help from the Guanabacoa city council, which offered them legal support, since residents “have contributed to the Municipal Administration for many years.”²¹³ The municipality helped neighborhood advocates to locate evidence of a nineteenth-century royal decree, which had ceded the lands for common use. “These lands

²¹³ Actas Capitulares del Ayuntamiento de Guanabacoa, 27 March 1941, AMMG, 166.

correspond to the state,” a neighborhood association wrote to government officials.²¹⁴ No less certain, however, was the fact that, in the century that followed, John Stowers, a US citizen, had purchased a title to the land. The problem of La Hata was therefore familiar: US Embassy officials reported that the land “has been occupied by Cuban squatters whom the Cuban authorities have refused to remove.”²¹⁵

In many other occupancy disputes around the city, the matter would have ended there, leading to a situation of informal occupation for residents and an effectively worthless title for the would-be owner. As a US citizen, however, La Hata’s titleholder was different, and he reached out to the US Embassy for help. In the meantime, residents responded in kind. As the titleholder used US allies to press Cuban officials, residents gained support from the Guanabacoa mayor and the city council along with various national politicians and union leaders from the Communist Party. With the residents backed by the municipal government and the titleholder backed by the US Embassy, both sides looked to the national government for a solution. Under pressure, the Ministry of Public Works agreed to expropriate the land in 1944. Legally, the move fell under the government’s agrarian reform initiative.²¹⁶

To ensure that officials followed through on their commitments, mobilization in La Hata continued on both sides. Neighborhood leaders held a mass rally in July, where veterans from the Liberation Army, representatives from the Cuban Labor Confederation (CTC), and Communist Senator Salvador García Agüero all called for action from Batista.²¹⁷ Children from the neighborhood gathered for a photo for the press, with a caption noting that bureaucratic hang-ups

²¹⁴ “Denunciado un nuevo caso de desalojo en finca de Guanabacoa,” *Noticias de Hoy*, July 30, 1941, 7; “Piden de nuevo al gobierno los vecinos de la Jata, que actúe para evitar varios desalojos” *Noticias de Hoy*, March 1, 1944, 1.

²¹⁵ Robert Woodward to Secretary of State, “Efforts of Embassy at Habana to expedite settlement of claim of John L. STOWERS,” 26 February 1946, RG59/837.52/2-2646, USNA.

²¹⁶ “Vecinos de ‘la Jata’ piden ayuda al jefe de estado,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 27, 1944, 7; “Repartirán tierras de la Finca La Hata,” *El Mundo*, September 27, 1944, 13.

²¹⁷ “Luchan los vecinos de la Jata contra el pretendido desalojo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, July 30, 1944, 8.

were placing numerous families in jeopardy of eviction.²¹⁸ In late August 1944, with just over one month remaining in Batista's term, residents celebrated a "tribute" to the president "motivated by the plausible accord adopted by the Council of Ministers in its latest meeting, expropriating the lands."²¹⁹ By late September, *El Mundo* confirmed progress, prompting celebration.²²⁰ Behind the scenes, Batista reportedly negotiated with Stowers over an expropriation amount, offering \$25,000.²²¹ Yet disputes surrounding the neighborhood did not end. The following year, a column in *Noticias de Hoy* wrote of "the problem of La Hata," explaining, "the accord has still not been executed."²²² Like other areas of Havana, La Hata remained in legal dispute. Meanwhile the US property owner continued to agitate against the residents.²²³

As tensions in the neighborhood remained high, negotiations between Stowers and the Cuban government revealed problems with the land legislation not anticipated in the debates surrounding its passage. To push the expropriation forward, the US ambassador took up the matter directly in a telephone conversation with President Grau, Batista's successor, who expressed approval. Yet the proceedings took an unexpected turn, when Paulina Alsina, the First Lady of the Republic, allegedly approached Stowers in a "late evening appointment" where she offered to pay him a \$200,000 appropriation, designated for "low-cost housing," on the condition that he return \$150,000 to her. Without her help, she reportedly said, it would be "difficult to secure payment." Stowers claimed to be "disgusted with the whole matter," but eventually

²¹⁸ "Piden la solución del conflicto de 'la Jata,'" *Noticias de Hoy*, April 27, 1944.

²¹⁹ "Vecinos de la Jata rinden homenaje al Presidente Batista," *Noticias de Hoy*, August 26, 1944, 1.

²²⁰ "Repartirán tierras de la Finca La Hata," *El Mundo*, September 27, 1944, 13; "Será construida una escuela en los terrenos de la Finca 'La Jata,'" *Noticias de Hoy*, September 27, 1944, 7.

²²¹ Robert Woodward to Secretary of State, "Official Attempt to Graft in STOWERS Property Case," 4 March 4 1946 RG59/837.52/3-446, USNA.

²²² Nelita Martín, "'La isla por dentro': El problema de La Hata," *Noticias de Hoy*, May 12, 1945, 7.

²²³ "Reparto de tierras La Jata," *Noticias de Hoy*, August 15, 1945, 7.

agreed to accept the payment provided it could be registered by the US Embassy for his protection. Because he had stalled, however, Alsina claimed the money had since been allocated for other expropriations.²²⁴ Embassy officials suspected similar instances of graft in the administration's plans to use \$19 million in sugar revenues to expropriate lands "ostensibly for redistribution to poor farmers."²²⁵ Caught in the morass of palace intrigue, the "social revolution" some property owners feared from the 1937 agrarian reform law was rumored to have become a vehicle for corruption instead.

Hope was not lost for La Hata, however. As embassy officials continued to pressure the Cuban government into 1947, the Ministry of Public Works now offered \$34,900, an amount that Stowers protested but ultimately accepted. Even so, Stowers remained concerned that he would not receive payment. Observing the dynamics of Cuban land conflicts in the 1940s, Stowers' Cuban lawyer therefore sought to utilize an additional source of pressure against the government. With Stowers' interests coming into perverse alignment with those of neighborhood residents, embassy officials reported,

On April 30 Mr. Stowers' attorney ... ostentatiously visited the property in question and soon found himself surrounded by squatters, who asked why he had come. He reminded them that in the neighboring Court of Guanabacoa there were filed the decisions of the Supreme Court under which the squatters were ordered ejected from the land. ... He suggested that if the squatters wished to forestall his actions, they could most conveniently do so by visiting the Ministry of Public Works and petitioning the Minister to conclude promptly the formalities in the case which would give them final and definite title to the land, with compensation to Mr. Stowers. Having produced his effect, he departed.²²⁶

²²⁴ Robert Woodward to Secretary of State, "Official Attempt to Graft in STOWERS Property Case," 4 March 4 1946 RG59/837.52/3-446, USNA.

²²⁵ Henry Norweb to Secretary of State, 20 March 1946, RG59/837.52/3-2046, USNA.

²²⁶ H. Bartlett Wells to the Secretary of State, 5 May 1947, RG59/837.52/5-547, USNA.

Hoping that popular protest could achieve what legal proceedings could not, the lawyer was surprised by what came next: “The squatters did not visit the Minister of Public Works,” reported embassy officials, “but during the night of April 30-May 1, persons unknown, presumably not unconnected with the squatters, fired the Court and its contents.”²²⁷ Press reports from Guanabacoa confirmed, “at two thirty in the morning a fire began in the Archive Department of the Correctional Court of Guanabacoa, destroying important documents.” A police lieutenant reportedly found “a can containing gasoline and a reel of film.”²²⁸ At least some residents of La Hata were determined to ensure that their rights to the land were upheld, by any means necessary.

Efforts to resolve the case of La Hata revealed deep flaws in the procedures surrounding the distribution of state land to poor citizens. These procedures required initiative and expenditure from the Cuban government, and they generated opportunities for corruption and graft. In most shantytowns in Havana, they were never initiated at all. Yet the unlikely series of events that led to a courthouse fire in 1947 revealed other possibilities. By mobilizing inside and outside of established political channels, residents of La Hata expressed a belief that they had a right to stay on their land. In doing so, they insisted that the lands belonged to the Cuban state, and that by virtue of their status as poor Cuban citizens, lands of the Cuban state should be theirs. In July 1947, these beliefs became reality. In the only such case I have located for the Havana metropolitan area, the Ministry of Public Works made funds for the expropriation available to Stowers, giving definitive land rights to residents of La Hata.²²⁹ With the status of the land

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ “Destruído parcialmente por el fuego parte del archivo de un juzgado correccional,” *El Crisol*, May 2, 1947, 8.

²²⁹ I have not located press accounts confirming that residents received land titles from the national government. However, the homes of many residents were already registered with the municipal government. Henry Norweb to the Secretary of State, 24 July 1947, RG59/837.52/7-2447.

resolved, La Hata was removed from the informality that afflicted other shantytowns. The neighborhood, however, remained bitterly poor.

2.7 CONCLUSION

From the remote province of Oriente to the capital of the Republic, the claim of state lands was debated and twisted across decades of radical social transformation. As poor people crowded into Havana, government officials defined narrow boundaries for urban citizenship, deporting poor foreigners, disciplining poor Cubans, and relocating them to the countryside. Yet the poor transformed these notions into a vision of their own. Where government officials constructed the shaky foundations of a welfare state designed to assist, manage, and exclude, the urban poor reconfigured sites of state control into centers of popular protest, where they demanded tangible benefits from their government and a place in their capital city. As the 1933 Revolution led to new measures on land reform, the urban poor reinterpreted these laws. By invoking agrarian reform laws in urban land disputes, poor people in Havana articulated the belief that the government should intervene on their behalf and, on that basis, that land in the capital belonged to them.

In making this claim, residents referenced a legal framework characterized by uncertainty and conflict. Many lands in Cuba had been titled ambiguously, leaving both the poor and the wealthy to rely on proscriptive rights based on possession. By the late 1930s, reform legislation stated that the government was responsible for cataloguing and reclaiming lands for the state, and, further, that it would redistribute such lands to the poor. In practice, however, these reforms merely perpetuated uncertainty, leaving stakeholders to wait and see how officials might

implement them. In many cases they were disappointed, since implementation required political will. In the meantime, however, many poor neighborhoods took these laws at their word, resisting land claims from titleholders by demanding intervention from the state. In most cases, they failed to gain title to their land, but they often succeeded in staving off eviction nonetheless. The result was a situation of informality, where titleholders could not evict, but poor people remained vulnerable to insecurity, threats, and violence.

That a court archive would be the target of arson from mobilized shantytown residents underscores the importance that the law acquired during these years for many of Havana's urban poor. Far from abstract phrases left to lawyers and politicians, residents of La Hata had learned through more than a decade of promises, threats, and uncertainty that the law was not fixed, but rather something to be leveraged and negotiated, and, if circumstances required, burned. In the process, they made real a radical interpretation of Cuban land legislation—an interpretation in which the government was obligated to legitimize informal land occupations in the capital and intervene on behalf of the urban poor. In pressing this interpretation to be carried into practice, La Hata had escaped the legal grey area of most informally occupied neighborhoods in Havana and put forth an expansive vision of urban citizenship. The government backed their claims. Land in the capital was theirs.

While the torched courthouse in Guanabacoa led to full property rights for La Hata's residents, many neighborhoods would not be so lucky. Miles away residents of Las Yaguas laid claim to their piece of the city, too. Their fight would be more difficult.

3.0 “THE FIRES OF ROME”: SHANTYTOWN NETWORKS AND THE STATE, 1931-1950

The state is obligated to rule on the juridical situation of such lands...
—Law decree 3173, 1939.²³⁰

There are two options: ... either build [us] decent homes ... or apply euthanasia to [us] all, wiping [us] from the world of the living.
—Attributed to Las Yaguas Mayor Rufino González, 1947.²³¹

The flames spread quickly through Las Yaguas. Built in a steep ravine in the industrial Luyanó neighborhood, the dense concentrations of scrap wood shacks lit up like kindling. Firefighters arrived amid crowds of semi-dressed residents, torn suddenly from sleep. By sunrise, more than 4,000 people were homeless. “We heard the fire alarm, but I was too tired,” one recalled. “Then my sister knocks down my door ... [She] didn’t have any more time but to grab the boy and pull me. ... We couldn’t save anything but the boy and a dress.”²³² All told, on April 2, 1950, 12 people were hospitalized for burns, one was killed, and 80 percent of Las Yaguas’ homes were destroyed.²³³

Spreading almost as quickly as the flames themselves, reports of the fire crisscrossed the nation the next day. In the commentary that ensued, it was soon clear that the political stakes of

²³⁰ Decreto no. 3173, 27 December 1939, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

²³¹ Roger de Lauria, “Lanza en ristre,” *Alerta*, March 12, 1947, 3.

²³² OL Interview with HH, 5 May 1969, Box 139, Folder 12, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 50.

²³³ “Perdieron hasta su miseria los indigentes, al quemarse las viviendas de Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol*, April 3, 1950, 1, 22.

the event surpassed the damage. Television news filmed residents scavenging for lost possessions, titling the report, a “national shame.”²³⁴ “The current problem will undoubtedly be resolved,” stated an editorial in *Información*. “But...it is not what those people need at the moment but rather tomorrow.”²³⁵ An editorial in *Alerta* was grim: “Will they wait until fire does the work of erasing those neighborhoods, even if it comes with the cost of exterminating most of the occupants?”²³⁶ The fire of April 1950, reports agreed, revealed a neighborhood whose precariousness was disgraceful to the government. Not just an isolated tragedy, many interpreted Las Yaguas’ destruction as part of an ongoing failure of the Cuban state.

If the national implications of such a local event were notable, however, it was even more notable that the “work of erasing those neighborhoods” remained undone—even after a fire had eliminated so many shacks. If the mainstream press saw the neighborhood as the embodiment of failure, the behavior of residents complicated this story. Las Yaguas was quickly rebuilt. In the following days, a report stated that the residents were “sleeping over the ashes of their burned homes,” since they “feared losing the piece of land attached to them.”²³⁷ Dense as ever, new scrap wood shacks soon covered the ravine.

What allowed this shantytown to remain in the city for so long? What did residents hope to gain by staying in a neighborhood that all agreed to be a refuge of last resort? And why had its prospects come to be so deeply associated with the state? While many accounts of Las Yaguas have focused on personal histories of residents, little is known about the wider legal and political contexts that allowed them to become so firmly entrenched in Havana.²³⁸ In contrast, this chapter

²³⁴ Noticiero Nacional, “Vergüenza nacional.”

²³⁵ “Victimas del fuego,” *Información*, April 4, 1950, 2

²³⁶ “Incendio en ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Alerta*, April 3, 1950, 1.

²³⁷ “Sobre las cenizas de las casas que se les quemaron duermen los indigentes,” *El Crisol*, April 4, 1950, 1, 10.

²³⁸ On Las Yaguas, see Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*; Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*; García Alonso, *Manuela*; Calderón González. Each of these accounts leaves analysis of state policy towards shantytowns prior to 1959 in the

analyzes the connections that developed between the neighborhood and the national government in the two decades that preceded the 1950 fire. As local mobilization met state initiative, these dynamic interactions changed Cuban slum policy, while leaving Las Yaguas unmoved.

Las Yaguas' collective struggles during these years were defined by property claims. Occupying land without title, residents made demands beyond the formal protections theoretically afforded to Cuban citizens. Legally, the neighborhood should not have existed, but it did—a situation that led to deficient infrastructure, persistent precariousness, and low social standing. Yet there were benefits too, including free rent in a central part of the city, possible access to employment, and, over time, social services from public and private organizations. To protect these benefits, residents built connections to the political system, and they did so by highlighting their status as citizens in spite of their informal property rights.

In response, the government recognized its obligation to assist residents in poverty, but it refused to extend that obligation to the legitimization of land claims. In addressing the poor, officials instead affirmed a basic thesis about the relationship between urban informality and the state: the government was justified in prohibiting urban land seizures so long as it met its obligations to poor people in other ways. Defining these obligations would be the catch. As the government expanded its commitments to citizens throughout the 1930s, the content of state obligations to the poor came to be the central point of contention in debates over Las Yaguas' future.

By no means inevitable, this was one of several debates that could have defined conflict in Las Yaguas, and its primacy was a result of the neighborhood's property status. Unlike La

hands of resident informants. Other studies of the labor movement have briefly mentioned shantytown activists, without systematically investigating their political dynamics. See, for example, del Toro González, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 111-130; Luis Padrón, *!Qué república era aquella!*, 276-279.

Hata, whose land belonged to a US citizen, Las Yaguas' land title belonged to a high Cuban government official, Cosme de la Torriente. From his influential position, he pressed to normalize Las Yaguas' informal status, making the relocation of residents a contractual state obligation. By doing so, he foreclosed for Las Yaguas the possibilities that remained open for La Hata, effectively impeding the legalization of residents' land claims. Yet he opened up a new set of debates. With property off the table, conflicts over the future of Las Yaguas now hinged on the extent of the state's obligation to provide basic social services for residents. The specific content of citizenship therefore became a language of contention between residents and the state and with unforeseen results: on one hand, it offered a path to protect the neighborhood from arbitrary relocation. On the other hand, it ensured that state intervention remained a political necessity.

In constructing these arguments, I focus specifically on Havana's most famous shantytown, Las Yaguas, and the shantytowns most closely linked to it, Isla de Pinos and Cueva del Humo.²³⁹ As well-recognized emblems of poverty, the neighborhoods were not significant for their size or material deprivations alone—traits that were shared with and sometimes exceeded by other urban and rural settlements. Rather, they became famous due to their central locations and to the contentious interactions discussed below.

I begin the chapter by reconstructing the early settlements of Las Yaguas and Isla de Pinos and the very different responses they provoked from the government. I then trace the ways that neighborhood leaders deployed vocabulary from the radical labor movement and the 1940 Constitution to advance local claims. The next section analyzes legislation drafted by de la Torriente for Las Yaguas, and shows how it re-centered subsequent debates on the content of

²³⁹ At times, these neighborhoods also went by the name "*Llega y pon.*"

citizenship rather than on property claims. Finally, I trace resistance to the relocation efforts of the Ministry of Health in 1944, which left the central shantytowns firmly in place while also solidifying a consensus that the state should act to eliminate them.

3.1 BETWEEN FIRE AND FREEDOM

Although informal neighborhoods had existed around Havana since its founding, 1931 marked the year when poor people's occupation of ambiguously titled land received significant attention from the national government. As migration, population growth, and internal displacement during the 1920s and early 1930s led poor people to invade vacant land throughout the city, the occupiers quickly sought official protection. Property claims made on the government were therefore fundamental to these neighborhoods at their settlement, and defending those claims was often their central organizing principle. In doing so, local leaders used an array of tactics to amplify their political leverage, implicitly reinterpreting officially stated norms for citizenship in the process. In cases where these tactics fell flat, residents stubbornly transgressed formal legal boundaries. As shantytown neighborhoods interacted with government officials, then, they contested the narrow boundaries of formal citizenship—sometimes by persuasion, sometimes by force.

Centrally located and spacious, Las Yaguas offered significant benefits to residents. The area was settled because of its close proximity to the central city during a rash of evictions from urban rental dwellings. The land was widely occupied during the late 1920s. According to resident Amparo Loy, “the first little house was built in October [19]26, the first, and after that, by [19]27 ... all the workers without jobs began taking shelter there. ... After that there was a

dead mass of Cubans.”²⁴⁰ The land’s appeal came from its accessibility to an array of nearby factories and Havana’s port, long a center for poor workers. Early in the century Liberal politicians proposed to build a worker’s housing project nearby.²⁴¹ At a time when jobs were scarce and rent was steep, Las Yaguas meant an opportunity to stay close to whatever work that might appear and to whatever assistance that might be available from the government. In 1931, a neighborhood mayor, Carlos Granados, spoke to reporters about the appeal of the neighborhood’s informal status: “We are without the worry of rents, or taxes that stifle us ...in all, free.”²⁴²

Las Yaguas was not alone. A short way down the hill, just outside the factories and docks that surrounded Havana’s bay near the Atarés Castle, settlers occupied other land, soon known as Isla de Pinos. Offering many of the same benefits as Las Yaguas, the area was also appealing for its proximity to discarded industrial materials, which poor people recycled to sell. Residents told reporters,

They used to go there to earn their two daily *pesetas*. One day, it occurred to one of them, to Santizo, to build a little shack ...where he could wait for the trucks and other vehicles that used to go to dump scraps. ... A few days later, there were a dozen shacks, later another dozen more and like that in succession, until they formed a group, currently some thirty homes.²⁴³

By the 1930s, the surrounding area was notorious. Visiting Havana in 1930, famed scientist Albert Einstein broke away from a scheduled itinerary to tour the area, hoping to penetrate “the

²⁴⁰ Calderón, *Amparo*, 157.

²⁴¹ Marchiori, *Dino Pogolotti*, 32.

²⁴² Neighborhood mayors were a common institution in Havana shantytowns. They were normally elected locally, and registered by local police. “El nuevo barrio cubano,” *Bohemia*, November 8, 1931, 36-37, 49, 52.

²⁴³ “La miseria y el infortunio han levantado un ‘pueblo’ al que han dado en llamarle ‘Isla de Pinos’ o la ‘Ciudad del Plante,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, September 28, 1931, 3, 11.

most miserable households ... the typical neighborhoods of Cuban poverty, which residents have baptized with the strange names of *Pan con Timba* and *Llega y Pon*.”²⁴⁴

As they occupied land and built homes, both neighborhoods sought political allies to protect their claims. They used a variety of tactics to prove their civic worth. In Isla de Pinos, a local mayor checked the criminal backgrounds of new arrivals, indicating that he had a relationship with city police and perhaps local politicians. Leaders there also divided poor newcomers from those who had more resources, which was likely a strategy to protect the better-constructed homes against arbitrary clearance. A resident explained that in “Vedado,” a section of shacks named after the wealthy Havana neighborhood, “we don’t permit making homes without zinc or with walls of sacking.” Those with fewer resources settled in a different section, Pogolotti, named after a poor workers’ neighborhood in Marianao.²⁴⁵ Highly conscious of their weak position, Isla de Pinos residents refused to be photographed by journalists.²⁴⁶

Leaders in Las Yaguas sought allies as well, with greater success. Initially, leaders named the area “the Cuban *barrio*,” only adopting the name Las Yaguas after Machado’s fall. Unlike Isla de Pinos, which had numerous West Indian residents, the settlers used their name to signify that they were Cuban citizens—an important point at a time of mass deportations (Chapter 2). A neighborhood leader explained how he appealed to the government when the Spanish-born property owner insisted on eviction:

I explained to him that we were Cubans without work, and if our [Cuban] employees sacrifice themselves giving contributions to sustain the indigents, mostly Spanish, then as a good Spaniard he should be generous with us, the

²⁴⁴ Quoted from Altshuler, *Las treinta horas de Einstein*, 8.

²⁴⁵ “La miseria y el infortunio han levantado un ‘pueblo’ al que han dado en llamarle ‘Isla de Pinos’ o la ‘Ciudad del Plante,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, September 28, 1931, 11; “Zubizarreta, velando por la higiene, hizo arder anoche el suburbio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 1-2.

²⁴⁶ “La miseria y el infortunio han levantado un ‘pueblo’ al que han dado en llamarle ‘Isla de Pinos’ o la ‘Ciudad del Plante,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, September 28, 1931, 11.

evicted sons of this land. ... I resorted to the authorities, who used reasons more convincing than mine to persuade the property owner.²⁴⁷

Making reference to the government's housing and repatriation of unemployed Spaniards, the leader framed residents' claims to the land as a right that should be granted on the basis of their citizenship. By 1931, then, the neighborhood already claimed its national status, voicing the same insurgent interpretation of citizenship that residents made in La Hata and across the city. As the state gradually acknowledged its obligation to assist the urban poor, residents of Las Yaguas insisted, in effect, that it legitimized their land claims as well.²⁴⁸

Unlike claims made in Isla de Pinos, La Hata, or elsewhere, the claims of Las Yaguas quickly gained recognition at high levels. Because of Machado's constitutional reforms through which he directly appointed leaders to administer Havana, the officials who approved the Las Yaguas settlement were not just from the municipality, but from the national government as well. Neighborhood activists reached out to Liberal Havana mayor and Machado appointee, José Izquierdo, who worked closely with Machado's Minister of Governance, Octavio Zubizarreta. At a time when both men were actively seeking to quell labor protests, they intervened to stop eviction efforts against the settlers. Mayor Izquierdo spoke directly with the land's title-holder after attending a meeting of Liberals, where "numerous electors who have their 'shack' in the Llega y Pon shantytown [Las Yaguas] communicated that ... more than 100 shacks had been destroyed."²⁴⁹ By late 1931, they stalled the eviction, and leaders required political affiliation to Machado and the Liberal party in order to move into the neighborhood. Minister Zubizarreta

²⁴⁷ "El nuevo barrio cubano," *Bohemia*, November 8, 1931, 36-37, 49, 52.

²⁴⁸ "El nuevo barrio cubano," *Bohemia*, November 8, 1931, 36-37, 49, 52; "Conjurado por el alcalde el conflicto planteado por una orden de desalojo contra doscientas familias que están residiendo en le lugar llamado 'llega y pon'" *El Heraldo de Cuba*, October 29, 1931, 2.

²⁴⁹ "Conjurado por el alcalde el conflicto planteado por una orden de desalojo contra doscientas familias que están residiendo en le lugar llamado 'Llega y Pon,'" *El Heraldo de Cuba*, October 29, 1931, 2.

reportedly used the area to occasionally shelter his own needy family members.²⁵⁰ Police soon monitored the settlement, strictly limiting land plots to 4 square meters.²⁵¹

What Izquierdo and the lands' title-holder discussed in their meeting is unclear, but the approval of the Las Yaguas settlement was aided by their conflictive relationship. One of the would-be owners, Cosme De la Torriente, was a lawyer of impeccable credentials—a veteran of Cuba's Independence War, a senator, and Cuba's representative to the League of Nations.²⁵² By the early 1930s, however, he became one of the most prominent figures in the moderate opposition to Machado. Also controversial, José Maria Bouza, his business partner, made his own enemies in the government, publicly criticizing officials and opposing well-connected business leaders.²⁵³ In 1931, a police report directed to Minister Zubizarreta found the Spanish-born Cuban citizen to have become “wealthy in Cuba, [by] conjuring bureaucratic intrigues, traitorous rivalries and administrative collusions ... always to the detriment of the Cuban state.” The report went on to conclude that Bouza “constitute[d] the true case of an undesirable alien.”²⁵⁴ While officials hoped to have Bouza deported, they discovered that, as a citizen, he had the right to stay. They were less convinced, however, of his right to have voting citizens cleared from his land.

Partly due to local tactics and partly due to circumstance, then, national officials supported Las Yaguas' land claims. In the months that followed, the neighborhood was exempted from the clearance efforts that targeted other settlers around the city. Still, for the

²⁵⁰ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 191.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 174.

²⁵² The nature of the business relationship between Bouza and de la Torriente is not clear. Sometimes de la Torriente is referred to as Bouza's legal counsel, not a co-owner. On de la Torriente's career, see Cosme de la Torriente, “Cuba, America and the War,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 1940, 145-155.

²⁵³ “Bouza y Torriente pretenden despojar a los desocupados del Reparto de Las Yaguas,” *La Palabra*, January 26, 1935, 1, 2.

²⁵⁴ Jefe de la Policía Judicial to Secretario de la Gobernación, 13 November 1931, Legajo 75, Expediente 3, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

government this agreement was an exception, not a rule, and it never formally expropriated the land (nor would it have had a clear legal mechanism to do so prior to 1938). Las Yaguas achieved unique recognition because of its unique connections to the national government. The blessing, however, would ultimately be mixed.

As Las Yaguas' residents built connections to politicians, state initiatives elsewhere in the city revealed the government's ongoing commitment to a narrow vision of urban citizenship. It publicized a new set of welfare initiatives days before New Year's Eve in 1931, releasing a film to audiences nationwide, which proudly documented the eradication of several Havana shantytowns. Reported in the press, the film showed the efforts of Minister Zubizarreta to resettle poor families from improvised housing across the city. Residents were fed and housed at a newly renovated shelter called General Machado Camp, at an old market near the Isla de Pinos shantytown called La Purísima, where poor Spanish families had awaited repatriation (Chapter 2). There, residents were allegedly incorporated into the labor market and offered shelter. Meanwhile, several shantytowns were burned to the ground—actions celebrated by government officials as acts of charity in spite of protests from residents.²⁵⁵

The film optimistically recounted recent government initiatives, which included a census of Isla de Pinos. Then, apparently without prior notification, police torched the neighborhood. Minister Zubizarreta personally supervised the burnings, encouraging reporters to take photographs, and cryptically comparing the flames that engulfed the shacks to “the fires of Rome.” Residents noted that they had “never received the visit of a bill collector or an eviction

²⁵⁵ “Película del problema de la indigencia,” *El Mundo*, January 29, 1932, 3.

notice, which were now presented with extreme urgency.”²⁵⁶ Surprised families were collected late at night and trucked to the new shelter, a move that was enforced by police. Over the course of two days, the entire neighborhood was turned to ash. Reporters noted several injuries, explaining that,

The watchmen that carried out the eviction had to struggle with the ‘inhabitants’ who in no way wanted to abandon that place, saying that ‘they would set the houses on fire if [residents] wouldn’t come out.’ One of the Jamaicans residing there, a young man, well-built, resisted the police, in the end was sent to the ambulances and dispatched to ‘La Purísima.’²⁵⁷

Protests to the move were likely made more intense by the fact that many residents were not Cuban citizens, leaving them vulnerable to deportation. One resident with “English” citizenship, likely West Indian, sued the government later for lost possessions with help from his embassy.²⁵⁸ As press coverage of the clearances highlighted their brutality, however, officials expressed satisfaction, publicizing the measures nationally and even boasting of them to officials from Uruguay.²⁵⁹

The paradoxical blend of state assistance and repression that manifested itself in the burning of Isla de Pinos was the result of conflicting notions of urban citizenship. By occupying land, demonstrating their worth, and seeking political allies, the Isla de Pinos residents joined many poor people in expressing the belief that in spite of their poverty they had the right to live in the city, where they hoped to be protected by their government. In clearing informal settlements, however, the government responded with its own narrower vision. Rather than legitimize insurgent land claims in Havana, officials sought to act against them by establishing

²⁵⁶ “Numerosos indigentes de ‘Isla de Pinos’ trasladados anoche al campamento de La Purísima,” *El Mundo*, December 23, 1931, 14; “Película del problema de la indigencia,” *El Mundo*, January 29, 1932, 3. “Zubizarreta, velando por la higiene, hizo arder anoche el suburbio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 1-2.

²⁵⁷ “Zubizarreta, velando por la higiene, hizo arder anoche el suburbio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 1.

²⁵⁸ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 217.

²⁵⁹ “Interesa conocer el Uruguay las medidas del Gobierno de Cuba en cuanto a la indigencia,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, December 27, 1931, 3.

their own norms for urban life. In this view, clearing poor neighborhoods was not repressive, since it was intimately linked to measures designed to provide social assistance. The urban poor saw land invasions as legitimate claims, whereas the government saw them as transgressions associated with poverty. By destroying Isla de Pinos and seeking “proper” settlement for the poor, the government sought to address the problem of poverty—but it denied that the urban poor had the right to claim land.

In a letter released to the press after the clearance, Minister Zubizarreta clarified these dynamics, stating a basic relationship between order and social assistance that would characterize slum policy in Havana for decades. The police, he wrote, would continue to round up the poor to provide “shelter and food at the ‘General Machado’ Provisional Camp.” At the same time, he used these provisions to prosecute the behaviors of those unwilling to accept assistance. These behaviors, he said, were “ruining the City with lamentable scenes before foreign visitors.”²⁶⁰ Such behavior, the ministry stated, was now “unjustified” because of state assistance, and would lead officials to “destroy the shacks and prevent the needy from living there.”²⁶¹

Enforcing rigid norms of urban citizenship, Zubizarreta therefore implied, required the government to care for the poor. Conversely, by doing so, the government denied legitimacy to the poor’s insurgent claims. Several weeks later, when numerous residents abandoned the Purísima shelter and returned to Isla de Pinos, actions Zubizarreta called “inexplicable,” officials burned the neighborhood again.²⁶² Yet if the charred ground left neighborhood families with

²⁶⁰ “Se les facilitarán uniformes y ropas a los indigentes que se encuentran en ‘La Purísima,’” *El Mundo*, December 24, 1931, 11.

²⁶¹ “Numerosos indigentes de ‘Isla de Pinos’ trasladados anoche al campamento de La Purísima,” *El Mundo*, December 23, 1931, 14.

²⁶² “Parece que a los menesterosos les agrada más la vida nómada de bohemio que la del asilo,” *El País*, December 22, 1931, 14; “De nuevo la tea purificadora destruye las casuchas que se levantaron en ‘Isla de Pinos,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, January 8, 1932, 16.

little recourse, it also symbolized that urban poverty was an issue that would have to be dealt with by the Cuban state.²⁶³

Their neighborhood twice burned, the Isla de Pinos residents did not give up on their demands. In September 1933, the Machado government collapsed, and shantytown residents “did whatever they felt like and no one did anything to stop them.”²⁶⁴ As poor people occupied land across the city, Isla de Pinos residents rebuilt their homes. By late 1933, the neighborhood was larger than before. When military forces battled revolutionaries at the Atarés Castle nearby, residents from that neighborhood refused to seek safety, knowing how easily they could lose their homes.²⁶⁵ By that time, a new neighborhood had emerged in the immediate vicinity, known as Cueva del Humo.

As Machado fled Cuba and mass participation came to play a greater role in Cuban politics, the growth of Las Yaguas and the rebirth of Isla de Pinos reflected the respective benefits and hazards of connections between shantytowns and the state. With a number of circumstances in its favor, Las Yaguas had been officially recognized through regulation and compromise and sustained by political networks—even as government officials made no effort to formalize its land. By contrast, the Isla de Pinos residents had forced their neighborhood into existence, against the work of police and their fires, finding no space for dialogue with officials. Through both force and persuasion, these neighborhoods acted to expand established notions of urban citizenship in similar ways, succeeding in occupying land, but failing to gain formal rights to do so. In both cases, residents expressed belief that their occupation of central areas of the city was legitimate and that the government should protect them. As a new regime was consolidated

²⁶³ “Zubizarreta, velando por la higiene, hizo arder anoche el suburbio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 1-2.

²⁶⁴ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 413.

²⁶⁵ José Hernández Torañó, “Isla de Pinos, barriada indigente ubicada en las laderas de atares, salió incólume del bombardeo,” *El País*, November 19, 1933, 1, 2.

by the end of the decade, politicians made new promises to deal with housing and urban poverty. Whether they would follow through according to precedents established at Las Yaguas, at Isla de Pinos, or some combination thereof, remained to be seen.

3.2 MAKING CLAIMS

As revolutionary upheaval left the government in disarray, the key connections that had sustained Las Yaguas' relationship to national officials disappeared. Publicly linked to the fallen dictator, Las Yaguas' core group of leaders fled in 1933.²⁶⁶ With no formal trace of their rights to occupy the land, it was up to a new group of local leaders to justify the existence of their settlement once again. As they built connections to the new government, neighborhood leaders used the same tactics that had proven effective during the *machadato*, emphasizing their political loyalty and their worth as citizens. Yet now they went further. The flurry of social commitments to the urban poor, first articulated by Zubizarreta, later expanded under Ramón Grau (1933-34), and finally institutionalized under Fulgencio Batista (de facto head of state, 1934-40), gave the neighborhood an effective new vocabulary with which to negotiate its claims. Where neighborhood leaders had once focused on their own worth, they now focused on the ability of the state to fulfill its stated commitments as well.

In protecting their neighborhood, leaders found a new set of allies in Cuba's growing labor movement. Among the first groups seeking to organize in shantytowns was the National Confederation of Cuban Labor (CNOC), a radical labor federation that recruited support from the

²⁶⁶ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 199.

unemployed in “parks, kitchens, encampments.”²⁶⁷ Eyeing the masses of people in Havana, organizers noted, “When the unemployed masses mobilize, they can immediately secure demands from the dominant classes.”²⁶⁸ Yet the same document in 1933 admitted that, despite the power of unemployed workers, the CNOC had had relatively little success incorporating them into the organization.²⁶⁹ These ties grew, however, amid the rapid rise and fall of Grau’s left-wing government. Following Grau’s fall in 1934, a CNOC-affiliated union briefly began a school in the neighborhood and included teachers such as the well-known revolutionary, Pablo de la Torriente Brau.²⁷⁰ With ties to the Communist Party, residents formed the Committee of Unemployed from the Neighborhood of Las Yaguas around the same time, joining with similar committees around the city.²⁷¹

By the end of the 1930s local leaders leveraged organized labor to generate influential ties to national politicians. Batista and Mendieta’s brutal repression of the labor movement disrupted neighborhood links to the CNOC in 1935, but new organizations quickly took their place.²⁷² An independent organization of the unemployed was registered in 1936 to operate in Las Yaguas by commander Estanislao Núñez, an Independence War veteran and neighborhood resident, who had been registered as an “indigent” in the shelter at La Purísima in 1933. Alexis García, a *Santería* priest and longtime neighborhood leader, was also part of this organization, which later expanded to incorporate Isla de Pinos and Cueva del Humo.²⁷³ In 1938 Núñez rather optimistically claimed to represent “all of the residents of those miserable neighborhoods on all

²⁶⁷ Circular, 1933, 1/8:7/2.1/6, Fondo Obrero, IHC.

²⁶⁸ La asamblea de las luchas y organización de los desocupados, n.d. 1/8:7/2.1/10-13, Fondo Obrero, IHC.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ “Bouza y Torriente pretenden despojar a los desocupados del Reparto de Las Yaguas,” *La Palabra*, January 26, 1935, 1, 2.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 1, 2.

²⁷² García Alonso, *Manuela*, 222.

²⁷³ As mentioned above, Alexis García is a pseudonym. Asociación de defensa de los vecinos desocupados e indigentes de la provincia de la Habana, 25 August 1936, Legajo 206, Expediente 4827, Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 3-166

the Island (more than thirty thousand).”²⁷⁴ Núñez's organization merged with the Communist Party after it gained control of the officially recognized Cuban Confederation of Workers (CTC) and allied with then-Colonel Batista in the late 1930s. The party quickly formed an organization within the CTC led by Juan Conde Nápoles, called the Unemployed Section, and whose rallying cry was “BREAD OR WORK!”²⁷⁵ His organization incorporated organizers from the neighborhood, including Rufino González Terry, who would be one of Las Yaguas' mayors until 1959.²⁷⁶ By establishing a network within the CTC, central shantytowns had powerful leverage within the incoming Batista administration.

In establishing these ties, residents employed a number of strategies to bolster their political strength and protect themselves from outside threats. One tactic was to demonstrate their credentials as Cuban citizens, as previous leaders had under Machado when they adopted “the Cuban *barrio*” as their name. While leading his committee of unemployed, for example, Núñez referenced symbols of the nation as he promoted an image of civic worth for the neighborhood. Reaching out to the press, he used his status as an impoverished veteran of Cuba's Independence War to generate positive publicity, leading the popular journal *Bohemia* to publish a feature on elderly veterans in the neighborhood.²⁷⁷ In 1936, residents held a ceremony in Las Yaguas to honor fallen Independence War hero Antonio Maceo, news of which Afro-Cuban columnist Gustavo Urrutia highlighted in the elite daily, *Diario de la Marina*.²⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Núñez publicly denied rumors that Las Yaguas residents were complaining about police

²⁷⁴ I have not found evidence that Núñez communicated with associations outside Greater Havana. Cristobal A. Zamora, “Viejos libertadores habitan el Reparto de Cuba Las Yaguas,” *Bohemia*, November 27, 1938, 32-33, 45, 47.

²⁷⁵ Conde Nápoles was mulatto, and seems to have lived outside the neighborhood. “Valiosa labor organizativa de los desocupados realiza la CTC,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 16, 1940, 3.

²⁷⁶ “Desfilaran el día 1ro de mayo miles de obreros desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 10, 1940, 3; “Constituido el comité de desocupados en el barrio de Las Yaguas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 29, 1940, 3.

²⁷⁷ Cristobal A. Zamora, “Viejos libertadores habitan el Reparto de Cuba Las Yaguas,” *Bohemia*, November 27, 1938, 32-33, 45, 47.

²⁷⁸ Gustavo Urrutia, “Las Yaguas,” *Diario de la Marina*, December 9, 1936, 2.

brutality. Composing an open letter to a police captain, Nuñez assured the public that officers had acted “with all respect and consideration,” and noted that “said rumors have been circulated by people of bad faith.”²⁷⁹ Other neighborhood leaders denounced reports about neighborhood crime in the press in similar terms, calling them efforts “to justify the aggression that they want to do to us.”²⁸⁰ In this case, the “aggression” referred to renewed eviction efforts from de la Torriente and Bouza. Their civic worth, residents implied, justified their resistance.

Following 1933, leaders in Las Yaguas went beyond claims about their own worth. In protecting and improving their neighborhood, they now utilized the language of the radical labor movement to make new kinds of claims. In a recruiting manifesto published in 1935, prior to Batista’s suppression of the general strike, the CNOC-supported Committee of the Unemployed of Las Yaguas denounced “foreign and native exploiters” and exhorted residents to “demand from the government the things that it can give us,” specifying, “we want Electricity, Water and Toilets, School for our children and Materials to rebuild our houses!”²⁸¹ As new organizations formed in 1936, similar claims for food, schools, and infrastructure blended with demands to protect the neighborhood against “the persistent threat” of forcible eviction.²⁸²

Leaders’ success in using the language of the radical labor movement to demonstrate their legitimacy to a wider public was reflected in reports on the neighborhood in the popular press. A 1935 report in *El Sol* lauded a government plan to eradicate the neighborhood. “But before dislodging them from their sordid slums [*tugurios*],” it declared, “the government must equip adequate sites for their lodging, since it cannot...leave them on the street.”²⁸³ A 1936 essay in *Bohemia* framed the issue as “the capitol vs. Las Yaguas: one of the two must yield.”

²⁷⁹ “Desmienten los vecinos de Las Yaguas que hayan sido víctimas de malos tratos por la Policía,” *Alerta*, May 19, 1936.

²⁸⁰ “Bouza y Torriente pretenden despojar a los desocupados del Reparto de Las Yaguas,” *La Palabra*, January 26, 1935, 1, 2.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² “Los habitantes de Las Yaguas y Llega y Pon piden mejoras,” *El Crisol*, May 15, 1936, 6.

²⁸³ “Contra los campamentos de indigentes,” *El Sol*, April 6, 1935, 1.

“Their shacks cannot be burned,” it read. “The Health Ministry must respect their dens. ... They are dignified Cubans. ...They need social laws.”²⁸⁴ Responding to these demands during his 1936 mayoral campaign, incoming mayor Beruff Mendieta promised, “the Revolutionary governments” would soon “construct in place of the huts of the ‘Cueva del Humo,’ ‘Llega y Pon,’ ‘Las Yaguas,’ etc.; comfortable and clean houses.”²⁸⁵ The administration did not construct the homes, but neighborhood leaders utilized the promise to further publicize the government’s obligation to help them.²⁸⁶ In 1931 Minister Zubizarreta had clearly linked the clearance of shantytown neighborhoods to the government’s obligation to provide for their basic welfare. By the late 1930s, the stakes of this obligation had risen.

They would rise still more with the drafting of the 1940 Constitution. Amid debates in the Constitutional Assembly and subsequent presidential elections, shantytown organizations competed for local votes by highlighting official promises of social rights. In the 1940 Havana mayoral campaign, Communist Juan Marinello made a well-attended appearance in Las Yaguas, with enthusiastic support from the CTC.²⁸⁷ Raúl Menocal, the eventual victor, also visited the neighborhood with a slew of local candidates.²⁸⁸ “The demands of the unemployed are not simply that they be given a plate of *harina y picadillo*,” noted the CTC’s Unemployed Section during the campaign, criticizing a rival Unemployed Union of Havana. Those demands included: “social security, fulfilling the Law of Eight Hours, low-cost kitchens, the Law of Paid Rest, a broad plan of public works, sanitizing the poor neighborhoods and opening closed factories.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ Inocencio el Lego, “Capitolio vs Las Yaguas: Uno de los dos tiene que sucumbir,” *Bohemia*, July 12, 1936, 38-39.

²⁸⁵ Beruff Mendieta, *Hacia una Habana mejor*, 12.

²⁸⁶ Cristobal A. Zamora, “Viejos libertadores habitan el Reparto de Cuba Las Yaguas,” *Bohemia*, November 27, 1938, 32-33, 45, 47.

²⁸⁷ “El futuro alcalde de la Habana en el barrio Las Yaguas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, June 21, 1940, 4.

²⁸⁸ “Fiesta coalicionista en el b. ‘Las Yaguas,’” *El Mundo*, May 25, 1940, 2.

²⁸⁹ “Valiosa labor organizativa de los desocupados realiza la CTC,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 16 1940, 3.

Meanwhile the association they criticized pushed for similar demands.²⁹⁰ Reflecting the increasing openness of the political process, neighborhood leaders cultivated ties to multiple politicians. With an abundance of connections, the new Constitution gave them added leverage in demanding social rights.

By 1940, then, the potential benefits of political reform had never seemed so enticing for the urban poor—but there were reminders that state assistance could be double-edged. By the late 1930s, after relatively limited involvement since the time of Zubizarreta, the Health Ministry made visits to several shantytowns. *Noticias de Hoy* reported the news with optimism, noting that the ministry's new initiative to sanitize the neighborhoods “responds to the work that the National Unemployed Section of the CTC has been doing.” At the same time the article warned of “other occasions” where “the remedy has turned out to be worse than the sickness, since ... the resident has had his humble shack burned.”²⁹¹ The warning proved prescient when, weeks later, the paper reported that the Unemployed Section confronted the chief of police about “clashes” with Cueva del Humo residents, citing police officers who “exceed their functions and dare to give 24 hours to some residents to move, threatening to destroy the shack where they live.” The Section claimed to be preparing “a protest meeting in the three neighborhoods.”²⁹² It is likely that the harassment was part of the Health Ministry's preparation for a convention of Rotary Clubs, for which it rounded up more than 400 poor people at La Purísima.²⁹³

Two days later, ostensibly unrelated to the dust-up with police, flames devoured portions of Cueva del Humo. Press reports mentioned no cause, “believing the origin to be coincidental.” No deaths were reported, but the flames generated fear. “100 people...with their meager

²⁹⁰ “Piden activo auxilio oficial los desocupados,” *Accion*, May 10, 1940, 8.

²⁹¹ “Se higienizaran los barrios de los desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 9, 1940, 3.

²⁹² “La CTC protesta de atropellos a los desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 21, 1940, 5.

²⁹³ “Orden de desalojo a mas de 400 residentes de ‘la Purísima,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 17 1940. On the meeting, see “Trata el Club Rotario de los accidentes y de barrios pobres,” *El Avance Criollo*, September 5, 1940.

belongings totally devoured by the fire ... Many saw themselves totally surrounded by flames, and the married couples, men and women, risked their lives ... to rescue their small children.”²⁹⁴ Even with the rapid arrival of firefighters in the hours before dawn, 20 shacks were destroyed. The CTC’s Unemployed Section oversaw a reconstruction effort, enlisting support from several unions and factories.²⁹⁵

If by 1940 shantytowns appeared to have gained a strong foothold in the urban political process, the fire hinted at their potential vulnerability to heavy-handed government intervention. If the fire seemed to repeat Zubizarreta’s 1931 campaign, however, there was a difference: by 1940, no elected official sought credit. Through the labor movement, and with reference to the Constitution, Havana’s central shantytowns had cultivated important political links.

3.3 PROPERTY RIGHTS IN LAS YAGUAS

As shantytown leaders reformulated the political language of the 1930s into compelling demands for neighborhood improvements and protection, discussions of Las Yaguas’ land rights often stayed beneath the surface. The absence was notable, since the neighborhood’s property status had singular importance in shaping its relationship to the state. Neighborhood leaders were slow to make explicit demands related to property, however. The Unemployed Section of the CTC, for example, explicitly pushed for the government to establish more sites like Las Yaguas for the poor, but it envisioned such sites as impermanent.²⁹⁶ Mostly, the group focused on other types of

²⁹⁴ “Voraz incendio se declaró ayer en el barrio indigente de la ‘Cueva del Humo,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 24, 1940, 5.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁹⁶ “Engañaron a los desocupados que asistieron al anfiteatro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 2 1940; “Construye un problema para los obreros la vivienda en la Habana,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 4, 1940, 3.

demands. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade there was real potential for Las Yaguas' property status to change. In late 1937, government officials raised radical possibilities for land claims in Havana with agrarian reform legislation through which the government could reclaim and distribute land to the poor. By 1940, numerous shantytowns in Havana tried to undermine eviction attempts by claiming to occupy state land (Chapter 2). Yet in Las Yaguas, ostensibly Havana's most politically savvy shantytown, these calls remained muted.

Part of the anomaly of Las Yaguas' weak property claims was due to its success. Densely populated and well connected, by the late 1930s the neighborhood was no longer the rough encampment it had been during the Great Depression. Numerous local businesses sold cheap merchandise, the Catholic Church built a school for children, and some residents improved their homes enough to sell them and move elsewhere.²⁹⁷ Eviction was bound to be a messy affair. One of the land's title-holders, José Guillén, a public official, concluded that it was not worth the trouble. Residents reported that he "decided to lose his rights" to the land.²⁹⁸ "He had his aspirations and it was more convenient for him to have us on his side than to have us against him," one explained.²⁹⁹ Still, this was not the same as giving residents a land title.

The other title-holders, de la Torriente and Bouza, were not so amenable, and in pursuing their title claims they shaped slum policy across the island. No longer the sworn opponent of an authoritarian regime, de la Torriente was named Cuba's Secretary of State under President Mendieta, later representing Cuba in the United Nations. Even with his political influence restored, however, he and his partner Bouza remained unable to regain possession of their land,

²⁹⁷ J.R. López Goldaras, "'Las Yaguas' no es un barrio indigente," *Diario de la Marina*, April 18, 1937, iv.

²⁹⁸ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 213.

²⁹⁹ MD EB interview with FA, 4 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 1, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 58-59.

despite several attempts.³⁰⁰ A lawyer with a deep understanding of property legislation, de la Torriente personally spearheaded opposition to the 1937 agrarian reform law.³⁰¹ As Congress passed the legislation, which was also backed in the Constitutional Assembly, he was therefore more aware than most of the potential implications for his property. It was increasingly apparent, moreover, that Fulgencio Batista, the young, mulatto military officer with populist leanings, would run for president. With eviction proceedings moving nowhere, de la Torriente shifted his tactics.

When government officials refused to clear occupants from the lands in 1935, de la Torriente asked the government to sign a rental contract to formalize the state's possession. They stalled. As land legislation moved through Congress, he continued to press the matter. In 1939, de la Torriente pushed President Federico Laredo Brú to sign a decree to acknowledge that “the state is obligated to rule on the juridical situation of such lands,” in order to “avoid conflicts of public order that would imply the total and complete eviction of the indigents who inhabit them.” The decree authorized the Secretariat of Health and Welfare to issue a public rental contract with the owners on behalf of the Cuban state.³⁰² Once signed, it formalized the state's possession of the lands, leaving the Health Ministry to “impede the construction of new shacks or constructions.”³⁰³

After de la Torriente personally requested that the president solve “such an upsetting problem,” Laredo signed the decree in December 1939, but the Health Minister declined to issue

³⁰⁰ “Bouza y Torriente pretenden despojar a los desocupados del Reparto de Las Yaguas,” *La Palabra*, January 26, 1935, 1, 2; J.R. López Goldaras, “‘Las Yaguas’ no es un barrio indigente,” *Diario de la Marina*, April 18, 1937, iv.

³⁰¹ US Embassy officials reported that the National Association for the Restoration of Cuban Credit submitted its objections to the land law through de la Torriente. Harold Tewell, “The New Cuban Land Law,” 6 January 1938, RG84/852/59, USNA, 27g. De la Torriente had also personally drafted legislation on rural land disputes during his days as a senator. See de la Torriente, *Arriendo u ocupación forzosa*.

³⁰² Decreto no. 3173, 27 December 1939, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

the contract.³⁰⁴ With Batista's presidency drawing near, de la Torriente grew more insistent, writing to Laredo as a “dear president and friend ... to beg you with insistence that you leave this matter resolved before you abandon the presidency.”³⁰⁵ In consultation with de la Torriente, Laredo’s legal consultant recommended an additional presidential decree in August 1940, explaining to the president that none of the new measures “imply abuse to the current occupants nor injury to the rights of the property owners.”³⁰⁶ Laredo signed the decree in September, one month before Batista took office.

In addition to recognizing the state as a tenant, the new decree directed the Ministry of Health to “undertake a census ... of the Finca El Blanquizal [Las Yaguas] to determine which are the occupants of shacks who, not having such a character, are able to rent a place to move into.” Tenants who could pay would be moved immediately, while “the construction of new shacks remains strictly prohibited ... on the lands rented by the state.” Identification cards would be provided for remaining residents while the government prepared a new shelter for them outside the capital. Although the decree was specific to Las Yaguas, its implementation was treated as policy for other shantytowns as well. As a final measure it noted that whichever shacks were left abandoned, “will be destroyed by means of fire.”³⁰⁷

By formally acknowledged the state’s role in maintaining residents of Las Yaguas on the land, the decree had serious political implications. Where residents at La Hata demanded state intervention in a dispute between private parties, at Las Yaguas de la Torriente acknowledged openly what officials would not: settlement was a product of state intervention. By implication,

³⁰⁴ Cosme de la Torriente to Federico Laredo Brú, 27 November 1939, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC; Mario Lamar, Memorandum al Presidente de la Republica, 23 September 1940, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

³⁰⁵ Cosme de la Torriente to Federico Laredo Brú, 9 August 1940, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

³⁰⁶ Mario Lamar, Informe al Presidente de la Republica, 14 August 1940, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

³⁰⁷ “Desaparecerá la barriada de indigentes,” *Arquitectura*, October, 1940.

whatever the state intended, occupancy rights were defined as a social benefit. By acknowledging that “complete eviction” would generate disorder, however, the decree conceded that these occupancy rights temporarily served the public interest. Nevertheless, in stopping short of making such rights permanent, the legislation codified Zubizarreta’s narrow thesis about urban poverty and the state: by ensuring the basic welfare of citizens who could not provide for themselves, the state was justified in withdrawing its charitable endorsement of transgressive land claims.

Taken together, these clarifications shifted the terms of debate for shantytowns in Havana. Prior to the decree it was possible that Las Yaguas might use its political leverage to dispute the property claims of the title-holders and demand rights to the land. In its aftermath, however, title-holders forfeited their own claims to evict by handing responsibility for relocation to the state. Rather than a property dispute, then, debates over when that relocation could take place would now focus on the extent of the state’s obligation to assist residents—on which residents could afford to find their own housing, for example, and which could not; or on what decent housing meant in an overcrowded city. It was not immediately obvious that a battle over property rights would have benefited residents more or less than one over social welfare. With the decree signed, however, the die was cast. In 1940 de la Torriente still had not regained possession of the land at Luyanó, but he had effectively foreclosed the possibility of expropriation and titling for residents. Las Yaguas, it was clear, would not follow the path of La Hata. In practice, the legislation meant that the neighborhood would now receive official protection in eviction suits. However, it also tightened its relationship with what was potentially a more formidable adversary: the state itself.

3.4 A LANGUAGE OF CONTENTION

As news of the decree reached the press, neighborhood leaders in the CTC saw the move as a ploy by the property owners. *Noticias de Hoy* ran the headline: “They want to destroy the Las Yaguas neighborhood by fire.” The article claimed that de la Torriente had been “visiting the chief of state frequently and it appears that his visits are related to the drastic presidential resolution.”³⁰⁸ Several days later, the paper ran an editorial criticizing the neighborhood's “would-be property owners.”³⁰⁹ Another columnist alleged Bouza's support for the Spanish Falange Party, and pointed out that the decree's objective was “not of ending indigence, but of removing the indigents as discreetly as possible from the lands they currently occupy to turn them over to their ‘property owners.’”³¹⁰ Other papers supported the decree. “Little by little, those conglomerations of houses” have become “towns,” stated one editorial. “One has to think...of setting out rules.”³¹¹

In framing their opposition, however, local leaders did not reject the plan outright but instead addressed the decree on its own terms, disputing that residents could find adequate housing elsewhere in the city. That month, CTC committees from various shantytowns met to set terms for their removal, highlighting “the problem that eviction would create for families.” Rather than express opposition to the eviction on principle, they demanded that health officials provide “an adequate place where they might go and reside,” a claim they resolved to circulate so that “public opinion” would “support this demand.”³¹² Whether they had real expectations that the government would provide such a space is unclear. With their stated ally coming into office,

³⁰⁸ “Quieren destruir por el fuego el barrio Las Yaguas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 29, 1940, 1.

³⁰⁹ Esmeril, “El problema de la desocupación,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 1, 1940, 2.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

³¹¹ “Barrarán los barrios de indigentes,” *El Avance Criollo*, September 30, 1940, 1.

³¹² “Acuerdan pedir mejoras al gobierno para los barrios de obreros desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 6, 1940, 3.

reports noted that residents were “convinced” that the relocation measures “will remain in disuse.”³¹³ Batista was less than a week from the presidency.

As the Health Ministry prepared to implement the decree, it contradicted the claims of neighborhood activists directly by publishing the names and occupations of numerous residents. Rather than deserving poor, the ministry stated that the residents of Havana’s central shantytowns were “public employees, businessmen, and industrialists, with economic resources, who live with an excessive eagerness for profit, at the margin of sanitation and tax laws.” The minister announced a period of 72 hours in which residents of Las Yaguas and Cueva del Humo who had the means to live elsewhere would have to move.³¹⁴ “The majority of the supposed indigents are people who have jobs,” reported *El Mundo*.³¹⁵

Yet the move provoked confusion. Along with the immediate removal of allegedly well-off residents, the ministry indicated that “true indigents” were also to be moved—some to Tiscornia in Casablanca, others to Finca Torrens, and others to the La Purísima shelter. While a timeline was not established for these moves, press reports implied there would be little delay. While some reports implied that only public employees would be evicted, other reports stated that the ministry would “evict all the houses and destroy them.”³¹⁶ *Alerta* reported that, according to the Health Minister, “the true indigents, who are very few, will be moved to the old market at La Purísima.” “We will not act violently,” the minister declared, “but we will have a heavy hand towards those who try to cause harm to the rest of society.”³¹⁷ Meanwhile reports

³¹³ “Barrerán los barrios de indigentes,” *El Avance Criollo*, September 30, 1940, 1.

³¹⁴ “Dentro de 72 horas tienen que desalojar la Cueva del Humo. También el barrio ‘Las Yaguas,’” *El Avance Criollo*, November 20, 1940, 1, 16.

³¹⁵ “Viven empleados como indigentes,” *El Mundo*, November, 21 1940, 10.

³¹⁶ “Dentro de 72 horas tienen que desalojar la Cueva del Humo. También el barrio ‘Las Yaguas,’” *El Avance Criollo*, November 20, 1940, 1, 16.

³¹⁷ “En pro de la higiene pública podrá Salubridad ordenar la clausura de inmuebles,” *Alerta*, November 22, 1940, 7.

trickled out that the government would split up neighborhood families, sending “the children to Tiscornia and the parents to ... ‘La Purísima.’”³¹⁸

The measures were widely publicized throughout the capital and it was quickly apparent that shantytown activists won the debate. The *Auténtico* journal *Luz* called the move “cold,” while *Noticias de Hoy* called it “radical.”³¹⁹ A columnist in the paper speculated, “Maybe one day we will also find out that ...in the large residences of Vedado ... live numerous indigents who are fantasizing to be wealthy people.”³²⁰ With dry sarcasm, another columnist in *El Avance Criollo* celebrated the “news of great transcendence: that in Havana indigents do not exist. ... The next Christmas should be happier than any.”³²¹

With the clearance publicly questioned, President Batista intervened, ordering more time for the move.³²² An additional 72 hours was set, while the Health Minister clarified that only those who were state or union employees would be moved.³²³ As the proposed evictions caused protest, not only from residents but the wider public as well, the Health Ministry backtracked further. On November 26, several papers reported that the minister had ordered a medical census of the neighborhood to treat sick residents, and that, in a gesture of charity, he had prepared 350 scholarships for neighborhood children.³²⁴

With the clearance stalled, publicity intensified around the claim that the state could not meet its obligation to house residents adequately. The Unemployed Section stated, “It is not logical to suppose that the government finds itself in conditions to lodge eight thousand families

³¹⁸ “Solicitan inspección en barrios de indigentes,” *El Mundo*, November 26, 1940, 10.

³¹⁹ “Dispuesta la clausura de la Cueva del Humo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 21, 1940, 10; Alberto Salas Amaro, “Ultimatum a ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Luz*, November 22, 1940, 3.

³²⁰ Esmeril, “Indigente puro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 22, 1940, 2.

³²¹ Rafael Esténger, “Los magnates de la Cueva del Humo” *El Avance Criollo*, November 21, 1940, 2.

³²² “Impide Batista el desalojo de desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 24, 1940.

³²³ “Aplaza y aclara la medida sobre indigentes el Dr. Despaigne,” *El Avance Criollo*, November 23, 1940, 3.

³²⁴ “350 becas para los niños de los barrios indigentes,” *Alerta*, November 26 1940, 10; “Se becara a los niños indigentes,” *El Mundo*, November 26, 1940, 10.

[sic] anywhere.”³²⁵ The Catholic University Students Group admonished the Health Ministry “not to designate the titles of businessmen and industrialists to those who hardly have enough for subsistence.”³²⁶ Calling Finca Torrens a “concentration camp,” a columnist from *Luz* made the electoral stakes clear: “Why are these things like this? ...because the President of the Republic is not named [opposition leader] RAMÓN GRAU SAN MARTIN, the president of the Cubans.”³²⁷ No further decisions by Batista or the Health Minister regarding the clearance reached the press. Unprepared for the sophisticated political strategy from the neighborhoods, the ministry postponed further action.³²⁸

The Health Ministry failed to clear shantytowns from Havana in 1940, but in the process they successfully reiterated a claim made by Zubizarreta during the *machadato*: in cases where the state met its obligations to care for residents, it was justified in prohibiting their illegal occupation of land. Throughout the 1930s, however, neighborhood activists had developed a political language with which to contest such claims. By insisting that, whatever their employment status, the state had not made adequate provisions for housing, they negated the Health Ministry’s justifications for removal on its own terms. For shantytown activists, housing was a right.

³²⁵ “En defensa de los desocupados,” *El Crisol*, November 29, 1940, 2.

³²⁶ “Solicitan inspección en barrios de indigentes,” *El Mundo*, November 26, 1940, 10.

³²⁷ Arturo Fernández de Castro, “La indigencia y el gobierno,” *Luz*, December 6, 1940, 2.

³²⁸ In late December, the Lions Club met to discuss the neighborhoods, indicating that action was still under debate. “Tratan problema de mendicidad,” *El Mundo*, December 20, 1940, 3.

3.5 URBAN INFORMALITY ON BEHALF OF THE STATE

The responsibility of the state to address Las Yaguas was reinforced in September 1944, late in Batista's presidency, when Bouza and de la Torriente again sought to reclaim the land. Rather than sue the residents, however, they sued the Cuban state for breach of contract, and they faced the disapproval of a nation. Press coverage of the trial revealed deep public support for neighborhood activists as they fought against eviction on the basis of property rights—a far cry from the ambivalence surrounding the initiatives from the Health Ministry. Yet since the state represented the neighborhood already, popular support did not translate into demands to expropriate the land and distribute it. Instead it highlighted the state's responsibility to provide for shantytown residents in other ways.

As the trial began, neighborhood activists and supporters made a powerful case in the press. In a series of articles that was supported by neighborhood leaders, a reporter from *El País* interviewed a mother who reflected on the possibility of eviction. “It would be so painful for us... Here my four children were raised; here they go to school, receive medical assistance; ... We love ‘Las Yaguas’ like we love Cuba.” Days later, the mayor, Rufino González, gave interviews in several papers, preparing for battle.

For thirteen years an enemy has threatened our borders, which is to say our wire fence marking the land claimed by the government. We respect the law and never use force against force, but within legal means we hope the government will protect us before the enemy, before the judicial claims. The landholders may have their reasons. We have ours.³²⁹

³²⁹ Roberto Pérez de Acevedo, “Donde la indigencia es ejemplo de superación” *El País*, September 18, 1944.

Reports noted an enthusiastic press and radio campaign for the neighborhood.³³⁰ *El Mundo* cited “enormous interest,” in the case, calling it “the most important eviction in recent times.” At a hearing in mid December the paper estimated that 60 people from Las Yaguas packed the courthouse to observe verbal arguments.³³¹



Figure 3: A journalist speaks with neighborhood leaders Rufino González and Manuela Azcanio during the 1944 trial between Las Yaguas’ property owners and the state. Below, neighborhood children.³³²

³³⁰ “Fracaso el desahucio de Las Yaguas,” *Luz*, November 28, 1944.

³³¹ “Opuesto el fiscal al desalojo del barrio de indigentes de Las Yaguas,” *El Mundo*, September 20, 1944.

³³² Roberto Pérez de Acevedo, “El enemigo, a pasos judiciales, amenaza ya nuestras fronteras, pero esperamos que el gobierno nos proteja; a ello tenemos derecho,” *El País*, September 18, 1944, 7.

In suing the state, de la Torriente and Bouza faced long odds. Meeting in the municipal courthouse, their lawyers argued that the state had violated its agreement to gradually remove residents.³³³ State attorney Carlos R. Duval led the defense.³³⁴ Despite the fact that the government had clearly not achieved what Brú's decree had intended, he countered the claims on multiple points, reportedly giving a "brilliant exposition."³³⁵ Pointing out that the 1939 contract was celebrated at a time when squatters already occupied the land, Duval argued that the land had never been delivered to the state, since de la Torriente and Bouza did not have possession to deliver it. "The Judge will have to consider said contract as simply celebrated, but not consummated, accepted within its writing that the lands are occupied by indigents." Secondly, Duval argued that a demand for the eviction of a third party, in this case the squatters, could not be carried forth in a suit against another party, the state. Reporters also pointed out the impossibility of "tossing 4,000 citizens from their homes into the most complete misery"³³⁶

Residents waited anxiously in late September to hear the verdict. Making no statement about the status of the property itself, the judge agreed with Duval's argument, citing the "physical" impossibility of the "expiration of an inexistent contract." "It is inferred...from the text," he stated, "that prior to the month of December 1939, said indigents occupied the land."³³⁷ For good measure, the judge charged de la Torriente and Bouza for the trial costs.³³⁸ When the eviction order was found to be unjustified, "jubilation" was unleashed in the neighborhood, where "the 'streets' and 'avenues' filled with hundreds of residents giving *vivas* to the judge and

³³³ "Admitida la demanda para el desalojo de las familias pobres de 'Las Yaguas,' y señalado el importante juicio para el 19," *El País*, September 12, 1944.

³³⁴ "Opuesto el fiscal al desalojo del barrio de indigentes de Las Yaguas," *El Mundo*, September 20 1944.

³³⁵ "Declaran sin lugar el juicio de desahucio seguido contra el barrio de los indigentes 'Las Yaguas,'" *Alerta*, September 28, 1944, 2.

³³⁶ Roberto P. de Acevedo, "Impugno el fiscal, Dr. Duval, la demanda para el desalojo de los 4,000 vecinos residentes actualmente en 'Las Yaguas,'" *El País*, September 19, 1944, 1.

³³⁷ "Declarado Sin Lugar el Desahucio del Barrio de Indigentes de Las Yaguas," *El Mundo*, September 28, 1944, 1.

³³⁸ Bouza and de la Torriente appealed the ruling, but apparently to no effect. "El desahucio del Barrio Las Yaguas," *El Mundo*, November 17, 1944, 3; "El desahucio de Las Yaguas," *El Mundo*, November 24, 1944, 3.

to the prosecutor Duval.” In the neighborhood's church, a mass was celebrated before the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre, while reporters noted that the neighborhood's permanence was now “guaranteed.”³³⁹ “With this ruling, justice has triumphed,” stated Las Yaguas mayor González to the press. “Las Yaguas must not disappear.”³⁴⁰

By the mid 1940s, behind a wave of public support and an active campaign within the neighborhood, Las Yaguas' land was clearly the responsibility of the Cuban state.³⁴¹ Unremarked in the press or in the neighborhood, however, was the fact that the ruling merely halted an eviction but did nothing to alter the neighborhood's property status. During the course of the trial, some neighborhood activists implied that the lands might belong to the state, indicating a potential path for residents to acquire formal title.³⁴² Yet in a trial where the defendant was the state itself, the utility of these arguments was limited. In declaring war with the title-holders, Las Yaguas' mayor Gonzales stated that the lands were already “claimed by the government.”³⁴³ While certainly the case, these claims did not translate into permanent occupancy rights for residents. Instead, the peculiar status of the neighborhood's property, combined with its close relationship to the state, continued to invite government intervention.

Indeed, rather than halting momentum for state intervention, publicity surrounding the trial encouraged it—beginning from within the neighborhood itself. Celebrating their court victory, González voiced his hopes that the incoming presidential administration “would resolve at once the social problem that we confront.”³⁴⁴ Similarly, a prominent scholar said he had been moved to tears by reports of Las Yaguas' property trial and made his terms clear: “To redeem

³³⁹ “Un fallo judicial echa abajo la pretensión de desalojar el barrio conocido por Las Yaguas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 28, 1944, 1.

³⁴⁰ “Declarada sin lugar la demanda contra los pobres de Las Yaguas,” *El País*, September 27, 1944, 1.

³⁴¹ “Son del estado los terrenos de Atarés,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 20, 1945, 1,8.

³⁴² “En Las Yaguas hacen rogativas 4,000 vecinos,” *El País*, September 25, 1944, 1, 6.

³⁴³ Roberto Pérez de Acevedo, “Donde la indigencia es ejemplo de superación,” *El País*, September 18, 1944, 1, 7.

³⁴⁴ “Declarada sin lugar la demanda contra los pobres de Las Yaguas,” *El País*, September 27, 1944, 1.

Las Yaguas is to fulfill a duty in the tradition of José Martí.”³⁴⁵ What such redemption would entail, however, was subject to a variety of interpretations. By leaving open the possibility of relocation on the condition of high concessions from the government, neighborhood leaders staved off clearance efforts from title-holders. Moving forward with such rhetoric, however, they walked a fine line.

3.6 A CURE WORSE THAN SICKNESS

By the time Grau was inaugurated as president in October 1944, victory was fresh for Las Yaguas, but the position of central shantytowns vis a vis the new government had grown complicated in ways not reflected in the trial. For reasons that are not clear, the CTC’s Unemployed Section was dissolved by the end of Batista’s term.³⁴⁶ Even at the height of the section’s influence during the 1940 elections, a columnist in *Noticias de Hoy* noted that most local unions had little interest in reaching out to shantytowns.³⁴⁷ Some organizers in Las Yaguas spoke of racism among members of the Communist Party.³⁴⁸ With shantytown networks weakened, residents were vulnerable.

Circumstances conspired to make them more vulnerable still. On October 18, 1944, several days after Grau’s inauguration and less than a month after Las Yaguas’ victory in court, a hurricane struck Havana, causing widespread damage. Thousands of poor people were left homeless. Las Yaguas, Cueva del Humo, Isla de Pinos, and other poor neighborhoods were

³⁴⁵ Quesada Miranda, “Dijo Martí que él quería echar su suerte con los pobres y los humildes; redimir a “Las Yaguas” es cumplir un deber martiano,” *El País*, September 19, 1944, 2.

³⁴⁶ Juan Conde Nápoles, once leader of the Unemployed Section, had returned to work at a local union by 1944. “Interesan medidas del gobierno contra el agio y prorroga de la ley de alquileres,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 4, 1944, 1, 8.

³⁴⁷ Luis Padrón, “Organización de los desocupados,” *Noticias de Hoy*, August 17, 1940, 3.

³⁴⁸ Calderón, *Amparo*, 196.

devastated. *Diario de la Marina* reported that many shantytown residents were lodged in shelters around the city, and that “Las Yaguas was in ruins.”³⁴⁹ Many residents flocked to the neighborhood’s cement chapel after staying “firm until the last moment in their modest houses.”³⁵⁰ A large picture of Cueva del Humo was printed the next day, showing residents swimming down a flooded neighborhood street.³⁵¹

The storm prompted a full-scale response from all levels of government at a time when Grau had barely taken office. Shantytown residents were wary. A military officer stationed at the Atarés Castle later recalled that the night of the storm, Grau himself appeared at the castle to check on preparations.

Dr. Grau ... told me he had word from ... a nearby neighborhood of indigents named ‘Las Yaguas’ [probably Isla de Pinos] ... He ordered...that we evacuate the inhabitants ... and that we give them refuge in the Castle. But, to our surprise, almost no indigent would take advantage of the opportunity ... And almost at the point of bayonets, we brought them up the slope to the fort.³⁵²

Health officials quickly dictated “a resolution ordering the OBLIGATORY ANTI-TYPHUS VACCINE in all those areas affected by the hurricane,” specifically targeting shantytowns.³⁵³ Residents were defensive when approached, and reportedly “rejected the doctors and shouted for them to bring food, since they were hungry.”³⁵⁴

Suspicion was justified. The Health Ministry quickly decided to relocate all residents, despite the fact that after the property trial it now had no legal pressure to do so. The Ministry of National Defense immediately prepared camps at a military base in Managua and at Cangrejas

³⁴⁹ “Información general en torno el ciclón,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 19, 1944, 2.

³⁵⁰ “El barrio de indigentes ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Diario de la Marina*, October 20, 1944, 13.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Fernández Miranda, *Mis relaciones con el General*.

³⁵³ “Últimas noticias del ciclón y medidas que se adoptan para combatir sus desastrosos efectos,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 20, 1944, 12.

³⁵⁴ “Normaliza Salubridad los servicios de vacunación masiva a causa del ciclón,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 21, 1944, 7; “Protesta de los indigentes,” *Información*, October 21, 1944, 16.

in Bauta, both outside Havana, to “provisionally” house shantytown families.³⁵⁵ Then, on October 21, three days after the hurricane, the Health Ministry “dictated ... a resolution declaring THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF INDIGENTS UNHEALTHY AREAS, through which proceeded their immediate ENCLOSUREMENT.”³⁵⁶ The decree called “the unhealthy state” of the neighborhoods a “danger...for the entire city of Havana.”³⁵⁷ The new president backed the initiative for different reasons, stating, “The government intends to end what are called neighborhoods of indigents ... eliminating first some criminal elements who take refuge within them.”³⁵⁸

Officials framed the move as one that was required by health concerns, but like previous relocation attempts, one that was justified by the government’s efforts to provide assistance to residents. Health officials declared that “residents would not be abandoned by the government,” and at least some residents were convinced.³⁵⁹ By October 22, four hundred people voluntarily joined other hurricane victims in the Managua camp, where smiling children were pictured on the front page of *El Mundo*, eating at a cafeteria. “They do not want to leave Las Yaguas; Satisfied to be in Managua,” the headline read, contrasting the destruction and stubborn resistance in the neighborhoods to the ample provisions of the camp.³⁶⁰ Visiting Managua, Grau was pictured with the children.³⁶¹ “Now we can eat a hot meal and we trust that the government will fulfill the promise it has made to give adequate housing and work to our families,” a resident was quoted.³⁶²

³⁵⁵ “Habilitado el campamento de Managua para albergar a las víctimas del ciclón,” *Diario de la Marina*, 21 October, 1944, 4,7.

³⁵⁶ “Clausura Sanidad los tres barrios de indigentes,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 22, 1944, 3.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ “Dice Orlando Rodríguez que el Gobierno terminará con los barrios de indigentes,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 22, 1944, 1.

³⁵⁹ “Clausura Sanidad los tres barrios de indigentes,” *Diario de la Marina*, October 22, 1944, 3.

³⁶⁰ Angel Gutierrez, “No quieren salir de Las Yaguas; Satisfechos de estar en Managua,” *El Mundo*, Oct 22, 1944, 1.

³⁶¹ “Continua en Pie el problema del b. de Las Yaguas. Se niegan a desalojar el lugar,” *El Crisol*, October 23, 1944, 2.

³⁶² Angel Gutierrez, “1,200 personas se alojarán en el campamento,” *El Mundo*, October 22, 1944.

Other residents fiercely opposed the moves, however, employing established public relations strategies and physically refusing to comply with orders. Rejecting the government's health concerns, Las Yaguas mayor Rufino González declared that “during ... eleven years...there has never existed an infectious sickness” in the neighborhood.³⁶³ Calling on the government to better provide for their relocation, Grau's supporters within Las Yaguas wrote to the president, questioning the “need to abruptly remove hundreds” and instead asking the government to “cede some of its lands...to construct a Neighborhood of Indigents of Havana.” Meanwhile, in Isla de Pinos, Cueva del Humo, and Las Yaguas, *El Mundo* reported “an almost generalized situation of protest, which sometimes comes close to the limits of violence.” While some were willing to move, the report continued, there were “others, significantly superior in number to the first ones, who resolutely oppose.”³⁶⁴ According to resident Manuela Azcanio, only 30 families from Las Yaguas went to Managua. “It was very far,” she explained.³⁶⁵

As the government strengthened its efforts to remove residents throughout the week, negotiations deteriorated. Officials convened neighborhood mayors to try and convince them of the move, with little result.³⁶⁶ Visiting with the president of the University Students Federation (FEU), Manolo Castro, Senator Eduardo Chibás circulated throughout the neighborhoods. The press reported that “Chibás began to speak and the residents interrupted him without letting him finish, after which he left.” Later, he “visited house by house, leaving milk for each child, taking the opportunity to tell the mothers the advantages of going to live in a clean place.”³⁶⁷ Manuela recalled,

³⁶³ “Continua en pie el problema del b de Las Yaguas. Se niegan a desalojar el lugar,” *El Crisol*, October 23, 1944.

³⁶⁴ Alfredo Nuñez Pascual, “Grave problema en los barrios de indigentes,” *El Mundo*, October 22, 1944, 1, 12.

³⁶⁵ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 327.

³⁶⁶ “Palacio: El problema de los indigentes,” *Prensa Libre*, October 24, 1944, 8.

³⁶⁷ “Continua en pie el problema del b. de Las Yaguas. Se niegan a desalojar el lugar,” *El Crisol*, October 23, 1944, 2.

Chibás went to the neighborhood on various occasions trying to take them by force to Managua, but he was looking for the house of hate. One day he was this close to staying in Las Yaguas. The fashionable greeting at that time between us was ‘To Managua!’ ‘To fuck your mother!’ was the response.³⁶⁸

Dramatizing their opposition, on October 24th, groups in Las Yaguas burned quarantine posts put up by the Health Ministry. According to one report, residents of Cueva del Humo attempted to burn the Health Minister's car as well. Sergio Carbó's *Prensa Libre* reported that residents were “rebellious against sanitary authorities, brandishing rocks and parts of trees ... altering the ... humane intentions of the government to intern them.”³⁶⁹ transform

Even as they publicly created disorder, however, neighborhood activists were conscious of their image before a wider public. Manuela reported that only neighborhood women were involved in burning the quarantine posts, likely a strategy to avoid public fears of criminality associated with masculinity.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, demonstrators were pictured in the press standing beneath a Cuban flag with pictures of Grau and José Martí. As they linked themselves to symbols of the nation, Alexis García recounted conscious efforts to generate positive publicity.

Many people arrived, asking if it was us who had become aggressive with the police or attacked someone. ...Immediately there appeared a lieutenant...‘Well, what happened here? What happened here?’ ...He tried to close the businesses, cut off the water to see if it would produce a riot, but...our attitude was calm, so that the journalists would come.³⁷¹

Protesters recognized that violence might hurt their cause. Meanwhile, as García hoped, the conflict generated the widest press coverage ever for the shantytowns.

³⁶⁸ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 330.

³⁶⁹ “Trataron de quemar el auto del Jefe de Salubridad los indigentes de ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Prensa Libre*, October 24, 1944, 1, 8.

³⁷⁰ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 332.

³⁷¹ RL, OL Interview of FA, 26 November 1969, Box 142, Folder 19, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 1.



Figure 4: Las Yaguas residents pose beneath a Cuban flag as they protest against relocation orders in 1944.³⁷²

Amid strong public backing both for and against the relocations, all agreed that the moves required the government to adequately provide for residents. Seeking to rally public opinion, Chibás stated, “The inhabitants of the neighborhoods of indigents are slaves of misery whom we must liberate, in spite of themselves. ...The Revolutionary government cannot tolerate Cubans living like animals.”³⁷³ In a blustering editorial entitled, “Burn down the shantytowns, Dr. Grau,” Sergio Carbó called on the new president to burn “those African hovels” which dishonored “the program of the New Cuba.” Yet even this argument rested on government assistance to residents. Denouncing the “insolence of those who with great irresponsibility, have

³⁷² “Continúa en pie el problema del b. de Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol*, October 23, 1944, 2.

³⁷³ “Eddy Chibás dice” *Prensa Libre*, October 4, 1944, 1, 4.

insulted and attacked the authorities from the sordid shantytowns,” he noted that resistance came “simply because the government wants to redeem them.”³⁷⁴ An *Auténtico* publication defended the relocation as a positive social intervention, stating, “The government ... did not seek to expel some unfortunates from those lands at the request of their influential property owners...but rather from a labor of social cleansing.”³⁷⁵ On all sides, then, official efforts to help neighborhood residents were integrally linked to relocation—but residents refused to move.

As the situation settled into a stalemate, new scrutiny around the government’s plans for assistance tipped the balance away from the Health Ministry. Amid repeated promises for redemption, the details of the government’s long-term plans had been limited to photos of the temporary Managua camp. In the storm’s aftermath, Manolo Castro of the FEU worked with Chibás to convince residents to move to the camps. In the meantime, he discussed plans for the neighborhoods with Havana’s College of Architects.³⁷⁶ In one meeting, Castro proposed a fifteen-day delay for the move and a \$1,000,000 peso credit for housing construction, which residents would undertake themselves.³⁷⁷ By October 31st, however, after extended meetings with neighborhood leaders, Castro grew skeptical of the government’s good faith and opposed any further moves. He soon agreed to coordinate neighborhood commissions in Las Yaguas and the Atarés neighborhoods, with membership that included numerous veterans from the Unemployed Section led by Conde Nápoles in the CTC. Neighborhood leaders stated to the press “that they will go wherever Manuel de Castro sends them.”³⁷⁸ “If he suggests that they...be

³⁷⁴ Sergio Carbó “Candela con los adueros de indigentes, Dr. Grau,” *Prensa Libre*, October 25, 1944, 1, 8.

³⁷⁵ “La fuerza moral,” *Luz*, October 27, 1944, 1, 8.

³⁷⁶ “Tregua de 15 días pide la FEU para llegar a una solución en el conflicto de “Las Yaguas,” *Prensa Libre*, October 26, 1944, 1, 4.

³⁷⁷ “Serán llevados a Topes de Collantes los niños desnutridos de las escuelas,” *El Mundo*, October 27, 1944, 1, 10; “El traslado de los indigentes,” *El Crisol*, October 27, 1944, 12.

³⁷⁸ “Solo obedecen a la FEU los indigentes,” *El Mundo*, October 31, 1944, 9.

moved to other places, they would do it immediately.”³⁷⁹ Now unconvinced that the government would fulfill its commitments, Castro suggested they stay. As his leadership lent credibility and publicity to shantytown leaders who claimed the moves would not meet their needs, the government abruptly stopped releasing statements to the press.

By November, it was clear that the government had again failed to relocate central shantytowns from Havana. In the process, however, officials again reinforced the connection between relocation and government assistance. In a radio broadcast on November 11, Grau noted that a “total solution” had not been found for shantytowns, but nevertheless claimed the Managua operation a success.

The government sought to move those indigents to Managua and to other places, facilitating the means of living to which they have the right. True, this was done against the will of many. ... It was not possible for the government to tolerate things in such a state in the suburbs of the very Capital of the Republic.³⁸⁰

Imposing the power of the state against the wishes of residents, Grau indicated, was acceptable—but only in order to improve their situation.

Throughout the end of Grau's term and into the term of his chosen successor, Carlos Prio, the Health Ministry continued to push for the elimination of shantytowns. Yet following the 1944 hurricane, these efforts generated cynicism. By linking their efforts to relocate shantytowns so closely to their own capacity to deliver basic social services, the continued presence of such neighborhoods highlighted state failure in a variety of ways. Critics of Grau claimed his inability to clear the neighborhoods was an effort to “placate the indigents ... the purest demagoguery.”³⁸¹ Local industrialists complained to the government that the neighborhoods were bad for

³⁷⁹ On indigentes following Castro: “Notable aumento de la recaudación con destino a los damnificados del Huracán” *El Crisol*, October 31, 1944, 1; on Castro's organizations in neighborhoods: “Impedirá la FEU choques entre indigentes y policía. Se crean comités en los barrios pobres.” *Prensa Libre*, October 31, 1944, 8.

³⁸⁰ Ramón Grau San Martín, “Al primer mes de gobierno,” in San Martín, *La revolución constructiva*, 9.

³⁸¹ “La actualidad: Desalojo de los barrios de indigentes,” *Carteles*, September 18, 1949, 61.

business.³⁸² Others pointed to the absence of public housing construction as “precisely what caused those urban blights that we are so ashamed of.”³⁸³ Still others blamed the absence of adequate social security laws.³⁸⁴ All agreed that Las Yaguas, for its very existence, required the government to act. Meanwhile, however, determined activism from within the neighborhood made the cost of action steep. “Neither the hurricane, nor the fire, nor the government can do anything against us,” boasted Las Yaguas mayor Rufino González in 1947.³⁸⁵

By the end of the 1940s, then, the government arrived at a delicate stalemate with Havana’s central shantytowns—one that served as a nagging reminder of the state’s inability to act. Then, in February 1950, fire struck Cueva del Humo, leveling about one third of the neighborhood. In late March, an entire informal neighborhood was destroyed by fire at Playa Cajío.³⁸⁶ And on April 2, a fire in Las Yaguas surpassed any previous destruction. *Noticias de Hoy* reported on groups of residents, “some wandering, others throwing themselves to the ground, crying and lamenting what appeared to be a nightmare.”³⁸⁷ Nearly two decades after avoiding Zubizarreta’s fires, Las Yaguas was destroyed. As it was rebuilt, officials began to consider new directions for the neighborhoods.

3.7 CONCLUSION

The fire of April 1950 registered as national shame. Ironically, however, the fire emerged alongside a widespread consensus that the elimination of Las Yaguas was necessary. Even

³⁸² “Realizan un censo de habitantes en los barrios de indigentes,” *Información*, March 7, 1947, 3.

³⁸³ Roger de Lauria, “Lanza en ristre,” *Alerta*, March 12, 1947, 3.

³⁸⁴ Humberto Hernandez, “Desocupación: Trágica perspectiva en el horizonte nacional,” *Magazine de Hoy*, August 19, 1945, 3.

³⁸⁵ Fernando Alloza, “Seis mil personas viven hacinadas en las chozas de Las Yaguas,” *Información*, March 2, 1947, 49.

³⁸⁶ “Ayuda inmediata par alas víctimas de Cajío,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 4, 1950, 5.

³⁸⁷ “Urge que se dé ayuda a las familias sin hogar del barrio ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 4, 1950, 7.

neighborhood activists were not opposed to moving, under the right conditions. The public frustration following the 1950 fire was therefore not exclusively drawn from concern for the neighborhood's preservation, but rather from the knowledge that the government had not met its obligations in providing for its relocation. In 1931, Octavio Zubizarreta had declared himself justified in burning down shantytowns because he had launched parallel initiatives to care for the poor. In 1944, Ramón Grau declared himself similarly justified in opposing "the will of many" residents in order to provide for their basic needs. As shantytown activists demanded that the state provide services, infrastructure, employment, and benefits consistent with the stipulations of the 1940 Constitution, however, they made it clear that fulfilling these basic needs could not be done offhand.

By 1950, then, Las Yaguas had successfully contested the discourse of the state on its own terms. While the neighborhood might have emerged as one of the most significant property disputes in Republican Cuba, legislation written by the neighborhood's elite title-holder, Cosme de la Torriente shifted the terms of debate. With lines of battle clearly drawn between residents and the state, activists from central shantytowns resisted relocation not by making property claims like the residents of La Hata but rather by demanding that the state ensure their rights to housing and other social benefits. As residents successfully highlighted the government's failure to meet its obligations, they also transformed their neighborhood into an emblem of state incapacity. As officials sought to build their government according to a different image, they sought to show their capacity through new methods. For new solutions, they turned to medical professionals, urban planners, and criminologists, whose ideas for the neighborhoods were developing quickly.

4.0 “FACTORIES OF MEN”: NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CULTURE OF POVERTY, 1924-1963

The imperfections of the past move to the present in the consciousness of the individual, and constant work is needed to eradicate them.

-Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, 1965.³⁸⁸

The relocation of several hundred shantytown residents to a camp at Managua after the hurricane of 1944 was characterized by President Ramón Grau as an initial solution to areas he called “*barrios de indigentes*” (neighborhoods of indigents). “In addition to terrible misery, those neighborhoods sheltered much terrible vice,” he said, and they did “harm to all...especially the children.”³⁸⁹ Yet after a confrontational standoff with police and health officials, residents of the *barrios de indigentes* refused to relocate. “Indigents” held at Managua, it was meanwhile reported, “remain in a continuous state of uprising, attacking law enforcement and fleeing.”³⁹⁰

Five years later, in 1949, Cuba’s Health Minister announced new plans to relocate shantytown residents. The minister proposed building a “culturing” neighborhood, “which would organize and orient its residents on cultural paths more attuned with Cuban civilization.”³⁹¹

Despite this rhetoric, by 1950 no such neighborhood had appeared, and these initiatives, too,

³⁸⁸ Guevara, “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba,” 227.

³⁸⁹ Ramón Grau San Martín, “Al primer mes de gobierno,” in San Martín, *La revolución constructiva*, 9.

³⁹⁰ “Sublevados en Managua centenares de indigentes,” *Luz*, December 29, 1944, 1.

³⁹¹ “Acuerdan fundar un patronato para hacer casas de indigentes,” *El País*, September 21, 1949, 8.

seemed doomed to failure.³⁹² When fire struck Las Yaguas in April 1950, however, a significant transformation was evident. Rather than police, the minister sent teams of social workers to shantytowns with instructions that they use persuasion to fulfill their tasks. And rather than a dramatic confrontation, some social workers reported gaining the trust of local residents.³⁹³

The political justification for these moves was clear. The 1944 property trial put Las Yaguas in the national spotlight, propelling demands for action from the state. By 1950, state action took place through social workers, who began their operations amid national outrage after Las Yaguas burned. In both cases, residents were active in generating political will for state assistance and in resisting relocation. Yet the cultural focus of government officials and methods they used in their interventions followed a different logic. Beyond responding to property conflicts or political pressure, what did government officials hope to accomplish by moving poor people out of the city? What disciplines and ideas influenced their methods as they did so? And how did their actions shape wider social classifications? This chapter offers an intellectual history of slum clearance in Havana.

Scholars of housing and urbanism in Cuba and Latin America have often engaged with the combination of technocratic planning and economic inequality in explaining patterns of spatial inequality.³⁹⁴ Cultural, ethnic, and racial categories of difference have generally been treated as only indirectly related to housing policy.³⁹⁵ The difficulty of locating racially targeted housing policies is unsurprising in a region where eugenicists advocated “constructive miscegenation,” or “*mestizaje*,” a construct that upheld aspects of white supremacy while

³⁹² “Trata el gobierno de lanzar a la calle a miles de vecinos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 8, 1951, 1, 4; “Seguirá Salubridad en la ‘humanitaria’ obra de botar indigentes,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 27, 1951, 1.

³⁹³ “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 1, 6-7, 12.

³⁹⁴ Holston, *The Modernist City*; Meade, “*Civilizing*” *Rio*; For more recent work on modernism and politics, see Healy, *Ruins of the New Argentina*.

³⁹⁵ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 205-210; Caldeira, *City of Walls*, 273-74.

rejecting strict racial divisions.³⁹⁶ Yet even the role of so-called “soft eugenics” in housing policy has been largely left unexamined.³⁹⁷ In Cuba, studies of social science and eugenics have examined the early part of the twentieth-century and focused on the categories used by social and political actors in debates about racial discrimination.³⁹⁸ Their role in housing policy has not been investigated.

This chapter focuses on the role of urban planning and social science in debates about shantytowns. It joins recent scholarship on Brazil that argues that urban poverty came to be a more salient category of discrimination than traditional racial categories in Rio de Janeiro’s legal system.³⁹⁹ In the context of public debates over shantytown relocation, many academic fields during the 1930s and 40s treated shantytowns—or *barrios de indigentes* (neighborhoods of indigents)—as an important spatial category that marked collective difference, even when explicit racial categories were left unstated. “Indigence” was de-racialized, yet it provided a space to openly highlight associations between race, crime, ignorance, primitivism, promiscuity, and physical inferiority. In *barrios de indigentes*, moreover, many scientists believed such traits to be hereditary (though not necessarily immutable). Through the lens of urban poverty, then, language associated with racial discrimination was refracted, reconfigured, and applied to housing.

These classifications shaped wider plans for the nation, since policy solutions to problems associated with *barrios de indigentes* preoccupied scholars from a variety of fields. On

³⁹⁶ Stepan, “*The Hour of Eugenics.*”

³⁹⁷ Outside of Cuba, several scholars of eugenic science have indicated that housing policy in Latin America was linked to biological categories, but not to traditional racial categories. These studies have not been focused directly on housing. See Rodriguez, *Civilizing Argentina*; Minna Stern, “From Mestizophilia to Biotypology.”

³⁹⁸ One exception to the lack of studies on eugenics during the Second Republic in Cuba is Arvey, “Sex and the Ordinary Cuban.” On eugenics and racial mobilization in Cuba, see Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*. On eugenics in Cuba, Stepan, “*The Hour of Eugenics.*” 76-79.

³⁹⁹ Fischer, “Quase Pretos de Tão Pobres?”

one hand, medical professionals and social scientists in the fields of eugenics, sanitation, and criminology proposed solutions that targeted the poor as individuals, while on the other hand, urbanists and economists proposed structural solutions. As shantytowns attracted widespread notice in Havana during the 1930s and 40s, I argue that these disciplines and their respective concerns for urban poverty converged under the rubric of national development and provided a compelling justification for the clearance of shantytowns.⁴⁰⁰ To align structural and individual solutions to urban poverty, officials established a new academic field in Cuba, social work that was specifically focused on implementing technocratic plans according to social scientific research, in a way that minimized political conflict.

Cuban scholars operated alongside counterparts from other Latin American governments, the US, and the United Nations (UN) to pursue national development along multiple fronts. The local synthesis of these international trends laid foundations for distinctive policy initiatives. Beginning in the 1950s and continuing after the 1959 Revolution, Cuban officials initiated centralized slum clearance programs in Havana (Chapter 6). In the process, they explicitly connected national development to the elimination of indigence, normalizing the idea that cultural characteristics associated with *barrios de indigentes* were antithetical to the norms of urban citizenship. Following the 1959 Revolution, these links between structural reform and individual behavior were adapted to a new socio-political reality.

I begin the chapter with an analysis of the work of one of Cuba's earliest and most notable housing reformers, Luis Bay Sevilla, who drew from progressive and structuralist roots in proposing housing legislation for Havana from the 1920s to the 1940s. I then examine the emergence of "*barrios de indigentes*" as a spatial category in the 1930s, and the classification

⁴⁰⁰ For a critical analysis of the rise of development as a paradigm, see Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

and analysis of indigent neighborhoods by social scientists in the 1940s. Next I discuss the parallel rise of modernist architecture in the city and its entanglement with economic development initiatives nationally and internationally following World War II (WWII). I conclude by examining the emergence of social work and the “culture of poverty” thesis as a fusion of both structuralist and progressive intellectual frameworks before and after 1959.

4.1 FORERUNNER LUIS BAY SEVILLA

As poor people crowded into Havana during the prosperous 1920s, architect Luis Bay Sevilla voiced concern. In his sprawling 1924 book, *La vivienda del pobre*, he synthesized a variety of academic disciplines in addressing urban poverty and housing. His scholarship reflected his eclectic background. A one-time tenement health inspector, prolific journalist, founding member of Havana’s College of Architects, and periodic policy consultant, Bay Sevilla was among Cuba’s most vocal housing reformers. Throughout the 1930s and 40s he served as director of the professional journal *Arquitectura*.⁴⁰¹

Something of a prophet in the patronage-system wilderness of the first Republic, Bay Sevilla's writing was frustrated and eclectic. He railed against “useless laws” that went unenforced, and a politics that “only have a personal character.”⁴⁰² Years later, in his obituary, a colleague gently noted that he was “critical.”⁴⁰³ During the 1930s, he wrote on a number of subjects, reconstructing the customs of *habaneros* from centuries past, demanding attention to

⁴⁰¹ Several publications appear under the name “Luis Bay y Sevilla.” However, the majority of his writings in *Arquitectura* appear under the name Luis Bay Sevilla, which I use. On Bay Sevilla’s career see the prologue to Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*; Enrique Luis Varela, “Luis Bay Sevilla,” *Arquitectura*, February 1948, 34-37.

⁴⁰² Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 187, 345.

⁴⁰³ Enrique Luis Varela, “Luis Bay Sevilla,” *Arquitectura*, February 1948, 34, 37.

urban planners in Europe, and reflecting on the *bohíos* (rural huts) of pre-Columbian indigenous groups.⁴⁰⁴ Yet he reserved his most passionate ruminations for the urban and rural poor, whose housing he interpreted through the currents of criminology, social medicine, proto-modernist architecture, and classical progressivism, and the improvement of which he saw as critical to the development of the Cuban nation.⁴⁰⁵ “Contemplating those sad spectacles of misery,” he wrote, “a mute protest rises in us...[and] the patriotic fiber beat[s] in our chest.”⁴⁰⁶

Bay Sevilla premised his vision of housing reform on perceived physical, behavioral, and cultural shortcomings of the poor, perceptions he backed with references to medical and social science. “To solve the housing problem it is not enough to give a house to the worker,” he wrote. “It is necessary to educate him so he knows how to keep it clean.”⁴⁰⁷ Outlining the deadly sicknesses and physical shortcomings caused by insufficient hygiene, the “promiscuity” caused by “unfortunate mixture, brothers close to sisters and parents to adult children of both sexes,” and the criminality caused by the anonymity of life in a “*solar*” (tenement), Bay Sevilla saw comprehensive housing legislation as critically important to the formation of a strong national population in a civilized world.⁴⁰⁸

At a time when scientific classifications of race were quite normal, Bay Sevilla did not write in explicitly racial terms, instead making thinly veiled references to black-identified cultural practices, which he assumed to thrive amidst sub-standard housing. He wrote about the “scandalous reputation” of tenements, fueled by “drums played by knotted, quivering fingers,”

⁴⁰⁴ Luis Bay Sevilla, “La vivienda del campesino,” *Arquitectura*, June 1936, 9-10; Enrique Luis Varela, “Luis Bay Sevilla,” *Arquitectura*, February 1948, 34, 37.

⁴⁰⁵ Bay Sevilla was an adherent to Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model of urban planning, even as he accepted some features linked to CIAM modernism. Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 15.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 20.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 105-107.

the “saints” of the residents, and “outrageous dancing until dawn.”⁴⁰⁹ In similar fashion, he did not view deficiencies among the poor as permanent or immutable. Drawing from the principles of the neo-Lamarckian, so-called “soft” eugenics, which were influential on the island, he called homes “factories of men,” prime sites for state intervention to “improve” their moral, physical, and social capacities. “While the poor lack decent shelter it will be impossible to better the customs of the people and elevate their level of civilization,” he wrote.⁴¹⁰

With his unlikely background as both a former health official in tenement homes and an architect, Bay Sevilla’s writing drew from two established intellectual traditions that circulated throughout the Atlantic world: progressivism and Marxism. Tenements, Jacob Riis had written of New York City in 1890, are “the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts; ... because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion.”⁴¹¹ A noted voice of US progressivism, Riis called for the expansion of charity, the enforcement of municipal regulations, and the construction of new homes by employers.

Criticizing such reforms, Frederick Engels saw the issue in starkly different terms. Noting that poverty and crowding had been a constant feature of urban life across time, Engels argued that under capitalism only the scale of such crowding had greatly increased. This, he argued, had to be eradicated at the root. “In order to make an end of *this* housing shortage there is only one means,” he wrote: “to abolish altogether the exploitation and oppression of the working class by the ruling class.”⁴¹² The two conflicting visions of those like Riis, who saw so-called slum housing as an issue for targeted physical and moral reforms, and those like Engels, who saw the

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, 105.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 43.

⁴¹¹ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 9.

⁴¹² Emphasis in the original. Engels, *The Housing Question*, 21.

issue as symptomatic of wide structural imbalances inherent to capitalism, shaped the strategies of politicians and planners throughout the twentieth century.⁴¹³

Bay Sevilla took the basic tropes of nineteenth-century progressives in Europe and the United States as his initial point of departure. Whether or not he had read Engels, he seems to have been little interested in a structural critique of society during his early career. In 1924 he briefly hypothesized that the overcrowding of Havana was caused by the city's rising wealth and high "level of culture," causing families to demand more spacious homes, and leaving urbanizing migrants to rent "dirty rooms."⁴¹⁴ In the tumultuous decade that followed the fall of the Machado regime, however, his thinking would evolve.

In 1938, army chief Fulgencio Batista appointed Bay Sevilla to lead a commission to study comprehensive housing legislation. Producing a 39-page bill, the commission proposed a variety of actions, to be directed by a planning committee that was heavy with architects but also included doctors, judges, and representatives from the labor ministry. Charged with demolishing tenements and shantytowns, the committee was to be freed from political constraints and given expansive flexibility. Within its purview were numerous aspects of urban development, and even the distribution of land.⁴¹⁵ "The solution to the problem of housing," Bay Sevilla wrote in the law's defense, "is a problem not only of construction technicians, but also of doctors, sociologists, jurists, and educators."⁴¹⁶ Presenting the legislation to the International Congress of Municipalities, which met in Havana in 1939, the architect was confident that the commission

⁴¹³ I am grateful to Alejandro de Castro Mazarro for pointing out the persistence of the distinction between the proposals of Engels and Riis. For a more detailed elaboration of these dynamics in the North Atlantic, see Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 17-19.

⁴¹⁴ Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 23, 24.

⁴¹⁵ Luis Bay Sevilla, *Proyecto de ley de casas baratas*, 15-44.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

had found a path towards making Havana a modern capital city, suitable for “the salvation of the race.”⁴¹⁷

The legislation, however, proved too ambitious for its time. As the bill was modified in Congress, Bay Sevilla's frustration was palpable. “My dear Colonel,” he wrote to Batista in 1939, the new legislation “basically ruins the affordable housing bill that I redacted, with your own ideas, and mine.”⁴¹⁸ Housing legislation did pass Congress, and various housing measures were written into the 1940 Constitution, but none of them was as extensive as what the commission had proposed. As failure became apparent, Bay Sevilla's frustration grew more pointed. Speaking to the College of Architects, he lamented, “A Cuban, generally, when he rises to an elevated position, does not accept that there might be another Cuban who knows more about a subject than he. ... This problem of deficient housing is something more complicated and difficult than the respectable members of Congress imagine.”⁴¹⁹ About the emergence and growth of shantytown neighborhoods, he was more pointed still. Criticizing the “hysterical defenders” of the neighborhoods, he noted that “on distinct occasions high government functionaries have sought to end this urban stain, without having done anything else but leave everything in the state they found it.”⁴²⁰ “The government should liquidate them with the greatest haste,” he concluded, “in order to free the City of the deplorable spectacle that those pigsties offer before the gaze of the foreigners who visit us.”⁴²¹

In enacting legislation, Bay Sevilla had failed, but in the process he spoke of things to come. Combining progressive and structuralist visions of reform, and linking the precarious homes of Havana's poor to urban planning and economic reforms, which he premised on the

⁴¹⁷ Luis Bay Sevilla, “La vivienda desde el punto de vista urbanístico,” *Arquitectura*, November 1941, 404.

⁴¹⁸ Luis Bay Sevilla to Fulgencio Batista, 8 January 1939, Legajo 507, Expediente 4, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC.

⁴¹⁹ Luis Bay Sevilla, “La vivienda desde el punto de vista urbanístico,” *Arquitectura*, November 1941, 399.

⁴²⁰ Luis Bay Sevilla, “Porque la barriada obrera de Pogolotti fue un fracaso,” *Arquitectura*, January, 1941, 34-35.

⁴²¹ Luis Bay Sevilla, “La vivienda desde el punto de vista urbanístico,” *Arquitectura*, November 1941, 403.

conclusions of medical and criminal scientists, he had laid out an expansive vision for the Cuban state.

4.2 “BARRIOS DE INDIGENTES”

As Bay Sevilla pushed for comprehensive housing institutions to address the urban poor, urban poverty was taken up by the government on a different trajectory. In terms far less ambitious than the crusading reformer would later propose, government officials acknowledged that caring for the urban poor was an official obligation. Machado’s 1931 legislation for the “feeding and defense of the unemployed” proposed to assist workers in a state of “indigence.”⁴²² In popular and official lexicons, the urban poor were therefore labeled in two ways: *desocupado* (unemployed) and *indigente* (indigent). Far from trivial, the tension between the two revealed the same tension between the nineteenth-century housing prescriptions of Engels and Riis—the need for structural reform on the one hand, and the need for social assistance and individual rehabilitation on the other.

During the 1930s, politicians, journalists, and activists debated the respective utility of these terms in describing informally housed communities like Las Yaguas. The language used to describe shantytowns therefore referenced a central question about the relationship between neighborhoods and the state: what type of intervention did they require? By the mid-1940s, the debate over vocabulary found an answer: the term *barrios de indigentes* was solidified in popular and political usage as a recognized category of space, framing policy initiatives towards

⁴²² Cuba, *Ley y decretos creando un comité*.

shantytowns. This reflected an uneven popular consensus that the neighborhoods were not merely the product of unemployment, but instead required reforms targeting culture, health, and behavior as well.

“Indigent” and “unemployed” were social categories long before *barrios de indigentes* entered public discourse. However, they took on new meanings as the Great Depression transformed Havana. In his 1924 *La vivienda del pobre*, Bay Sevilla included a chapter called “The protection of the indigent.” Indigents, he implied, without mentioning *barrios de indigentes*, were “social elements that live without sufficient resources in a way that chokes them, and they fight without any success to separate their family from the corrupting environment of the tenement.” He related indigence to “street begging.” Indigents were those who could be moralized and regenerated, those who were “conquered by fortune.”⁴²³ As masses of unemployed, landless people crowded into cities, by the end of the 1920s both terms came to apply to visible, identifiable groups. Spanish “indigents” were gathered and deported from Havana, while “indigent” Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Mexicans, Haitians, and Jamaicans were repatriated from Oriente.⁴²⁴ Struck by economic depression, “indigent” North Americans, one report noted, were gathering in camps in Washington, D.C.⁴²⁵ “Indigent” Cubans were spread throughout Havana, as well. The rival term, “*desocupado*,” was at times used in combination with “*indigente*,” and was more evocative of labor struggles and the political upheaval of the

⁴²³ Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 381, 382, 385.

⁴²⁴ “Los indigentes portorriqueños serán repatriados a bordo de un transporte norteamericano,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, August 18, 1931; “Se trata de repatriar a su país dos mil asiáticos que viven en la indigencia,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, July 28, 1931, 3; “Por los españoles indigentes,” *El Sol*, August 22, 1931; “Ingresaron ayer en Tiscornia 180 familias hispanas que se hallan en la indigencia,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, May 19, 1931, 2

⁴²⁵ On Washington DC: “Socorro para los indigentes en el invierno,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, September 2, 1931, 1.

early 1930s, especially as groups of protesters organized themselves under the mantra “*los sin trabajo*” (the unemployed).⁴²⁶

This tension between the terms was not lost on contemporary observers. During the early 1930s, union literature eschewed the term “indigent” and used the term “unemployed” when referring to the growing masses of poor, non-unionized men who were often homeless. In 1936, groups within central shantytowns hoping for assistance of all kinds invoked both terms, forming an “Association of Defense for the Unemployed Indigent Residents of the Province of Havana.”⁴²⁷ In 1945, the director of Hygiene and Social Provision within the Ministry of Labor sought to take control of the “unemployment” fund from the Health Ministry. “But if that is not possible,” he added, “at least the name should be changed to Indigents Fund, since that fits within the functions of welfare.”⁴²⁸ In the 1950s, the fund was still referred to alternatively as the “unemployment” or “indigent” fund.

By the early 1930s, then, “unemployed” and “indigent” were officially recognized categories used to describe poor people, and both had implications for their relationship to the state. It was only gradually, however, that they would come to describe a specific category of urban space.⁴²⁹ Press reports about Las Yaguas from 1931 described the neighborhood as simply a “*barrio*” (neighborhood) or a “*reparto*” (subdivision). Even as reports noted that “indigents” had been relocated from the Isla de Pinos neighborhood the same year, the place itself was referred to as a “*suburbio*,” “*barrio de pobres*,” or “*conjunto de chozas*” (suburb, poor

⁴²⁶ “Los sin trabajo serán alojados en el antiguo mercado ‘La Purísima,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, June 19 1931, 1.

⁴²⁷ Asociación de defensa de los vecinos desocupados e indigentes de la provincia de la Habana, 25 August 1936, Legajo 206, Expediente 4827, Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.

⁴²⁸ “La organización de la higiene y la previsión social en la nueva ley orgánica del Ministerio del Trabajo,” presented by Oswaldo Morales Patiño, 1945, Legajo 745, Expediente 16, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC, 11.

⁴²⁹ While Bay Sevilla had linked indigents to *casas de vecindad*, it was only indirectly. His chapters on *solares* and *casas de vecindad* specifically made no mention of the word “indigent.” Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 103-112, 381-386.

neighborhood, or collection of shacks).⁴³⁰ Since it was destroyed by the government to move residents to the Purísima camp for “indigents,” and then repopulated by those same camp residents, however, Isla de Pinos was strongly associated with the term. When in 1933, after Machado's fall, armed struggle broke out around the adjacent Atarés castle, a press report made the connection between people and place explicit: “Isla de Pinos, *barriada indigente* located on the slopes of Atarés, emerged unscathed from the bombardment.”⁴³¹

In the years that followed, the term “*barrio de indigentes*” cropped up with increasing frequency in reports describing Las Yaguas, Cueva del Humo, Isla de Pinos, and other neighborhoods, though its usage was still not uniform.⁴³² By 1937, the term was established enough that a writer in *Diario de la Marina* thought to contest it, writing a piece entitled “Las Yaguas is not a *barrio de indigentes*,” and by 1938 an urbanist published a study of “the so-called *barrios de indigentes*.”⁴³³ The early Communist journal, *La Palabra*, like the CNOC, seems to have refused the term entirely, and called Las Yaguas a “*reparto*” populated by “*desocupados*” in several articles.⁴³⁴ In 1939, when another Communist journal, *Noticias de Hoy*, began coverage, it would initially insist on the term “*barrios de desocupados*” exclusively.

⁴³⁰ “La miseria y el infortunio han levantado un ‘pueblo’ al que han dado en llamarle ‘Isla de Pinos’ o la ‘Ciudad del Plante,’” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, September 28, 1931, 3; “Zubizarreta, velando por la higiene, hizo arder anoche el suburbio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Mundo*, December 27, 1931, 1.

⁴³¹ Emphasis mine. This is the first instance in my notes, excluding the Purísima indigents’ “camp,” in which “barrio” and “indigente” were combined. However I have not reviewed all Cuban newspapers published during the early 1930s. José Hernández Toriño, “Isla de Pinos, *barriada indigente* ubicada en las laderas de Atarés, salió incólume del bombardeo,” *El País* November 19, 1933, 1-2.

⁴³² Reports in *El Crisol* described Las Yaguas and Cueva del Humo as *barrios de indigentes* in 1934, though later reports in the same paper referred to them as *repartos*. “El mayor del barrio de ‘Las Yaguas’ cobra tributos,” *El Crisol*, May 18, 1934, 1; “A punto de ser devorado por las llamas el Reparto Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol*, February 18, 1935, 6.

⁴³³ J.R. López Goldaras, “‘Las Yaguas’ no es un barrio indigente,” *Diario de la Marina*, April 18 1937, section 3, IV; Enrique Andino, “Estudios sobre los llamados barrios de indigentes: Su solución científica por el urbanismo,” *Revista Municipal y de Intereses Económicos*, May-June 1938, 62-69.

⁴³⁴ “Bouza y Torriente pretenden despojar a los desocupados del Reparto de Las Yaguas,” *La Palabra*, January 26, 1935, 1, 2; “Así se vive en el Reparto ‘Las Yaguas,’” *La Palabra*, January 27, 1935, 4.

By the mid 1940s, however, even this journal would often use the term “*barrios de indigentes*.”⁴³⁵

By the 1940s, then, “*barrio de indigentes*” had become, among the press, a discrete spatial category—one that was used even in journals that rejected its connotations. Although the most conservative scientists and officials continued to note the need for better employment opportunities for the poor, the gradual, uneven victory of “indigent” over “unemployed” in classifying urban shantytowns aligned with an implicit consensus among scientists that the problems of these neighborhoods could not *only* be dealt with through structural economic reforms. Not merely manifestations of unemployment, the neighborhoods were linked, as Bay Sevilla had argued, to the need for targeted interventions from the state.

4.3 THE INDIGENT HOME: “BARRIOS DE INDIGENTES” IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

In the absence of a centralized bureaucracy to deal with popular housing, the targeted interventions proposed by scholars were diffuse. As “indigence” and informal housing became linked in the public discourse, scholars of public health and eugenics gradually intervened, crafting policy solutions to improve the conditions of informal housing and in some cases to eliminate the *barrios de indigentes* themselves. Their proposals were fragmentary and overlapping. Taken together, however, they comprised a wide array of knowledge available to policy makers.

⁴³⁵ Articles using the term “*barrios de desocupados*” were the norm; for examples of exceptions, see, “Voraz incendio se declaró ayer en el barrio indigente de la ‘Cueva del Humo,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 24, 1940, 5; Romilio Portuondo, “Ayuda para los de ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 24, 1946, 7; “Proposiciones del estado para desalojar a los barrios de indigentes,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 6, 1949, 5; “Continúan los vecinos de las yaguas demandando auxilio inmediato de las autoridades,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 5 1950, 7.

By the 1930s, Bay Sevilla's conclusions had already drawn approval from health officials and were aligned with the conclusions of local eugenicists.⁴³⁶ With the term *barrios de indigentes* growing in popular discourse, medical officials continued to study deficient housing, sometimes using the term directly. In a paper presented in a 1940 conference, Oswaldo Morales Patiño and several co-authors interested in "labor medicine" cited the need to construct homes for poor workers, noting that "these buildings should be under the care of the state in order to have an absolute control...making their possessors keep them clean at all times."⁴³⁷ In 1949, Morales Patiño discussed sanitary problems in some *barrios de indigentes*, related to the "secret raising of pigs."⁴³⁸ Eugenicist José Chelala characterized *barrios de indigentes* explicitly in a series of articles published in *Bohemia* in 1941, some of which he sent directly to then-opposition leader Grau. Chelala criticized health officials for doing too little to enforce codes and to help the poor, which he saw as a threat to national security in a time of war.⁴³⁹

These medical concerns were synthesized and propelled by the newly institutionalized field of juvenile delinquency, a field that deemed heredity and environment as especially important. In May 1933, Cuba established a juvenile court system, and in 1938, it created the Child Correctional Center at Finca Torrens.⁴⁴⁰ With official recognition for their discipline, scholars concluded that there were strong links between "indigence," deficient housing, and juvenile crime, advocating a variety of solutions.

⁴³⁶ Dr. José A. López del Valle, Cuba's sanitation director, wrote an effusive prologue to *La vivienda del pobre*. Bay Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 10; Domingo Ramos, Informe elevado a la junta nacional de sanidad y beneficencia sobre demografía sanitaria nacional, 12 January 1945, Legajo 745, Expediente 48, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC, 8.

⁴³⁷ Oswaldo Morales Patiño, Pelayo Pelaez, Alfredo Castellanos y otros, "Medicina del Trabajo en Cuba. Su estado Actual y Orientaciones Futuras," 6-9 May 1940, Legajo 745, Expediente 31, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC.

⁴³⁸ Oswaldo Morales Patiño, Informe elevado a la Junta Nacional de Sanidad, 1949, Legajo 745, Expediente 53, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC, 2.

⁴³⁹ José Chelala, "¿Hacia una verdadera política sanitaria?" *Bohemia*, July 27, 1941, 33, 51; José Chelala, "La tragedia sanitaria de Cuba," *Bohemia*, June 29, 1941, 28-30, 57-58; José Chelala, "¿Dispone Cuba de sanidad para su defensa?" *Bohemia*, July 6, 1941, 44-46.

⁴⁴⁰ Saavedra, *Delincuencia infantil en Cuba*, 236-38.

Scholars of juvenile delinquency abroad linked “the indigent home” to criminal tendencies. An influential study by Argentine criminologist Ernesto Nelson published in 1933 explained that it was necessary to consider the relationship between adolescents’ “hereditary baggage” and “the environment” in which they lived.⁴⁴¹ The study went on to classify three types of problematic homes, seen to generate crime: “the incomplete home,” lacking a parent, “the incompetent home,” with negligent, criminal, or abusive parents, and “the indigent home,” with parents living in misery.⁴⁴² In an extensive section on “the indigent home,” Nelson outlined various elements of poverty, including unemployment, poor hygiene, and high fertility, calling the tenement house “the incubator of crime”⁴⁴³ The worst type of indigent housing, he wrote, was “a tin shack set on empty land on the city’s outskirts.”⁴⁴⁴ Professional scholars and medical students researching juvenile delinquency at the University of Havana cited Nelson and organized their theses around his classifications until at least the 1950s.⁴⁴⁵

Adding to these studies, scholars of juvenile delinquency in Cuba discussed the fundamental role of housing, particularly shantytowns and tenements, in generating acquired and hereditary degeneration of young people and their predisposition to crime. A 1935 study identified “the poor home” as the discipline’s main target and recommended legislative measures to generate employment and better housing.⁴⁴⁶ A 1945 study by lawyer Leonor Saavedra y

⁴⁴¹ Despite their discussions of “indigence” and housing, criminologists do not seem to have used the term *‘barrios de indigentes’* frequently. Even Saavedra, citing Nelson, and writing about shantytowns in Cuba, did not use the term. Nelson, *La delincuencia juvenil*, 20.

⁴⁴² Nelson, *La delincuencia juvenil*, 20; Similarly, a 1937 study argued for legislation, along US lines, that would deal with delinquency and material deprivation—linked to “indigent” parents, and mental handicaps separately. Raggi, *Criminalidad juvenil y defensa social*, 353.

⁴⁴³ Nelson used the word “conventillo.” Nelson, *La delincuencia juvenil*, 61.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 63.

⁴⁴⁵ I am grateful to Kelly Urban for sharing these medical theses. Medical student theses from the University of Havana classes 1948-1952 are housed in the archives of the Museo Histórico de las Ciencias ‘Carlos J. Finlay.’ See Rafael A. Gutiérrez Reynaldos, “Causas de la delincuencia infantil” (PhD diss., Universidad de la Habana, 1948); Dagoberto Riverón Travieso, “Estudio de los factores ambientales como causa” (PhD diss., Universidad de la Habana, 1952). Also citing Nelson’s classification is Saavedra, *Delincuencia infantil*, 141-42.

⁴⁴⁶ Verdaguer, *La delincuencia infantil*, 7, 25.

Gómez sharpened the focus on housing. “A large part of our population finds itself without work, which means that thousands of Cuban families have had to emigrate...to ‘concentration’ camps—as I call them.”⁴⁴⁷ Addressing the problem, Saavedra prescribed effective government intervention: “our government should have prevented this a long time ago, urgently needing to ‘control the birth rate of our poor, inferior classes.’”⁴⁴⁸ Medical students who focused on juvenile delinquency applied these conclusions to shantytowns directly, characterizing Las Yaguas, Cueva del Humo and others as “sad spectacles” that “degrade our culture.”⁴⁴⁹

Given their biological focus, these writers were more concerned with race as it related to housing than Bay Sevilla had been, but like him they explained biological inferiority as caused by poverty more generally. Even so, scientists were especially concerned with neighborhoods as sites of undesirable social and racial mixture. One criminologist wrote that crowded tenements forced cohabitation among “distinct families who have never before met and who belong to the most diverse social and ethnic classes.”⁴⁵⁰ Citing Israel Castellanos and other eugenicists, Saavedra worried that “the poor classes, biologically inferior for being socially inferior, reproduce themselves in large contingents...This danger is infinitely greater,” she continued, “due to cohabitation with a biologically inferior race.”⁴⁵¹ All told, however, race was mentioned infrequently in scientific discussions of urban poverty, in spite of clearly worded conclusions about the biological deficiencies of the poor. In each case, poverty was considered a condition separate from African descent.

By the 1950s, then, medical conclusions about poverty, race, and housing were synthesized in the institutionalized field of juvenile delinquency. In this field, there was

⁴⁴⁷ Saavedra, *Delincuencia infantil en Cuba*, 136.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁴⁹ Luis J. Fernández “Profilaxis y tratamiento de la delincuencia infantil” (PhD diss., Universidad de la Habana, 1951), 19.

⁴⁵⁰ Verdaguer, *La delincuencia Infantil*, 7.

⁴⁵¹ Saavedra, *Delincuencia infantil en Cuba*, 142, 144.

consensus that indigence was represented in a particular type of home, which produced individuals with criminal tendencies. While, for some, racial mixture worsened this type of home, they saw poverty as a separate and crucial variable. Over time, scholars applied these conclusions to their discussions of *barrios de indigentes* in Havana, and their conclusions resonated in the popular press. A 1939 article in *Bohemia* claimed that many children in *barrios de indigentes* became criminals, not because they were born criminals, but because of their living conditions.⁴⁵² In 1952, quoting heavily from a study of juvenile delinquency in Argentina, one article claimed that perhaps 85 percent of youth from *barrios de indigentes* and *solares* in Cuba were juvenile delinquents. “These were children pushed to evil by the ignorance of their parents and by the laziness of public authorities,” declared another.⁴⁵³ As a result, discussions of *barrios de indigentes* increasingly focused on the next generation of Cubans, and by implication, the future of the nation.

4.4 SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THE STATE

Despite numerous proposals from doctors and criminologists, however, their effectiveness in generating shantytown policy was limited by the issue’s complexity. Health officials often carried out policies in conjunction with police, but they had few tools to address entire neighborhoods. In their normal dealings with housing, they merely assessed fines and sometimes evicted families from single buildings.⁴⁵⁴ As Bay Sevilla recognized, shantytowns were

⁴⁵² “Palabras a las mujeres sobre la niñez cubana desvalida,” *Bohemia*, August 13, 1939, 42-43, 61, 63.

⁴⁵³ “Los problemas del niño delincuente,” *Bohemia*, Aug 31 1952, n.p.; “La aniquilación del niño: crimen y pecado,” *Bohemia*, July 27, 1952, n.p.

⁴⁵⁴ On health officials working in tenement buildings, see chapter 5.

multifaceted, presenting issues that single agencies could not address. When political pressure generated momentum for new initiatives towards *barrios de indigentes*, all policies therefore implied dividing and classifying the neighborhood residents to determine what state obligations might be, and which tools should be used to fulfill them. In other words, into the 1950s, policies towards *barrios de indigentes* were written more as questions than solutions.

In 1939, for example, legislation signed by President Federico Laredo Brú and written by Cosme de la Torriente sought to determine how many residents in Las Yaguas were not, in fact, in extreme poverty. “The local Sanitation Authority of Havana will proceed to undertake a census,” the legislation explained, “to determine who are the indigents, and who are those [who] can rent a place to move to.”⁴⁵⁵ When the Health Ministry, acting on Grau's orders, sought to clear Las Yaguas again in October 1944, Eddy Chibás made a statement to the press in which he was more specific. “The inhabitants of the *barrios de indigentes* are not all equal,” he declared. “They divide into three categories: true indigents, workers without appropriate housing, and the criminal element. The first two categories constitute a problem of social assistance that can be resolved kindly. The last category is not a matter of social assistance, but rather, social defense.”⁴⁵⁶ By 1948, Congress debated housing legislation that continued to refine these classifications. One bill proposed to take a detailed census of the neighborhoods to exclude those who were not poor, while finding relatives to shelter those who found themselves in neighborhoods “due to accidental circumstances.” Those who were limited by “permanent

⁴⁵⁵ Mario Lamar, Informe al Presidente de la Republica, 16 August 1940, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

⁴⁵⁶ “Por primera vez en ocho años Cuba tendrá presupuestos. Ya están listos y serán enviados al congreso dice Chibás,” *El Crisol*, October 30, 1944, 1.

circumstances” were to be placed in “a rehabilitation regimen without restricting their personal liberty.”⁴⁵⁷

Uncertainty surrounding shantytown policy was reflected in the fact that *barrios de indigentes* remained an informal term throughout the 1940s. De la Torriente’s legislation referred to “indigents” who inhabited “such lands,” while never using the term *barrios de indigentes*.⁴⁵⁸ The term was finally recognized in 1952 legislation, which echoed previous proposals. Residents of *barrios urbanos de indigentes* (urban neighborhoods of indigents) with “profitable employment,” it stated, were to be forced to find housing elsewhere, while those who did not were to be “totally reeducated” and provided with “social assistance” under the care of the Health Ministry and the Corporation for Social Assistance.⁴⁵⁹ In each case, shantytown residents were classified with precision in order to determine the extent and nature of the state's obligation to them—and in each case, policy makers made it clear that no single solution would ensure success. For the way they were formally and informally defined in policy, then, *barrios de indigentes* highlighted the need for precisely the type of multi-disciplinary effort Bay Sevilla had proposed.

By the time Grau sought to relocate shantytown residents at the Managua camp in 1944, he had a variety of scientific theories at his disposal, but none that claimed to deal with the neighborhoods comprehensively. Instead, the poor received state welfare through overlapping institutions. The complications of this system are illustrated by their intersection in the story of one man, Pedro López, who was interned in the camp.

⁴⁵⁷ Gabriel Prats F. Cubas, “Un proyecto de ley de positivo interés para los propietarios,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, May 1948, 15.

⁴⁵⁸ Decreto No. 3173, 27 December 1939, Legajo 371, Expediente 6, Secretaria de la Presidencia, ANC.

⁴⁵⁹ David Green, “Government Plans for Low-Cost Housing Developments,” 1 August 1952, RG59/837.02/8-152, United States National Archives.

López was estimated to be 18-22 years old.⁴⁶⁰ According to a report that doctors compiled, his childhood in Santa Clara had been interrupted abruptly at age 6, when his father died of a sickness “of the blood.” He had been sent to live with an elderly grandmother who could not control him. At the age of 11, she placed him in a juvenile facility.⁴⁶¹ He was soon moved to a new Juvenile Corrections Center at Finca Torrens in 1939, and was eventually released.⁴⁶² After the 1944 storm hit Havana, destroying many shantytowns, López was rounded up with hundreds of poor people and brought to Managua, where President Grau promised their rehabilitation.⁴⁶³

At Managua, López soon had a physical altercation with a guard and faced criminal charges and forensic examinations for the court. The doctors wrote that he was “of the black race,” and that his skin “presents manifestations of a papulous syphilis.” They suspected that his father's blood sickness had been “a brain syphilis,” which the boy had inherited. “Syphilitic heredity is determinant of criminality,” Saavedra would write later that year.⁴⁶⁴ On the basis of the medical report, a judge suspended López's trial and interned him.⁴⁶⁵ The young man was sent to the asylum at Mazorra before being transferred to another asylum on the Isle of Pines.⁴⁶⁶

In January 1946, after several months, doctors declared him cured.⁴⁶⁷ López was set free in March 1946, nearly fifteen months after his fight with the guard.⁴⁶⁸ With no housing, no

⁴⁶⁰ Report of Dr. Albert Mata Lavin, 25 December 1944, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 8.

⁴⁶¹ Anibal Herrera and José Meluzá to the Director del Servicio Médico Forense, 13 April, 1945, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 47.

⁴⁶² “A punto de ser devorado por las llamas el Reparto Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol*, February 18, 1935, 6.

⁴⁶³ Anibal Herrera and José Meluzá to the Director del Servicio Médico Forense, 13 April, 1945, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 47.

⁴⁶⁴ Saavedra *Delincuencia infantil en Cuba*, 174.

⁴⁶⁵ Statement of Judges Costo y Parra, Vignier y Riera, and Romeu Jaime, 3 July 1945, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 85.

⁴⁶⁶ Dr. Esteban Valdés Castillo to Secretario de la Tribunal de Urgencia, 2 October, 1945, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 91.

⁴⁶⁷ Dr. Guillermo Alberni Herrera to Presidente de la Tribunal de Urgencia, 14 January 1946, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 94.

record of employment, and no support, López was released into the city. Despite detailed reports compiled by criminologists, psychologists, and doctors, the state could decide on no further solution. All the institutions involved agreed that López demonstrated characteristics that they associated with indigence, and which they increasingly located in *barrios de indigentes*. Yet by 1946, López had already visited Cuba's only proposed solution to such neighborhoods: the Managua camp—and the camp was now abandoned. After a lifetime of institutional confinement, López embodied an open question for state officials as they searched for appropriate policies. It was the same question raised by the informal neighborhoods scattered across Havana.

4.5 “SCRATCHING THE URBAN SURFACE”: “BARRIOS DE INDIGENTES” AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Elsewhere in the city, Luis Bay Sevilla continued to search for answers. As director of the journal *Arquitectura*, Bay Sevilla oversaw publications from members of Havana's College of Architects, a politically active community that was increasingly concerned with urban planning. He also corresponded with architects throughout Europe and Latin America, promoting the journal internationally and reprinting articles from architects abroad.⁴⁶⁹ As part of an active, national network throughout the 1940s, Cuban architects joined with international peers in debating the principles of modernism, a new paradigm that fused design with urban planning and

⁴⁶⁸ José Cabezas, Braulio Gonzalez, and Antonio Vignier, Acta de Sentencia, 22 March 1946, Legajo 262, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC, 132-33.

⁴⁶⁹ See, for example, Mario Buschiazzo to Luis Bay Sevilla, 25 September 1936, Legajo 507, Expediente 4, Donativos y Remisiones, ANC.

demanded technocratic authority. Local architects took up social and political issues with increasing enthusiasm, though from a different angle than Bay Sevilla. Rather than considering ways to deal with the urban poor directly, architects wrote of ways to plan a city that would not produce urban poverty. Even as *barrios de indigentes* were mentioned only tangentially in these wider plans, they embodied the precise definition of what planners hoped to avoid.

As doctors and criminologists debated issues associated with “indigents,” officials associated with labor and economics discussed its structural foundations. In 1940, from the Ministry of Labor's Department of Hygiene and Social Provision, Diego Vicente Tejera, addressed unemployment in a book entitled “Individual Rights are not Incompatible with a Socialist Regime,” which proposed expanded state assistance for unemployed workers based on the principles of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.⁴⁷⁰ Yet discussions of employment relations contended with the demands of organized labor, and stirred political concern. In 1943 prominent government economist Gustavo Gutiérrez cited the economic interventions of the US and British states to dismiss “absurd” fears of communism that structural forms could incite.⁴⁷¹

Urban planners took up similar structural issues without their political baggage. In an extended three-part essay entitled “Architecture and Socialism,” published between May and July 1944, architect José Bens Arrarte reflected on how Vicente Tejera’s “socialist regime” might apply to architecture in fulfilling the needs of a modern society. Like Bay Sevilla, Bens fused this focus with calls for an expansive state to meet the collective social needs of the population. The architect of the day, he wrote, was not the one who “builds this or that palace, church or theater... but rather one whose work will be linked with other efforts towards the

⁴⁷⁰ Vicente Tejera, *Los derechos individuales*.

⁴⁷¹ Gutiérrez, *La problemática cubana*, 7-8.

economic development of the city, social wellbeing, and the happiness of others.”⁴⁷² Writing of the “machinism” of the modern age, and the dangers of “unchecked capitalism,” Bens defended the potential benefits of state interventions “under a democratic regime.”⁴⁷³ Framing the housing issue as global in scope, Bens cited a wide array of legislation from Europe and the United States “to put an end to the *barrios insalubres* [unhealthy neighborhoods] and infected shacks of indigents.”⁴⁷⁴

Like many Cuban architects, Bens drew from a variety of architectural schools, but these proposals bore the influence of French architect Le Corbusier, leader of the International Congress of Modern Architects (CIAM). “The machinist era,” wrote Le Corbusier in the famous 1933 essay *The Athens Charter*, “has provoked immense disturbances in the conduct of men.... Chaos has entered the cities.”⁴⁷⁵ In response, the Charter called for greater state control to regulate basic functions of urban life. Holding their first Congress in 1928, CIAM architects began to outline a new approach to housing, with contradictory roots in the monumentalism of the French urban planner Haussmann and radical social critique along the lines of Engels.⁴⁷⁶ CIAM architects were unaffiliated with the Soviet Union, but James Holston has argued that they deliberately fashioned their proposals in a way that could adapt to governments across the political spectrum. The key element of Le Corbusier's thinking was that urban planning should serve the collective whole, even as he avoided adherence to fascism or communism.⁴⁷⁷

Like his peers, José Lluís Sert, an architect and professor in Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, was deeply concerned with balancing and correcting the structural forces that had led

⁴⁷² J.M. Bens-Arrarte, “Arquitectura y socialismo,” *Arquitectura*, April 1944, 174.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 174, 226, 254.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁷⁵ Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, 48-9.

⁴⁷⁶ Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 219-26.

⁴⁷⁷ See Holston, *The Modernist City*, 31-58.

to the creation of urban slums, but drew from the conclusions of medical scientists and criminologists as well. His 1942 book, *Can Our Cities Survive?*, was intended as a “free form” development of the principles of Corbusier's *Athens Charter*.⁴⁷⁸ He devoted a large portion of the book to slums, “the obvious cancer of city growth,” which, like Engels, he saw as symptoms of broader, structural issues.⁴⁷⁹ Le Corbusier had written of unplanned suburbs as “bastard boroughs,” a problem that “necessitates the squandering of public funds.”⁴⁸⁰ Sert was more specific, supporting his conclusions with citations from criminologists and social scientists. “The only remedy for this condition,” he wrote, “is the demolition of the infected houses and the reconstruction...of sanitary dwellings.”⁴⁸¹ Yet eradication was not, for Sert, a solution by itself. Instead, he argued that slums should be addressed through comprehensive planning that would reorganize the entire city. “Present slum clearance projects may be ... viewed as a mere scratching of the urban surface, considering that they are no more than compromises with the urgent necessity of removing *all* slums from our cities and providing proper housing for vast masses of people.”⁴⁸²

Cuban architects were deeply connected with CIAM, and formally created a working group in 1939 after an extended visit to Cuba by Sert.⁴⁸³ The chair of the Department of Urbanism at the University of Havana (formed in 1924), Pedro Martínez Inclán had been a proponent of the Garden City model, but enthusiastically adopted the tenets of modernism in the 1940s. In 1949, Martínez Inclán modified Le Corbusier's *Athens Charter* into a new work, which he titled, *Code of Urbanism: the Athens Charter, the Havana Charter*. Martínez Inclán's *Code*

⁴⁷⁸ Sigfried Gideon, “Introduction,” in Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?*, x.

⁴⁷⁹ Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?*, 41

⁴⁸⁰ Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, 59, 61.

⁴⁸¹ Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive?*, 24.

⁴⁸² Emphasis in the original. Ibid, 36.

⁴⁸³ Hyde, *Constitutional Modernism*, 49-50,

proposed “the creation of Ministries of Urbanism ...[with] wide and well defined legal authorities...to be able to carry out the general planning [*planificación*] of the nation.”⁴⁸⁴ Writing extensively against the type of crowded, unordered construction represented by shantytowns, Martínez Inclán did not name “*barrios de indigentes*” directly, but his carefully planned city required shantytowns to end.⁴⁸⁵

With momentum on their side internationally, urban planners gradually gained technocratic authority in Cuba. Evident before 1940 in proposals such as Bay Sevilla’s Low-Cost Housing Law, the idea of urban planning was strongly supported by the 1940 Constitution and written into several articles.⁴⁸⁶ First, local municipalities were to create housing commissions “concerned with everything related to the dwellings of workers.” Additionally, “the state shall support the creation of low-cost dwellings for workers,” including legislation to promote company housing for employees.⁴⁸⁷ In 1942, following constitutional precepts, Batista established the national Pro-Urbanism Board, which operated under the mantra “better cities, better citizens.” Yet architect Horacio Navarrette expressed the frustrations of the Board in 1943, as he noted the need for sound “urbanistic legislation.”⁴⁸⁸ For Navarrette, scientific considerations prioritized concerns other than those proposed by the politicians—concerns such

⁴⁸⁴ Martínez Inclán, *Código de urbanismo*.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 18, 20.

⁴⁸⁶ Timothy Hyde has documented ways in which the 1940 Constitution outlined a corporatist vision for the role of civil society in ensuring these rights, particularly among architects, by collaborating with the state to plan national policy, Hyde, *Constitutional Modernism*, 32.

⁴⁸⁷ See articles 79 and 215 in Lazcano y Mazon, *Constitución de Cuba*.

⁴⁸⁸ Discourse of Horacio Navarrette, transcribed in Luis Bay Sevilla, “El plan de fabricación del gobierno,” *Arquitectura*, June 1943, 224-25.

as “the elimination of the so-called *barrios de indigentes*.”⁴⁸⁹ Functioning in an advisory capacity, the Board had no power with which to contest legislation.⁴⁹⁰

In the aftermath of WWII, momentum for comprehensive national planning built across the globe, linking urban planning to social and economic development. A 1948 report from the UN Social and Economic Council stated, “The problem of housing is conceptualized as the essence of the social problem.”⁴⁹¹ Within the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), of which Cuba was a founding member, Latin American economists increasingly viewed state intervention as necessary to counteract unfavorable terms of trade, stimulate local economic growth, and resolve the unemployment associated with shantytowns. On a parallel track, momentum for centralized urban and regional planning built in the Pan-American Union (PAU), which later became the Organization of American States (OAS). During WWII, American urban planner Francis Violich documented planning activities across Latin America and sought to link them to US and pan-American networks.⁴⁹² More technocrat than theorist, by the 1950s Violich criticized the ways that CIAM had subordinated urban planning to the field of architecture, and proposed greater coordination with other “technical fields,” including engineering and economics.⁴⁹³

Within Cuba, architects channeled this momentum by promoting a national planning bureaucracy whose appeal transcended ideological divides. “Had there existed a National

⁴⁸⁹ Emphasis in the original. Discourse of Horacio Navarrete, transcribed in Luis Bay Sevilla, “El plan de fabricación del gobierno,” *Arquitectura*, June 1943, 224-25.

⁴⁹⁰ In 1945, Grau's Ministry of Public Works drafted a master plan for the city, though architects complained that it was often ignored. Cuba, *El plan de obras*, 33; on disappointment with the extent of the plan, see Horacio Navarrete, “Una ley de propiedad horizontal,” *Arquitectura*, May 1948, 133.

⁴⁹¹ “La crisis de la vivienda en América Latina como parte del problema mundial,” *Arquitectura*, May 1948, 149.

⁴⁹² Violich served as Housing and City Planning Specialist at the PAU from 1945-47, and from his faculty position at the University of California at Berkeley he remained influential in Latin American urban planning throughout his career. In the 1950s, the OAS created postgraduate programs in Bogotá and Lima for training and research on social, economic, and political aspects of housing policy. Violich, *Urban Planning for Latin America*, xxi-xxii.

⁴⁹³ Violich, *Low-Cost Housing in Latin America*, iii; Chastain, “Francis Violich and the Rise and Fall of Urban Development Planning in Chile, 1956-69,” 23.

Planning Law,” argued an architect before members of Batista's cabinet in 1953, “we would not have the grave problem of scarce housing for the middle class and the neediest.”⁴⁹⁴ An editorial in the conservative *Diario de la Marina* hailed the promise of coordinated urban planning for the “betterment of living conditions.”⁴⁹⁵ “Planning,” wrote a left wing politician, “has the same utility for an economy of private initiative as it does for an integrated collectivist system of totalitarians.”⁴⁹⁶ Prior to 1959, then, urban planners and economists were converging around the idea of collective planning, carefully weighing its socialist connotations.

These measures led to the creation of a National Planning Board in 1955. Primarily composed of architects, the Board included engineers, economists, and public officials from the ministries of Public Works and Labor. Bay Sevilla did not live to see it, but legislation for comprehensive planning had finally passed. Unlike Bay Sevilla's proposed commission, however, this one had a much wider scope, focusing on all housing, not just that of the poor. And unlike the medical and criminological interventions he proposed, the commission's planners had economic and architectural concerns. The doctors who had formed part of Bay Sevilla's proposal were eliminated, and the plan lacked a clear mechanism for targeted interventions into *barrios de indigentes*.⁴⁹⁷

The Planning Board became law in 1955, promising a nation without shantytowns. In a media campaign promoting the Board, architects spoke of the potential of planning to add precision to state authority.⁴⁹⁸ An architect explained to television audiences that planning would lead to “the general development of our communities, of our people...so they won't produce

⁴⁹⁴ “Información general sobre la ley de planificación nacional,” *Arquitectura*, May 1953, 183.

⁴⁹⁵ “Urbanismo, planificación y plusvalía,” *Diario de la marina*, September 29, 1952.

⁴⁹⁶ Raúl Lorenzo, “Economía planificada,” *Bohemia*, October 19, 1952, n.p.

⁴⁹⁷ “Ley sobre planificación nacional,” *Arquitectura*, March 1955, 97-100.

⁴⁹⁸ Orlando Naranjo Marin, “Comentarios sobre la ley de planificación nacional,” *Arquitectura*, March 1955, 104-116.

barrios de indigentes.”⁴⁹⁹ The prevention of *barrios de indigentes*, both present and future, was to be achieved by coordinating industry, transportation, and housing, not by direct interventions.

The practical authority of the Board remained vague, but important domestic and international figures used it as a platform to make increasingly ambitious proposals for the nation. The Minister of Public Works was named at its head, but the Board lacked full executive authority within the government.⁵⁰⁰ To enact more serious reforms, it contracted with the architectural firm of José Lluís Sert—now president of CIAM—to draw up a new master plan for Havana. In the meantime, scholars and officials presented a wide range of proposals at the Board’s first Congress in late 1956. A presentation on housing argued that construction since 1952 had reduced the housing deficit.⁵⁰¹ Bens Arrarte presented on regional planning via the construction of agricultural cities, the urbanization of the countryside, and the elimination of *bohíos* (huts).⁵⁰² Attending from the US, the influential urban planner Francis Violich presented on controlling urban growth through regional planning, and ways to control the use of private land. Planning, all agreed, was the solution.

Planners in the fields of urbanism and economics similarly saw *barrios de indigentes* as symptoms of the insufficient regulations of the past, a problem they claimed to be on the brink of solving. A 1954 report from *Diario de la Marina* on the government’s National Plan for Action went so far as to claim that the *barrios de indigentes* had already been eliminated.⁵⁰³ Well aware that this was not true, several months later Batista explained more modestly to Congress that

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, 104.

⁵⁰⁰ Speech by Nicolás Arroyo in Angel Gutierrez Cordovi, “El Primer Congreso Nacional de Planificación,” *Arquitectura*, January 1958, 15.

⁵⁰¹ Carlos Maruri, “La Habana de 1956,” *Arquitectura*, January 1957, 39.

⁵⁰² Angel Gutierrez Cordovi, “El Primer Congreso Nacional de Planificación,” *Arquitectura*, January 1957, 8.

⁵⁰³ “Esquema del programa económico del Presidente Batista,” from *Diario de la Marina*, December 23, 1954, in Cuba, *El programa económica*, 60.

officials would “complete...the plan...to eradicate the so called ‘*barrios de indigentes*.’”⁵⁰⁴ Asked for proposals to deal with the neighborhoods, one architect joked that “I would order all the houses of indigents burned until the problem were solved.”⁵⁰⁵ The larger point was that, through planning, many intellectuals thought the root causes of shantytown housing could soon be eliminated.

Meanwhile, however, *barrios de indigentes* remained, and underserviced subdivisions grew. Writing in 1955 in *Bohemia* of rapid building in central Havana, an architect associated with the Planning Board explained that “new constructions” made without proper planning created “problems that are more grave than what it hoped to resolve.”⁵⁰⁶ In 1957, another architect explained, “Even after the creation of the National Planning Board, regulations for land plots still do not exist” leading to “the disordered growth of our cities,” and creating new “slums.”⁵⁰⁷ Yet whatever the practical shortcomings of the National Planning Board, its impact was clear. The prevention of *barrios de indigentes* was a core justification for the existence of a state planning apparatus, which claimed to hold the potential to accelerate the economic and social development of the nation. Whether or not shantytown clearance was achieved, a technocratic consensus had been institutionalized, defining them as antithetical to the planned city.

⁵⁰⁴ “Mensaje Presidencial al Honorable Congreso,” February 28, 1955, in Cuba, *El programa económica*, 71.

⁵⁰⁵ Jose Antonio Viego, “Errores urbanísticos de Marianao,” *Arquitectura*, June 1953, 252.

⁵⁰⁶ Eduardo Cañas Abril, “Indican los arquitectos como ofrecer al pueblo casas económicas,” *Bohemia*, March 13, 1955, 67.

⁵⁰⁷ The English word “slums” appears in the original. Eduardo Montouliou “El Primer Congreso Nacional de Planificación: La verdadera planificación es una sola, integral, no puede haber divorcio entre el enfoque físico, social y económico,” *Arquitectura*, August 1957, 422.

4.6 SOCIAL WORK AND THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

Despite the exclusion of doctors from the Planning Board, the drive to plan a city without shantytowns relied on medical and criminological knowledge. By the mid 1940s, there was no clear, politically feasible way to implement these conclusions on a wide scale. By the 1950s, Havana's recently created School of Social Work provided a way. More of a method than an academic field, social work offered the possibility of bringing families into line with the conclusions of social science through negotiation and persuasion. While urban planners sought to prevent the shantytowns of the future, social workers sought to address the shantytown residents of the present.

Like urban planning, social work was on the rise internationally, in part as a response to the racial science of Nazi Germany. In 1945, Cuba sent several representatives from the Board of Social Service to the first Pan-American Congress of Social Work, held in Santiago, Chile. At the conference's introductory session, an Argentine delegate explained that social work "should remain independent of biological and sociological theories, of political and social doctrines."⁵⁰⁸ "The post-war," he explained, "with its spiritual, economic, and social consequences had already shaken strongly the foundations of many of our scientific disciplines."⁵⁰⁹ In response, social workers were to act "by persuasion and not by way of authority, fraternally 'drawing near to the needy.'"⁵¹⁰

Debates at the conference reflected wider concerns for economic development, but social work was envisioned as a neutral force in ideological conflicts. Acknowledging that social work

⁵⁰⁸ Alberto Zwanck, "Contribución al tema: El servicio social en la protección a la Infancia y adolescencia" in Congreso Panamericano de Servicio Social, *Primer Congreso Panamericano*, 160.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 160.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, 161.

was designed as a female-dominated profession, a Brazilian delegate noted that a social worker could make “her influence felt in the relations between the Union and Management” by ensuring friendly negotiations.⁵¹¹ A presentation from a Peruvian delegate linked social work with land reform, prompting discussion from an Argentine delegate who declared that “property should always function for the collective.”⁵¹²

The expansion of social work in Cuba was tightly linked to efforts to combat juvenile delinquency. Cuba created a Board of Social Service in 1938, leading to the creation of the School of Social Work at the University of Havana. Officials from the Juvenile Corrections Center at Finca Torrens were involved with the creation of the school, and by 1949, the new head of the Center had been trained there.⁵¹³ In social work, then, the concerns of medical and criminological professionals for *barrios de indigentes* found new institutional backing. In 1950, social workers began to operate through a Department of Social Action within the Ministry of Health. Soon the Department began to work actively in Havana’s *barrios de indigentes*.

While their method was persuasion, not forced compliance, social workers did not break with previous approaches to juvenile delinquency. In an extensive published report on the Isla de Pinos shantytown, for instance, one social worker focused specifically on families, taking note of parents beset with “ignorance or unawareness of their obligations,” who could be improved through education.⁵¹⁴ Yet the author also spoke of “a minority” for whom action was impossible “because the parents are completely amoral and live off what the children produce for them.”

⁵¹¹ Rubens de Siqueira, “Los objetivos y las realizaciones de la División de Higiene del Trabajo del Ministerio del Trabajo, Industria y Comercio del Brasil,” in Congreso Panamericano de Servicio Social, *Primer Congreso Panamericano*, 107.

⁵¹² See Fernando Fuenzalida’s comments following María Rosari Araoz, “El Problema Rural y el Servicio Social,” in Congreso Panamericano de Servicio Social, *Primer Congreso Panamericano*, 224.

⁵¹³ Elena Mederos de González, “Antecedentes relativos a la creación de la Escuela de Servicio Social de Cuba,” *Revista de Servicio Social*, February 1949, 2-4; Antonia Valdés Perdomo, “El servicio social en el Instituto de Reeducción de Menores Varones,” *Revista de Servicio Social*, April and September 1949, 11-13.

⁵¹⁴ “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 7.

These cases required “integral juvenile legislation that would make it possible to separate” parents from children.⁵¹⁵ The report’s general conclusion was that the neighborhoods were “susceptible to modification or improvement in the majority of cases,” especially among families who lived there because of economic conditions. But such improvement was only possible with appropriate state assistance.⁵¹⁶

Internationally, meanwhile, the biological focus directed towards shantytowns in previous work on juvenile delinquency diminished gradually. A key figure behind this shift was Oscar Lewis, a US anthropologist who taught at Havana’s School of Social Work in 1945.⁵¹⁷ In 1952, Lewis published an article, “Urbanization Without Breakdown: A Case Study,” in which he argued that urbanization was not “a simple, unitary, universally similar process.”⁵¹⁸ As he studied Mexico City during the 1950s, he noted that social life took place “in small groups, within the family, within households, within neighborhoods.” Hoping to study these “smaller universes,” Lewis called for “the delineation of distinctive regions within cities.”⁵¹⁹ In 1958, Lewis presented another paper to the International Congress of Americanists in Costa Rica, where he argued that “poverty in modern nations...creates a sub-culture of its own.” “One can speak,” he wrote, “of a culture of poverty.”⁵²⁰

Partially the result of Lewis’ deep engagement with the US and Mexican academics, the idea of a “culture of poverty” carried many preexisting scientific conclusions about *barrios de indigentes*, but stripped them of their biological connotations. In dialogue with Mexican

⁵¹⁵ The claim that shantytown residents used children as beggars to supplement their incomes is supported elsewhere. See, for example, García Alonso, *Manuela*, 245-46; quoted from “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 7.

⁵¹⁶ “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 7.

⁵¹⁷ Womack, “An American in Cuba,” 1.

⁵¹⁸ Lewis, “Urbanization Without Breakdown,” 424.

⁵¹⁹ Lewis, “Further Observations on the Folk-Urban Continuum,” 502.

⁵²⁰ Lewis, “The Culture of the *Vecindad* in Mexico City,” 387.

biotypology, US cultural anthropology, and the concerns of social history, Lewis borrowed from Mexican scholars in studying disparate characteristics in individuals to draw conclusions about groups, but abandoned their biological investigations of the relationship between environment, body, and mind as racist.⁵²¹ Without mentioning medicine or psychological treatment, Lewis described characteristics as diffuse as “gregariousness,” features of post-traumatic stress, social deprivation, and deficient housing as cultural.⁵²²

Economists and housing specialists in Latin America received Lewis’ work on urban culture with interest. In 1958, Lewis coordinated a conference with Phillip Hauser, a US demographer who consulted for the UN and chaired the Social Science Research Council’s Committee on Urbanization.⁵²³ A year later, Hauser led a seminar on “Urbanization in Latin America” held in Santiago, Chile, and sponsored by several bureaus within the UN and ECLA. A relatively large delegation from Cuba attended, including engineers and architects from the Ministry of Public Works, and an engineer from the National Planning Board.⁵²⁴

Hauser and sociologist José Echevarría opened the seminar by applauding the momentum towards economic and urban planning evident in the “underdeveloped” region of Latin America. Their paper focused on economic structures but also made comments about family life amidst urbanization and, more specifically, Lewis’ work on Mexico City.⁵²⁵ Another paper presented at the seminar, authored by the UN’s Bureau of Social Affairs, outlined “policy needs for data and for research” that included the “cultural traits and aspirations” of urban populations.

⁵²¹ Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” 197; Roseblatt, “Other Americas,” 614-615.

⁵²² Roseblatt further explains, “Lewis could not integrate analysis of economic conditions and history (much less biology and the body) with attention to the psychology of the self, although he never abandoned attention to economic conditions.”

Roseblatt, “Other Americas,” 615.

⁵²³ Benmergui, “Housing Development,” 37 fn1.

⁵²⁴ In attendance from Cuba were José Morales Hernandez and Enrique Castellbí, engineers, Ministry of Public Works. José Sust Méndez, engineer, Member of the National Planning Board; professor Faculty of Engineering, Universidad de la Habana.

Enrique de Jongh, Manuel Gutiérrez García, and Daniel Alvarez del Río, architects, Ministry of Public Works. Luis Sisto Guerra, architect, Municipality of Havana. Hauser, *Urbanization in Latin America*, 325.

⁵²⁵ J. Medina Echevarría, and Phillip Hauser, “Rapporteurs’ Report,” in *Ibid*, 34-46, 49, 58.

“Sociological or anthropological investigations of specific social classes, occupational groups, or neighborhoods in the cities,” it noted, “are only beginning to appear.”⁵²⁶

By 1959, then, evolving concerns for economic and urban development in Latin America were actively synthesized with a new agenda to explore the urban poor in cultural terms. Like Bay Sevilla’s work before, the seminar represented the fusion of structuralist and progressive tendencies towards the goal of national development, and for the Cuban delegation it came at a time of new possibilities for urban policy. In Havana, revolution was in full swing.

4.7 A NEW MAN

On the early morning of January 1, 1959, Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba. With the army defeated and demoralized, and the moderate opposition stifled, state power was transferred to an unlikely group of young guerrilla fighters, who rode into the capital on a wave of optimism that resonated across the globe. As the new leaders embraced radical change in some arenas, however, they also resurrected the Batista government’s disrupted shantytown initiatives, which relied on old lines of thought. Social workers soon returned to *barrios de indigentes*, and leaders framed their new initiatives by synthesizing concerns for national development with reforms targeting the culture of individuals. Soon, the cultural reform of shantytown residents was associated with the success of the Revolution.

Former Batista official Eduardo Anderson shaped shantytown policy during the early Revolution, and he declared shantytowns to be sites of hereditary physical deficiency. From

⁵²⁶ Bureau of Social Affairs, United Nations, “Some Policy Implications of Urbanization,” in *Ibid*, 297.

within the National Housing Commission, Anderson wrote a report on “Crime in the *barrios de indigentes*,” in which he referenced previous work on Cuban shantytowns and criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso, to make a case for relocation. *Barrios de indigentes*, he wrote, contained “all the environmental factors that classically signify those who are descendants of, and predisposed to crime.” The individuals in those areas, he continued, were “genetically constituted according to the laws of heredity...[and] the physical conditions of the parents.”⁵²⁷ Even as he noted that the neighborhoods produced many virtuous inhabitants, he hinted at racial mixture as a factor behind criminal degeneration. Criminality, he explained, was “especially marked in those abandoned human groupings in which the darkest colors intermix with the most beautiful tonalities of life.”⁵²⁸ He defined most shantytown residents as “conquered,” timid, incapable of finding jobs or solutions for themselves. “But once the solution is found,” he quoted a social worker in agreement, “they feel motivated by the work.”⁵²⁹

For Anderson, the deficiencies of neighborhood residents justified comprehensive initiatives for their social welfare. The report outlined a plan for the “social advancement” of *barrios de indigentes* that was largely similar to what was later initiated by the newly formed Ministry of Social Welfare in 1960. Anderson’s plan proposed to build new homes, schools, recreational facilities, community centers, and a Department of Maintenance, reinforcing “self-help and mutual aid.”⁵³⁰ (The phrase later became the title for Cuba’s slum relocation program.) He also proposed offering full employment for the neighborhoods, including for women who might be heads of families, in order to eliminate crime.⁵³¹

⁵²⁷The report was published between 1959-1960. Anderson, *La delincuencia en los barrios de indigentes*, 4.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

⁵³¹ *Ibid*, 14-15.

While these proposals resonated with other housing officials, Anderson's conclusions on physical degeneracy conflicted with some of the core messages of the new regime. Publicity from the Ministry of Social Welfare quickly shifted away from labeling residents as physically deficient, even as it carried out policy solutions for a number of shantytowns across the island similar to what Anderson proposed. Whereas Anderson highlighted the inherited and learned criminality of residents as a justification for reform, Ministry literature now denounced efforts to label residents as "criminals, impossible to reincorporate into a dignified social existence." "Far from alarming," it stated "the physical and moral configuration of the residents offered hope for their revolutionary civic action."⁵³² After visiting the Las Yaguas shantytown in 1961, Oscar Lewis echoed this optimism before audiences in the US. "It was clear that the people were still desperately poor," he wrote, "but I found much less of the feelings of despair, apathy, and hopelessness that are so diagnostic of urban slums in the culture of poverty."⁵³³ Aligned with Lewis' focus on culture, not biology, Cuban anthropologists conducted studies of Las Yaguas that were deeply influenced by his new book, *Children of Sánchez*, which had become an international best seller. Fidel Castro called the book "revolutionary," and during the late 1960s, two books would be published within Cuba modeled on Lewis' ethnographic techniques.⁵³⁴

The shift in tone was significant.⁵³⁵ For Anderson, state intervention was required to uplift residents from physical, moral, and cultural deficiency. For the Ministry and for Lewis, however, those deficiencies were rooted in an old, discriminatory social structure. As residents accepted a new, inclusive society they would be freed from the burdens of their history. By this

⁵³² Cuba, *Con los Pobres*, n.p.

⁵³³ Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," 194.

⁵³⁴ Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, ix; Calderón, *Amparo*; García Alonso, *Manuela*.

⁵³⁵ The shift was not uniform—for example, a report from outside the Ministry still referred to Las Yaguas as a center of sickness and vice in late 1961. See Rafael Sánchez Lalebret, "Construyan veinte repartos para erradicar los barrios insalubres," *Bohemia*, November 19 1961, 34-37.

formulation, doing work for the Revolution was evidence of social redemption, already achieved. Between a picture of shantytown children in rags and a clean, modern new neighborhood, publicity from the Ministry of Social Welfare boasted, “What a people can do when it has faith in its government.”⁵³⁶

None of these changes implied the elimination of “indigence” as a category of difference; instead, the category was renamed and redefined in political terms. For government officials as much as for Lewis, problems remained in classifying ongoing behaviors associated with *barrios de indigentes*. For his part, Lewis failed to develop a conceptual framework for poverty in a socialist system. In one of his essays, for example, he stated, “I am inclined to believe that the culture of poverty does not exist in the socialist countries” but argued that its elimination would “take more than a single generation,” even under “a socialist revolution.” The essay concluded that the culture of poverty “tends to decline” in socialist countries.⁵³⁷ Meanwhile, according to *Juventud Rebelde*, despite the government’s “redemptive labor” in relocating shantytown residents to a new neighborhood in Santiago de Cuba, “antisocial conduct” continued. Children wandered the streets without going to school, while the community center, designed for “educational activities to raise the cultural level of residents,” was closed. Even worse, the residents were building crude shacks as additions to their homes. “A new society cannot permit the existence of this type of antisocial outbreak,” it concluded.⁵³⁸ Even as official rhetoric emphasized shantytown residents’ full inclusion in the revolutionary project, that inclusion was premised on traditional social norms.

⁵³⁶ Cuba, *Con los Pobres*, n.p.

⁵³⁷ Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” 194, 199.

⁵³⁸ “El poder local contra una conducta antisocial,” *Juventud Rebelde*, August 10, 1966, 8.

These complexities notwithstanding, the rhetoric was powerful. Efforts at cultural reform in shantytowns blended with larger plans to promote national economic development through a system of moral rather than material incentives. “To build communism, a new man must be created simultaneously with the material base,” wrote Ernesto “Che” Guevara in 1965.⁵³⁹ In the meantime, as the National Planning Board was being reconfigured, Cuban architects discussed ambitious structural proposals along lines developed in the 1950s. Through regional planning, they hoped to align the distribution of the population with new plans for industrial development, and in the process, solve areas they now called “*barrios insalubres* (unhealthy neighborhoods)”⁵⁴⁰ Along lines begun by planners in the 1950s, the revolutionary government labeled resistance from shantytowns as a vestige of past flaws. In the process, concerns for national development and individual consciousness were linked.

4.8 CONCLUSION

From the work of Luis Bay Sevilla to the early years of the 1959 Revolution, the scattered conclusions of social scientists who studied urban poverty embodied the promises and the perils of state reform. By the time of the Cuban Revolution, urban poverty was not limited to material deficiency but had also become a discrete social category, constructed by dense layers of medical and criminological studies. These studies sought to understand the physical, environmental, and social characteristics of poor people in order to better address their needs and better incorporate them into the dominant norms of urban society—in many cases with little concern for the

⁵³⁹ Guevara, “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba,” 228; Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 95-97.

⁵⁴⁰ Unión Internacional de Arquitectos, *La arquitectura*, 37-38.

demands of the people themselves. By reaching out to residents of the city whose lives had often been marked by the absence of any state protection, the welfare initiatives they proposed could be a blessing. Yet by reconfiguring established social and racial cleavages according to formal scientific language, those initiatives could also be a curse.

As recognized emblems of urban poverty, the informal neighborhoods that came to be known as *barrios de indigentes* were at the center of scientific discussions of poverty's impact on individuals and the nation. Recognizing the conclusions of medical professionals and criminologists, urban planners and economists saw such neighborhoods as chaos in the midst of a city where they hoped to create order. Concerns for shantytowns therefore shaped master plans for Havana, regional plans for the country, and development strategies for the nation. As these types of plans gained momentum internationally during the early years of the Cuban Revolution, progressive fears of urban degeneration mingled with socialist faith in the potential of technocratic planning. In the resulting synthesis, improving the culture of poor people became a national goal. The Revolution marked a geopolitical rupture; yet the revolutionary government remained committed to well-established tenets of national development.

In the midst of continuity and change, however, the government did not implement its plans exactly as it hoped. Instead, the directives of scientific planning met the actions of shantytown residents, property owners, tenants, landlords, and investors in Havana. All of them confronted state initiatives with ideas of their own.

5.0 A CONSTRUCTIVE REVOLUTION: RENT CONTROL AND PRIVATE INVESTMENT IN HAVANA'S HOUSING MARKET, 1939-1963

The tenants of 143 Campanario Street in the Los Sitios neighborhood of central Havana paid between \$4.5 and \$8 pesos for their rooms, normal prices in 1944. While none of them was without work, their job titles indicated the sort of partial, irregular employment that was normal, too: carpenter, painter, bricklayer, “household chores,” or simply “employed.” They paid their rent, however, and had receipts to prove it. Each month, they turned money over to a principal tenant who managed their building—34 separate dwellings, home to 37 separate families, divided within what was once listed as a single address.⁵⁴¹

Overcrowded, the tenants were also insecure. In what they suspected was a coordinated scheme, the owner obtained an eviction ruling against the principal tenant on the pretext that he rented the building alone. He justified the move by planning to make what tenants called “fictitious renovations,” possibly to raise rents later. More, they claimed the manager hid the ruling for months. Now, with eviction impending, they took the matter to court. Claiming that the proceedings threatened “public order,” and that “there will not be a single tenant among us that is able to find a house to move into,” the tenants sued by referencing recent presidential decrees. “What we cannot tolerate, and what this respected court cannot allow,” they wrote, “is

⁵⁴¹ Denuncia de Luis Soto Montes et al., 17 October 1944, Legajo 254, Expediente 80, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

that *señor* Espinosa publicly threatens us...saying he has nothing to do with the changes in governments or the current laws.”⁵⁴²

To explain the overcrowding and informal employment represented at 143 Campanario, studies of the Republic agree that high rates of private construction, especially in the capital, combined with almost nonexistent public housing, while landlords often circumvented rent control policies.⁵⁴³ Along similar lines, scholars have noted the overrepresentation of Afrodescendants in deficiently housed areas, blaming economic inequality and discrimination.⁵⁴⁴ Together, these conclusions support a general thesis that spatial inequality in the Republic resulted from unchecked private initiative, sharply contrasting with the nationalized housing sector following 1959. While these studies accurately highlight aspects of Havana’s housing sector, they have not systematically investigated the history of key aspects of public policy: rent control and mortgage regulations. More, they have not accounted for the ways these policies shaped the type of legal activism evident at 143 Campanario. Beyond Cuba, studies of such policies have revealed their importance, both as a social benefit and in exacerbating social cleavages.⁵⁴⁵ How did private property interact with public policy in Havana? What was the impact of this interaction on the political system? And how did interaction between public and private initiative in the Republic shape the policies of the revolutionary government?

This chapter calls into question the strict dichotomy between private and public housing initiatives. Like the tenants of 143 Campanario, many residents of Greater Havana saw housing as a component of urban citizenship, leading policy makers to pass and strengthen rent control

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 74-76, 94; Fernández Núñez, *La Vivienda en Cuba*, 65-72; del Toro González, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 127-30; Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 19-21.

⁵⁴⁴ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 110-15; Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 225.

⁵⁴⁵ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

legislation for tenants of all social classes. As a way to stimulate construction in the meantime, they offered incentives for private construction. As social divisions in new constructions widened, they began to regulate the mortgage market as well. I argue that, as a result of these interventions, the legal and political systems became central arenas to determine who had rights to what housing, reinforcing both the language of citizenship and widespread calls for the state to solve deficient conditions. One component of this language was a discourse around morality, a term that was written into the 1940 Constitution and shaped housing policies. As private developers collaborated with public institutions, this language served as a platform for social and racial discrimination, leading to new inequalities, which reinforced criticism of the state. Policy reforms during the early years of the Revolution reflected these pressures and sought to eliminate conflicts around housing. As the revolutionary government nationalized the housing sector, it did so on lines that had little to do with geopolitics and much to do with political dynamics that developed during the Republic.

Although the legal and political circumstances of shantytown neighborhoods were not directly connected to these dynamics, they served as an important point of reference in housing debates. As the appropriate role of the state in housing became a central point of contention between property owners and tenants, who together comprised the vast majority of people in the capital, shantytown housing served as evidence of state failure on all sides. Debates over shantytowns therefore mapped onto heated political debates about housing across Havana, lending visibility to neighborhoods like Las Yaguas and making their elimination an increasingly important political task.

The chapter begins by analyzing the political dynamics of rent control leading up to 1945. It continues by analyzing the impact of rent control in practice and the ways conflicts

around housing blended racial classifications into the language of housing and morality. It then discusses the ways that such language combined with state policy in the housing market, and examines the relative lack of public housing in the Republic. Finally, it traces these multiple dynamics across two political shifts: first, Fulgencio Batista's reforms (1952-58) and, second, the housing legislation of the revolutionary government until 1963.

5.1 RENT CONTROL

In the three decades preceding the 1959 Revolution, the relationship between tenants and landlords played an outsized role in urban popular politics, shaping debates over the meaning of citizenship. Between 1920 and 1958, Greater Havana grew in absolute and relative terms, maintaining an extremely high rate of tenancy as increasing portions of the urban population lived in subdivided, substandard housing. As the urban popular classes gained new footholds in the political system following 1933, two interconnected promises on housing characterized popular campaigns: first, that the state enact new legislation for the protection of tenants in their existing homes, and, second, that it should promote expanded housing construction to provide new and better homes. In 1939, Congress acted on the first promise, passing legislation to control rents throughout the country. Yet the legislation sustained attacks from a property lobby, which also deployed the language of citizenship and characterized state regulations as an infringement of their rights. As a concession, the government took action around its second promise by offering incentives to the private housing market.

During these years, the search for adequate housing became increasingly competitive, and many faced deteriorating conditions. Population growth played a role. After the 1920s,

Greater Havana's population increased from 728,500 people in 1931 to 1,361,600 in 1958. From 12.6 percent of the national population in 1919, Greater Havana held 20.9 percent of all Cubans by 1958.⁵⁴⁶ As Havana grew, the vast majority of its population rented their homes—in 1943, 92 percent of families in Havana City and 86 percent of families in Greater Havana were renters.⁵⁴⁷ Underlying these features of the city was a growing density within the housing stock. Between 1919 and 1953 the number of dwelling units per building in Havana province increased, while the number of people per dwelling decreased in Greater Havana, indicating a tendency to subdivide homes and buildings into greater numbers of dwelling units for smaller families.⁵⁴⁸

The trauma of mass evictions surrounding the 1933 Revolution fueled widespread demands for tenant protections, leading to the passage of rent control legislation. During his brief first government, Grau temporarily suspended evictions by way of decree.⁵⁴⁹ In 1936, citing a “multitude of profit-seeking property owners and sub-renters,” who threatened to create “grave conflict” with the popular classes, the House of Representatives passed a bill limiting rents to pre-1936 levels.⁵⁵⁰ The bill died in the Senate, but momentum for housing reform continued. Incoming Havana mayor Beruff Mendieta made the issue central to his 1936 campaign.⁵⁵¹ Writing on behalf of the campaign, Afro-Cuban activist Gustavo Urrutia saw rent controls and measures preventing racial discrimination in housing as “minimal points for a municipal

⁵⁴⁶ Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 120.

⁵⁴⁷ Cuba, *Censo 1943*, 1010-11.

⁵⁴⁸ Cuba, *Census 1919*, 762; Cuba, *Censos 1953*, 1, 206, 210.

⁵⁴⁹ In 1933, Grau declared a temporary moratorium on evictions, which the US State Department declared to be the result of the “propaganda of another revolutionary committee, viz ‘pro tenants,’ organized to oppose ejection by violence.” Sumner Welles to Secretary of State, 25 October 1933, RG84/804.4/191, USNA.

⁵⁵⁰ Carlos M. Palma, “Proposición de ley sobre los alquileres,” *Alerta*, May 27, 1936, 15.

⁵⁵¹ Antonio Beruff Mendieta, “Al pueblo y al cuerpo electoral del término municipal de la Habana,” in Beruff Mendieta, *Hacia una Habana mejor*, 45.

agenda.”⁵⁵² In the midst of a populist turn, then-Colonel Fulgencio Batista also included rent control in his 1938 minimum legislative program.⁵⁵³

In March 1939, the Senate conceded, but with its own conditions. New legislation sponsored by Batista’s ally, Senator Carlos Saladrigas, passed and was quickly approved in the House of Representatives.⁵⁵⁴ Congressional wrangling had changed the law, however, which, among other things, stopped short of imposing penalties on infracting landlords as previous measures had proposed. Still, the law froze rents for all buildings constructed prior to 1937 at their 1937 levels, while rents for tenement houses (*ciudadelas*, *casas de vecindad* and *solares*) were to be reduced by 25 percent from their 1939 levels.⁵⁵⁵

The delay in the Senate was the result of an increasingly well-organized lobby of property owners, who saw rent controls as an infringement on their rights. Seeking political unity in 1934, urban property associations across the country formed the National Federation of Property to organize against tenants who “threaten a new attack on the rights of property with their absurd ambitions.”⁵⁵⁶ Urban property owners were a socially heterogeneous group, and their association linked a variety of urban organizations. While some commanded relatively modest means, others were architects, engineers, Rotary and Lions Club members, members of the Chamber of Commerce, and congressmen. One of the Federation’s directors, Raúl de Cárdenas, became Vice President of the Republic in 1944.⁵⁵⁷ Eddy Chibás, a rising political star

⁵⁵² Gustavo Urrutia, “Puntos para un programa municipal mínimo,” in Beruff Mendieta, *Hacia una Habana mejor*, 65-66.

⁵⁵³ The program suggested a reduction of rents according to their value, up to 30 percent for the lowest priced rental units, as well as penalties for landlords who violated the law. Edward Lawton to Secretary of State, 14 December 1938, RG84/850.2/1439, USNA.

⁵⁵⁴ Edward Lawton to Secretary of State, 6 March 1939, RG84/850.2/1737 USNA; Edward Lawton to Secretary of State, 25 March 1939, RG84/850.2/1810, USNA.

⁵⁵⁵ Cuba, *Ley de Alquileres*, 3-5.

⁵⁵⁶ Bartolome S. Padilla, “Frente único,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, November 1934, 1.

⁵⁵⁷ “Síntesis del desenvolvimiento del Congreso,” in Congreso Nacional de la Propiedad, *Memoria*, 12.

in the Auténtico party, also featured in its membership.⁵⁵⁸ Yet despite these powerful members, they lacked the popular support necessary to have a determinative influence on controversial issues like rent control.

This did not prevent them from mounting opposition, however, and they centered their message on the importance of private property as a foundation for citizenship. Speaking to Congress in 1939, Raúl de Cárdenas declared that, “as egotistical as they want to portray us,” the interests of the Federation were linked “to public interest, to general wellbeing, to the future of the nation.” Rent controls, he claimed, restricted free contracts and were “anti-democratic.”⁵⁵⁹ Another member presented a paper entitled, “Private property constitutes the genesis of the nation,” stating that laws “favoring...sometimes certain social sectors, sometimes others...incite the emigration of men and riches, which is the first symptom of the disintegration of a people.”⁵⁶⁰ Along similar lines, Ernesto Pujals used a term in wide circulation, claiming that rent control would “condemn the rest of society to indigence” by halting economic progress.⁵⁶¹ For the property lobby, rent control threatened the content of citizenship, even as its proponents claimed to protect it.

In response to the property owners’ campaign, the 1939 Senate legislation conceded a component of their demands that aligned with popular will: incentives for private housing construction. While rent controls remained untouched, the law supported the larger principle that “the problem of rents” should be solved through market mechanisms, and “laws of supply and

⁵⁵⁸ Eduardo Chibás, “El problema del agua en la Habana,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, May 1938, 10.

⁵⁵⁹ Raúl de Cárdenas, “Exposición que dirige al Congreso de la República el Centro de la Prop Urbana de la Habana sobre el proyecto de Ley de Alquileres,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, March 1939, 7.

⁵⁶⁰ Salaya y de la Fuente, “La propiedad privada constituye la génesis de la nacionalidad,” 6.

⁵⁶¹ Ernesto Pujals, “Rebaja de alquileres,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, October 1938, 5.

demand.”⁵⁶² Supported by economists such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, the law only passed after including substantial tax exemptions for constructions completed within two years—constructions that would not initially be subject to controlled rents.⁵⁶³ For periods of 5-10 years upon completion, new constructions were exempted from construction permit fees and all property taxes, and had their water payments reduced by 33 percent.⁵⁶⁴ The exemptions were extensive enough to cause worry among municipal officials.⁵⁶⁵

By linking rent controls to tax exemptions, the Senate’s legislation undermined the property owners’ central argument to politicians, since housing construction accelerated with its passage.⁵⁶⁶ It also divided their interests. Property owners pointed out that the exemptions were favorable to those wealthy enough to invest in new constructions, sacrificing “the property owners of old, the poor property owners...to the benefit of rich property owners.”⁵⁶⁷ Yet a report in *El Sol* stated that “the best of the Rent Law, what makes it most acceptable even to the property owners themselves,” was that “constructions have risen considerably.”⁵⁶⁸ By 1940, a report indicated that 1,200 homes in Havana were exempt from property taxes, a number that

⁵⁶² Ducassi Mendieta quoted in Bartolome Padilla, “Sigue el tema de la rebaja de alquileres,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, October 1938, 3.

⁵⁶³ Rent levels for new constructions were later controlled in 1944 and 1945 and 1949 legislation, but these rents were initially established at market rates much higher than the central-city buildings affected by the first rent control law. Cuba, *Ley de Alquileres*, 13-31.

⁵⁶⁴ Cuba, *Ley de Alquileres*, 8.

⁵⁶⁵ Upon the law’s passage Beruff Mendieta voiced his support but noted that municipal revenues have been disrupted. “El ritmo de la ida administrativa municipal perturbado por la Ley de Alquileres, así lo declara el alcalde Beruff Mendieta,” *Diario de la Marina*, April 4, 1939, 1.

⁵⁶⁶ “Aumenta la Ley de Alquileres la construcción,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 1, 1940, 1; “Han construido, por la Ley de Alquileres, mil 200 casas,” *El Crisol*, 28 August 1940, 3.

⁵⁶⁷ Julio Alvarez Arcos, “Banquete conmemorativo del 60 aniversario de la fundación del Centro de la Propiedad Urbana de la Habana. 1881-1941,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, September 1941, 27.

⁵⁶⁸ “Ley de Alquileres,” *El Sol*, November 30, 1940.

would continue to grow.⁵⁶⁹ The law was initially slated to last for two years, but Congress extended it until 1944, including the tax exemptions.⁵⁷⁰

National politicians listened closely to the property lobby, but regarding rent control they remained firm. Speaking before a somewhat hostile assembly of property owners after issuing a new decree in 1945, President Ramón Grau began his speech by acknowledging that any form of government intervention in rents would make the owners “cry.”⁵⁷¹ Prior to the 1944 presidential elections, Batista did what Congress would not, freeing the rent control issue from wider compromises. Against rising, almost hysterical opposition from property owners to another congressional extension of the 1939 rent controls, a wide array of local unions and neighborhood groups mobilized.⁵⁷² Amid rumors of a rent hike as high as 40 percent, many called for action from Batista.⁵⁷³ Seizing the issue from Congress in March 1944, the administration extended the 1939 law indefinitely through a presidential decree. Unlike the existing legislation, the decree included penalties for violating landlords. More significantly, and with construction on the rise, the decree abandoned previous tax incentives for new construction.⁵⁷⁴ Upon taking office, Grau strengthened the measures further through two new decrees.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁶⁹ According to Chailloux, 1,356 new houses were constructed in the two-year period. “1,200 casas de la Habana están exentas de tributos por la Ley de Alquileres,” *Alerta*, November 28 1940; Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 109.

⁵⁷⁰ Charles H. Ducoté, “Rent Adjustment Law Extended for an Additional Period of One Year,” 2 April 1943, RG84/850.2/633, USNA.

⁵⁷¹ “Discurso del Hon. Sr. Presidente de la República, Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín,” in Congreso Nacional de la Propiedad, *Memoria*, 27.

⁵⁷² “Interesan medidas del gobierno contra el agio y prorroga de la Ley de Alquileres,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 4, 1944, 8.

⁵⁷³ “Oposición a un nuevo aumento de alquileres,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 20, 1944, 1, 4.

⁵⁷⁴ Decree 804 of 1944 was drafted by the War Economy Board and justified as an emergency war measure. It clarified that dwellings controlled by the 1939 legislation would be held to their 1937 prices, regardless of whether or not they changed tenants. It also made evictions for non-payment more difficult. In a concession to property owners, Batista’s decree allowed rents to rise by 10 percent annually, but Grau overrode the increase after it came into effect in 1945. Cuba, *Ley de Alquileres*, 21, 23; “El Régimen Oficial de los Precios,” *ORPA*, October 1944, 7.

⁵⁷⁵ These were also drafted by the War Economy Board. The first suspended the annual 10 percent rent hikes, and the second allowed tenants to pay their outstanding rents after a sentence of eviction had been reached. “La Junta de Economía eleva a Grau la Ley de Alquileres,” *Noticias de Hoy*, January 27, 1945, 1; “Confirma la ORPA la noticia exclusiva de Hoy sobre congelación de los alquileres,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 14, 1945, 1.

In 1939, then, rents were officially frozen for all previously existing dwellings, generating a political dynamic in which measures favoring tenants were balanced by measures encouraging investment in private construction. In the years that followed, what property owners labeled a radical, demagogic measure became an inviolable pillar of democratic politics. For property owners, overturning the law became a focal point for debates about urban citizenship.

5.2 RENT CONTROL IN PRACTICE, 1939-1945

Rent control laws were strong in practice, decisively shaping occupancy disputes throughout the city. As conflicts among landlords, managers, tenants, and subtenants landed in court, rent controls expanded the role of the legal system in the lives of the urban poor. The result was that many *habaneros* came to view housing as a right, whose protection they demanded from politicians. And while property owners claimed that rent controls violated the norms of urban citizenship, tenants countered that reasonably priced housing was an essential component of that citizenship. As property owners and professional managers created ingenious ways to circumvent rent laws and harass tenants, however, housing conditions deteriorated in the central city, leading both to emphasize the failure of the government.

The available evidence indicates that rent controls were effective in limiting evictions and somewhat effective in stabilizing rental prices. Based on statistical compilations, several authors have estimated that 60-70,000 evictions took place annually in Havana, within a total urban rental stock of about 460,000 units. This would mean that nearly 15 percent of renters faced

eviction proceedings each year.⁵⁷⁶ There was more to the story than these numbers suggest, however. First, the vast majority of cases likely did not result in eviction. While citywide data is unavailable, in 1951 the Department of Evictions from the National Federation of Property's Havana chapter reported filing 1,753 suits across the city in the previous year, suits they claimed to pursue for their members based on "vast experience" and deep knowledge of eviction law.⁵⁷⁷ Of these cases, 146, or eight percent, were carried out.⁵⁷⁸ In other words, in 1950, 92 percent of eviction cases brought to trial by a department of lawyers specializing in eviction law resulted in no eviction. The percentage for the city as a whole was likely higher. And while rents did rise over the period when the decrees were in effect, overall estimates indicate that they either rose less than 10 percent, or in another study held steady as a percentage of family income for middle-income and poor Cubans between 1934-1952, despite the growing density of the city.⁵⁷⁹

Aside from its material impact, rent control placed the legal system at the center of occupancy disputes. The volume of litigation increased because of rent control, not in spite of it. Citing a recent decree favoring tenants in 1949, a property owner explained that it would be logical to expect evictions to diminish, "but since everything concerning rent legislation...has no logic...eviction cases [*desahucios*] have risen...which never result in evictions [*lanzamientos*],

⁵⁷⁶ Hamberg claims that "70,000 evictions a year were ordered...out of an urban rental stock of 460,000 units." Ibarra claims that in 1952, "60,000 eviction cases were handled in the courts of Havana alone, despite a rent freeze." I have not located the data used for either of these claims. Ibarra cites no source for the 1952 number, and I have been unable to locate several sources included in Hamberg's citation. Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 21; Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution*, 166.

⁵⁷⁷ In 1940, Havana's Center for Urban Property noted such difficulties in securing evictions that it formed a Department of Evictions to coordinate legal strategy among property owners, helping them navigate the formidable paperwork securing the removal of a tenant might require. "Actividades realizados de 1939," *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, January 1940.

⁵⁷⁸ "Actividades del Centro de la Propiedad Urbana de la Habana durante el año 1950," *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, February 1951, 23.

⁵⁷⁹ The US State Department noted in 1950, "Rentals at present are from \$5 to \$10 per month per room, having risen over a ten year period from a range of \$2 to \$5." The Cuban Economic Research Project, *A Study on Cuba*, 434; R.M. Connell, Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba, 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA, 4; Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution*, 165.

but do produce an excess of work.”⁵⁸⁰ An example of what this work might entail, tenant Pedro Raurell generated several eviction suits as he moved between rooms in a single building. Initially, he sub-rented his apartment from a principal tenant but fell behind in his payments. When faced with eviction proceedings, he moved voluntarily to a room rented out by a different tenant, where he faced additional eviction proceedings filed against the room’s previous occupant. In response, he claimed the landlord was violating rent laws.⁵⁸¹

Eviction proceedings were therefore frequent, but they served a variety of purposes other than the actual removal of tenants. A collection of 1958 eviction cases in Guanabacoa for nonpayment reveals that many tenants used what was normally a more than one-month gap between an eviction sentence and a forcible eviction to pay outstanding rents. Even when these evictions were carried out, the result was often that tenants stayed several months in an apartment without paying.⁵⁸² And for tenants who refused to pay more to their landlords than they were obligated to under rent control measures, one tactic was to pay less than the requested amount, forcing landlords to press the issue in court. Speaking to inspectors, for example, property manager Fausto Wong claimed that he had fined a disgruntled tenant for breaking a window, after which she refused to pay rent. When confronted with eviction, she eventually paid and stayed in the apartment. As she did, however, she filed her own suit, later dismissed, claiming that Wong raised the rent illegally.⁵⁸³ In another case, a judge evicted a tenant who had

⁵⁸⁰ “Actividades del Centro de la Propiedad Urbana de la Habana durante el año 1948,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, February 1949, 19-20.

⁵⁸¹ Jefe de la Policía Judicial to the Presidente de la Sala 5a de lo Criminal, 8 February 1945, Legajo 262, Expediente 34, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁸² Desahucios, octubre, noviembre y diciembre 1958, (Without number), Documentos pre-clasificados, AMMG.

⁵⁸³ Ulpiano Suarez to Jefe de la Sección de Inv. de la ORPA, 6 Sept 1944, Legajo 258, Expediente 42, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

withheld his entire rent to protest an increase demanded by the owner, but noted that if the tenant had continued to pay the stipulated price, he would have been protected.⁵⁸⁴

Property owners frequently challenged the validity of the laws in court, but judges affirmed the basic authority of the state to regulate rental prices on the basis of the “social function of property” provision of the 1940 Constitution.⁵⁸⁵ Inconsistent rulings were frequent, but centered on technicalities. Ruling in favor of a tenant who claimed that the landlord had collected rent beyond what was proscribed by the law, for example, a judge cited the 1940 Constitution as he ordered the excess rent returned to the tenant. “There is no doubt regarding the applicability of these much-touted laws,” he stated.⁵⁸⁶ Meanwhile another judge refused to order the return of money to a tenant in a similar case.⁵⁸⁷ Yet he did not deny the baseline authority of the rent decrees to regulate rental prices. As disputes between left- and right- wing judges grew heated, there was little dispute about the basic validity of rent control.

The strength of the rent laws was real enough that landlords devised ways to circumvent them, which they did by harassing tenants, hiring professional managers, allowing buildings to fall into disrepair, and disguising rent hikes by subdividing properties and creating new “rooms” through complex sub-tenancy arrangements.⁵⁸⁸ One tenant claimed that his landlord “has raised the rents, alleging that the...law-decree is unconstitutional,” while threatening to “throw us out onto the street.”⁵⁸⁹ Other tenants stated that their landlord illegally turned off the water supply to pressure them to leave.⁵⁹⁰ Most rent increases were hidden under sub-tenancy arrangements, however. Inspectors found that Fausto Wong charged a total of 57 pesos to various sub-tenants

⁵⁸⁴ Eduardo Nuñez, “Consignación,” *Repertorio Judicial*, July 1946, 134.

⁵⁸⁵ Jesse Horst, “Shantytown Revolution,” 703.

⁵⁸⁶ Juan Moré “Precio legal de arrendamiento,” *Repertorio Judicial*, February 1946, 36.

⁵⁸⁷ Eduardo Nuñez, “Arrendamiento,” *Repertorio Judicial*, May 1946, 101.

⁵⁸⁸ For an elaboration on such methods, see Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 116.

⁵⁸⁹ Denuncia de Juan Carrera, 7 February 1945, Legajo 268, Expediente 37, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹⁰ See Legajo 276, Expedientes 29-33, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

of a single apartment for which he only paid a total of 30 pesos monthly.⁵⁹¹ According to one of those sub-tenants, Wong “has worked for a long time in capriciously raising the price of the rents,” making “illegal profits.”⁵⁹² For his part, Wong claimed, “it is simply the best way to keep paying ... the property owner,” and that he raised the rent after clearing out pool tables.⁵⁹³ Other property managers operated on a much wider scale. In 1944, sub-tenants complained that a principal tenant contracted with the infamous slumlord Ernesto Sarrá, who quickly subdivided the rooms with “unhealthy plywood [*cartón*], dividing the rooms into two or more apartments, which he rented to distinct people.”⁵⁹⁴ According to *Noticias de Hoy*, by 1940 Sarrá had taken control of numerous properties in Havana, leaving poor families across the city with “the permanent threat of being tossed out to the street hanging over their heads.”⁵⁹⁵

Poor tenants’ deep engagement with the legal process was revealed in the months following Batista’s 1944 decree. The decree gave them new rights to sue their landlords for violations of the rent laws, and tenants brought numerous cases to trial. In all cases that I have located in Cuba’s National Archive, judges ruled against tenants. The Supreme Court later found the specific provision of the decree that allowed for such suits to be unconstitutional.⁵⁹⁶ For

⁵⁹¹ Ulpiano Suarez to Jefe de la Sección de Inv. de la ORPA, 6 Sept 1944, Legajo 258, Expediente 42, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹² Erestina Valdes to Sr. Jefe del Departamento Legal y de Fiscalización de la ORPA, 19 July 1944, Legajo 258, Expediente 42, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹³ Ulpiano Suarez to Jefe de la Sección de Inv. de la ORPA, 6 Sept 1944, Legajo 258, Expediente 42, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹⁴ Jefe de la Policía Judicial to Presidente de la Sala Quinta, 12 Feb 1945, Legajo 260, Expediente 28, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹⁵ “Las tragedias de nuestro pueblo,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 12 1940, 1.

⁵⁹⁶ As rent laws changed in 1944 and 1945, detailed court records were preserved for some cases in the Urgency Court. These cases resulted from tenants suing their landlords for fines, using Batista’s 1944 decree. The courts rejected all such suits, however. Government inspectors and the first instance courts referred such cases to the Tribunal de Urgencia, where judges refused to enforce that portion of the decree. By 1945, the court issued an opinion that it applied to all suits, denying the legitimacy of such fines. The Supreme Court confirmed the unconstitutionality of that portion of the decree. Therefore, none of the cases mentioned below resulted in penalties assessed against landlords; yet in seeking these penalties, tenants presented records of the proceedings and strategies of previous suits.

On bureaucratic conflicts surrounding the rent hikes, see Eugene Desvernine, “Cuban Government Enacts Decrees Restricting Landlord’s Right of Eviction,” 2 February 1945, RG84/850.2/56, USNA. On the Urgency Court’s decision about landlord penalties, Sala de Vacaciones, “Sentencias y Autos; Sentencia 313,” *Repertorio Judicial* 1946, 286.

several months, however, tenants aggressively confronted landlord violations, with the help of judicial inspectors. Suing his landlord from Santo Suárez, for example, Emilio Mirando, an alleged lottery numbers runner, hand-wrote a poorly worded letter addressed directly to President Grau, claiming that he paid rent “higher than the house.”⁵⁹⁷ Another tenant claimed that his landlord should be held responsible for the “crime of grave disobedience, attempted fraud, and conspiracy to alter the prices of things.”⁵⁹⁸ In another case, 14 tenants from Los Sitios joined together in denouncing illegal eviction efforts from their landlord.⁵⁹⁹ Nor were all claimants poor. Another claim came from a single tenant in El Cerro, who was paying a relatively high 23 pesos per month, and securing extensive documentation from the municipality, while using polished legal language.⁶⁰⁰

While numerous suits appear to have been undertaken by tenants on their own behalf, others came from large tenant organizations with political connections. On November 13, 1944, the “Central Committee” of a group identified as “Popular Revolutionary Defense,” claimed damages for violation of the rent law.⁶⁰¹ The Tenant Confederation of Cuba raised another suit. Presenting their case in formal legal language, the confederation secured backing from a lawyer representing the Office of Price and Supply Regulation (ORPA), a government body, which was more active in supporting the decrees than the courts. In another case, tenants contested an eviction with the help of the Confederation of Cuban Labor (CTC), and generated publicity for

⁵⁹⁷ Denuncia de Emilio Mirando, 18 November 1944, Legajo 261, Expediente 20, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹⁸ Denuncia de Antonio Zayas, 18 April 1945, Legajo 274, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁵⁹⁹ Denuncia de Luis Soto Montes et al., 17 October 1944, Legajo 254, Expediente 80, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰⁰ Eusebio Ramirez Alemán to Sala Quinta de la Audiencia de la Habana, 28 November 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 26, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰¹ Denuncia de Defensa Popular Revolucionaria, 13 November 1944, Legajo 261, Expediente 19, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

their case in the communist press.⁶⁰² Meanwhile, numerous other tenants reached out to the Communist Party, which publicized their cases in *Noticias de Hoy*.⁶⁰³

In bringing these claims to the courts, tenants and tenant organizations argued that rent controls were their rights as citizens. One group highlighted that a blind Independence War veteran lived among them, always paying his rent.⁶⁰⁴ Another group of tenants referenced the “impossible material situation faced by the Cuban people in exercising their rights.”⁶⁰⁵ Another tenant reported being “a modest worker with absolute faith that all the problems of humble and modest men are being attended to by the government that rules for the honor of Cuba.”⁶⁰⁶ They also reached out for state protection in ways that extended beyond the courts, especially through the Health Ministry. Many tenants demanded state attention in response to dilapidated homes.⁶⁰⁷ In one case sub-tenants sued a principal tenant for speculating “with us poor people,” claiming that the eleven rooms, “according to the Health [Department], should not exist.”⁶⁰⁸ In 1951, *Noticias de Hoy* demanded action from the Health Ministry against slumlord Sarrá’s “foul solares.”⁶⁰⁹

On the other side, however, health regulation could be used against tenants, since they allowed the Ministry to clear out dwellings that it deemed unsafe. In 1939, an architect noted that there was no clarity regarding the way that new tenant protections might interact with the Health

⁶⁰² José Miguel Pérez Lamy to La Sala, 20 June 1945, Legajo 274, Expediente 24, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰³ For example, “Desalojan a una familia que ha pagado su renta,” *Noticias de Hoy*, August 4, 1944, 4; “Desalojan en masa a los inquilinos para aumentar las rentas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 26, 1944, 1; “Pese a hallarse al corriente en el pago, se intenta lanzar a los vecinos de Águila 906,” *Noticias de Hoy*, September 16, 1944, 8; “Quieren desalojar a varios inquilinos y aumentar la renta,” *Noticias de Hoy*, June 27, 1944, 4.

⁶⁰⁴ Denuncia de Luis Soto Montes et al., 17 October 1944, Legajo 254, Expediente 80, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰⁵ Denuncia de vecinos todos del edificio Cuba No. 62, 24 January 1945, Legajo 268, Expediente 6, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰⁶ Denuncia de Pedro Raurell, 8 December 1944, Legajo 262, Expediente 34, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰⁷ “Grave Riesgo sobre los inquilinos de Mariano 424, Cerro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 25 1945, 7; “En medio de un pantano pestilente vive una familia en la barriada del Cerro,” *Noticias de Hoy*, August 18, 1945, 1, 7.

⁶⁰⁸ Vicente Sánchez to Tribunal de Urgencia, 29 November 1944, Legajo 260, Expediente 28, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁰⁹ “Brutal desalojo de varias familias en el Vedado ayer,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 11, 1951, 1.

Code. “Clearly,” he explained, “tenements...are in no condition to be rented as houses.”⁶¹⁰ Indeed, if rooms “should not exist,” as the sub-tenants claimed, forcible eviction might be the logical conclusion. In 1951, the police and Health Ministry officials oversaw the eviction of three families from a Vedado *solar*. Evicted tenants claimed the owner had prompted the move “in order to be able to sell.”⁶¹¹ In other cases, tenants claimed that corrupt inspectors were colluding with wealthy landlords. In the town of Encrucijada, a claim that health officials were selling eviction orders to property owners reached the courts.⁶¹²

This uncertainty prompted additional political mobilization. After the Vedado eviction, representatives from the Communist Party questioned sanitation officials to determine if other buildings would be threatened.⁶¹³ In another case, leading up to the eviction on the basis of health codes, a report in *Noticias de Hoy* stated, “Numerous telegrams have been sent to the President of the Republic and the Minister of Health related to this attempted abuse.”⁶¹⁴ Since the influential property owner’s lawyer was Francisco Prío, brother to then-Senator Carlos Prío—later President of the Republic—residents approached the senator, who promised “to solve their situation of anguish.”⁶¹⁵

Thus, following the 1939 passage of rent control legislation, the legal system and the state more generally played an increasingly central role in occupancy disputes throughout the city. While property owners had claimed that rent laws were an affront to urban citizenship, tenants throughout the city seized on rent controls as a basic component of their rights. As conditions deteriorated in the central city, however, tenants demanded that elected leaders do

⁶¹⁰ Oscar Diaz Mendez “Ambigüedades técnicas de la Ley de Alquileres,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, April 1939, 8.

⁶¹¹ “Brutal desalojo de varias familias en el Vedado ayer,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 11, 1951, 1.

⁶¹² “Grave delito atribuyen a un jefe de Salubridad,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 14, 1951, 3.

⁶¹³ “Muchos expedientes de clausura de casas estudian en Sanidad,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 12, 1951, 4.

⁶¹⁴ “Evitó el público que fueran desalojadas varias familias pobres de oficios núm 359,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 18, 1945, 7.

⁶¹⁵ “Trata de desalojar a numerosos inquilinos en oficios numero 359,” *Noticias de Hoy*, May 19, 1945, 7.

more to protect them. Property owners looked at such conditions and blamed the protections themselves. The result was that the role of the state became a focal point for debates about housing.

5.3 MORALITY AND RACE

As rent control came to be a central pillar of housing politics in the central city, it was central to debates about the boundaries of urban citizenship as well. As actors defined these boundaries in different ways, questions of poverty and race swirled beneath the surface. In the Cuban public sphere, neither of these categories was acceptable grounds for explicit social exclusion. Instead, debates took place over a shared language of “morality,” strongly linked to tenement houses and shantytowns and written into the 1940 Constitution. This language allowed racial discrimination to persist, even as the same language could be employed to highlight racial exclusion.

As the state intervened in the rental market, Afro-Cuban activists denounced racial discrimination in housing, but their complaints provoked limited public debate. Many argued against racial discrimination, which was widely acknowledged to exist; few publicly argued for it. Explicit racial discrimination was prohibited by the 1940 Constitution, and several antidiscrimination laws proposed by Afro-Cuban societies listed it as a top issue to be confronted by the government.⁶¹⁶ In 1939, a writer in Guanabacoa published a scathing critique of rent control, noting that it did little to address “racial, sexual, or even class discrimination.”⁶¹⁷ Racial discrimination was especially apparent to upwardly mobile Afro-Cubans. After extensive field

⁶¹⁶ “Texto del proyecto Ley de Educación y Sanciones Contra la Discriminación Racial,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 3, 1952, 5; Convención Nacional de Sociedades Cubanas de la Raza de Color, *Programa*.

⁶¹⁷ “La Ley de Alquileres y la discriminación,” *La Publicidad*, March 25, 1939, 1.

research in the 1940s, Afro-Cuban activist Juan Chailloux claimed, “The black family with sufficient resources to occupy a decent apartment has to face the greatest problem when they look to find somewhere to rent.... They do not rent to blacks.”⁶¹⁸

Calls to legislate against racial discrimination in the rental market were weakened by the difficulty in pinning it down, however. One high profile case, reported in *Noticias de Hoy*, involved a black tenant, who rented a room “by way of a friend.” Later, “aware that the house that was leased would be inhabited by a black woman, the property owner ripped up the document, destroying it ... meaning that she did not rent to black people.”⁶¹⁹ In an exceptional case, a property owner advertised an apartment by writing that he “only did business with whites.”⁶²⁰ The case was taken to trial separately by both the Communist Party and the Afro-Cuban Club Atenas and widely publicized. Yet the shame was apparently so severe that, before a sentence was reached, the accused was rumored to have killed himself “for being profoundly shamed by his crime of discrimination.”⁶²¹ While many similar cases likely went unreported, explicit discrimination was usually disguised.

Instead of race, many property owners used a widely shared discourse of morality to describe desirable or undesirable city residents. In 1939, a property owner claimed, “The Rent Law has produced an unsettling demoralization among tenants.... Those who have been excellent payers until now, claim the right to a discount because their neighbor got one.”⁶²² In 1941, one Havana landlord gave tenants eleven conditions for behavior, the first stating simply: “be moral.”⁶²³ In 1951, a neighborhood association demanded that officials act to improve the

⁶¹⁸ Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 140.

⁶¹⁹ “Niéguese una propietaria a alquilar las habitaciones a personas de la raza negra,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 24, 1947, 1.

⁶²⁰ “Juzgarán hoy al autor de grave delito de discriminación,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 8 1947, 7.

⁶²¹ “Rumorase que se suicidó un acusado por grave delito de discriminación racial,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 23, 1947, 5.

⁶²² Bartolome Padilla, “Perturbación, demagogia, despojo,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, April 1939, 3.

⁶²³ Carta para el inquilino, 23 June 1941, Legajo 254, Expediente 80, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

“moral level” of Marianao.⁶²⁴ This language was not only publicly acceptable, but also backed by public policy. In 1932, Congress debated legislation that would offer “certain practical guarantees to know the moral quality of the residents,” and which would require tenants to proffer character references in order to rent a house.⁶²⁵ In 1945, a police investigator in Guanabacoa filed a standard report on a tenant during a rent dispute in which he noted for the court that the tenant was “of good conduct and morality.”⁶²⁶ And public housing legislation explicitly required screening for residents based on their work and family status, so that, as one architect put it, projects would not become areas of “doubtful morality.”⁶²⁷ These policies were backed by article 79 of the 1940 Constitution, which stipulated housing legislation to promote the “physical and moral wellbeing” of workers.⁶²⁸ Thus, where calls to exclude based on race were absent, morality had the potential to function as an officially recognized substitute.

Through the language of morality, then, racial discrimination persisted, since the characteristics of blackness and immorality overlapped in popular and official constructions of deficient housing. A prime example was the “solar,” which represented the most notorious type of tenement housing in Havana, frequently mentioned with *barrios de indigentes* (shantytowns).⁶²⁹ Scattered in what were once mansions throughout the city, *solares* were often linked to criminality, immorality, and racial mixture. In 1924, Luis Bay Sevilla characterized *solares* as refuges for “habitual criminals,” symbols of national shame and generators of social conflict. “Crowded in groups of the most diverse origins,” he wrote, “residents live in those

⁶²⁴ “Sesiones de la Junta de Gobierno junio, julio y agosto de 1950,” *Revista de los Repartos Almendares y Kohly*, 1951, n.p.

⁶²⁵ “Se propone en una ley presentada al senado que se exijan testigos responsables al alquilar una casa,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, February 2, 1932; “La modificación e la ley sobre inquilinos conviene a los intereses generales,” *El Heraldo de Cuba*, February 5, 1932.

⁶²⁶ Vgte no 3575 to Jefe de la Sección, Guanabacoa, 18 April 1945, Legajo 275, Expediente 47, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶²⁷ Manuel Febles Valdés, “El problema de la vivienda en Cuba,” *Arquitectura*, April 1948, 102.

⁶²⁸ See article 79 in Lazcano y Mazon, *Constitución de Cuba*.

⁶²⁹ “Solar” was officially used in Cuba to describe a parcel of land. As a term to describe dilapidated, subdivided homes, or “negro tenement houses,” David Ames plausibly claims that the term “stems from the days when the Negroes built little shacks on empty lots.” Ames, “Negro Family Types in a Cuban Solar,” 159.

monstrous cages with desperation [and] tremendous rancor towards their exploiters.”⁶³⁰ Press accounts noted that *solares* were inhabited by “thousands and thousands of human beings who breathe foul air...open to all contagions.”⁶³¹ “The *solar* corrupts and degenerates the humble classes of the city,” wrote Chailloux.⁶³² According to architect and Afro-Cuban activist Gustavo Urrutia, in 1931, “Two hundred thousand people...live in *solares* in Havana and it is necessary to eliminate them for hygiene, health, culture, and morality.”⁶³³

A moral label as much as a physical description of a type of housing, the *solar* was strongly associated with blackness. *Solares*, according to one author were an “inheritance” of the “*Barracón* ... which housed the first slaves brought whipped and battered from Africa.”⁶³⁴ Poet Nicolás Guillén wrote of the *solar*, where tourists listen to music “they can’t dance to.”⁶³⁵ A 1956 photo essay in *Bohemia* eulogized the *solar* as the “flower of dark blood.”⁶³⁶ And these associations were firmly rooted in empirical facts. Of 50 *solares* studied by Chailloux in 1944, 95.7 percent of residents were blacks or mestizos. “There are cases,” he reported, “where the absence of whites can be classified as tradition.”⁶³⁷ It is likely that Chailloux, an Afro-Cuban activist, purposefully searched for racially concentrated buildings to study—but he found them in abundance. Another study surveyed a single *solar* to find that 69 percent of residents were black.⁶³⁸ Afrodescendants were heavily overrepresented in shantytowns as well.⁶³⁹ The “immorality” of deficient housing was therefore strongly associated with blackness.

⁶³⁰ Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 106.

⁶³¹ “La misera vivienda del pobre,” *El Sol*, September 1, 1934, 1.

⁶³² Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 135.

⁶³³ “Para acabar con los solares,” *El Sol*, March 21, 1931, 1, 5.

⁶³⁴ “La vida en los solares,” *Ahora*, May 1944, 6.

⁶³⁵ Nicolás Guillén “Visita a un solar” in Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 1:176.

⁶³⁶ Francisco Riveron Hernández, “Con ojos del campo ví...el solar habanero,” *Bohemia*, July 8, 1956, n.p.

⁶³⁷ Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 141.

⁶³⁸ Ames, “Negro Family Types in a Cuban Solar,” 159–63.

⁶³⁹ A 1936 publication from the Convención Nacional de Sociedades Cubanas de la Raza de Color claimed that 86 percent of unemployed and 91 percent of indigents were of “the colored race” along with 97.5 percent of shantytowns. While neither the

Despite these associations, overcrowded, subdivided apartments affected tenants of all races, lending importance to the discourse of morality for those who hoped to avoid negative classifications. Blacks were only slightly overrepresented as tenants in the city (table 1), and by 1950, perhaps 15 percent of Havana residents lived in extremely dilapidated rental housing (not including residents of shantytowns).⁶⁴⁰ Thus, tenants of all races used the language of morality to indicate their own worth, especially when their housing called such worth into question. In 1944, one group of poor tenants reported that, because of their landlord, they worried about “overcrowding themselves with danger to their health and morality.”⁶⁴¹ Complaining of racial discrimination, Chailloux sought to disassociate blackness from immorality, noting that buildings turned away black renters, “despite there being many cases in which the moral reputation of whites living in the building is extremely doubtful.”⁶⁴² The discourse of morality therefore negotiated a nebulous gap between the national belonging of upstanding poor citizens and the nationally shameful homes they often occupied. As many sides reinforced the rhetorical links between immorality and deficient housing, however, they recycled a discourse that connected Afro-descendants to undesirable behavior.

specific areas of study for these statistics, nor the criterion used in determining race were listed, the numbers were likely somewhat inflated. A 1938 university study of Las Yaguas, Isla de Pinos and Cueva del Humo noted that “close to sixty percent” of residents were “of the colored race.” Convención Nacional de Sociedades Cubanas de la Raza de Color; Enrique Andino, “Estudio sobre los llamados barrios de indigentes: Su solución científica por el urbanismo,” *Revista Municipal y de Intereses Económicos*, May-June 1938, 66.

⁶⁴⁰ Numbers of *solares* in the capital vary according to sources, reflecting the subjective nature of the term. In 1919, the Health Ministry conducted a survey of *casas de vecindad*, which included *solares*, as well as tenement houses more generally. It documented 1,548 buildings in the capital, and already by 1924 Luis Bay Sevilla speculated that the number had grown. In 1951, a report in *Noticias de Hoy* documented only 69 *solares* in parts of Centro Habana and Habana Vieja, but apparently excluded other types of tenement housing. By contrast, the same year Herminio Portell-Vila reported that there were 205 *solares*, *cuarterías*, *ciudadelas*, and *casas de vecindad* in the same area. According to the US State Department, in 1950 the National College of Architects estimated that 15 percent of Havana lived in *solares* and tenements (excluding *barrios de indigentes*).

See Bay y Sevilla, *La vivienda del pobre*, 106; Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 107; Honorio Muñoz, “Un inodoro para cada 28 personas en 69 solares,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 3, 1952, 1, 8; Portell Vila, “De como viven los habaneros pobres,” *Bohemia*, December 9, 1951, 66-67, 83; R.M. Connell, Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba, 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA.

⁶⁴¹ Denuncia de vecinos todos del edificio Cuba No. 62, 24 Jan 1945, Legajo 268, Expediente 6, Tribunal de Urgencia, ANC.

⁶⁴² Chailloux, *Los horrores del solar habanero*, 140.

Table 1: Percentage of Families Renting Their Home, by Race, 1943.⁶⁴³

Pre-1959 Municipality	% of Urban Black Heads of Household Renting	% of Urban Native White Heads of Household Renting
Guanabacoa	67%	64%
Havana	96%	91%
Marianao	74%	72%
Regla	75%	75%
Santa Maria del Rosario	48%	48%
Santiago de las Vegas	67%	62%
<i>Greater Havana</i>	91%	86%

5.4 MORALITY AND THE MARKET

As the language of morality became common to describe deteriorating conditions in the central city, those conditions interacted with the expanding housing market in several ways. First, neighborhood associations highlighted concerns for morality as they organized to prevent properties from becoming rental units. Investors avoided rent laws entirely by refusing to construct reasonably priced units. And as the rental market in the central city became saturated, the only low-cost units available were found in underserved subdivisions on the city's outskirts, leading to claims that the popular classes were forced into housing associated with the low morals of shantytowns. The combined result reinforced racial and social segregation and fueled elite and popular demands for changes in state policy.

⁶⁴³ Cuba, *Censo 1943*, 1010-11.

In seeking to protect the value of their homes, neighborhood associations actively asserted the need to make rental properties unavailable and exclude undesirable social groups. In 1940, a property owner from the luxurious Fifth Avenue in Miramar posted a notice in *El Crisol* to fellow property owners from the area, apologizing profusely for having allowed the sale of a property where rental units were now being constructed. "I see with great displeasure," he wrote, that new owners had bought the property "in order to make apartments, and had I known before I would not have sold."⁶⁴⁴ In 1951 a neighborhood bulletin from the Repartos Almendares y Kohly pressed the mayor to act against "houses of bad reputation and worse morals." Hoping to prevent subdivided properties, the author requested, "Whenever you might have news of an unrented house in our neighborhood ... communicate it, without delay, to our administrator. We will be able to act quickly with the property owner."⁶⁴⁵ In 1955, a city councilman from Guanabacoa complained of areas where "property owners maintain a private police force that impedes free access of citizens ... making it in fact a feudal estate."⁶⁴⁶ In 1950, property owners from the Alturas del Bosque subdivision met with the Mayor to request the removal of a shantytown from their area, which "is the pride of the Municipality of Marianao for its cleanliness."⁶⁴⁷

In the meantime, most well-funded new construction projects did not include low-cost rental units. The property lobby frequently claimed that rent controls would discourage construction, and in the case of new low-cost rental dwellings they were correct. In 1950, the US State Department reported, "Where a house has been occupied since war time and was entered at

⁶⁴⁴ "A los propietarios y vecinos del Reparto Miramar," *El Crisol*, August 27, 1940, 5.

⁶⁴⁵ "Sesiones de la Junta de Gobierno junio, julio y agosto de 1950," *Revista de los Repartos Almendares y Kohly*, 1951, n.p.; "Casas de inquilinato," *Revista de los Repartos Almendares y Kohly*, 1951, n.p.

⁶⁴⁶ Enrique Lambarri, quoted in Armando Rabilero, "Ayuntamiento de Guanabacoa rescatara su autoridad, que ha sido violada por los repartistas," *Alerta*, August 9, 1955, 1.

⁶⁴⁷ "Entrevístense con Alcalde Orúe los propietarios del Reparto El 'Bosque,'" *El Sol*, Febrero 24, 1950, 1.

a comparatively low rental, ... [it] seriously reduces the sales value of the property.” The report continued, “The overwhelming majority of Cuban owner-builders have preferred to invest in a higher quality of housing which not only offers a high rental return but also is believed to attract a more responsible type of occupant than the average slum dweller.”⁶⁴⁸ New constructions charge “such an elevated rent that it is out of reach of the middle class,” reported an architect.⁶⁴⁹

The flip side of increasing exclusivity in new constructions were unregulated, underserved suburbs that grew in their midst—in most cases legally purchased, but still perilously similar to *barrios de indigentes*. Following WWII, developers increasingly bought large tracts of land and mortgaged them as small lots, either with new homes already constructed or as land tracts where buyers could build. Often, however, these developers failed to comply with municipal ordinances. In 1943 an architect reported that “all the urbanistic science, all the architecture and sanitary engineering, and even social medicine, are publicly ignored—without any sanctions assessed for it!”⁶⁵⁰ In 1950 an article in *Bohemia* reported on an area housing approximately 100,000 residents, who “lack the most elemental public services.” A resident placed in charge of the lands by the development company claimed that for electricity, “it costs more to get official authorization than the service itself.” Other residents claimed that crime was rampant without an adequate police presence.⁶⁵¹

These new developments were legally distinct from shantytowns, but they often had similar conditions. An article in *El Sol* claimed that the poor “pass weeks, months, even on

⁶⁴⁸ These findings were backed by a 1951 report for the IBRD, which claimed that, for investors, “individual homes are preferred to multiple developments where the disposal of the property to permanent owners may not be definitely assured.” R.M. Connell, Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba, 11 August 1950, pp. 4-5, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA; Truslow, *Report on Cuba*, 631.

⁶⁴⁹ Manuel Febles Valdés, “El problema de la vivienda en Cuba,” *Arquitectura*, no. 177, April 1948, 100.

⁶⁵⁰ Angel Cano Suarez, “Repartos y urbanizaciones,” *Arquitectura*, March 1943, 122.

⁶⁵¹ I have not been able to determine the accuracy of the population estimate. The areas reported were “*los repartos comprendidos entre La Palma y Calabazar*.” Mario del Cueto, “Miles de familias se encuentran sin agua, transporte, luz, ni teléfono a solo veinte minutos de la capital,” *Bohemia*, February 24, 1952, 66-67, 84.

occasion years without being able to install water or electricity, living ... worse than those who crowd into *barrios de indigentes*, because at least they do not suffer acquiring the shack where they live, nor do they have to pay taxes to the municipality.”⁶⁵² Officials claimed that, once established, the underserved subdivisions became sites of popular protest against the government, when in fact the services were the legal responsibility of the developers.⁶⁵³ Commenting on the situation in 1952, Herminio Portell-Vilá explained, “*Habaneros* do not want to live in tenements, *solares* ... or *barrios de indigentes*.... What is nowhere seen is the tutelary function of the state, the province, or the municipality, in collaborating with these efforts.”⁶⁵⁴

In 1946, Grau signed a decree designed to confront “the existing anarchy in the land divisions [*parcelaciones*],” but enforcement was difficult.⁶⁵⁵ In 1949, a joint effort between Havana’s College of Architects and the Health Ministry halted 108 construction projects in Marianao and 800 more across the island. Hearing of the operation, popular Marianao Mayor Francisco Orúe visited the College of Architects with a large group of workers contracted on the projects, “expressing his desire to cause the least possible damage to the offenders ... and to come to an understanding regarding the standstill of projects in his municipality.” Indeed, despite the fact that architects claimed to operate out of concern for “the personal security of the tenants and for health,” the issue contained populist dimensions: The popular classes needed housing, while bureaucrats denied it.⁶⁵⁶ Given such pressures, an architect later claimed the 1946 decree

⁶⁵² “Los nuevos repartos: un engaño al pueblo,” *El Sol*, February 17, 1951, 1.

⁶⁵³ Luis Bay Sevilla, “Decreto sobre parcelaciones suburbanas,” *Arquitectura*, March 1946, 99-100; José Maria Bens Arrarte, “Los parcelamientos clandestinos,” *Arquitectura*, November 1955, 539.

⁶⁵⁴ Herminio Portell-Vilá, “La Habana de los repartos,” *Bohemia*, March 29, 1952, 52-53, 82.

⁶⁵⁵ Luis Bay Sevilla, “Decreto sobre parcelaciones suburbanas,” *Arquitectura*, March 1946, 99-100.

⁶⁵⁶ “Cooperan los arquitectos con el Ministro de Salubridad en el mejoramiento de la sanidad y la vivienda,” *Arquitectura*, November 1949, 338.

had been “dead letter.”⁶⁵⁷ The result was that new subdivisions often resembled shantytowns and all their attendant cultural connotations.

As poor families were, in effect, barred from well-serviced constructions on the city’s periphery, the housing stock in Havana’s central city had reached a saturation point—and the city’s population continued to grow. To avoid rent controls, new buildings constructed in the central city charged high rent. Worse, new construction usually implied demolition, leaving families with nowhere to move. In the meantime, property owners used construction to justify eviction and raise rents while making only minor repairs.⁶⁵⁸ Tenants protested such moves, but tactics could be dirty. In 1952, *Noticias de Hoy* alleged that a landlord allowed the collapse of one of his buildings in order to secure the removal of a small business.⁶⁵⁹ Discussing demolitions in the central city, an article in *Bohemia* pictured a shoeless girl in front of a shantytown street. “This girl,” the caption read, “innocent angel who never asked to come into the world, is a ‘tenant’ in one of the many shantytowns. Hundreds and hundreds of families of modest means may be going to keep her company.”⁶⁶⁰

The combined result of a saturated rent market and demolitions was that from 1943 to 1953, the municipalities of Centro Habana and Habana Vieja lost significant numbers of residents, declining to 90 percent of their 1943 populations, while Greater Havana grew by 129 percent over the same period (figure 1). Census data do not track race by neighborhood until 1980, but by then these municipalities were disproportionately populated by black or mulatto

⁶⁵⁷ José Maria Bens Arrarte, “Los parcelamientos clandestinos,” *Arquitectura*, November 1955, 539.

⁶⁵⁸ Under decree 804, unless the entire building was reconstructed, renovated apartments could not be leased for more than six percent above what they had been previously. Cuba, *Ley de Alquileres*, 15.

⁶⁵⁹ “Peligroso derrumbe en Monte 359,” *Noticias de Hoy*, February 3, 1952, 1.

⁶⁶⁰ Waldo Medina, “Ley que se alquila, o el eterno plieto del casero y el inquilino,” *Bohemia*, October 5, 1952, 26.

residents, making it likely that nonwhites suffered disproportionately from demolitions.⁶⁶¹ And while there were no racially segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in Havana, the same was likely not the case for some wealthy sections. Based on fieldwork in the 1960s, for example, Susan Rigdon described Miramar as “a quiet, prosperous, all-white Havana suburb.”⁶⁶² Because of exclusive new constructions, popular demands for housing focused on generating new and economically accessible homes. Because of underserviced, peripheral subdivisions, they demanded better regulations as well. Property owners supported these demands as a way to eliminate the need for rent control. On all sides, demands focused on new policies to stimulate housing construction.

⁶⁶¹ Residents of these neighborhoods were 44 and 47 percent black and mulatto, compared to 36 percent in Greater Havana. These were sections of the city, moreover, that urban planners slated for demolition. The Jesus María neighborhood successfully resisted decades-long efforts to demolish homes to widen streets, and in Sert’s 1958 plan, Jesús María and wide swaths of Habana Vieja were slated for gradual demolition. Armando Maribona, “Pueden ser convertidas en céntricas y activas, barriadas en que hoy valen poco las propiedades,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, November 1940, 12-13; Town Planning Associates, *Plan piloto de la Habana*, 33, 42; de la Fuente, *A Nation For All*, 313.

⁶⁶² Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Neighbors*, xiv.

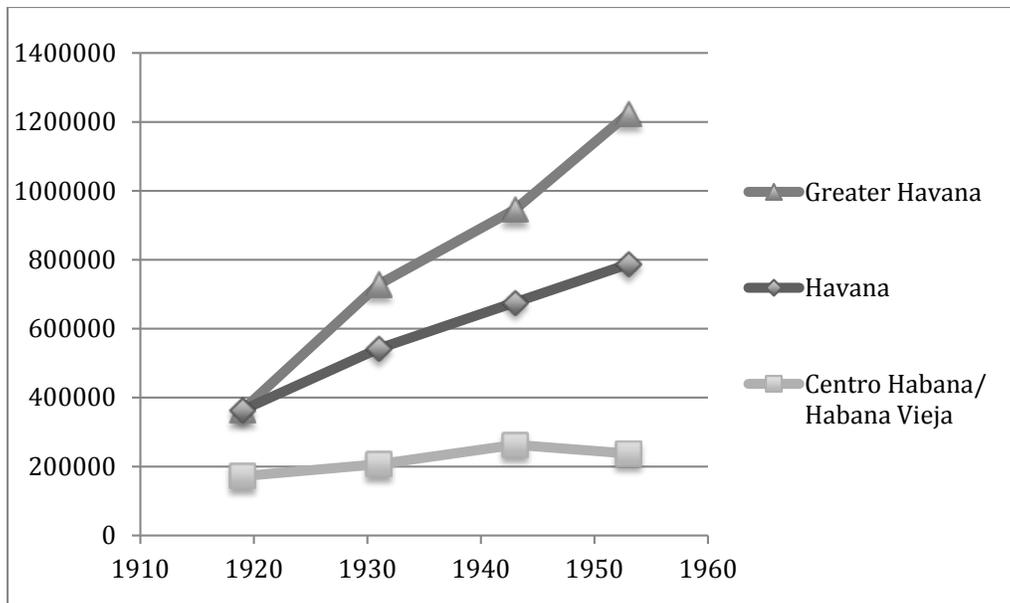


Figure 5: Population change in Havana, 1919-1953.⁶⁶³

5.5 PUBLIC HOUSING, 1940-1952

Given these pressures, it is notable that public housing remained relatively limited during the Second Republic.⁶⁶⁴ Further research is needed to assess Havana's volume of public housing construction relative to other Latin American capital cities, but it seems to have been less than average, in contrast with Cuba's relatively high per capita GDP. The question becomes particularly important in the aftermath of WWII, when public housing initiatives gained momentum internationally and the price of construction materials dropped. Three factors seem to underlie this situation in Cuba. First, active political mobilization in existing public housing units

⁶⁶³ These numbers are roughly aligned to the present day borders of the Centro Habana and Habana Vieja Municipalities. Cuba, *Censos 1953*, 11; Cuba, *Censo 1943*, 825; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 120.

⁶⁶⁴ The relative lack of public housing during the republican period has provoked criticism from scholars. For example, Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula refer to "the brevity of the welfare state." See *Havana: Two Faces*, 74; del Toro, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 127-30.

and agitation around future ones, made them unprofitable. Second, several key figures favored measures to stimulate low-cost housing production in the private market—a position reinforced by their proximity to US housing officials who advocated similar policies. Third, corruption during Grau’s administration (1944-48) limited the funds available for housing and generated skepticism about new projects. Grau’s efforts were dramatized in the failure of the Barrio Obrero, Havana’s largest national public housing project of the Second Republic, which discouraged the Batista regime from similar initiatives after 1952.⁶⁶⁵

Like most welfare initiatives of the Republic, public housing generated intense political debates. The government passed public housing legislation in 1910, appropriating funds for the Pogolotti neighborhood in Marianao. After its distribution, workers were obligated to make payments, but most did not. What followed was decades of protests and disputes, as officials threatened to evict residents and residents used the neighborhood’s public status to demand infrastructural improvements. Calling the neighborhood “a failure” in 1941, Bay Sevilla, argued, “The cause of all this is only one: politics.”⁶⁶⁶ Yet the law did give the government a legal channel to allocate funds to public housing, which meant that new initiatives remained open to discussion in all subsequent administrations.⁶⁶⁷

Even so, the politicization of public housing reinforced a wide-ranging consensus among Cuban technocrats that the state should facilitate construction by collaborating with the private

⁶⁶⁵ On municipal public housing initiatives, for example, Francisco, “Panchin” Batista (brother of Fulgencio) organized the distribution of 18 homes in Playa Jaimanitas, Marianao for nearby shantytown residents in 1946. In 1951, the municipal government of Regla distributed 14 homes to poor residents. “El barrio obrero municipal,” *El Sol*, October 5, 1946, 1; Herminio Portell Vila, “El Ejemplo de Regla,” *Bohemia*, November 30, 1952.

⁶⁶⁶ Bay Sevilla “Por que la barriada obrera de Pogolotti fue un fracaso,” *Arquitectura*, January 1941, 30.

⁶⁶⁷ In the 1950s, the funds were rolled into the National Housing Commission (CNV), which was responsible for slum clearance among other things. The US State Department reported, “The collection of their monthly installments has been frequently and deliberately neglected, in an effort to gain favor with the workers. As a result, succeeding Governments have been unable to dispose of the necessary funds to carry through the program which was contemplated in the original law.” Eugene Desvermine, “Cuban Government Issues Regulations Governing the Construction, Repair and Distribution of Low-Cost Housing for Workers,” 30 October 1944, RG84/850.2/1421, USNA.

market. For example, Bay Sevilla's housing proposal, which never passed, proposed expansive government oversight of homes but argued directly against public housing, which he saw as beholden to patronage politics. Likewise Gustavo Gutiérrez, the architect of Batista's economic policies, favored measures to encourage the private sale of homes through long-term amortization payments.⁶⁶⁸ "If the US and England have had to mobilize private capital ... what could Cuba have done with its resources alone?" asked Pedro Martínez Inclán, chair of the Department of Urbanism at the University of Havana.⁶⁶⁹ Many architects agreed that in order to construct low-cost housing on the scale necessary, public funds should be combined with "private or semi-private initiative," which they said was common in Latin America.⁶⁷⁰

Congress appropriated money for new housing after the 1944 hurricane, but the execution of the plan reinforced the arguments of skeptics.⁶⁷¹ While many of the funds went to individual families, the government also began work on a residential development in Luyanó that came to be known as the Barrio Obrero. The project was a disaster. It was slated to have "no less than 1,500 individual houses; eight four-story apartment buildings; an open market; a school; a recreation facility; a home for the elderly and a child-care facility." Yet according to the same government bulletin, at a 1947 inauguration ceremony for the project only 114 of the homes had been completed and only two of the eight apartment buildings were close to being finished.⁶⁷² By 1950, the houses were said to be valued at \$14,000 pesos each, far beyond the reach of the poor.⁶⁷³ After spending additional funds on the project in 1952, Batista was able to distribute

⁶⁶⁸ Luis Bay Sevilla, "El plan de fabricación del gobierno," *Arquitectura*, June 1943, 224-26; Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Banquete conmemorativo del 60 aniversario de la fundación del Centro de la Propiedad Urbana de la Habana. 1881-1941," *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, September 1941, 34-35.

⁶⁶⁹ Pedro Martínez Inclán, "La Ley de Alquileres," *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, May 1941, 8.

⁶⁷⁰ Manuel Febles Valdés, "El problema de la vivienda en Cuba," *Arquitectura*, April 1948, 101.

⁶⁷¹ Eugene Desvermine, Cuban Government Issues Regulations Governing the Construction, Repair and Distribution of Low-Cost Housing for Workers, 30 October 1944, R84/850.2/1421, USNA.

⁶⁷² Cuba, *Memoria del plan*, n.p.

⁶⁷³ R.M. Connell, Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba, 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA.

only 433 homes, less than a third of the original projection.⁶⁷⁴ Additional problems arose when landowners sued the government for not handing over required expropriation payments.⁶⁷⁵ In the meantime, the government used other low-cost housing appropriations to expropriate lands on underserved subdivisions like La Hata, with rumors of kickbacks to politicians and property owners (chapter 2).

The partially completed Barrio Obrero became a rallying cry for protest against the government—a “concrete demonstration of incapacity,” according to one author.⁶⁷⁶ The homes remained unoccupied throughout Prio’s presidential term (1948-52), practically within sight of Havana’s central shantytowns. Facing eviction, shantytown residents at the Plaza Cívica site threatened to occupy the neighborhood.⁶⁷⁷ After a fire in Las Yaguas in April 1950, similar rumors reached such proportions that police were stationed around the Barrio Obrero to protect it.⁶⁷⁸ The outcome of public housing projects prior to 1952 therefore discouraged new state-directed construction. However demands for action to promote low-cost housing remained high.

⁶⁷⁴ “Fueron sorteados las 433 casas construidas en el Barrio Obrero,” *Diario de la Marina*, July 5, 1952, 1, 22.

⁶⁷⁵ “Malversados 700 mil pesos del pago de expropiaciones,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 28, 1949, 6; “Sin pagar las expropiaciones,” *Revista Nacional de la Propiedad Urbana*, October 1949, 10; “Entregan cheques para pagar terrenos del Barrio Obrero,” *El Mundo*, July 26 1952, 1.

⁶⁷⁶ Herminio Portell-Vilá, “Casas para pobres en Brasil y en Cuba,” *Bohemia*, October 7, 1951, 7.

⁶⁷⁷ “Trescientas familias pobres ocuparán el Barrio Obrero de Luyanó si el gobierno insiste en sus maniobras para desalojar el lugar donde viven,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 12, 1950, 4.

⁶⁷⁸ “Numerosas familias de ‘Las Yaguas’ refugiadas bajo el paso superior,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 3, 1950, 13.

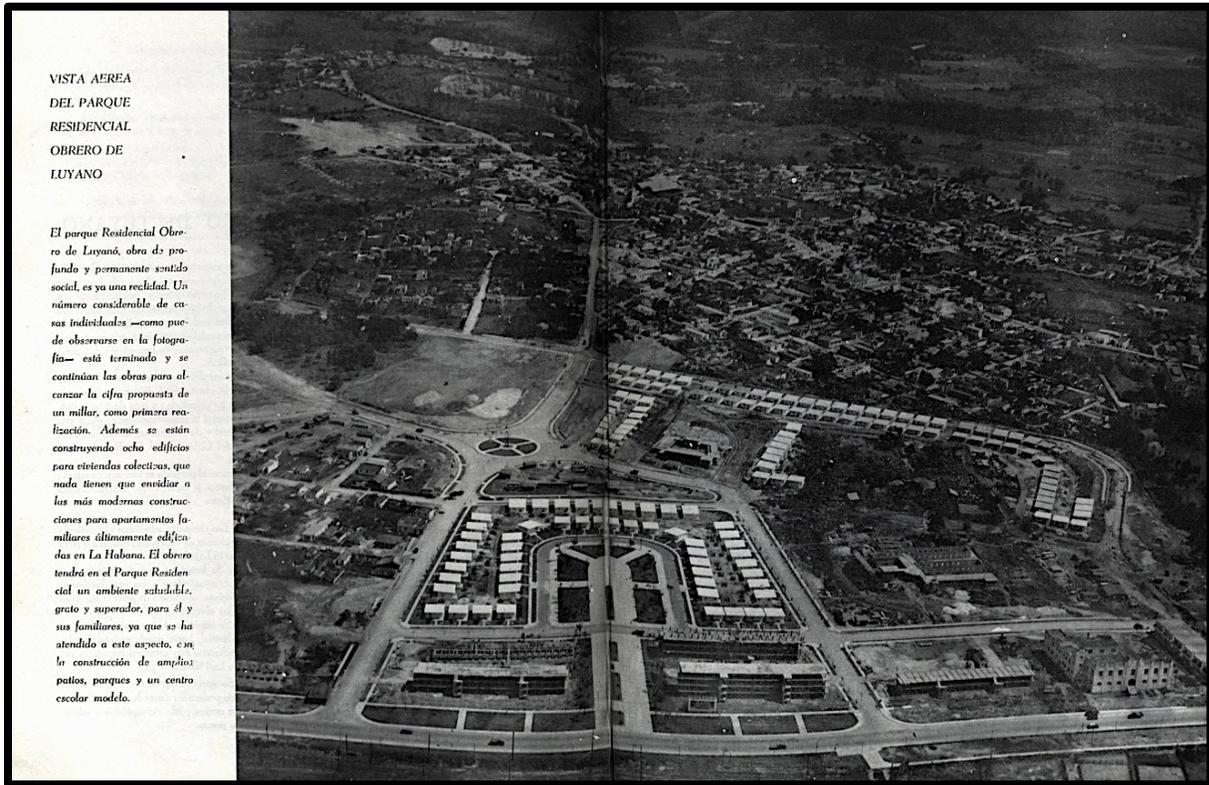


Figure 6: The Barrio Obrero (Worker's Neighborhood) as it appeared at its 1947 inauguration.⁶⁷⁹

5.6 BATISTA'S HOUSING PROGRAM

On March 10, 1952, when Batista took control of the presidency, the Barrio Obrero remained empty. Immediately after securing power, Batista moved to distribute houses from the neighborhood and to address housing issues more broadly. His initiatives on housing demonstrated the same dual-track approach he had used to stabilize the political system in the 1930s. On the one hand, he sought to generate mass support through populist gestures, including support for the strong tenant protections initiated in 1939. On the other hand, he sought to establish firm, centralized institutions to stabilize the economy and discipline the popular

⁶⁷⁹ Cuba, *Memoria del plan*, n.p.

classes—institutions he hoped would expand foreign investment towards national development, particularly in housing for the capital. This was a developmentalist regime, and housing was a central component to its plans. With growth from the sugar industry largely stagnant and unemployment on the rise, members of the administration saw the housing sector as central to job creation, general wellbeing, and legitimate governance.

On the first track, Batista delivered in several ways, standing up to criticism from planners and urban elites. Distributing the Barrio Obrero through the CTC, the government finished parts of the neighborhood and settled expropriation claims.⁶⁸⁰ In an effort to set up a parallel welfare state akin to Evita Perón's in Argentina, Marta Fernández, Batista's wife, occasionally distributed additional units from the neighborhood to poor families.⁶⁸¹ The administration intended the neighborhood to be economically solvent, however, and soon clashed with residents who were unable or unwilling to make amortization payments.⁶⁸²

Meanwhile, Batista launched a debate within the Consultative Council on possible reforms to rent control. When the council faced irreconcilable differences and ultimately emerged with a bill that would have undermined the existing legislation, Batista intervened personally. Securing CTC support and announcing a labor holiday in the capital, Batista spoke to hundreds of thousands of workers, promising to resolve the rent issue and to encourage new construction. The US Embassy reported, "Some quarters believe that the rent measure...was deliberately put forth to give Batista an opportunity to make a grandstand play in vetoing it."⁶⁸³ Soon after the rally, he announced his own law, which reduced rents for many homes in Havana

⁶⁸⁰ "Fueron sorteadas las 433 casas construidas en el Barrio Obrero," *Diario de la Marina*, July 5, 1952, 1, 22; "Entregan cheques para pagar terrenos del Barrio Obrero," *El Mundo*, July 26 1952, 1.

⁶⁸¹ "Entrega tres casas a los pobres la primera dama," *Alerta*, April 15, 1954, 1.

⁶⁸² "En Cuba: desalojos en el Barrio Obrero," *Bohemia*, October 9, 1955.

⁶⁸³ "Weekly Report," 12 September 1952, RG59/737.00(W).9-1252, USNA.

and maintained most occupancy rights. The law strengthened the ability of property owners to evict tenants in order to construct new buildings, however.⁶⁸⁴

Within the first year of his regime, then, Batista took measures that were decidedly against the wishes of urban planners, with populist undertones. He distributed public housing to CTC supporters, extended distortionary rent control measures, and even legalized some underserviced subdivisions. Yet the administration saw these measures as part of a broader strategy to give housing technocrats precisely what they wanted. The heart of Batista's plans on housing centered on the expansion of private investment through the mortgage market, in ways that aligned with urban planning.

Following a consensus among urbanists that the state should collaborate with private capital, Batista launched a set of measures to sponsor investment in middle-class housing.⁶⁸⁵ In 1951, the *Report on Cuba*, authored by the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), noted that mortgage loans were “very restricted; and that the market for new mortgage bonds is virtually nonexistent.”⁶⁸⁶ Batista sought to channel money into the construction of new subdivisions through the *Fomento de Hipotecas Aseguradas* (Promotion of Ensured Mortgages, FHA), an institution modeled on the US Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and headed by a US citizen, Isidoro Quintana, who had worked with the US FHA in

⁶⁸⁴ David Green, “New Rent Law,” 13 October 1952, RG59/837.02/10-3152, USNA.

⁶⁸⁵ During Prio's administration, discussion was underway to improve financing for home mortgages, since the initial capital required to build a home was prohibitively high. “Crédito de dos millones acuerda la Cámara para hacer viviendas baratas,” *El Crisol*, December 5, 1951, 1; R.M. Connell, Housing and City, Town, and Country Planning—Cuba, 11 August 1950, RG59/837.02/8-1150, USNA.

⁶⁸⁶ Blaming the mortgage moratoriums of 1933, 1934, and 1940, the Truslow Report additionally noted that “This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the situation which prevailed before the Great Depression ... [when] a relatively vigorous and highly-developed market for real estate mortgages and mortgage bonds existed in Cuba, in contrast to the virtual absence of markets for Cuban internal government bonds and private securities outside the real estate field.” This was largely due “to the suitability of mortgages for sugar financing.” Truslow, *Report on Cuba*, 632.

Miami.⁶⁸⁷ “Thousands of Cuban families...can have their own house without a large down payment or the worry of a high monthly rate,” promised government publicity.⁶⁸⁸

As housing construction accelerated in the mid-1950s, many cited the FHA as an important contributing factor. Combined with a “condominium law [*ley de propiedad horizontal*],” which allowed units in multi-family buildings to be purchased rather than rented, the FHA offered an avenue for developers to circumvent the populist-dominated rental system. In a 1958 speech, Batista cited the FHA and the condominium law, stating, “There are thousands of new property owners...do these things not make one proud to be Cuban?”⁶⁸⁹ Though the institution bore the mark of US influence, officials saw it as a national innovation. After an inter-American conference in New Orleans, one report stated, “The experience in Cuba was unequalled even in the United States itself.”⁶⁹⁰ Even left-wing journalists like Samuel Feijóo conceded, “Official organisms like the National Housing Commission and the FHA do their part,” while noting that the progress was “minimal” for the poor.⁶⁹¹ By April 1956, the FHA had approved \$42.7 million in loans, and was actively insuring \$13.6 million nationwide. In Greater Havana, eleven new FHA subdivisions and 27 high-rise condominium buildings were under development. Batista claimed that by 1958, the FHA had underwritten the construction of 8,088 houses in Havana, or over 2,000 per year, for a total of \$78.3 million in loans, 88 percent of which was in Greater Havana.⁶⁹² Broken down annually this would have been approximately one fourth of the national construction value from 1958.⁶⁹³

⁶⁸⁷ David Green, “Cuban FHA Created,” 19 March 1953, RG 59/837.02/3-1953, USNA.

⁶⁸⁸ “¿Que es y como opera FHA?” *Bohemia*, November 1, 1953, 64-65; Jeronimo Lamar, “El arte de transformar una finca rustica abandonada en un nuevo centro urbano,” *Bohemia*, September 13, 1953, 64.

⁶⁸⁹ Batista, “Discurso pronunciado por el Mayor General Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar,” 22.

⁶⁹⁰ “Elogian sistema del FHA. Ponen a cuba como modelo para toda la América Latina.” *El Mundo*, March 5, 1955, 10.

⁶⁹¹ Samuel Feijóo, “La vivienda del pobre,” *Bohemia*, March 10, 1957, n.p.

⁶⁹² Fulgencio Batista, “Vivienda,” n.d. [c. 1961], Box 136, Folder 77, Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar Collection, Cuban Heritage Collection (hereafter CHC); C.A. Boonstra, “Development of the Cuban FHA,” 4 August 1955, RG59/837.02/5-1656, USNA.

⁶⁹³ The Cuban Economic Research Project, *A Study on Cuba*, 433.

Yet the practices of the FHA in the US leave reasons for skepticism. As of 1949, only one African American in the greater Miami area, from where Cuba's new director came, had been granted an FHA loan.⁶⁹⁴ Indeed, historian N.D.B. Connolly calls the US FHA "likely the most effective vehicle for racial segregation in American history."⁶⁹⁵ I have not located evidence that the Cuban FHA restricted investments to particular locations based on race as the US institution did. However, it openly encouraged the selection of buyers based on characteristics associated with "morality," publicly reinforcing the same language of discrimination used in the private market.

Furthermore, like its US counterpart, the Cuban FHA left occupant selection in private hands. Neither lending money nor constructing homes, it instead insured mortgage loans between private lenders and borrowers for home purchase and construction. Created in March 1953, by 1954 the FHA insured all mortgages generated by "approved entities," which received special certification.⁶⁹⁶ Most of the "approved entities" were commercial banks or construction companies, though several non-state retirement funds were also approved.⁶⁹⁷ In order to qualify for FHA financing, developments were required to meet building standards more stringent than legal norms and to screen borrowers.⁶⁹⁸ Extensive sanitary and architectural provisions were also established for FHA projects.⁶⁹⁹ Thus, the FHA accelerated the building potential of private

⁶⁹⁴ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 188.

⁶⁹⁵ Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 180.

⁶⁹⁶ In the case of default from borrowers, the FHA would be responsible for the loss and therefore took steps to verify that loans did not exceed a property's value. David Green, "Revised Charter for the FHA," 11 August 1954, RG59/837.02/8-1054, USNA.

⁶⁹⁷ Harold Randall, "Development of the Cuban FHA," 22 April 1954, RG59/837.02/4-2154, USNA.

⁶⁹⁸ An FHA publication claimed, "The debtors accepted by the FHA are cautiously examined by our Department of Credit with the object of not accepting solicitors of credit who cannot fulfill their commitment." This document was produced after the 1959 Revolution, however during the first year of the Revolution FHA legislation was not changed significantly, and it is unlikely that this publication was a major departure from previous norms. Antonio Ravelo Nariño to Julián de Zuleta, 25 June 1959, Legajo 1138, Expediente 10, Banco Nacional de Cuba, ANC; Raúl Villasuso, "El Fondo de Hipotecas Aseguradas (FHA)," *Revista de Servicio Social*, July-December 1954, 8.

⁶⁹⁹ "Interviene Salubridad en las construcciones," *El Mundo*, March 13, 1955, A-4.

developers who would make houses available to approved buyers. The selection of those buyers was up to the developers, in effect underwriting the social divisions of the private market.

In spite of these restrictions, the FHA was intended to be a solution to the social housing problem, though officials acknowledged its limitations. One FHA official claimed, “Principally, the FHA tends to accommodate the middle class and the working class,” and that it had no interest in “the moneyed classes.” It limited the value of insured homes to \$16,000.⁷⁰⁰ At the same time it was widely acknowledged that the loans were not available for the poor. The cheapest homes listed in an informational publication were \$3,000, requiring a \$300 down payment and a \$16.20 monthly payment amortized over 30 years—a relatively high payment over an extremely long period.⁷⁰¹ The abovementioned official readily admitted, “theoretically the FHA regime supposes that there should co-exist...another state organism with direct responsibility for the disappearance of poor houses and the construction of the future houses of the needy classes.”⁷⁰²

As the state intervened in the mortgage market with heady promises, the popular classes demanded inclusion. A principal example was a new FHA subdivision Las Delicias, under development by the bus workers union, whose houses cost a relatively modest \$4,500 each.⁷⁰³ The project had initially struggled to gain FHA financing, but succeeded by publicizing its case to politicians. In 1954 organizers from the United Bus Workers Union stated that, “Thanks to the President of the Republic,” their cooperative had built twenty-five houses with thirty more under

⁷⁰⁰ Raúl Villasuso, “El Fondo de Hipotecas Aseguradas (FHA),” *Revista de Servicio Social*, July-December 1954, 10.

⁷⁰¹ “¿Qué es y cómo opera FHA?,” *Bohemia*, November 1, 1953, 64-65.

⁷⁰² Raúl Villasuso, “El Fondo de Hipotecas Aseguradas (FHA),” *Revista de Servicio Social*, July-December 1954, 10.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid*, 10.

way, and asked for support to continue their work. The union's ambitious plans went much further, with hopes that 3,000 bus workers could construct "their own low-cost homes."⁷⁰⁴

Publicity surrounding the project contrasted sharply with many FHA projects. In a pro-Batista section of *Alerta*, a black union member explained the history of the project, stating that workers did not want to pay rents "for the enrichment of parasitic capital."⁷⁰⁵ A large report on Las Delicias in *El Crisol* claimed that the initiative had "its origin with a small group of workers on route 16-17," who hoped to work with a "prestigious" institution "destined to liberate the workers of that sector from the monthly payment of rents."⁷⁰⁶ In August 1955, the union inaugurated 46 houses in the subdivision at an event attended by the director of the National Housing Commission.⁷⁰⁷ The project was something of a political showpiece, but it also reflected popular demands. Left to its own devices, however, the FHA favored higher-grade projects, screening developers who screened buyers according to their own criteria. Meanwhile, expanded housing construction meant that residents of rent-controlled houses in the central city faced displacement as developers built condominiums.

On the eve of revolution in 1958, then, Batista's dual-track housing measures had exacerbated deep social conflicts, even as they had succeeded in generating unprecedented levels of construction. Havana's rental market remained distorted and corrupt; FHA-funded projects reinforced development that was unavailable to the poor; and under-serviced subdivisions expanded on the city's edges. "When new constructions come as an avalanche," wrote an architect in 1955, "the unsheltered families are tossed out to un-serviced 'subdivisions.'... A

⁷⁰⁴ "Demandan exenciones para casas," *El Crisol*, March 13, 1954, 7.

⁷⁰⁵ "Cooperativa de viviendas (CUTOA) orgullo del Sindicato de Trabajadores de Omnibus Aliados," *El Crisol*, March 19 1954, n.p.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁷ "Casas para obreros," *Alerta*, August 20, 1955, 8.

localized problem ... spreads dangerously.”⁷⁰⁸ As crisis engulfed Batista’s government in the late months of 1958, the administration badly needed popular support. In November 1958, facing defections in the military and losing US support, Batista acknowledged the central importance of popular housing to his legitimacy, launching a 50-million-peso low-cost housing initiative, administered by the National Housing Commission to construct decent housing for the poor.⁷⁰⁹

5.7 HOUSING AND THE REVOLUTION

Cuba’s new policy makers took up the issue of popular housing in 1959. As an issue of wide relevance, housing immediately occupied a central role in the plans of revolutionary leaders, as it had for the deposed dictator. Mere weeks after Fidel Castro arrived in Havana, the government enacted populist reforms along the same two tracks employed by Batista in 1952. First it leveraged popular support in the rental market by temporarily suspending evictions on January 26.⁷¹⁰ Then, on February 7, it enacted measures to promote the construction of low-cost popular housing. With reforms underway, Castro made his position on past housing policies clear. “What were they doing for fifty years?” he asked at a speech on March 1959. “Did they fix the housing problem? No! No they didn’t fix it, because I see the immense majority of the people living in

⁷⁰⁸ Eduardo Cañas Abril, “Indican los arquitectos como ofrecer al pueblo casas económicas,” *Bohemia*, March 13, 1955, 68.

⁷⁰⁹ BANDES was to lend 10 million pesos to the National Housing Commission “at an interest rate of 5.75 per cent on one half of the loan and 6 per cent on the other half, with repayment to begin in five years over a period of approximately 10 years. The income from the constructed housing is security for repayment of the loan.” Leonard Price, “Cuban Government Signs Contract for Low-Cost Housing Project,” 10 December 1958, RG59/837.02/12-1058, USNA.

⁷¹⁰ The decree was then allowed to lapse. It was later extended, although there was a gap when evictions were legal again. Paperwork was filed through the Urban Property Association in Guanabacoa, where judges continued to rule evictions justified, but I have no evidence to contradict government claims that no forcible evictions were carried out in the meantime. See, for example, Clodomiro Sánchez Pérez contra Zoila Sánchez, 6 July 1960, (Without number), Documentos pre-clasificados, AMMG; Jill Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 47.

one room, in a *solar*, in one of those houses falling down with 200 people inside it.”⁷¹¹ As he proclaimed a break with the past, his indignation reflected a well-established consensus.

Three years later, in 1962, the initiatives launched during the first months of 1959 were obsolete. Alongside a strengthening relationship to the Soviet Union, rents had been abolished entirely, and housing construction centralized in the Ministry of Construction. In the intervening years, housing policy shifted significantly towards the demands of the popular classes and this shift affected the dynamics of housing in Havana for years to come. While the early housing policies of the Cuban Revolution conformed to certain aspects of socialist doctrines, the housing sector was already unevenly nationalized prior to 1959. As the state took over the rental market and infused its semi-private popular housing initiatives with language that emphasized moral reform, it revealed the radical possibilities of policies that had their origins in the Republic.

Rent control was a case in point. From January 1959 until October 1960, the government intervened progressively in the rental market, eventually turning tenants into potential owners. These measures adhered closely to the patterns of popular mobilization that had emerged around legal structures in Havana since 1939. On March 10, 1959, President Urrutia signed an extension of Batista’s 1952 rent law, which included new rent reductions between 30 and 50 percent.⁷¹² Similar to previous legislation, the extension included significant tax exemptions for new construction, but now only in cases in which builders would occupy the apartments themselves.⁷¹³ As property owners voiced disapproval in familiar ways, the US Embassy officials noted that the “arbitrary drastic reduction of rentals” was “a severe jolt not only to

⁷¹¹ Fidel Castro, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” March 11, 1959, in Castro, “Discursos e intervenciones.”

⁷¹² Reductions were 30 percent for rentals of more than \$200, 40 percent for units rented between \$100-200, and 50 percent for units rented at less than \$100. E.A. Gilmore, Jr., “Cuban Government Orders Drastic Reduction Rental Housing,” 12 March 1959, RG59/837.02/7-1259, USNA.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

landlords, but to the construction industry, investors, and others.”⁷¹⁴

As they had for decades, tenants quickly seized on the measures, which had broad appeal. As news spread, *El Crisol* reported that “all day and night yesterday, we received...distinct groups...supporting the recent rent reduction.” Many of these groups sent donations to the revolutionary government, while representatives from a Tenant’s Committee asked for further legislation to create a permanent registry of rental prices (to facilitate opposition to illegal rent hikes), a proposal they had made earlier in the decade.⁷¹⁵ These and other actions from tenants propelled state action as tenants fought for their reductions in court, and landlords fought back.⁷¹⁶ US Embassy officials reported that the Ministry of Justice had opened an office for the public staffed with lawyers, and “nearly all of the problems presented to date have centered around rental reduction cases.”⁷¹⁷ Technically the eviction moratorium expired after 45 days, and was only extended for an additional 30 days in August 1959, but embassy officials noted an “intrinsic bias in favor of the tenant against the landlord” in the courts.⁷¹⁸ Landlords continued to file eviction papers as many tenants stopped paying rent entirely. In Guanabacoa, for example, a judge ordered several evictions based on nonpayment into 1960, even after tenants claimed exceptions based on the new laws. No date of removal is listed, however, and it is unlikely the evictions were carried out.⁷¹⁹

Yet the dynamics of tenant-landlord conflicts quickly surpassed the plans of revolutionary leaders. As many tenants stopped paying rent entirely, leaders pushed back against

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ “Ofrecen su aporte al Gobierno, inquilinos,” *El Crisol*, March 9, 1959, 1.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid, 1.

⁷¹⁷ Leonard Price, “Decree No. 1303 Implementing Cuban Rent Reduction Law,” 12 May 1959, RG59/837.02/5-1259, USNA.

⁷¹⁸ On the dates of the moratorium, see Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 46; Quoted from Harvey Wellman, “Political Implications of the Urban Reform Law,” 20 October 1960, RG59/837.02/11-960, USNA.

⁷¹⁹ For example, Clodomiro Sánchez Pérez contra Zoila Sánchez, 6 July 1960, (Without number), Documentos pre-clasificados, AMMG.

popular pressure. In October 1960, the government enacted the first Urban Reform law and nationalized rental properties entirely, granting ownership to tenants who were to make amortization payments to the state. At the same time, the law respected the populist wing of the property lobby by compensating landlords. While the law abolished the rental system, it also meant that, in theory, tenants who had ceased to pay now had to start. Citing new payments, restricted mobility, and the fact that many now found themselves owning apartments they did not like, the US State Department reported, the Urban Reform was “the most unpopular measure taken by the Castro regime in its 22 months of office,” an assessment they claimed was supported even by “officers of the Yugoslav Embassy, who, because of their socialist proclivities, have usually approved of the various economic measures of the Castro regime.”⁷²⁰ As late as 1965 many former tenants continued to neglect of payments on their homes, prompting the government to seek new enforcement methods.⁷²¹ On rents, then, longstanding political pressures favored greater redistribution than their radicalizing leaders were willing to give. Regardless of popularity, however, the Law transformed previous tenant-landlord conflicts into conflicts with state authorities.

Reforms on housing production followed logically from republican policies as well. Led by Pastorita Nuñez of the July 26 Movement, the Instituto Nacional de Ahorro y Vivienda (National Housing and Savings Institute, INAV) was designed to leverage capital from savings towards social ends, meeting the need of those who could not afford the types of homes offered through the FHA, which continued to function. INAV was therefore deeply rooted in existing paradigms. Consistent with all prior public housing initiatives, moral criteria were required for

⁷²⁰ Harvey Wellman, “Political Implications of the Urban Reform Law,” 20 October 1960, RG59/837.02/11-960, USNA.

⁷²¹ Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 214.

eligibility for homes.⁷²² In constructing homes, INAV extended financing and regulation to cheaper owner-occupied homes, along lines similar to those proposed in 1958 by Batista's National Housing Commission. Like the 1958 plan, it was funded through an initial government appropriation to be recovered through monthly amortization payments from residents, with additional financing to come from FHA-style housing bonds purchased by individual lottery-ticket buyers and by larger entities.⁷²³ Not hostile to investors, the institution acknowledged the need to locate additional private financing, although its optimistic projections for lottery proceeds led leaders to underestimate how much capital they would need. In March 1959, the US State Department reported on negotiations between Pastorita Nuñez and US-based construction and engineering firms for the construction of popular housing in East Havana. The firms involved in the discussions reported that the Cuban government planned to seek US financial backing for new industrial construction.⁷²⁴

INAV was infused with quasi-religious language, blending the long established language of morality with the promises of the Revolution. An autonomous institution like the FHA, INAV claimed to be an instrument of moral redemption, even while funded from lottery proceedings, by turning gambling into an agent of social change. INAV listed as its primary goals to eliminate gambling and convert the popular classes into homeowners. A manifesto for the institution published in early 1961 linked gambling to Cuba's history of colonialism and slavery, recounted INAV's birth in the Sierra Maestra, and announced that the institute "would create homes over the ruins of gambling dens, would make gardens where misery had reigned before."⁷²⁵ Castro

⁷²² Cuba, *INAV*, n.p.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁴ It is unclear the degree to which these plans were considered. The same contractor mentioned that financing might be secured through direct trade agreements surrounding sugar, rather than the direct investment solicited during Batista's administration. E.A. Gilmore, Jr., "GOC Plans for Low-Cost Housing," 13 March 1959, RG59/837.02/3-1359, USNA.

⁷²⁵ Cuba, *Revolutionary Reform of Gambling*, 13.

declared that INAV “is the first institution in the world of this kind ... Instead of the state exploiting gambling, the state combats gambling: it transforms gambling into saving.”⁷²⁶ This language of moral reform reflected old hopes in the possibilities for state reform, although such hopes were now framed according to more radical possibilities.

The state’s rent policies addressed the populist demands of the Republic, ended the conflicts between tenants and landlords, and through INAV deepened the state’s involvement in the housing sector. By 1962, however, housing policy underwent a sharp break, following the Bay of Pigs invasion. INAV policies blended easily emerging socialist doctrines, but as private capital became scarce, its activities were curtailed and the FHA abolished. INAV remained in charge of processing the distribution of homes, but not of construction. As the government openly declared itself socialist, a new state-controlled housing program came into place. With private investment no longer a central component of housing production, and conflicts over rent no longer central to the political system, many of the mechanisms that produced spatial inequality were eliminated. The language of morality remained in place.⁷²⁷

5.8 CONCLUSION

The centralized state housing system of 1962 was a break with the past, but it was also years in the making. Since the 1930s, calls for housing reform had animated popular politics in Havana, leading to a series of policy initiatives that regulated and stimulated the private market. The

⁷²⁶ Fidel Castro, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” March 11, 1959, in Castro, “Discursos e intervenciones.”

⁷²⁷ Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 81.

reform of the rental system in 1959-1961 was shaped by goals, conflicts and policies that were inherited from the Republic. Beginning with the rent law of 1939, local and national politicians enacted a series of laws and decrees designed to favor tenants in occupancy disputes with landlords. These laws played a significant role in limiting the ability of landlords to evict tenants arbitrarily, preventing large increases in rental prices from taking hold in many parts of the central city, but they also led to deteriorating housing conditions through the unregulated subdivision of existing units. Rent laws had a wider political impact, however, expanding the central role of the state in basic housing disputes throughout Havana.

Debates over rent control led all sides to demand construction. Politicians initially passed rent control legislation by linking it directly to tax concessions for private developers. These direct links were broken in 1944, but they established a basic pattern where housing policy in the capital counterbalanced measures favoring tenants with ones that would encourage private investment in housing instead of public housing. These measures intensified in the 1950s, leading to the development of a Cuban FHA, which was designed to promote private investment. This delicately balanced system, in which the dominance of tenants in political disputes over rent control was combined with the government's wider reliance on private investors, altered the dynamics of socio-cultural cleavages in the city by allowing a widely shared language of morality to mediate access to housing. The result was that poor and especially dark-skinned Cubans were generally excluded from new well-serviced developments in Greater Havana, contributing to social and racial segregation in the city.

Thus by 1959, the revolutionary government sought to reform a housing system that had been the subject of intense state attention for decades. By initially favoring tenants, the government intervened in a system that had been shaped by the actions of the poor in their

conflicts with landlords. Tenants quickly seized on the favorable environment by largely abandoning rents. By 1962 the government eliminated those conflicts but created potential grounds for new ones, as it became the collector of tenants' payments. In the absence of a negotiated housing policy with private investors—a true innovation—state control grew over housing construction as well.

As its power grew, the government continued to grapple with the delicate balance implied by its own radical claims at moral redemption. With the elimination of landlords and developers from Havana, the government checked some of the key mechanisms through which social discrimination had proliferated. Yet the basic premises through which those mechanisms had operated remained intact. South of the capitol, the contradictions and ambiguities of this formulation now faced a test. In 1962, with the structures of a new housing system in place across the island, the residents of Las Yaguas waited to see what the changes would mean for them.

6.0 “THEY ARE CUBANS TOO”: SLUM CLEARANCE BETWEEN REPUBLIC AND REVOLUTION, 1950-1963

The outlook we had [in Las Yaguas] has been broken.
—Alexis García⁷²⁸

In 1949, shantytown leaders from Las Yaguas, Isla de Pinos, and Cueva del Humo presented a journalist with proposals for public housing to replace their neighborhoods. Ex-President Ramón Grau’s unrealized promises to trade shacks for modern constructions should go on, they argued, and residents would do the work themselves, paying for the homes gradually. “We have enough people,” stated a leader from the shantytown federation. “We do not want a gift.” “The government that offers these folks decent, human homes, will have won the people,” commented another leader.⁷²⁹ Printed in the popular weekly, *Bohemia*, the proposals seemed to generate little notice as public housing in the capital languished.

Then in 1961, after 12 years of evolving shantytown policies, circumstances changed. In the midst of a turn towards the socialist bloc, revolutionary officials presented shantytown leaders with a plan that, in many ways, was the realization of their old hopes. The government would fund new neighborhoods, and occupants would pay for them over time. Just as leaders had proposed, moreover, shantytown residents were to build the houses. In assigning meaning to

⁷²⁸ As mentioned above, Alexis García is a pseudonym. OL, MD interview with FA, 16 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 4, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 74.

⁷²⁹ Angel Miolan, “¿Como piensan los pobladores de los barrios de indigentes?” *Bohemia*, September 18, 1949, 114.

these houses, however, there was a shift. While in 1949, the leaders had emphasized their civic worth as a prerequisite for their labor, by 1961 project leaders implied that the new projects would instill them with civic worth. “The Revolution did not just provide adequate housing to the mistreated compatriots,” claimed a report, “it elevated them...to the honorable status of citizens of a free land.”⁷³⁰ And their labor was important, since, as another report put it, “in a socialist system there is no room for begging.”⁷³¹ Separated by 12 years, and by the physical, social, and cultural boundaries that divided shacks from the formal city, the statements of 1949 and 1961 are striking, then, both for their identical content and their contrasting implications. The roots of this uneasy convergence—between shantytown leaders making demands of the state, and the state making demands of shantytown residents—is the subject of this chapter.

Most accounts of slum clearance in Havana begin in 1959. Yet the policy shifts that led to Las Yaguas’ final clearance in 1963 had deeper roots, beginning with its reconstruction from a fire in April 1950. The trajectory of Las Yaguas during these years been studied only in bits and pieces, and very few accounts have acknowledged any pre-1959 initiatives towards shantytowns at all. As a result, studies of the revolutionary period have assumed that the government’s program had little precedent.⁷³² The few exceptions have assumed sharp divisions between pre- and post-1959 initiatives.⁷³³ The history of Las Yaguas between fire and eradication therefore sheds light on the evolution of the Cuban state at a time when the government shifted from democracy to dictatorship in 1952, and from capitalist to socialist alliances during 1959-1961.

⁷³⁰ Máximo Algorta, “Convertido en un reparto moderno el sórdido ‘llega y pon’ de Los Quemados,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1961, 19.

⁷³¹ Rafael Sánchez Lalebret, “Construyan veinte repartos para erradicar los barrios insalubres,” *Bohemia*, November 19, 1961, 34-37.

⁷³² Without discussing initiatives beyond Las Yaguas, Butterworth writes that after the 1944 hurricane, “efforts to oust the residents of the slum all but ceased until the revolutionary government razed Las Yaguas in 1963.” Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, 14; Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 77-84; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces*, 135-36; Fernández Núñez, *La Vivienda en Cuba*, 103-105.

⁷³³ Del Toro González, *Algunos aspectos económicos*, 261-63.

Several basic questions serve to assess change and continuity during these years: First, what methods did these regimes use in their efforts to clear shantytowns from Havana, and how did they change? Second, to what extent did shantytown residents shape these methods?

I argue that efforts to clear Las Yaguas from 1950 to 1963, and slum clearance in Havana more broadly, came from a synthesis of actions dictated by two frameworks. First, state initiatives reflected neighborhood leaders' successful engagement with the political system through an established language of contention that emphasized their unfulfilled rights as citizens. Second, the implementation of those initiatives reflected the rise of a hemispheric paradigm for urban policy linked to national planning, social workers, and the "culture of poverty" thesis. As these frameworks collided in Las Yaguas and other shantytowns, the result was an evolution of policy initiatives that granted increasingly generous concessions to residents in exchange for relocations from contested lands. The rhetorical cost, however, was that officials shrouded their initiatives in the language of "redemption," which denied the legitimacy of local mobilization and land occupation, even as it met some local demands. In short, in the case of Las Yaguas and several other neighborhoods, shantytown mobilization was vindicated but not valorized—and it would continue to be defined as beyond the norms of urban citizenship.

The chapter begins by examining an eviction outside the central shantytowns, which contrasted sharply with what the government was willing to undertake in Isla de Pinos, Cueva del Humo, and Las Yaguas. It continues by examining the birth of a slum clearance program based on the persuasive methods of social workers during the Prio administration, documenting the ways that this program was expanded and institutionalized during a large-scale, relatively successful slum clearance operation launched by Batista's government in the mid-1950s. It then addresses Las Yaguas' unlikely survival of the program, continuities and changes in the slum

initiatives of the Revolutionary Government, and, finally, the complicated success of those initiatives in clearing Las Yaguas.

6.1 OUR JOSÉ MARTÍ

At the geographic heart of 1950 Havana's greater metropolitan area, wide, flat, low-lying terrain surrounded a small hill. The land was bordered to the north by a steep ridge, topped by the imposing Principe Castle that guarded the elegant homes of Vedado and the grand Avenue Paseo as it pointed off towards the sea. To the south and east, what was once farmland now stood at the crossroads between new developments in Marianao, El Cerro, and the central city, offering an entryway towards the capitol and an ideal canvas on which to display the accomplishments of the Republic. Crowded, beautiful, and growing, Havana had for years attracted planners who hoped to develop these central lands, and by 1950, with construction on the rise, long-standing proposals were finally underway. At Havana's center would be a modern Civic Plaza that would feature a statue of José Martí, hero of independence, and father to the Cuban nation.

Havana's proud future was mired in its conflictive present, however, as these lands had become central to hopes of poor residents as well. Speculators had purchased much of the area, which they rented haphazardly to thousands of occupants. In geographic terms, it was at the time perhaps the largest informally occupied area in Greater Havana—"a city in ruins," according to one report.⁷³⁴ "Where they will raise ... the monument to the Apostle," declared a photo report in

⁷³⁴ This estimate is based on Raul Glez-Abreu Gómez, "Plano del Termino Municipal de la Habana en los 43 barrios," 1945, Mapoteca, Biblioteca Nacional José Martí. Quoted from, "Trescientas familias pobres ocuparán el Barrio Obrero de Luyanó si el gobierno insiste en sus maniobras para desalojar el lugar donde viven," *Noticias de Hoy*, April 12, 1950, 4.

Bohemia, there is a “theater of pain and a stage for all human misery.”⁷³⁵ At the heart of a crowded city, then, three sets of interest sought to influence the site’s future: a surge in new construction was entwined with plans from politicians and architects, in direct opposition to the claims of poor, politically mobilized Cuban citizens in scattered collections of shacks. The future of Havana would be determined less by plans and blueprints than by negotiation and conflict—and how such conflicts would play out was far from clear.

In early 1950, the Ministry of Public Works put these dynamics to the test, initiating expropriations and evictions that quickly foreclosed any questions over who had rights to the neighborhood’s property. Protest targeted the Cuban state. One group of poor residents formed a committee and organized a meeting with city councilmen from the Communist Party (PSP), which erupted into threats to take over the empty Barrio Obrero if the government’s plans were carried out.⁷³⁶ After stalling, the Ministry of Public Works moved forward anyway—although it acknowledged the need to indemnify poor families along with owners. In October 1951 the Ministry paid approximately 100,000 pesos to land owners. Concurrently, a court representative signaled that the eviction rulings were final, delivering 50 pesos each to an estimated 300 families—25 pesos in the name of property owners and 25 from the Ministry of Public Works. Residents had no legal avenue, except to demand better compensation.⁷³⁷

Protest did not focus on the eviction ruling, but highlighted instead the state’s failure to care for residents. Denouncing the “precipitous form in which the Ministry of Public Works has attacked and destroyed the modest shacks they inhabit,” residents demanded more time.⁷³⁸

⁷³⁵ Baldomero Rios, “Contrastes en el aristocrático Vedado,” *Bohemia*, January 29, 1950, 48-50.

⁷³⁶ “Trescientas familias pobres ocuparán el Barrio Obrero de Luyanó si el gobierno insiste en sus maniobras para desalojar el lugar donde viven,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 12, 1950, 4.

⁷³⁷ Quoted from “Liquidán indemnizaciones a los vecinos de la Plaza Cívica,” *Alerta*, October 27, 1951, 7; “Piden trescientas familias un plazo para buscar casas,” *Alerta*, October 20, 1951, 3.

⁷³⁸ “Piden trescientas familias un plazo para buscar casas,” *Alerta*, October 20, 1951, 3.

Others claimed that they had never received payments.⁷³⁹ Alongside parallel efforts by Communists, Fidel Castro, a young lawyer and aspiring politician, reportedly worked on behalf of squatters in the area to negotiate higher indemnities.⁷⁴⁰ With construction underway in early 1952, neighborhood organizations continued to publicize their resistance, claiming that there was nowhere else in the city to live and reformulating the symbolism of the José Martí statue with signs reading, “act and think with our Martí.”⁷⁴¹

The Ministry was not moved. Facing down protesters, construction workers began to excavate the site as promised. In late October 1951, a crane began to “rip off the roofs of the houses where people still lived.”⁷⁴² In November, as one elderly resident was loading his possessions into a truck arranged by the Ministry, a dynamite blast launched rocks into the neighborhood, killing the man instantly and narrowly missing several children. *Noticias de Hoy* labeled the blast “terrorism,” and new protests soon followed.⁷⁴³ Even as poor families continued to occupy the edges of the Plaza, however, by 1953 the central area was empty.⁷⁴⁴ With the land free for “the vital nucleus of our city’s future,” residents were forced to seek homes elsewhere.⁷⁴⁵ Without time to make other arrangements, some made their way across the city to another contested site, Las Yaguas.⁷⁴⁶

⁷³⁹ “La tragedia de la Finca Ermita,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 9, 1951, 1, 4.

⁷⁴⁰ Szulc, *Fidel*, 214-16.

⁷⁴¹ F. Rodríguez Piedra, “Un negocio, 4 mil familias a la calle,” *La Última Hora*, February 7, 1952, 10-11; “Protestan contra los desalojos, vecinos del barrio del Príncipe,” *Alerta*, January 11, 1952, 10-11.

⁷⁴² “Piden trescientas familias un plazo para buscar casas,” *Alerta*, October 20, 1951, 3.

⁷⁴³ “La tragedia de la Finca Ermita,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 9, 1951, 1, 4; “Muerto a causa de una explosión,” *El Crisol*, November 9, 1951, 8.

⁷⁴⁴ Citing an interview with Jorge Aspiazo, Szulc claims that Castro was successful in negotiating a 50 peso indemnity for residents, until the agreement was scrapped when Batista cleared the neighborhood after his 1952 coup. This claim is partially supported by Batista’s own claim to have eradicated 515 homes and 1,532 residents from “La Pelusa,” where Castro was working. However, evictions at the Plaza were well under way by the time of Batista’s coup. Szulc, *Fidel*, 215; “Barrios de Indigentes Erradicados,” n.d. [c. 1961], Box 135, Folder 77, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar Papers, CHC.

⁷⁴⁵ Quoted from “Liquidación indemnizaciones a los vecinos de la Plaza Cívica,” *Alerta*, October 27, 1951, 7.

⁷⁴⁶ LP Interview with CM, 11 April 1969, Box 139, Folder 41, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 1.

6.2 TOWARDS A DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ACTION

Away from the construction, Havana remained an informally housed city. The public battles of Las Yaguas and the central shantytowns against property owners and the state respectively, meant that these neighborhoods were relatively entrenched. Aside from firmly establishing the state's legal responsibility for their property status, local conflicts had generated a widespread public consensus that the state could not relocate residents without offering support commensurate with their rights as citizens. Still, the expropriations and evictions underway in the Plaza Cívica served as notice that a place in the central city could not be taken for granted.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, central shantytowns demanded adequate housing and other benefits, but until the 1950 fire, their most significant achievement was to halt arbitrary relocations, not procure resources from the state. Following the fire, however, public pressure consolidated momentum around new policies, with hints that local demands might be taken more seriously. As officials targeted the neighborhoods, they began to draw from methods developed by social workers and influenced by Oscar Lewis, who taught at Havana's School of Social Work in 1944.⁷⁴⁷ By the 1952 presidential elections, shantytown policy in Havana no longer relied on the imposition of force if such force was ineffective. Instead, influenced by local mobilization, state initiative focused on persuasion, opening new avenues for local claims.

These tactics developed gradually, as central shantytowns remained under vague, persistent threat. Leading up to the 1950 fire, health officials argued publicly that shantytowns endangered the health of the wider population. In 1946 the Health Ministry lifted a shantytown quarantine begun during the 1944 hurricane, but officials continued to press for the eradication

⁷⁴⁷ Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, xii.

of “the sick part” of the metropolis.⁷⁴⁸ “Just imagine ... what would happen to the inhabitants of Havana if an epidemic developed in one of those neighborhoods,” explained a health official.⁷⁴⁹ In March 1947, Grau’s Health Minister, Pedro Nogueira, told reporters that he had received complaints from nearby businesses, citing “a grave threat to public health.”⁷⁵⁰ In a meeting later that month, he proposed to vaccinate and remove infected residents and close all local businesses.⁷⁵¹ Accompanying these discussions were rumors around hasty relocation plans. That year, the Ministry of Public Works proposed building a national park and a military museum near the Atarés Castle, offering 25 pesos to each family from Cueva del Humo and Isla de Pinos that would move.⁷⁵² Other government housing proposals would have sent residents to distant, underserviced lands.⁷⁵³ All the while, the much-touted Barrio Obrero public housing project remained incomplete.⁷⁵⁴

Many press reports agreed with health officials that the conditions of deep poverty were cause for alarm, but residents were savvy at deflecting criticism towards the state. Citing “a scene from a Dostoyevsky novel,” a sympathetic journalist reported that the nearby Hijas de Galicia clinic received hundreds of visits daily from shantytown residents seeking medical help for symptoms of malnutrition.⁷⁵⁵ In one sensationalized incident, a baby in Las Yaguas died after

⁷⁴⁸ Fernando Alloza, “Seis mil personas viven hacinadas en las chozas de Las Yaguas,” *Información*, March 2, 1947, 49.

⁷⁴⁹ Acosta, Loló, “La vergüenza de los barrios de indigentes,” *Carteles*, February 20, 1949, 22-23.

⁷⁵⁰ “Grave amenaza para la salud pública, el barrio ‘Las Yaguas,’” *El País*, March 6, 1947, 4.

⁷⁵¹ “Los antihigiénicos barrios de indigentes,” *El Sol*, March 29, 1947, 1.

⁷⁵² Neighborhood leaders quickly rejected the move, publicizing word of a “grave threat.” Alberto Pavia, “Bajo la promesa de entregar veinte y cinco pesos a cada familia, amenazan desalojar a los vecinos del barrio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Crisol*, February 27, 1947, 8.

⁷⁵³ One proposed plan involved moving residents to La Hata, Guanabacoa. While residents were open to the move provided the homes were well serviced, the Guanabacoa press criticized relocating shantytown residents into the municipality. See “Los llamados ‘barrios de indigentes’ en Guanabacoa,” *La Tutelar*, n.d. [c. 1947]; Angel Miolan, “¿Como piensan los pobladores de los barrios de indigentes?” *Bohemia*, September 18, 1949, 40. On other plans, see “Barrio para los indigentes,” *El Sol*, April 5, 1947, 1; Clara Moreda Luis, “Los barrios de indigentes,” *El Crisol*, March 7, 1947, 9.

⁷⁵⁴ Herminio Portell-Vilá, “El Barrio Obrero de Luyanó,” *Bohemia*, February 13, 1949, 27.

⁷⁵⁵ Alberto Pavia, “Bajo la promesa de entregar veinte y cinco pesos a cada familia, amenazan desalojar a los vecinos del barrio de Isla de Pinos,” *El Crisol*, February 27, 1947, 8.

being bitten by rats.⁷⁵⁶ Yet local leaders sharply contested health officials' abstract characterizations of their homes as threatening to the wider urban area. In a 1949 *Bohemia* report, Cueva del Humo mayor Abelardo Pol declared, "we want the Health Ministry to come visit us ... so they know our needs and wants; let them stop speaking to us from far away."⁷⁵⁷ Others claimed to prevent the outbreak of disease only through their own diligence, blaming municipal officials for failing to pick up trash and provide basic resources.⁷⁵⁸ And whenever the neighborhoods faced eviction, leaders stuck to familiar talking points, explaining "that they did not oppose the disappearance of the shantytowns, but rather the tossing of families out of their homes where they have sacrificed so much."⁷⁵⁹

By the start of Carlos Prio's presidential term in 1948, neighborhood leaders' success in publicly linking plans for relocation to demands for benefits from the state made their elimination appear more distant than ever. A detailed 1947 report in *Información* noted the proliferation of businesses, church groups, and political organizations in Las Yaguas supervised by dense community networks.⁷⁶⁰ Political groups of all kinds visited the neighborhoods offering resources in exchange for support.⁷⁶¹ Now purged from the Confederation of Cuban Labor (CTC), Communist-affiliated groups took a renewed interest in the neighborhoods, organizing for public schools in Las Yaguas.⁷⁶² And the Federation of Barrios de Indigentes, organized by the University Student Federation (FEU), remained outspoken in demanding shantytown

⁷⁵⁶ "Devoraron las ratas a una niña en Las Yaguas," *Alerta*, August 18, 1952, 1; "Muere una niña a la que casi devoran las ratas," *El Mundo*, August 19, 1952, 1.

⁷⁵⁷ Angel Miolan, "¿Como piensan los pobladores de los barrios de indigentes?" *Bohemia*, September 18, 1949, 40.

⁷⁵⁸ "Continua en pie el problema del b. de Las Yaguas. Se Niegan a Desalojar el Lugar," *El Crisol*, October 23, 1944.

⁷⁵⁹ Alberto Pavia "Bajo la promesa de entregar veinte y cinco pesos a cada familia, amenazan desalojar a los vecinos del barrio de Isla de Pinos," *El Crisol*, February 27, 1947, 8. "Gestiona la FEU becas para los niños indigentes. Deben construirse viviendas para los sin trabajo," *El Pais*, February 22 1949, 3.

⁷⁶⁰ Alberto Pavia, "Bajo la promesa de entregar veinte y cinco pesos a cada familia, amenazan desalojar a los vecinos del barrio de Isla de Pinos," *El Crisol*, February 27, 1947, 8.

⁷⁶¹ Fernando Alloza, "Seis mil personas viven hacinadas en las chozas de Las Yaguas," *Información*, March 2, 1947, 49; "Muy agradecidos al ingeniero Carlos Hevia," *El Crisol*, January 9, 1952, 6; "Costea Salubridad un acto politiquero que darán en Las Yaguas," *Noticias de Hoy*, April 15, 1950, 4; García Alonso, *Manuela*, 353-56.

⁷⁶² "Lucha la FDMC por una escuela pública en Las Yaguas," *Noticias de Hoy*, February 23, 1950, 11.

rights.⁷⁶³ Mongo Píz, the Federation's president and a Cueva del Humo resident, organized positive publicity for the neighborhoods with the help of his "propaganda secretary," including several feature stories by popular weekly journals *Carteles* and *Bohemia*. In 1950 a journalist from *Carteles* agreed to spend a "weekend" in Cueva del Humo, photographing and interviewing friendly residents with the Federation's guidance, eventually spending a "wonderful night" in a shack.⁷⁶⁴

The 1950 fire in Las Yaguas put the political capacity of the neighborhood on full display, and residents captured the sympathy of the nation. Following the blaze, the front page of *Alerta* pictured a Las Yaguas woman kneeling above burned homes, reading a Bible passage to her young daughter.⁷⁶⁵ As residents quickly rebuilt their homes, one journalist stated that the neighborhood "will be a new edition of the phoenix legend."⁷⁶⁶ By now a somewhat familiar public figure, Las Yaguas mayor Rufino González gave interviews, stating, "What we need is wood, nails, furniture, clothes, and food, because we will do the work ourselves.... At this point we have not received any visit from officials; let them come bring us what we need."⁷⁶⁷ With tight organization and wide visibility, neighborhood representatives made it clear that their voices would be heard in future discussions.

Yet the publicity surrounding the fire made it clear that state officials would be part of the conversation too—and relocation remained a top priority. Along with another fire in Cueva del Humo that year, the incident pushed the Health Ministry's larger plans for the neighborhood into

⁷⁶³After FEU President Manolo Castro's death in 1947, the residents of Isla de Pinos erected a bust in the center of the neighborhood to honor "the man who fought for us the most." "Acto en memoria de Manolo Castro en 'Isla de Pinos,'" *El Crisol*, February 23, 1949, 10; Alberto Pavia, "Bajo la promesa de entregar veinte y cinco pesos a cada familia, amenazan desalojar a los vecinos del barrio de Isla de Pinos," *El Crisol*, February 27, 1947, 8

⁷⁶⁴ Ángel Lázaro, "Fin de semana en la 'Cueva del Humo,'" *Carteles*, February 12, 1950, 24-29; Angel Miolan, "¿Como piensan los pobladores de los barrios de indigentes?" *Bohemia*, September 18, 1949, 39.

⁷⁶⁵ "¡Gracias a dios salvamos la vida...!" *Alerta*, April 3, 1950, 1.

⁷⁶⁶ "Arrasadas 'Las Yaguas' por un incendio... La reconstrucción," *Información*, April 4, 1950, 22.

⁷⁶⁷ "Sobre las cenizas de las casas que se les quemaron duermen los indigentes," *El Crisol*, April 4, 1950, 1, 10.

the national spotlight to an extent not seen since the 1944 hurricane, and there were hints that the Health Ministry sought to repeat previous actions. Following the fire, Minister Ramírez claimed to be studying a construction project on state lands “in more remote areas.” And while such construction would “come about with cooperation from residents,” Ramírez echoed a formulation designed to negate the claims of residents that the state was obligated to provide for them. Many, he stated, were not “true indigents” and would not be included in the plans since “they are perfectly capable of paying for housing.”⁷⁶⁸ With these statements, however, the Ministry was caught in the trap of its own rhetoric—and one which neighborhood leaders put to use: it could not publicly justify the clearance of the neighborhoods without ensuring that residents could adequately provide for themselves.

As the fires generated public sympathy, Prio’s Health Minister Carlos Ramírez Corria recognized the dilemma. After the fire in Cueva del Humo, the neighborhood mayor reported that the Health Ministry had sent materials, and that Ramírez himself made “daily visits.”⁷⁶⁹ After the Las Yaguas fire, in the midst of swirling rumors of arson by the government after a failed rally for mayoral candidate and brother to the president Antonio Prio, the Health Ministry planned a “Day with Ramírez Corria in the Reparto Las Yaguas,” a title that was quickly changed to “Pro Municipal-Health, Antonio Prio for Mayor,” and which was to include visits from local business leaders, gift handouts, conga drums, and possibly alcohol. Calling the event “the most inept kind of politicking,” *Noticias de Hoy* denounced the Ministry for playing politics while failing to provide “gasoline [for trucks] to pick up the trash”⁷⁷⁰ Yet the change in tone was

⁷⁶⁸ “Piden ayuda los Damnificados de la Playa de Cajío,” *El Crisol*, April 4, 1950, 1-2.

⁷⁶⁹ Ángel Lázaro, “Fin de semana en la ‘Cueva del Humo,’” *Carteles*, February 12, 1950, 24-29.

⁷⁷⁰ “Costea salubridad un acto politiquero que darán en Las Yaguas,” *Noticias de Hoy*, April 15, 1950, 4.

meaningful. According to *El Crisol*, following the fire, neighbors were “grateful to the National Police,” simply “because they have been authorized to raise their homes out of the rubble.”⁷⁷¹

While his plans for relocation remained in suspense, Ramírez’s public statements brought to the surface previous negotiations between several sets of interests in Havana. Months earlier, *Carteles* reported on meetings between Ramírez and President Prio about strategies to overcome “enormous difficulties” and “tenacious” neighborhood resistance.⁷⁷² Ramírez also “exchanged impressions” with officials from the National Tourism Board and with property owners from around the city.⁷⁷³ The minister spoke with representatives from the Lyceum Society, the Rotary Club, Lions Club, and several other organizations to “coordinate the efforts of all interested institutions.”⁷⁷⁴ The result was a plan for a “regulating neighborhood,” where residents would be kept healthy and monitored by government officials. Financing would come from the “indigents fund,” and other sources.⁷⁷⁵ In addition, Ramírez “addressed the possibility of raising contributions from the property owners of those lands,” a proposal that “faced serious objections” at first, but quickly generated a pledge of two million pesos.⁷⁷⁶ “My plan,” explained Ramírez, “must be in the careful hands of people interested in ‘social action.’”⁷⁷⁷

In April 1950, with the attention of the nation turned towards Las Yaguas, Ramírez had momentum to take action, and he introduced a new set of actors to do it. On April 4, he issued a public statement assuring the nation that residents could be relocated and also rehabilitated effectively, through the efforts of social workers.

⁷⁷¹ “Sobre las cenizas de las casas que se les quemaron duermen los indigentes,” *El Crisol*, April 4, 1950, 1, 10.

⁷⁷² “La actualidad,” *Carteles*, February? 18, 1949, 61.

⁷⁷³ “Otra vez los indigentes,” *Alerta*, September 16, 1949, 4; “Plan de Salubridad para resolver lo de barrios indigentes,” *El País*, September 13, 1949, 8.

⁷⁷⁴ “Acuerdan fundar un patronato para hacer casas de indigentes,” *El País*, September 21, 1949, 8.

⁷⁷⁵ “Los dueños de las tierras ofrecen dos millones de pesos al gobierno para que desaloje a los vecinos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 6, 1949, 5.

⁷⁷⁶ “Otra vez los indigentes,” *Alerta*, September 16, 1949, 4; “Los dueños de las tierras ofrecen dos millones de pesos al gobierno para que desaloje a los vecinos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, October 6, 1949, 5.

⁷⁷⁷ “Acuerdan fundar un patronato para hacer casas de indigentes,” *El País*, September 21, 1949, 8.

The entire population of those neighborhoods is cooperating with a plan to make rehabilitating neighborhoods, where adults can elevate their cultural level and protect the future of their children. There are already construction experts in the neighborhoods with a clear notion of a different kind of sanitary life. Little by little they are elevating that cultural level. The group of social workers has been doing lovely work, and it is not utopian to think that soon those neighborhoods of so-called indigents will have tools, dispensaries, schools, [and] small industries.⁷⁷⁸

While eliminating Havana's central shantytowns remained a key goal for the Health Ministry, it planned a new type of intervention to achieve it. Social workers, not police, would now be on the front lines—and Ramírez assured that they would generate sustained cultural uplift. "A house and its materials in themselves are much less important than the culture of its residents," concluded the minister.⁷⁷⁹

6.3 BEYOND POLITICS: SOCIAL WORKERS IN ISLA DE PINOS

Spoken in the midst of crisis, the Health Minister's rhetoric was not easy to put into practice, even after the publicity of the fire. Yet as officials moved slowly, pressure mounted. Criticizing the national government's slow reaction, Havana's city council took up the issue of shantytowns in 1951, following a series of incendiary articles from Ortodoxo councilman Herminio Portell-Vilá. "One would laugh if it were not so painful!" he giped in *Bohemia*, after putting together a census team for the central shantytowns.⁷⁸⁰ In November 1951, the council unanimously approved legislation to set up a commission to negotiate with police for the targeted removal and relocation of Las Yaguas, Isla de Pinos, and Cueva del Humo, along with a public hearing on the

⁷⁷⁸ "Sobre las cenizas de las casas que se les quemaron duermen los indigentes," *El Crisol*, April 4, 1950, 1, 10.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁰ Herminio Portell-Vilá, "Viviendas de pobres," *Bohemia*, October 14, 1951, 113.

matter.⁷⁸¹ “It is past time that we do something more than feel sorry for ourselves,” stated an editorial in *El Mundo*, favorably reviewing the measure.⁷⁸² The council’s initiative was ultimately scuttled by infighting, but all members publicly criticized “the Central Power,” which, “up until now has had no solution.”⁷⁸³

Given the pressure, however, the “Central Power” had not been as idle as the city councilmen assumed. Plans for Ramírez’s publicly constructed “culturing” neighborhood were abandoned, but as the council debated in November 1951, *Diario de la Marina* reported that the Health Ministry had created a Department of Social Action to clear shantytowns. Social worker Celina Cardoso was named to head the initiative, “in which many predecessors failed,” and the report stated she “had the sage instinct—a woman after all—to understand ... that to conquer prejudices, resistance and even deep rancor, it was necessary to win the confidence ... of the indigents themselves.”⁷⁸⁴ For its first mission, the Department of Social Action targeted Isla de Pinos, the neighborhood burned to the ground by Machado’s police two decades before. By November, 100 homes had been eliminated.⁷⁸⁵

In Isla de Pinos, social workers collaborated with doctors, lawyers, and the Boy Scouts, to integrate themselves into neighborhood life. Social workers assisted residents in collecting back pay on pensions, teaching others to read so that they could apply for a fingerprint identification card, and registering birth certificates for others so they could find formal employment. Volunteers came to play with local children, and a Women’s Committee was

⁷⁸¹ “La sesión del ayuntamiento. Realizarán un censo de indigentes para eliminar sus barrios,” *Información*, November 27, 1951, 1; “La lacra social del barrio de indigentes,” *El Crisol*, November 28, 1951, 1.

⁷⁸² “Los barrios de indigentes,” *El Mundo*, November 28, 1951, 2.

⁷⁸³ Actas Capitulares del Ayuntamiento de la Habana, Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, 237, 240, 243.

⁷⁸⁴ It is unclear precisely when social workers began to work in Isla de Pinos. In November 1951 a report claimed they had been working for “many months.” Arturo Alfonso Roselio, “Los indigentes: gran tarea de rehabilitación social,” *Diario de la Marina*, November 25, 1951, 50.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 50.

established to sew new clothes. Firefighters were called to unclog a water drain, while some tubercular residents were taken to sanatoriums. Additionally, the Department offered dental care and other medicine through a mobile clinic. “At the beginning many refused to attend the clinic, but we broke down their resistance as they gained more confidence,” reported a social worker.⁷⁸⁶

The social workers conducted these operations with a clear eye towards removing residents. After checking a tubercular man into a sanatorium, a social worker reported that the children had been “alleviated ... of their family burdens,” permitting the oldest daughter to work as a domestic servant. “Soon they will be able to abandon the neighborhood,” the report continued. Another social worker convinced a home for the elderly to permit two sisters to take up residence with their pet hen. In other cases, social workers claimed to have “guided individuals towards ... purchasing small plots of land with very small payments,” where they could build a home that was “always cleaner and more comfortable than what they currently have.” For several Russian-born residents, social workers arranged for new passports and travel funds to return to their country of birth—reportedly a voluntary return, though one that was required by law, since foreigners were prohibited from living in “a state of indigence.” “When they abandoned the neighborhood, the five corresponding houses were immediately demolished,” the social worker explained.⁷⁸⁷

Though using a lighter touch than previous removal efforts, social workers faced a daunting task. Even after being allowed to keep their hen, the elderly sisters quickly returned to the neighborhood. After another elderly woman’s house was burned—by whom is unclear—she declared that before going to a nursing home, she would “rather live in the jungle.” “Practice has

⁷⁸⁶ “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 1.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

shown us, that bringing these types of elderly people to the ‘homes’ is all but impossible,” commented a social worker.⁷⁸⁸

Other workers cited resistance of a fiercer kind. Railing against tax-shirking businessmen, political sergeants who lied to the press, habitual delinquents, and outside political interests who had chosen the neighborhood “as a field of action,” one social worker complained of “fierce tumults without any other cause than the destruction of a few unoccupied homes.” “Unoccupied” could be a relative term, however. In December 1951, workers from the Health Ministry destroyed a series of homes and distributed “various sheets of zinc” to nearby residents. Returning to find her home in ruins, Ana Lidia allegedly attacked two men with a machete, cracking the skull of one. Injured as well, the “ferocious woman” claimed that she was the one who had been attacked and was only defending her home, from which “no one had given permission to take those materials.”⁷⁸⁹ Sarcastically denouncing the “humanitarian” labor of the Health Ministry, *Noticias de Hoy* reported that residents had successfully halted demolition efforts, reportedly greased with twenty pesos per home, with protests “that almost came to disturb the peace.”⁷⁹⁰

For all its caution, government action in Isla de Pinos quickly inflamed tensions. Calling President Prio a “good millionaire after all,” *Noticias de Hoy* published a series of highly critical articles denouncing the government’s “frequent inhuman acts.”⁷⁹¹ The Department of Social Action is “destroying the houses by fire,” the journal reported, “fanning indigents

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁷⁸⁹ “Fiera riña en Isla de Pinos,” *Alerta*, December 6, 1951, 3.

⁷⁹⁰ “Trata el gobierno de lanzar a la calle a miles de vecinos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 8, 1951, 1, 4; “Seguirá Salubridad en la ‘humanitaria’ obra de botar indigentes,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 27, 1951, 1.

⁷⁹¹ “¡Ni siquiera este techo van a tener!,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 9, 1951, 1; “Trata el gobierno de lanzar a la calle a miles de vecinos,” *Noticias de Hoy*, November 8, 1951, 1, 4.

throughout the city along with the ashes.”⁷⁹² Meanwhile, conservative papers like *Diario de la Marina* supported the measures, denouncing “false indigence.” “Politicians have always exploited the thesis that the indigents did not want to abandon their neighborhoods,” the author wrote, citing the dramatic success of the Department’s “persuasive methods in some cases, and of the smooth but constant pressure of authority in others.”⁷⁹³

In spite of these rhetorical battles, by February 1952, social workers claimed to be moving towards success. “Currently the Department has gained the confidence and friendship of almost all the neighborhood residents,” claimed a social worker.⁷⁹⁴ By 1952, then, new methods from social science were applied to the political dynamics of Havana shantytowns. Removal of the neighborhoods remained at the top of the state’s agenda, and local resistance remained fierce. As the state deployed social workers to navigate treacherous political terrain, the future of Havana’s central shantytowns hung in the balance.

6.4 A NEW REGIME

Batista promised to turn half-measures into full-scale reform after taking control of the government in 1952. In the weeks following the coup, the US State Department reported that “the new government seems to be determined” to build “cheap housing projects,” claims that Batista repeated in a series of radio addresses to the nation.⁷⁹⁵ Rejecting the label of dictator in an April interview, Batista justified his suspension of elections as “transitory,” and promised

⁷⁹² “Seguirá Salubridad en la ‘humanitaria’ obra de botar indigentes,” *Noticias de Hoy*, December 27, 1951, 1.

⁷⁹³ Arturo Alfonso Roselio, “Los indigentes: gran tarea de rehabilitación social,” *Diario de la Marina*, November 25, 1951, 50;

“La explotación de la mendicidad y la falsa indigencia,” *Diario de la Marina*, November 25, 1951, 50.

⁷⁹⁴ “Plan de trabajo del Departamento de Acción Social del Ministerio de Salubridad,” *Selva Habanera*, February 9, 1952, 12.

⁷⁹⁵ David Green, “Government Plans for Low-Cost Housing Developments,” 1 August 1952, RG59/837.02/8-152, USNA; Duwayne G. Clark to US Ambassador, 28 March 1952, RG84/737.00(W)/3-2852, USNA.

“radical rectification” for “the sincere and pure dreamers of the Revolution.” At the center of the article, he was pictured on a hill overlooking the shacks of Las Yaguas, pointing off into the distance. “Although many great capitals endure them,” he explained in the caption, “in Cuba there is no justification for those neighborhoods to exist.”⁷⁹⁶

Reflecting popular ideas in social science and urban planning, Batista viewed shantytowns in cultural terms, and he entangled that culture with the responsibilities of an expanding welfare state. Claiming that other countries faced urban poverty as a result of economic crisis or “heartless cosmopolitanism,” he explained that Cuba was neither poor nor uncaring. Havana shantytowns, he claimed, were partially the result of “shortsightedness and inattention from the state,” but, because of resident behavior, they were worse than the scale of the poverty they contained. “There will be enormous surprise the day it is publicly known that in a good number of cases, residents in ‘Las Yaguas’ ... earn more than a teacher in a school,” he said. The misery of shantytowns was more “moral than economic,” and “it is not nearly what those neighborhoods make it appear.”⁷⁹⁷ By highlighting urban poverty, while simultaneously questioning the extent of the state’s obligation to provide for residents, Batista laid a foundation for both expanded benefits and stronger discipline.

The thesis of moral decay in shantytowns also served as a foil for appropriate norms of citizenship, and Batista argued for the role of the state in situating the poor on the correct path. “The citizen who lives in ‘his’ house...thinks and acts very differently from the father who lives in uncertainty and alienation,” he stated. In response, he promised to deploy “the social action of my government” to “rapidly launch a well studied, coordinated, scientific plan” for the

⁷⁹⁶ Enrique Pizzi de Porras, “Quiero que todos los cubanos vivan la vida digna a que tienen derecho,” *Bohemia*, April 27, 1952, Supplement, 8-11.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 8-11.

construction of new homes for workers. Once in place, such a program would make clear that “there is no reason for a number of compatriots who remain inhumanly at the margins of society.”⁷⁹⁸

These priorities were quickly reflected in legislation, which clarified the illegality of *barrios urbanos de indigentes* (urban neighborhoods of indigents). In May 1952, the Junta Nacional de Economía (National Economy Board, JNE) approved a report on low-cost housing, proposing measures on rural huts as part of a wider plan to promote housing construction.⁷⁹⁹ In June, the Cabinet approved specific legislation on the matter, regulating rural housing and adding measures against *barrios urbanos de indigentes*. Echoing Cosme de la Torreinte’s 1939 legislation, the measure mandated the elimination of these neighborhoods, while linking relocation to various types of social welfare. Shantytown residents with “profitable employment” were to be forced to find housing elsewhere, while those who did not were to be “totally reeducated” and provided with “social assistance” under the care of the Health Ministry and the Corporation for Social Assistance.⁸⁰⁰

Departing from efforts of previous administrations, which had focused on public health, Batista’s administration integrated slum clearance measures into a broad institutional structure dedicated to housing. Working past opposition from sugar growers and other interests, an August decree made the already-existing National Housing Commission (CNV) an autonomous entity, financed by taxes and penalties on rural property owners whose land held sub-standard

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid, 8-11.

⁷⁹⁹ “Aprobado la Junta de Economía el informe relativo de la vivienda,” *El Mundo*, May 14, 1952, 5.

⁸⁰⁰ David Green, “Government Plans for Low-Cost Housing Developments,” 1 August 1952, RG: 58/837.02/8-152, USNA; “Nuevos impuestos con destino a mejorar la vivienda rural. Dedicada también a barrios de indigentes,” *El Mundo*, June 14 1952, 1, 8

dwellings.⁸⁰¹ Additionally, the decree set “a tax of 50 percent on the increase in the value of the lands on which *barrios urbanos de indigentes* are located” after the state cleared them of occupants. The clearances and payments were to be conducted through “voluntary agreements” between the CNV and title-holders of the lands.⁸⁰² Rather than paying property owners for occupied land, as agrarian reform laws had problematically done, the decree channeled profits from property owners towards the relocation of shantytowns.

Neither the 1952 nor 1953 decrees offered an explicit definition of *barrios urbanos de indigentes*, but together they reinforced the links between urban land seizures and the welfare state. While the 1952 legislation implied that shantytowns were areas of deficient housing where some residents needed rehabilitation, the 1953 legislation made it clear that they were areas of informal urban land occupation. Since the program functioned through voluntary agreements with titleholders, it amounted to the institutionalization of norms to settle property conflicts. The government ultimately supported titleholders, the decree implied, but by taxing them in exchange for slum clearance it also tacitly recognized the legitimacy of residents’ claims to social welfare. The results of the combined taxes were effective. By October 1953, the CNV reported a budget of 1.5 million pesos, and estimated that it would receive two million pesos annually.⁸⁰³

With medical hygienist José Pardo Jiménez at its head, Doctor Humberto Fernández Aguirre overseeing its shantytown efforts, and an autonomous operating budget, the CNV was positioned to put legislation into practice, promising “true rehabilitation.” An official spelled out the methods of the institution as it dealt with the neighborhoods one by one: “To the elderly, we

⁸⁰¹ The new taxes applied to rural lands, and it was the obligation of property owners to declare the dwellings on their property to meet building standards to gain an exemption. “Law Decree no. 1005” in Guy Bush to the Department of State, 10 May 1954, RG59/837.02/5-1054.

⁸⁰² “Law Decree no. 1005” in Guy Bush to The Department of State, 10 May 1954, RG59/837.02/5-1054.

⁸⁰³ These revenues included taxes on rural lands and slum clearance, as well as payments from residents of public housing projects at Pogolotti and the Barrio Obrero. “Iniciarán vasto plan de viviendas baratas,” *El Crisol*, October 7, 1953, 7.

say, you will be provided a nursing home; to the children, schools; to the sick, hospitals; and to those who are able to work, facilities to find work.” Deploying teams of social workers to investigate neighborhoods and administer censuses, the CNV set out to clear neighborhoods that had been built to resist clearance. The first neighborhood target would be Isla de Pinos, followed by Cueva del Humo, and then Las Yaguas.⁸⁰⁴ With social workers at their doors, not flames, Havana’s central shantytowns faced a new type of challenge.

6.5 THE NATIONAL HOUSING COMMISSION

In 1954, the CNV began the largest slum-clearance initiative in Havana’s history, a program designed to eliminate informal centers of concentrated poverty from the capital. Relying on persuasion, not force, the CNV’s methods were innovative in two ways. First, the campaign was explicitly designed around established channels of shantytown protest, managing publicity and neutralizing claims for resources by offering relatively generous compensation on an individualized basis. Second, it established a reliable procedure to resolve insurgent land claims while generating revenue. Well-resourced, innovative, and flexible, the CNV faced off against Havana shantytowns.

“The destruction of the Isla de Pinos shantytown is the beginning of the end,” declared an optimistic news report in 1954.⁸⁰⁵ Optimism seemed justified. In early January 1954, a small

⁸⁰⁴ “Iniciarán vasto plan de viviendas baratas,” *El Crisol*, October 7, 1953, 7.

⁸⁰⁵ Guillermo Villaronda, “Como fue erradicado el barrio ‘Isla de Pinos,’” *Alerta*, January 18, 1954, 2.

neighborhood, Villanueva, was cleared.⁸⁰⁶ Then in February, “thirty-something shacks in the ‘Casariego’ shantytown” in Rancho Boyeros were demolished.⁸⁰⁷ By early March, “Cueva del Humo, and Fanguito numbers one, two and three, with more than one thousand shacks or houses and more than four thousand residents” were gone. By April, La Pelusa, a neighborhood that had successfully resisted Prio’s clearance efforts near the Plaza Cívica, was in the process of eradication.⁸⁰⁸ Rising above these accomplishments was the January clearance of Isla de Pinos, where the CNV claimed to have helped 550 families find the means to live elsewhere.⁸⁰⁹ Set before a wide, empty field enclosed by a barbed wire fence, a billboard credited the “public works plan of President BATISTA,” and the CNV for the surrounding scene: “This was Isla de Pinos and its residents are living better,” it read.⁸¹⁰

By mid-1955, Pardo Jiménez, now Batista’s Minister of Public Works as well as head of the CNV, claimed to have relocated more than 10,000 people while eliminating 16 shantytowns from Havana. After 1959, Batista claimed that the CNV had relocated and rehabilitated 25,000 people during the 1950s, eliminating 70 percent of all urban shantytowns. It is possible that these numbers were exaggerated, and they limited the definition of “shantytowns” to areas lacking land title, not infrastructure. However, multiple reports from major newspapers leave little doubt that many people were relocated and a large number of shantytowns cleared.⁸¹¹ “The operation

⁸⁰⁶ “Erradican un barrio,” *El Crisol*, January 5, 1954, 1.

⁸⁰⁷ “Tomó posesión en OP Pardo Jiménez; Erradicará más barrios indigentes,” *El Avance Criollo*, February 18, 1954, 1,14.

⁸⁰⁸ “Inaugura Batista Avenida 4 Septiembre,” *El Avance Criollo*, March 9, 1954, 1; “Sigue la erradicación de barrios de indigentes,” *Avance Criollo*, April 6, 1954, 3.

⁸⁰⁹ Guillermo Villaronda, “Como fue erradicado el barrio ‘Isla de Pinos’” *Alerta*, January 18, 1954, 2.

⁸¹⁰ Oscar Rego, “Desaparece un barrio de indigentes y aparecen dos,” *Carteles*, January 24, 1954, 25-27.

⁸¹¹ I have not located precise published records for all of these clearances, particularly those following 1955. In August 1955, Pardo Jiménez stated to reporters that more than 10,000 residents had been moved. By 1961, Batista claimed that 25,000 residents were moved from 36 neighborhoods.

Batista’s claims correspond to press reports from 1954, but later years are murkier. In Batista’s personal records, he reproduced CNV data for 12 specific neighborhoods, 2,047 shacks, and 6,274 residents cleared during 1954. Only 70 of these residents were from urban areas beyond Greater Havana. In these notes, Batista goes on to claim that 11,231 residents had been moved by the time he made an address to Congress in March 1955. He further reports that “more than 14,000” residents were subsequently moved from approximately 5,000 shacks and 24 neighborhoods in 1956, for a total of approximately 25,000 people.

that appeared impossible for thirty years, has now been achieved,” Pardo Jiménez told reporters.⁸¹²

More remarkable than the operation’s scale, was the fact that no resident protest reached the press. The program was effected, Batista later reflected, “without producing a single protest, a single note of inconformity with the laborious eradication.”⁸¹³ A rosy picture, no doubt, Batista’s characterization was bolstered by press accounts that ranged from skeptical approval to effusive praise. Characterizing the conduct of the “ex-indigents” as “excellent,” a report in *Alerta* called the CNV’s work a “moral triumph.”⁸¹⁴ “Social salvation,” declared an editorial in *El Avance Criollo*.⁸¹⁵ The CNV “has produced [a] miracle” reported *Gente de la Semana*.⁸¹⁶ A public report from the CNV even claimed support from the FEU, “who were strongly opposed in the past.”⁸¹⁷ As part of the campaign, First Lady Martha Fernández de Batista publicly visited multiple shantytowns to speak to residents.⁸¹⁸ Roundly thanking General Batista, the first lady, and the CNV, a journalist repeated a claim made during Machado’s rule nearly three decades before, gushing, “The next Christmas will pass without the presence of shantytowns.”⁸¹⁹

Batista’s general political repression and censorship were central components of the CNV’s success. Publicity was infused with pro-government propaganda, and CNV officials supervised reporters. Additionally, the government had forced the PSP journal *Noticias de Hoy*

According to Batista, this marked the clearance of 70 percent of all *barrios de indigentes*, presumably in Greater Havana. With several exceptions, I have not located press reports to corroborate most clearances post-1955. It is unclear how many of the purported 25,000 residents were from cities outside Greater Havana.

See Batista, *Piedras y Leyes*, 316; “Barrios de indigentes erradicados,” n.d. [c. 1961], Box 135, Folder 77, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar Papers, CHC; Rodolfo Rodríguez Zaldívar, “Erradica la bochornosa lacra,” *Bohemia*, August 7, 1955, Supplement; Cuba, *Un año de labor*, 28-38; “Promete Pardo Jiménez acabar con los barrios de indigentes,” *El Faro*, February 18, 1957, 1.

⁸¹² Rodolfo Rodríguez Zaldívar, “Erradica la bochornosa lacra,” *Bohemia*, August 7, 1955, Supplement.

⁸¹³ “Barrios de indigentes erradicados,” n.d. [c. 1961], Box 135, Folder 77, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar Papers, CHC.

⁸¹⁴ Guillermo Villaronda, “Como fue erradicado el barrio ‘Isla de Pinos,’” *Alerta*, January 18, 1954, 2.

⁸¹⁵ “Bacheo y barrios indigentes,” *El Avance Criollo*, March 8, 1954, 1.

⁸¹⁶ “Borrando un baldón,” *Gente de la Semana*, November 11, 1956, 20.

⁸¹⁷ Cuba, *Un año de labor*, 33.

⁸¹⁸ González, *Martha Fernández Miranda de Batista*, 174-177.

⁸¹⁹ Guillermo Villaronda, “Como Fue Erradicado El Barrio ‘Isla de Pinos’” *Alerta*, January 18, 1954.

to halt publication in July 1953, several months before the CNV began to operate in Isla de Pinos. The most reliable public forum for shantytown protest since 1938, the journal's silence amid the clearances was deafening. Meanwhile, Ortodoxo, Auténtico, Communist, and student opposition leaders faced harassment and prosecution.⁸²⁰ Without free elections, these leaders had little incentive to leverage shantytowns protests against ruling politicians. And while the CNV publicly claimed to have support from the FEU, the neighborhood leaders connected to the Federation of Barrios de Indigentes were nowhere heard in the press. How officials dealt with these leaders is unclear, but a once-active political structure appeared to be broken or silenced.⁸²¹ Discussing the clearances years later, Las Yaguas resident Alexis García blamed Cueva del Humo's weak community organization and the death of Manolo Castro in 1947. Cueva del Humo "didn't have strong leadership," he said. "Or, rather, they didn't have capacity."⁸²² Leadership opportunities were few in undemocratic times.

It is not plausible that 25,000 residents were relocated without opposition. Still, the absence of negative publicity is evidence of a strategy that was more sophisticated than censorship and repression alone. Indeed, mainstream skeptics of the campaign were numerous, and they voiced suspicion that the CNV had not gone far enough, not that it had gone too far. Under the headline "One Shantytown Disappears and Two Appear," a *Bohemia* report claimed that the eradication of Isla de Pinos was accompanied by the rapid growth of several more peripheral shantytowns. "It would be deplorable if the Commission's efforts...did nothing but move the indigents from one side of the city to the other," it stated. Yet as Fernández Aguirre

⁸²⁰ Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 124.

⁸²¹ Identifying Isaías Hernández as the mayor of Cueva del Humo, reporters made no mention of Abelardo Pol, or Mongo Píz, respectively mayor and president of the shantytown federation in 1950, who had publicly resisted previous clearances. However, the title of "mayor" was used somewhat informally in press reports on shantytowns. Juan Pedro Sánchez, "Autobiografía de un barrio de indigentes: Cueva del Humo cuenta su vida...", *Bohemia*, April 18, 1954, 32.

⁸²² OL, MD, MB, AT interview with FA, 16 May 1970, Box 142, Folder 28, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 13.

and Pardo Jiménez assured the reporter that the CNV would soon eradicate these other neighborhoods, he conceded that the clearances were “undoubtedly worthy of praise.”⁸²³ Opening with a similar question, “will they really eradicate the problem or only disperse it?” another article anthropomorphized Cueva del Humo. “I will be dead,” the suffering neighborhood “told” *Bohemia* readers beneath pictures of men destroying its shacks. “Goodbye, let it be forever!”⁸²⁴ An article in the Afro-Cuban publication *Atenas* called the clearances “excellent,” while noting that poverty in Havana’s peripheral neighborhoods remained severe.⁸²⁵ Even a CNV report published after 1959, with every political reason to criticize previous efforts, stated that clearance efforts had generally improved the lives of residents.⁸²⁶ Wistful but accepting, even skeptical journalists were impressed by the CNV’s work.

This positive reputation led some shantytown residents to seek out the CNV for protection. In 1955, residents from a shantytown at Los Quemados, Marianao, publicized protests against eviction proceedings from a US property owner—proceedings not connected to the CNV. Acting on requests from a neighborhood commission, the director of the local paper *El Sol* called the CNV’s Fernández Aguirre, who promised to visit. “We are interested in the case,” he told journalists. Residents were interested in the CNV too, requesting that it build them homes on the contested land in exchange for monthly payments.⁸²⁷ Rather than an agency of repression, residents saw in the CNV an opportunity to claim benefits. When a judge dismissed eviction proceedings against the approximately 100 residents several months later, the paper displayed

⁸²³ It is plausible that Pardo Jiménez was true to his word, since the Caseriego neighborhood in Rancho Boyeros was eradicated soon after. See, “Tomó posesión en OP Pardo Jiménez; erradicará más barrios indigentes,” *El Avance Criollo*, February 18, 1954, 1, 14; Oscar Rego, “Desaparece un barrio de indigentes y aparecen dos,” *Carteles*, January 24, 1954, 25-27.

⁸²⁴ Juan Pedro Sánchez, “Autobiografía de un barrio de indigentes: Cueva del Humo cuenta su vida...,” *Bohemia*, April 18, 1954, 30-32.

⁸²⁵ Mario Guiral Moreno, “Los barrios indigentes,” *Atenas*, October 1954, 39.

⁸²⁶ However, the report was produced by an official who was active in Batista’s CNV. See Anderson, *La delincuencia en los barrios de indigentes*, 2.

⁸²⁷ “Interesado el Ministro Pardo Jiménez. Pretende resolver el desahucio en Quemados,” *El Sol*, May 7, 1955, 1.

the “triumph” on its front page.⁸²⁸ While there is no evidence that the CNV built houses on what remained informally occupied land, the neighborhood remained intact during Batista’s rule.⁸²⁹

In neutralizing resident protest, then, the CNV operated with persuasive, depoliticizing tactics, defusing collective demands by meeting smaller individual requests. Residents were processed by a team of social workers led by María Isidora Ros, who, with “an affectionate smile of friendship and understanding,” presented them with solutions beyond the neighborhoods.⁸³⁰ Accompanied by social workers, a reporter met with families who reported feeling “happy to have abandoned Isla de Pinos” for more distant subdivisions. Various residents launched new commercial endeavors with the CNV’s help.⁸³¹ Meeting with a neighborhood mayor and a resident who had lived in the neighborhood since 1930, a reporter listed requests residents made to the CNV. One-third asked for building materials, 23 percent for money, 14 percent for jobs as public employees, three percent for scholarships, and 25 percent for a “later solution.”⁸³² They asked for a “great assortment of things,” explained Fernández Aguirre, mentioning three months worth of rent, the purchase of land “on the outskirts of the city,” and medical care. “Some of the requests were suitable,” he said. “Others were impossible and they were convinced ... to modify them.”⁸³³ In meeting these requests, the CNV claimed to have found work for approximately 50 percent of affected residents, finding 20 percent to be capable of living elsewhere once a residence had been located, and moving 10 percent to self-constructed homes in peripheral

⁸²⁸ The eviction was dismissed on identical grounds to those used by the Judge to halt 1944 eviction proceedings in Las Yaguas: since the property owners never had possession of the land, previous eviction efforts were ruled invalid, leaving no grounds for the present case. Thus, the case merely halted the eviction while title remained with the US owner. See Chapter 2.

⁸²⁹ “Rechazada la demanda de desahucio. Triunfaron los vecinos de Quemados en el pleito con Walter Ebenezer Dickenson,” *El Sol*, August 27, 1955, 1; “Los Quemados: una vergüenza que desaparece,” *Metas*, June, 1960, 24.

⁸³⁰ Juan Pedro Sánchez, “Autobiografía de un barrio de indigentes: Cueva del Humo cuenta su vida...,” *Bohemia*, April 18, 1954, 30-32.

⁸³¹ Guillermo Villaronda, “Como fue erradicado el barrio ‘Isla de Pinos,’” *Alerta*, January 18, 1954, 2.

⁸³² Juan Pedro Sánchez, “Autobiografía de un barrio de indigentes: Cueva del Humo cuenta su vida...,” *Bohemia*, April 18, 1954, 30-32.

⁸³³ Oscar Rego, “Desaparece un barrio de indigentes y aparecen dos,” *Carteles*, January 24, 1954, 25-27.

subdivisions. Additionally, it sent 10 percent to medical institutions. Two percent went to live with family members in other provinces.⁸³⁴ By dealing with individual requests, the CNV avoided the more substantial demands often made by neighborhood leaders.

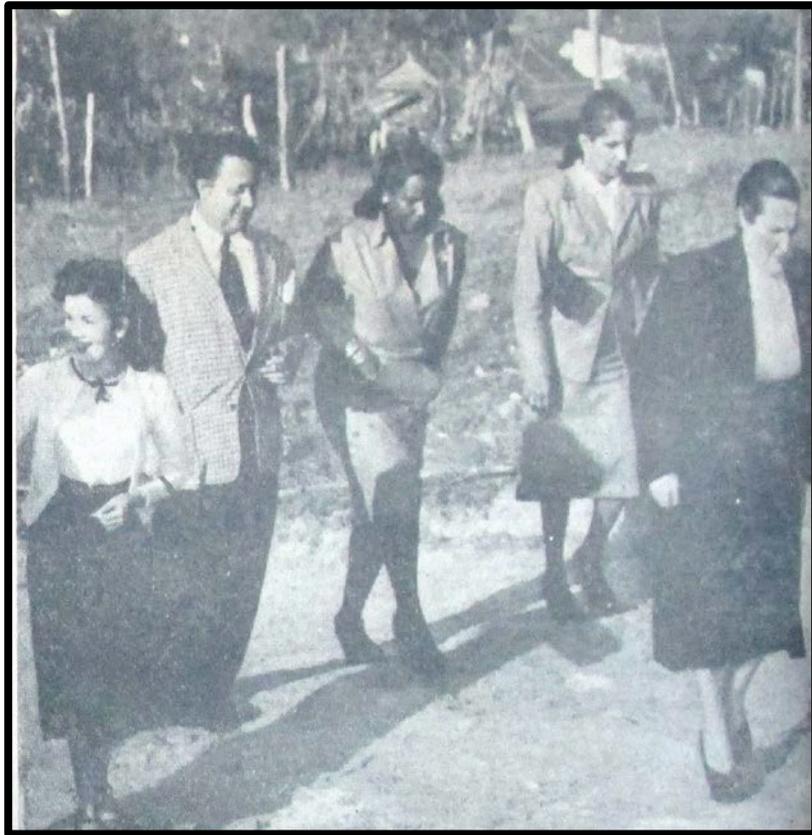


Figure 7: Led by Maria Isadora Ros (right), social workers leave a shantytown accompanied by a journalist (second from left) in 1954.⁸³⁵

These strategies allowed the CNV to bask in positive press coverage and to claim that it had addressed the residents' needs, even as it sidestepped longstanding hopes for public housing. By eliminating shantytowns, it instead pushed residents towards the city's housing market.

⁸³⁴ Cuba, *Un año de labor*, 35-36.

⁸³⁵ Guillermo Villaronda, "Como fue erradicado el barrio 'Isla de Pinos,'" *Alerta*, January 18, 1954, 2.

Where shantytown protests had often pointed out that the city lacked adequate housing, the CNV portrayed new subdivisions with questionable infrastructure as socially beneficial. Boasting of its work, the CNV publicized the cases of multiple former Isla de Pinos residents who had relocated to La Hata, Guanabacoa, where they reportedly enjoyed “the tranquility” in which they lived.⁸³⁶ On the distant outskirts of Greater Havana, La Hata was one of the poorest areas of the city, with minimal services, where residents had only recently gained rights to occupy the land (Chapter 2). A report published after 1959 acknowledged that the physical conditions of new neighborhoods occupied by relocated residents were generally not much better than their old ones.⁸³⁷ Falling short of residents’ hopes for modern constructions, then, the CNV led residents to a housing market where well-serviced subdivisions were expensive and discriminatory, and decent rental dwellings were scarce.⁸³⁸

Whether the CNV significantly improved the lives of relocated residents is therefore doubtful. Yet in two respects, the slum clearance program was a wild success: first, it depoliticized shantytown relocation by neutralizing established lines of protest, and, second, it established workable procedures to resolve urban property disputes. In offering resources to residents in exchange for moving, the government responded to individual demands for public benefits and broke up informal neighborhoods, even as it sidestepped collective demands for public housing. A far cry from Grau’s 1944 efforts at the Managua indigents camp, the CNV addressed neighborhoods with a budget, a plan, and with workers who were trained to facilitate modest claims. And in meeting local demands, the CNV also silenced entrenched sites of local protest.

⁸³⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁸³⁷ Anderson, *La delincuencia en los barrios de indigentes*, 2.

⁸³⁸ See Chapter 4.

6.6 LAS YAGUAS

In the publicity that surrounded the CNV's shantytown campaign, one neighborhood was rarely mentioned. As informal settlements disappeared, Havana's most famous shantytown remained, resisting the CNV's new strategies successfully just as it had avoided Zubizarreta's fires in 1931. "The Las Yaguas neighborhood remains in the same place, unshakable," stated a 1957 report. "Pardo Jiménez's resolve has not led to a ... solution."⁸³⁹ While the CNV raised the threshold for effective local resistance by counteracting the public relations strategies of shantytown leaders, Las Yaguas' leadership generated internal unity sufficient to meet it. Although they failed to generate sympathy in the popular press, leaders continued to campaign among their neighbors. Relocation, they insisted, could not be so cheap. Their cohesion was fortified as relocated residents from other shantytowns moved in, ensuring that action against them would be a messy, collective affair. Neighborhood leaders also strengthened their ties to the Batista government. Even as Las Yaguas remained politically strong, however, its visibility as an emblem of state failure loomed large.

As social workers moved to gain the confidence of shantytown residents throughout Greater Havana, Las Yaguas' leaders opposed them actively, weighing the benefits they already had against the meager payments they were to receive. Along with local mayor Rufino González and the now-clandestine PSP, Alexis García rallied the community.⁸⁴⁰ "I was opposed," he said, to offers of 200-peso relocation indemnities. Many were not convinced, however, leading to "struggles between the neighbors."⁸⁴¹ Recalling a conversation with a frustrated woman who

⁸³⁹ Regino Martín, "Hay que cuidar la gallina de los huevos de oro," *Bohemia* October 13, 1957, 47.

⁸⁴⁰ The PSP seems to have kept up an active clandestine presence in Las Yaguas during the 1950s. See Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 224.

⁸⁴¹ OL, MD Interview with FA, 27 May 1970, Box 142, Folder 30, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 32.

planned to use the money to leave Havana, he told her, “With \$200.00 you won’t do anything. ...You came fleeing your village, because the hunger and misery there was plaguing you.”⁸⁴² Working with the Agrupación Católica Universitaria (Catholic University Group, ACU), Manuela recalled, “At the beginning people thought [the social workers] really were going to make things better ... but later ... they saw that the only ones who had improved were the ones in charge of improving us, and they got a salary for it.”⁸⁴³ In the meantime, the ACU seems not to have supported the social workers, opening a new high school the same month that the CNV campaign began.⁸⁴⁴

With smaller informal neighborhoods gone, Las Yaguas’ utility as a site for cheap housing grew, likely increasing its capacity for resistance. Many residents of Isla de Pinos and Cueva del Humo accepted relatively generous indemnities from the CNV and simply moved to Las Yaguas.⁸⁴⁵ Of the residents still in Las Yaguas in 1963, more reported moving to the neighborhood in 1955, in the midst of the CNV’s shantytown eradications nearby, than in any year in the neighborhood’s history, rivaled only by 1931.⁸⁴⁶ As they did, the extent to which the CNV actively sought to clear the neighborhood is not clear. In his interviews with Oscar Lewis, García makes several vague references to a police raid of Las Yaguas in 1956, which he and others resisted with letters to Batista’s wife, Marta Fernández, but his account is fragmentary.⁸⁴⁷ Manuela voiced annoyance after head social worker Maria Isidora Ros convinced her to check

⁸⁴² OL, MD Interview with FA, 16 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 4, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 69.

⁸⁴³ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 370.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 383.

⁸⁴⁵ OL, MD, MB, AT interview with FA, 16 May 1970, Box 142, Folder 28, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 12; According to a different resident, displaced residents from Isla de Pinos and Cueva del Humo lived in the Matanzas section of Las Yaguas where they were “worse off, more screwed up—‘the ones who came last,’ they were called.” Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 351. Anderson attributes a rise in crime in Las Yaguas to the arrival of these residents. Anderson, *La delincuencia en los barrios de indigentes*, 2-3.

⁸⁴⁶ These numbers are based on surveys conducted of families remaining in Las Yaguas in early 1963, after 329 families had been relocated. Alonso was able to survey approximately 50 percent of these residents. “Inmigración a Las Yaguas,” 1963, Aida García Alonso Collection, Digital Library of the Caribbean (hereafter DLC); García Alonso, *Manuela*, 12.

⁸⁴⁷ MD Interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 8.

into a nursing home. “They tricked the old people to leave, like me,” she remembered.⁸⁴⁸ “I came back to the neighborhood dirtier than I left it.”⁸⁴⁹

Neighborhood leaders gave the government reasons not to press them. The neighborhood’s cohesive organizational structure enabled leaders to form productive political ties to the government. At a time when Batista sought legitimacy, Manuela claimed that Rufino Gonzalez, his wife, and the network he represented, were strong supporters of Batista, an impression shared by Oscar Lewis and García.⁸⁵⁰ In the late 1950s, a central avenue in Las Yaguas still bore the name “September 4,” after Batista’s 1933 uprising.⁸⁵¹ Amparo, a resident who had worked with the Communist-affiliated CTC’s Unemployed Section during the early 1940s, held a job granted by politicians linked to Batista in exchange for organizing votes.⁸⁵² When several participants in anti-Batista attacks allegedly took shelter in Las Yaguas during the late 1950s, Marta Fernández was apparently disappointed enough to cancel a customary toy distribution for neighborhood children.⁸⁵³

As Las Yaguas’ prospects for remaining in the city improved, however, its separation from the formal city increased. As its population grew, moving into the neighborhood requiring bribing local police officers that were connected to neighborhood businesses.⁸⁵⁴ The officers were widely rumored to operate a local drug trafficking network, while markets for stolen goods and other items flourished.⁸⁵⁵ “People were becoming more and more shameless, but now no one

⁸⁴⁸ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 374.

⁸⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 379, 415.

⁸⁵⁰ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 412; MD, OL Interview with FA, 27 June 1969, Box 142, Folder 10, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA.

⁸⁵¹ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 386, 13-25.

⁸⁵² Manuela also recalls vote-getting operations opposition candidate Tony Varona in 1958, with votes reportedly selling for 10 pesos each; García Alonso, *Manuela*, 412-13. Calderón, *Amparo*, 214.

⁸⁵³ MD interview with AL, 16 April 1969, Box 139, Folder 36, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 20.

⁸⁵⁴ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 412.

⁸⁵⁵ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 388-389; Calderón, *Amparo*, 201.

was dying of hunger,” remembered Manuela of the late 1950s.⁸⁵⁶ Nearby neighborhood associations begged the CNV to finish with the “absurd” shantytown, a “cancer,” they claimed, where residents lived a “at such a low level of existence that it is hard to find something similar anywhere on Earth.”⁸⁵⁷ In 1957 left-wing journalist Samuel Feijóo called Las Yaguas “the vortex [*maremágnum*] ... of final poverty, of sickness, of abandonment.”⁸⁵⁸

Unlike the sensationalized, popular resistance to eviction suits or public health relocations in the 1940s, Las Yaguas’ success against the CNV was no longer celebrated in the national press. Instead, resistance was conducted internally, as leaders rallied residents behind the collective benefits of their central location, rejecting what they deemed insufficient offers from the state. These networks were fortunate to have strong connections to politicians who were influential with Batista’s government. Yet in the battle for social acceptance and dignity, residents were victims of their own success. The permanence they had worked so hard to achieve reinforced perceptions of cultural degeneracy and political corruption.

6.7 THE REVOLUTION IN LAS YAGUAS

“I don’t remember what I did January first,” stated Alexis García. “If I got drunk, if I slept, if I went out, I don’t remember.”⁸⁵⁹ With little fanfare, revolution came to Las Yaguas—and as the old regime crumbled, the neighborhood’s relative security crumbled too. In meeting the transition, leaders in Las Yaguas were initially skeptical of all state interventions, and they met

⁸⁵⁶ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 395.

⁸⁵⁷ Regino Martín, “Hay que cuidar la gallina de los huevos de oro,” *Bohemia* October 13, 1957, 78

⁸⁵⁸ Samuel Feijóo, “La vivienda del pobre,” *Bohemia*, March 10, 1957, n.p.

⁸⁵⁹ MD interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 9.

talk of relocation by making substantial collective demands. For their part, meanwhile, revolutionary leaders did not see Batista's slum clearance program as controversial or misguided. To the contrary, in marshaling evidence of the regime's failure, they pointed to Las Yaguas' continued existence. Yet as government hopes for eradication collided with neighborhood calls for benefits, the wider rhetoric of the Revolution opened new spaces for dialogue. By 1963 the government was able to realize long frustrated hopes for Las Yaguas' destruction. In the process, it met residents' longstanding demands for adequate housing. In the aftermath, officials characterized the neighborhood's history of resistance as a failure of the past.

Residents greeted January 1, 1959, with distance and caution, as local political leaders positioned themselves strategically in relation to the new government. During the first month of 1959, Manuela recalls that supporters of Batista opponent Tony Varona "immediately changed and organized themselves for the *Revolution* to assault the houses of Batista supporters," including her own. Fleeing the neighborhood temporarily, she states that residents severely beat the wife of one alleged Batista supporter.⁸⁶⁰ According to Manuela, residents "thought that since they were talking about the Revolution no one would do anything to them."⁸⁶¹ Only Manuela recounts this event, but it is consistent with an image of neighborhood residents trying to connect to the new government. Interestingly, Las Yaguas mayor Rufino González is absent from all accounts of events following 1959.⁸⁶²

Other residents were more indifferent. While many agreed that Batista's fall was a happy occasion, by no account was Las Yaguas deeply invested in the Revolution before 1959. "I heard a lot of sirens ... a lot of commotion, you know, that the General had left, and I felt really

⁸⁶⁰ Emphasis is in the original. García Alonso, *Manuela*, 413.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid*, 413.

⁸⁶² Manuela claims that he remained mayor until the neighborhood disappeared, but FA never mentions him. It is likely that his status as a well-known Batista supporter caused him to leave the neighborhood. *Ibid*, 267.

happy,” recalled one resident.⁸⁶³ García recalled more mixed views. “There were many of them who knew the truth...that the system here needed to change,” he said. “But others...thought that a revolution didn’t mean anything. They said, ‘look, the president is Joe Schmo, what does it matter to me?’”⁸⁶⁴ García also recalled how the neighborhood benefitted from longstanding informal ties to the PSP. “There were many ... who were waiting for them to burn down Las Yaguas because there hadn’t been anything but counter-revolutionaries there,” he said, “But ... the Socialist Party knew what kind of politics we were developing.”⁸⁶⁵ Other radicalized residents had organized under the Catholic Church, and some switched their affiliation after the group turned against Castro.⁸⁶⁶

Local concerns proved justified when the new government moved to address the neighborhood with force, assuming Las Yaguas was a site of criminality and counter-revolution. An internal report from a housing official called the shantytown “spectacular...for the number of criminal acts recently taking place.”⁸⁶⁷ On February 18, 1959, police raided Las Yaguas, by some accounts looking for prisoners who had escaped after Batista’s fall, and by others seeking out supporters of Batista’s ally Rolando Masferrer.⁸⁶⁸ “600 detained in Las Yaguas,” reported *El Crisol*, a total which *Diario de la Marina* placed at 800, and *El Mundo* “almost 1,000.”⁸⁶⁹ Forcibly rounding up hundreds of men from the neighborhood, police reportedly went from house to house, seizing marijuana, weapons, radios, televisions, clothing, “and other objects

⁸⁶³ OL interview with HH, 5 May 1969, Box 139, Folder 12, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 110.

⁸⁶⁴ MD interview with FA, 19 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 5, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 47.

⁸⁶⁵ MD interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 5.

⁸⁶⁶ RS, ES, CS interview with GG, 13 September 1969, Box 143, Folder 38, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 12; Amparo claims that some supporters of the Revolution hid guns in the neighborhood. Calderón, *Amparo*, 215; Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, xxxix.

⁸⁶⁷ Anderson, *La delincuencia en los barrios de indigentes*, 3.

⁸⁶⁸ MD Interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 9.

⁸⁶⁹ For an additional account of the roundup, see Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 228.

whose origin could not be verified by owners.”⁸⁷⁰ “The number of shots that night!” Manuela remembered.⁸⁷¹ *El Mundo* reported wild gunfire against police, to “great alarm” and general confusion, while *Diario de la Marina* reported that the initial shots came from police as residents tried to flee. In both accounts, the tumult left three residents shot, including one woman, all of whom were taken to a hospital.⁸⁷² After the roundup, the police forced men into trucks, transporting them to a park near a police station, where a near-riot ensued. When one police officer allegedly told residents, “no one who is honorable and decent lives in Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol* reported that residents launched protests, which “could have had fatal consequences.”⁸⁷³

Yet the detained men soon gained sympathy from the police by emphasizing their status as hardworking poor citizens. Many claimed that they would miss work.⁸⁷⁴ As National Revolutionary Police Chief Efigenio Ameijeiras sought to calm the situation, *Diario de la Marina* reported that he met with three “older residents,” including García.⁸⁷⁵ According to his own account, García convinced the police chief to let the men go by praising the Revolution, arguing that the radios were not stolen, and denouncing Batista’s police for forcing drug traffic on the neighborhood.⁸⁷⁶ After meeting with these residents, the press reported that Ameijeiras entered the park unarmed, promising the men that he had no “rancor” in his heart, and that the Revolution would not “go against the humble classes.” Stating that the government would provide jobs, health care for the sick, and education for children, the police chief sought to distance himself from the practices of the Batista government. “We have not come here for

⁸⁷⁰ “Promete la policía ayuda a los indigentes,” *El Mundo*, February 18, 1959, A7.

⁸⁷¹ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 414.

⁸⁷² “Promete la policía ayuda a los indigentes,” *El Mundo*, February 18, 1959, A7; “Ocupadas armas y drogas por la policía en ‘Las Yaguas’” *Diario de la Marina*, February 18, 1959, 16-B.

⁸⁷³ “600 detenidos en Las Yaguas,” *El Crisol*, February 18, 1959, 1, 5.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 1, 5.

⁸⁷⁵ “Ocupadas armas y drogas por la policía en ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Diario de la Marina*, February 18, 1959, 16-B.

⁸⁷⁶ MD Interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 10.

politics,” he said. Residents were calmed by the message, though whether they agreed to abandon “politics” is doubtful. According to *El Mundo*, Ameijeiras told residents that Fidel Castro, “like all of us, has come from the humble classes,” leading residents to shout out “vivas” to the Revolution. The police chief was reportedly carried back to Las Yaguas on the shoulders of enthusiastic residents, where he arranged for the delivery of a truck full of food. He then instructed residents to form a seven-person commission, which included García, to coordinate with police.⁸⁷⁷

Using their first violent encounter with the new regime to establish productive ties to the government, Las Yaguas leaders secured a commitment for benefits. The press praised the agreement. “For the first time in Cuban history, a public disturbance has been transformed into an act of revolution,” reported *Revolución*. Noting that the incident had nearly led to “grave consequences” until Ameijeiras “avoided anything worse,” the report stated that the government now planned to “transform Las Yaguas,” organizing a “civic-revolutionary commission” to facilitate social change. Where there had been a “center for criminals,” the attitude of residents was now allegedly “favorable to revolutionary changes.”⁸⁷⁸ After the police roundup Manuela recalled the sudden proliferation of olive-green militia members in the neighborhood. “They looked like iguanas after a rainstorm.”⁸⁷⁹ The plans left no doubt, however, that government leaders were “looking towards the eradication of the neighborhood.”⁸⁸⁰

Despite new political links, then, residents remained skeptical. Alliances with the government had often been a starting point for local resistance, not an end, and impending eradication had been a fact of life for decades. Despite their new relationship, resistance quickly

⁸⁷⁷ “Promete la policía ayuda a los indigentes,” *El Mundo*, February 18, 1959, A7.

⁸⁷⁸ J. Hernández Artigas, “La revolución transforma ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Revolución*, February 18, 1959, n.p.

⁸⁷⁹ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 415.

⁸⁸⁰ J. Hernández Artigas, “La revolución transforma ‘Las Yaguas,’” *Revolución*, February 18, 1959, n.p.

resumed as the government sent social workers from the CNV back into Las Yaguas.⁸⁸¹ María Isidora Ros and Eduardo Anderson, both veterans of Batista's slum clearance campaign, oversaw new efforts to remove residents from the neighborhood on an individual basis, though it is unclear how many.⁸⁸² Amid worries that elderly women would be moved to homes, Manuela remembered, "the poor old women began to tremble."⁸⁸³ According to one resident, these social workers began to register the houses and relocate residents, to general opposition. "No one wanted to leave like that."⁸⁸⁴ According to an outside observer, a number of residents "wanted nothing to do with the plans of the government," and formed a new shantytown near Puentes Grandes, a Havana suburb.⁸⁸⁵ And tensions emerged with other government officials as well during a charitable food distribution on one of the first Christmas Eves after the Revolution. When a police sergeant opposed the giveaways, the elderly leader and *santero*, García, grew furious: "if you would have looked through my skin, which is dark dark black, you would have seen me turn red."⁸⁸⁶

Despite these conflicts, the government gained credibility from successful piecemeal relocations and other state initiatives.⁸⁸⁷ Isidora and Anderson relocated an unconfirmed number of residents before 1960. Moreover, of 740 families left in Las Yaguas in 1960, 103 were moved

⁸⁸¹ The CNV initially maintained its basic structure as it was moved within the Ministry of Public Works, employing many of the same social workers from the mid-1950s. "Derogan disposiciones sobre la Comisión N. de Viviendas," *Diario de la Marina*, February 18, 1959, 12-A.

⁸⁸² OL Interview with HH, 5 May 1969, Box 139, Folder 12, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 86.

⁸⁸³ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 417.

⁸⁸⁴ OL Interview of HH, 5 May 1969, Box 139, Folder 12, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 86.

⁸⁸⁵ It is unclear whether these residents left during 1959 when the CNV operated in the neighborhood, or after the Ministry of Social Welfare began its operations in 1960. Reports on this new neighborhood are contained in photo captions that Alonso hoped to include in a second edition of her book *Manuela*, which was never published. "Capítulo XXXI," 1963, Aida García Alonso Collection, DLC. See also García Alonso, *Manuela*, 418.

⁸⁸⁶ Lewis recounts the event happening in 1961, but interview transcripts seem to indicate 1959. Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 108; OL Interview with FA, 28 July 1969, Box 142, Folder 11, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 18-19.

⁸⁸⁷ The elimination of shantytowns was a stated objective of INAV, established early in 1959, but the institution did take direct initiatives on the matter. See "INAV," *INRA* 1, no. 1 (1960): n.p.

and provided housing through the Urban Reform.⁸⁸⁸ The Urban Reform Law allowed these families to relocate to good houses vacated by wealthy exiles, or homes in the well-constructed East Havana project, likely fostering trust in the government.⁸⁸⁹ The government also provided some Las Yaguas residents temporary work in rural sanitation brigades organized by the Health Ministry. “A lot of people came from Las Yaguas and elsewhere to work a couple of weeks, long enough to get their pay and gamble it away,” remembered a worker.⁸⁹⁰ During 1961, literacy workers taught Las Yaguas residents to read, efforts that they first met with enthusiasm but that ultimately had little success.⁸⁹¹ In February 1961, the government established centers for childcare and recreation.⁸⁹² With halting steps, Las Yaguas residents engaged with the state productively.

Yet questions over the neighborhood’s eradication lingered. In 1960, the Revolutionary Government launched new plans for slum clearance across the country, calling the move an “obligation of the nation.”⁸⁹³ As before, the program relied on social workers, reflecting international trends as well as the established practices of the state. In 1960, the government established the Ministry for Social Welfare, where Minister Raquel Pérez explained that social workers would be a “coordinating element... between the needy and the resources offered by the state.”⁸⁹⁴ The Ministry addressed issues like juvenile delinquency, education for the poor, and the clearance of shantytowns.

⁸⁸⁸ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 12.

⁸⁸⁹ According to one resident, those who moved with the Urban Reform got a “better deal” than those who moved later. Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 251.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 388.

⁸⁹¹ Calderón, *Amparo*, 218; García Alonso, *Manuela*, 10-11; Butterworth paints a slightly more optimistic picture, but agrees that many residents remained illiterate following the campaign. Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura*, 99.

⁸⁹² “La inauguración de círculos infantiles y de campos deportivos para niños,” *Bohemia*, February 12, 1961, 61; Informes estadísticos preliminares presentados por el Departamento de Investigación y Estadísticos, July 1960-March 1961, Legajo 15, Expediente 290, Ministerio de Bienestar Social, ANC.

⁸⁹³ “De la Manzana de Gómez al Nuevo Vista Alegre,” *Metas*, March-April 1960, 28-9.

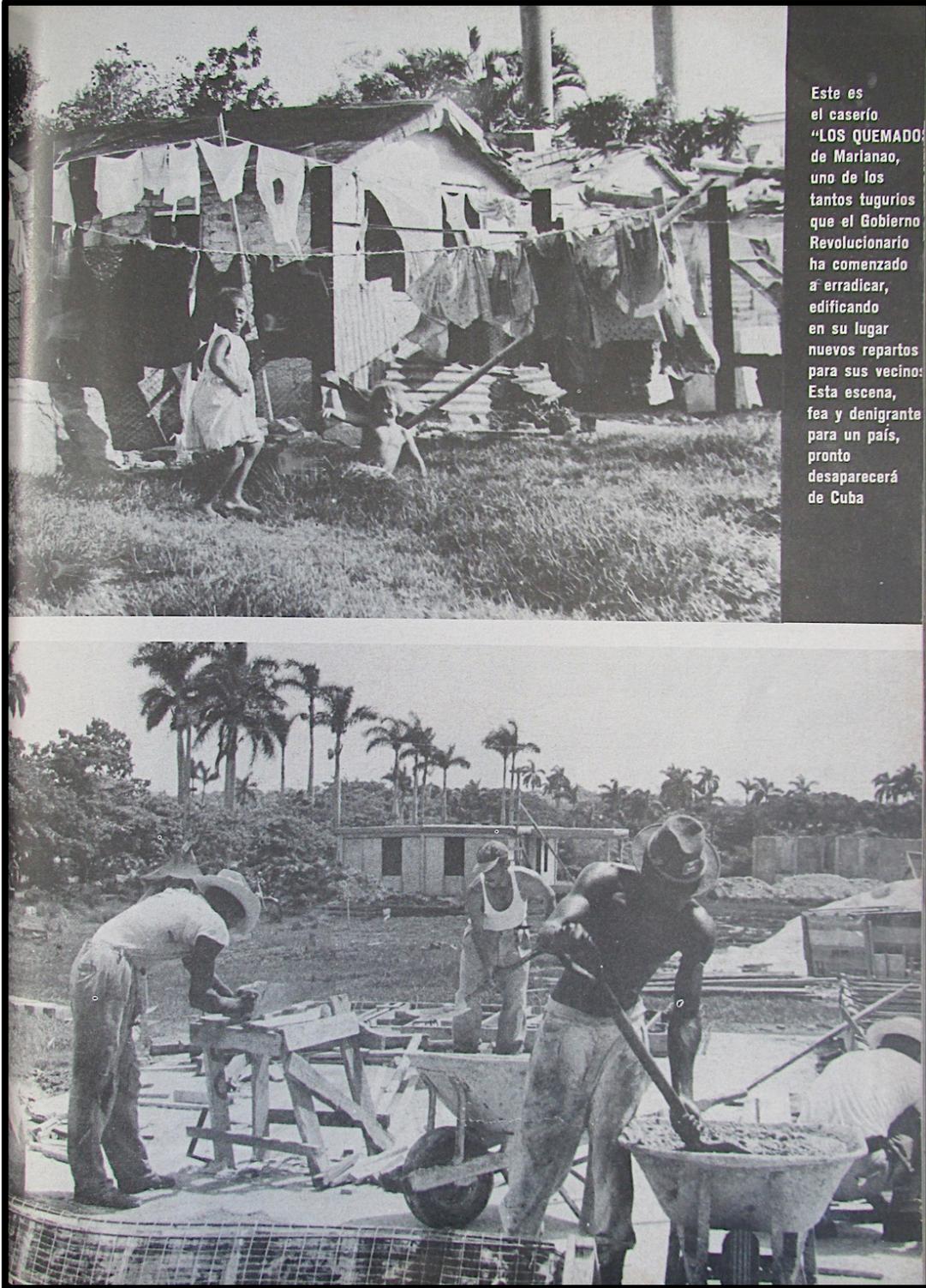
⁸⁹⁴ Raquel Pérez González, “La función de bienestar social dentro de la revolución,” *Metas*, March 1960, 53.

In addressing shantytowns, the Ministry showed that it was prepared to surmount neighborhood resistance without alienating residents. The program departed from the Batista regime's efforts in two key respects: first, it would directly oversee the construction of new homes for residents, and, second, it would deal with neighborhoods collectively. After taking over from the CNV during the first months of 1960, the Ministry launched its new campaign, "Self-Help and Mutual Aid" (*Esfuerzo propio y ayuda mutua*). It initially slated 10,457 residents from shantytowns across the island for relocation and rehabilitation.⁸⁹⁵ A final report on the Self-Help program, presented in 1963 claimed that 21 new neighborhoods were constructed across Cuba, with a total of 3,400 houses.⁸⁹⁶ In Greater Havana, the program targeted three neighborhoods and 5,019 residents. Set for clearance were Zamora and Los Quemados, in Marianao, and Las Yaguas.⁸⁹⁷

⁸⁹⁵ MINSAP, *Desarrollo económico*, 80.

⁸⁹⁶ In 1961, as the program was phased out, a report stated that 20 subdivisions were under construction in addition to the seven in Havana, listing 27 total neighborhoods targeted for clearance in Cuba. Rafael Sánchez Lalebret, "Construyan veinte repartos para erradicar los barrios insalubres," *Bohemia*, November 19 1961, 34-37; Unión Internacional de Arquitectos, *La arquitectura*, 82.

⁸⁹⁷ Publicity for the program did not explicitly define "shantytown," but Los Quemados and Las Yaguas both were on previously disputed land. I have not located information about Zamora before 1959. MINSAP, *Desarrollo económico*, 80.



Este es el caserío "LOS QUEMADOS" de Marianao, uno de los tantos tugurios que el Gobierno Revolucionario ha comenzado a erradicar, edificando en su lugar nuevos repartos para sus vecinos. Esta escena, fea y denigrante para un país, pronto desaparecerá de Cuba

Figure 8: Above, the Los Quemados shantytown—"ugly and denigrating for a country." Below, residents work to construct new homes in 1960.⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁸ Vicente Rodríguez, "Los Quemados: Un tugurio más que la revolución echa abajo," *INRA* 1, no. 7 (1960), 71.

The Self-Help program began in the Manzana de Gómez shantytown in Santiago de Cuba, where a new neighborhood was designed as a “pilot test” for all Cuban shantytowns and accompanied by wide publicity.⁸⁹⁹ Inaugurated on July 26, 1961, a single new subdivision, Vista Alegre, would house 3,682 residents in 612 homes adjacent to a new factory.⁹⁰⁰ Unlike “Self-Help” programs that helped residents “upgrade” their own neighborhoods, which were common in other Latin American cities later in the 1960s, the Ministry of Social Welfare gave residents little control over the projects.⁹⁰¹ Residents undertook the construction as volunteers, with the supervision of outside technical advisors.⁹⁰² Men and women worked on different tasks in six-hour shifts, as Minister Pérez “demanded the cooperation of residents.”⁹⁰³

As the Self-Help program expanded to other cities across Cuba, publicity focused on the spontaneous, redemptive potential of the Revolution. Writing of “a town that builds itself” in Santa Clara, a reporter documented Ministry functionaries making personal donations for the materials used by poor shantytown residents to build new homes.⁹⁰⁴ Blending revolutionary and religious rhetoric as the government sought to co-opt opposition from the Catholic Church, an early report on the program quoted the Gospel of Mathew beneath pictures of shacks: “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’” Another photo showed a dark-skinned baby crawling out of the muddy entryway to a shack, accompanied by words from Castro: “These are the ones who needed us, and these are the ones we have helped.”⁹⁰⁵ *INRA* magazine linked these religious overtones to racial equality. Talking to “Daniel,” a 66-year-old

⁸⁹⁹ “De la Manzana de Gómez al Nuevo Vista Alegre, *Metas*, March-April 1960, 26.

⁹⁰⁰ Julian Granda, “Homenaje de cemento y piedra a los héroes caídos: el Reparto Nuevo Vista Alegre,” *INRA* 1, no. 7 (1960): Supplement, R, S, T.

⁹⁰¹ On these programs in Peru and Chile, see for example, Turner, *Housing by People*, 18, 25.

⁹⁰² “De la Manzana de Gómez al Nuevo Vista Alegre, *Metas*, March-April 1960, 28-29.

⁹⁰³ Cuba, *Con los Pobres*, n.p.

⁹⁰⁴ José Lorenzo Fuentes, “Un pueblo que se levanta a si mismo,” *INRA* 1, no. 6 (1960): 50-53.

⁹⁰⁵ Quoted from Gustavo Aguirre, “También son cubanos,” *INRA* 1, no. 3 (1960): 36-37. On the use of religious rhetoric during the early Revolution, see Guerra, “To Condemn the Revolution is to Condemn Christ.”

black resident with “a wrinkled face and white hair,” the report noted that 90 percent of residents were black like him, often suffering from hunger that “looked like it had been growing for centuries.”⁹⁰⁶

The rhetoric of redemption framed local resistance negatively, as a cultural function of the old political system. By providing housing, however, the government also met the demands of local activists. At Los Quemados, Marianao in Greater Havana, reporters noted that all previous removal efforts had failed. Citing “negative attitudes,” the report explained that a neighborhood assembly, “came together to back the project” after carefully considering the proposal.⁹⁰⁷ Residents were “indifferent...since they had seen too many governments rise and fall,” claimed a report, until the Revolutionary Government “made them a neighborhood where they could live like everyone.”⁹⁰⁸ It took Castro’s words, claimed another report, “to transform passive resistance...into the enthusiasm that today propels the plan forward.”⁹⁰⁹

As the program progressed in Santiago and elsewhere, the planned clearance of Las Yaguas became central to a narrative of redemption for the poor. In 1959, pictures of Las Yaguas appeared in publications imploring the rich to donate to revolutionary efforts.⁹¹⁰ In October 1960, an article in *Bohemia* criticized politicians in Caracas, Venezuela for doing “apparently nothing to eradicate the ‘ranchos’...what in Cuba would equate to ‘Las Yaguas.’”⁹¹¹ And Castro mentioned the neighborhood frequently.⁹¹² In a speech at the University of Havana in November

⁹⁰⁶ Julian Granda, “Homenaje de cemento y piedra a los héroes caídos: el Reparto Nuevo Vista Alegre,” *INRA* 1, no. 7 (1960): Supplement, R, S, T.

⁹⁰⁷ “Los Quemados: una vergüenza que desaparece,” *Metas*, June 1960, 24.

⁹⁰⁸ Julian Granda, “Homenaje de cemento y piedra a los héroes caídos: el Reparto Nuevo Vista Alegre,” *INRA* 1, no. 7 (1960): Supplement, T.

⁹⁰⁹ “De la Manzana de Gómez al Nueva Vista Alegre,” *Metas*, March-April 1960, 29, 56.

⁹¹⁰ “Carta a los ricos de Cuba,” *Bohemia*, May 1959, 68-69.

⁹¹¹ “Las dos Caracas,” *Bohemia*, October 9, 1960, n.p.

⁹¹² See, for example, Fidel Castro, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” January 23 1961 in Castro, “Discursos e intervenciones”; Fidel Castro “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” in *Ibid*; Fidel Castro “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante,” May 1, 1961 in *Ibid*.

1960, he linked the religious symbolism of the Ministry's campaign directly to Las Yaguas, labeling enemies of the government as "Pharisees" who had not "cast their lot with the poor."

Let the enemies of the government

go to the neighborhood of Las Yaguas to see how others lived, and then let them say that it was just, that it was noble, that it was good, and let them say the Revolution is bad because it wants Las Yaguas to have decent houses ... Let them say the Revolution is bad.⁹¹³

Meanwhile, filmmakers from the Soviet Union shot scenes for the film *Soy Cuba* in the neighborhood. "Don't look away!" a scene implored viewers, as a wealthy American stumbles through the neighborhood in horror after a night with a prostitute.⁹¹⁴

Promises for reform were convincing to residents. As the Ministry of Social Welfare oversaw the construction in Santiago, a group from Las Yaguas began to construct one of seven new subdivisions to replace their neighborhood. Negotiation persisted, however. García vaguely recalls his initial skepticism as part of the reason why he later had no official leadership position in the neighborhood Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR): "I had to provide certain facts about the motives of our move from Las Yaguas to here, and one of the CDR members said that I ... sounded like a *latifundista*.... And that hurt me ... I told him, *chico*, I wouldn't call someone a *latifundista* who has lived 28 years in Las Yaguas, fighting in the conditions that we fought."⁹¹⁵ García further claims that he sought out an architect from the government to try and convince him to construct the new homes on the old site of Las Yaguas, something that was apparently impossible due to its uneven terrain.⁹¹⁶ A more significant dispute arose around wages for the constructions. While publicity for the Self-Help program insisted that

⁹¹³ Fidel Castro, "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante," November 27, 1960, in *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁴ Kalatozov, *Soy Cuba*.

⁹¹⁵ OL, MD Interview with FA, 8 June 1969, Box 142, Folder 8, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 79.

⁹¹⁶ OL, MD, MB, AT interview with FA, 16 May 1970, Box 142, Folder 28, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 13.

the construction of neighborhoods was voluntary, some workers thought otherwise. When they complained about the lack of wages, “the Social Welfare office went to the different ministries and collected a sum of money to pay us”—though the Ministry did not count these as wages.⁹¹⁷ Some Las Yaguas residents considered the homes benefits they had earned, whether they worked or not. Many residents never made required payments for their homes.⁹¹⁸

Construction on the first of seven new subdivisions for Las Yaguas residents began in 1960, but relocations did not begin until some of the projects were completed in 1962.⁹¹⁹ While the Vista Alegre project in Santiago moved all residents together, subsequent projects were split into groups of no more than 150 units.⁹²⁰ The new subdivisions replacing Las Yaguas were scattered about distant corners of the city, with several in Marianao, others in Guanabacoa, and others in southern Havana.⁹²¹ Officials credited residents with hours of labor on the projects, which counted towards the payments they would owe on new homes, and residents happily remember Ernesto “Che” Guevara joining the brigades to work on one of the sites.⁹²² By early 1963, two subdivisions had been completed and 411 families remained in the neighborhood. The final five subdivisions were finished during the early months of that year.⁹²³

Residents greeted the moves with anxiety and excitement. “People didn’t sleep at all that night,” remembered Manuela.⁹²⁴ “The first days I was so disoriented in a concrete house,” remembered Amparo, “but from a house of palm branches to a house of cement in a residential

⁹¹⁷ Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 109.

⁹¹⁸ OL, MD, MB, AT interview with FA, 16 May 1970, Box 142, Folder 28, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 1.

⁹¹⁹ Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Men*, xl; MD Interview with FA, 2 October 1969, Box 142, Folder 16, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 13.

⁹²⁰ Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 79.

⁹²¹ The subdivisions were named Martí, Miraflores, Hipódromo, La Perla, el Central, Lumumba, and Vista Alegre. Rafael Sánchez Lalebret, “Construyan veinte repartos para erradicar los barrios insalubres,” *Bohemia*, November 19, 1961, 34.

⁹²² Higher numbers of hours also gave residents preference in selecting new homes. See Calderón, *Amparo*, 219; García Alonso, *Manuela*, 418, 420.

⁹²³ García Alonso, *Manuela*, 12.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 420-21.

neighborhood, it's like day and night, right?⁹²⁵ Reflecting on the move in 1969, García voiced enthusiasm for the homes, but he also regretted the loss of community and a lack of appreciation for how hard the neighborhood had worked for their new homes. “The outlook we had [in Las Yaguas] has been broken. I mean really broken,” he said, highlighting the paradoxical way that fires had brought neighbors together in the past. “There’s more independence and no worry since ‘my house won’t burn because it’s cement,’” he claimed. “Differences have arisen.... There are a lot of people who ... want to say ‘I don’t remember anything from Las Yaguas.’... Me, come on, I’m satisfied, I’m happy ... when people think back on those conditions, because they’ll have more responsibility. Today they’ll know how to show more respect.”⁹²⁶

With relocations underway across the island, government officials publicly celebrated shantytown clearances, but expressed ambivalence of their own. With new urban reforms, the types of urban property disputes that had fueled shantytown activism diminished. As private investment in housing dried up, the program was expensive, too.⁹²⁷ By August 1961, the government abolished the Ministry of Social Welfare, ending the Self-Help program in the process.⁹²⁸ “The accelerated evolution of the country produced ... a revision of the solutions to the problem of shantytowns [*barrios insalubres*],” explained an official report in 1963.⁹²⁹ The report claimed several reasons for the shift, including slow construction, high absenteeism given other employment opportunities, and low productivity from non-specialized workers, leading to a system “inadequate” for the industrialized system Cuba was developing.⁹³⁰ The report also

⁹²⁵ Calderón, *Amparo*, 219.

⁹²⁶ OL, MD interview with FA, 16 May 1969, Box 142, Folder 4, Oscar Lewis Papers, UIA, 74-75.

⁹²⁷ Hamburg notes that economic difficulties, cost of materials, and architectural trends likely made the program unviable. Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 80.

⁹²⁸ INAV would continue to oversee the distribution of new homes from within the Ministry of Public Works until 1968, but no longer constructed homes. *Ibid*, 75.

⁹²⁹ Unión Internacional de Arquitectos, *La arquitectura*, 82.

⁹³⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

stated that the program was isolating shantytown residents from the rest of society, while, “the growth of revolutionary organizations at the level of neighborhood blocks has made it possible to do great work with families coming from slums [*tugurios*]. . . . Difficulties resulting from the low educational and economic level of their previous environment disappeared quickly.”⁹³¹ By the time Las Yaguas contested lands were emptied, publicity surrounding slum clearance had already run its course.⁹³² Deficient housing continued to present major difficulties in Havana, but for the time being, as residents prepared to occupy new homes, national political debate around shantytowns was over.

6.8 CONCLUSION

The Revolutionary Government’s clearance of Las Yaguas was produced by over a decade of engagement between neighborhood leaders and government social workers. The final, messy product, visible in seven new neighborhoods spread around the capital, bore the influence of both camps. On one hand, government officials proposed to settle urban property disputes by facilitating shantytown relocation and offering benefits in exchange. On the other hand, residents resisted relocation by publicly highlighting their rights as citizens and demanding benefits higher than officials were prepared to give. Over time, this engagement led to better offers from the government, as it depoliticized local conflicts through non-confrontational interventions. Yet the

⁹³¹ Ibid, 82.

⁹³² There was limited publicity of Las Yaguas’ clearance. *Metas* and *INRA*, which had publicized previous clearances, had both ceased publication by 1963. *Bohemia* did not cover the clearances during 1963, and there is no mention of the clearances in April 1963 in *Noticias de Hoy*.

internal cohesion of Las Yaguas allowed the neighborhood to resist all the same, until a new government met long-awaited demands for housing.

The Self-Help program was therefore a success, but mostly according to republican standards—something revolutionary officials recognized by abandoning it so quickly. Batista's CNV had succeeded, not by constructing homes, but by promoting individual solutions, depoliticizing neighborhood relocation and establishing procedures to resolve urban property conflicts. In providing housing, the Revolution's program succeeded in a similar fashion, overcoming entrenched local resistance to remove neighborhoods whose activism in property disputes had proven politically damaging to the government. As a program that alleviated deficient housing or urban poverty broadly defined, however, its impact was limited. And as property disputes faded, political pressure for slum clearance waned as well.

As much as it was about housing, then, the Self Help Program was also about politics. Since the 1930s, Las Yaguas residents had transformed a relatively small property dispute into a national flashpoint for critics of the state. They had leveraged this visibility into an enduring place in the capital, contesting relocation by pointing to the inability of governing officials to provide anything meaningful in return. In providing new, modern houses, the Revolutionary Government had risen to the challenge. In the process, however, officials transformed the clearance of Las Yaguas into a testament to their vision of citizenship, which was narrower than the one articulated by some residents. Their program drew heavily from international currents of social science, which defined the political mobilization of shantytowns as an affront to national development and as evidence of the culture of poverty. As neighborhood activists navigated changing circumstances to procure housing from the state, they therefore reinforced an official

narrative that denied the validity of their own demands. By engaging with the state, Las Yaguas residents were defined as beneficiaries, not heroes, of the Revolution.

7.0 EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION

Just a short bus ride from Old Havana, the neighborhood of La Hata was built along hills and winding streets. In 2014, self-built “*llega y pon*” construction was evident nearby, but the central area had improved since the 1950s. Its houses were sturdy and eclectic, some wood, others concrete. Large, multi-story houses were scattered throughout. One of these belonged to Enrique Hernández Armenteros. A 94 year-old community leader and *babalawo* (*Santería* priest), Enrique’s house was among the neighborhood’s best-known destinations.⁹³³

Featured in a 2004 biography, Enrique’s story was a product of mid-century patterns of Havana housing. Raised in the province of Santa Clara, he moved to Havana in the late 1940s, where he made shoes in the central city near the *malecón* (sea wall). In 1950, after wandering through Guanabacoa, “he had a premonition: ‘I will settle on this land.’”⁹³⁴ At the time, La Hata was still a neighborhood of shacks, but one where poor people had won formal rights to live.⁹³⁵ Three years after the government finalized expropriation payments to its owner, John Stowers, Enrique and his wife moved there, and he gathered wood from shipping crates to build his house. A direct descendant of Congo slaves, Enrique was deeply religious, and his new home included a “a comfortable altar to St. Lazarus, his patron saint.”⁹³⁶ Enrique became a religious leader, and

⁹³³ Alfonso, *Tata Nganga*.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

⁹³⁵ On conditions in La Hata in 1960, see “En Cuba,” *Bohemia*, June 5, 1960, 68.

⁹³⁶ Alfonso, *Tata Nganga*, 39-40.

eventually one of the most prominent *babalawos* in the capital. Over the years, his house improved through his own work.

Even as residents made good use of the opportunities available to them, however, life in poor Havana neighborhoods like La Hata was beset with challenges. Teacher Carmela Martínez Echevarria, whose legendary efforts to educate Havana's popular classes were featured in the 2014 feature film *Conducta*, began her career teaching in La Hata in the 1960s.⁹³⁷ At first the families made fun of her, she said, and she recalls winning them over gradually as she worked with parents to gather materials to build extra classrooms for the school.⁹³⁸ Film director Sara Gómez explored similar frictions between teachers and students in the new Las Yaguas subdivisions in her 1974 film *De cierta manera*. The film depicts fictional teacher Yolanda, white and of a wealthy family, seeking ways to relate to difficult students whose families had been scarred by poverty in Las Yaguas.⁹³⁹ Inclusion was stated as a central goal of the revolutionary government but social divisions were deep.

In some respects, then, the problems of Las Yaguas' former residents and the problems of La Hata resembled each other in the decades following 1959. Residents of both neighborhoods now occupied their homes legally yet still faced ongoing social marginality. The similarities are unsurprising, given the neighborhoods' shared origins. Both grew large during the 1930s, as poor men and women claimed land in the capital when employment was scarce and evictions were rampant. When government officials tried to relocate poor migrants, residents insisted on their rights to stay, and they used political connections and agrarian legislation for leverage. During

⁹³⁷ Daranas, *Conducta*.

⁹³⁸ Redacción OnCuba, "The Real Carmela of *Conducta*."

⁹³⁹ Gómez, *De Cierta Manera*.

the 1940s, they joined shantytown residents across Greater Havana to claim that their lands belonged to the Cuban state. As citizens, they insisted, they could live on them.

Yet in the years between La Hata's expropriation in 1947 and Las Yaguas' eradication in 1963, the stories of these neighborhoods diverged, and this dissertation has sought to explain this process. The residents of La Hata realized the radical potential of the legal system by pressuring the government to expropriate lands from a US titleholder. In the aftermath it faded into relative obscurity. By contrast, the occupation of Las Yaguas was never formalized, and the area became a national icon of urban poverty whose future was debated by the capital's poor and elite alike.

The fame of Las Yaguas was due to the actions of both its residents and land titleholders. To resist eviction, neighborhood leaders built connections to the radical labor movement, the Catholic Church, university students, and local and national politicians. They publicized their claims. The neighborhood's elite titleholders responded with legislation and with their own political pressures. Given the government's reluctance to permit eviction, Cosme de la Torriente pressed officials to acknowledge the state's own obligation to relocate residents in 1939. The government agreed, claiming to have the residents' wellbeing in mind. The effect was to shift the debate over relocation from one of property rights to one of social welfare. Replacing titleholders, the Cuban state became a key protagonist. Leaders in Las Yaguas accepted this debate creatively. If they were to be relocated, they replied, it would be in accordance with their rights as citizens. And since jobs and housing were not available in the capital, the state would have to provide them. During the 1940s, their activism brought relocation efforts to a halt amid wide publicity.

In highlighting the state's failure to provide adequate housing, residents of Las Yaguas spoke to difficulties that affected the entire capital. As urban tenants seized on rent control

policies to combat price hikes from landlords, housing stock in the central city deteriorated. Government initiatives to improve housing elsewhere via the mortgage market increased inequality and provided financial backing to developers, as public housing remained scarce. Many agreed that the lack of affordable housing in the capital required better government planning—and in a well planned capital, many insisted, Las Yaguas should not exist. By publicizing their resistance on the basis of housing demands, residents of Las Yaguas transformed their neighborhood into an emblem of state failure in a city of fierce housing debates. The neighborhood's relocation became a political necessity.

Under pressure, officials deployed new solutions based on international currents of social science and urban planning. They developed centralized slum-clearance initiatives during the 1950s, using social workers to depoliticize shantytown resistance and relocate residents. Neighborhood leaders engaged with these social workers, securing increasingly generous compensation in exchange for relocation. In the case of Las Yaguas this compensation took the forms of new homes, funded by the revolutionary government in the early 1960s. In securing rights to the city, then, the residents of Las Yaguas contested formal legal, social, and political structures—but they also reinforced those structures' basic premises. They made demands by reinterpreting the government's own rhetoric in accordance with their own needs, which allowed them to secure benefits far beyond many poor people in the capital. It also left existing conclusions about social marginality in place, effectively devaluing the neighborhood's political history. Still, as Las Yaguas joined La Hata in the uneven social geography of Greater Havana, residents of both neighborhoods proudly made the Revolution their own.

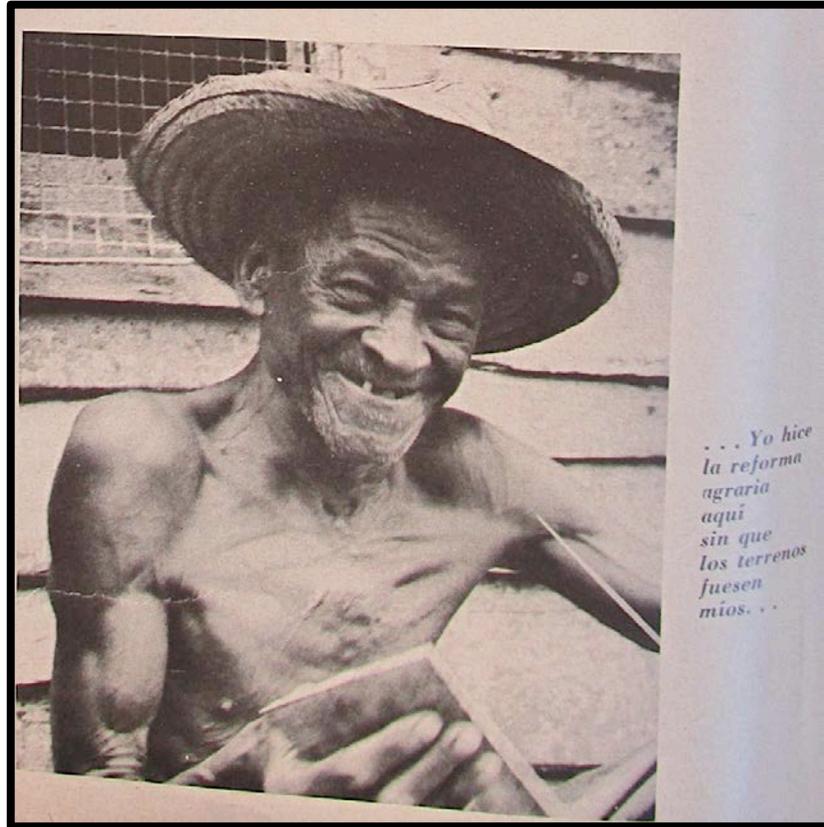


Figure 9: A resident of Los Quemados in 1960: "I did the agrarian reform here, and the lands weren't mine..."⁹⁴⁰

7.1 SOCIALISM

In the years following the 1963 eradication of Las Yaguas, attention to shantytowns diminished. Debate among housing officials resumed periodically, but without the same urgency as during the 1950s and early 1960s. Government leaders "largely ignored" shantytowns, write Mario Coyula and Jill Hamberg, "in the belief that a rapid rate of new construction would make it possible to relocate their residents."⁹⁴¹

⁹⁴⁰ Vicente Rodríguez, "Los Quemados: Un tugurio más que la revolución echa abajo," *INRA* 1, no. 7 (1960), 7.

⁹⁴¹ Hamberg and Coyula, "The Case of Havana, Cuba," 10.

As the age of slum-clearance was ending in Cuba, however, it gained momentum elsewhere—partly in response to the Cuban Revolution. In 1962, poor residents in central Caracas rioted in Fidel Castro’s name after renaming their neighborhood “Sierra Maestra” to celebrate the Revolution. Meanwhile officials from Rio de Janeiro to Santiago, Chile, cooperated with the US-backed Alliance for Progress initiatives, seeking to alleviate conditions associated with urban poverty and prevent Cuban-style revolution from spreading.⁹⁴² In Rio de Janeiro, the “land wars” that had centered relocation debates on the Brazilian legal system now shifted to the political system, as they had during the previous decades in Cuba. The municipal government took responsibility for slum clearance, evicting 31,000 people from shantytowns in 1961. Following the 1964 military coup, the federal government launched a large slum clearance initiative in the city, removing over 100,000 poor people from informally occupied land.⁹⁴³ Funded by the US Agency for International Development, this initiative was partially motivated by fear of the Cuban Revolution. It also resembled Cuban initiatives, both before and after 1959.

In the meantime, many shantytowns remained in Havana, untouched. “The largest shantytowns were indeed eliminated,” writes Hamberg, “but contrary to some assertions...most smaller ones continued to exist and even grow.”⁹⁴⁴ By 1987, an estimated three percent of the capital lived in shantytown housing. Infrastructure improved slowly in many neighborhoods, and rights to occupy the land were generally assured.⁹⁴⁵ Even so, Alejandro de la Fuente references a 1987 study to show that prejudices against such neighborhoods remained significant. Police categorized several shantytowns as centers of crime, despite having crime rates similar to the rest

⁹⁴² Velasco, *Barrio Rising*, 87-88; Fischer, “A Century in the Present Tense,” 29; Murphy, “In and Out of the Margins,” 73.

⁹⁴³ Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*, 78-80, 297-99.

⁹⁴⁴ Hamberg, “The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy,” 82.

⁹⁴⁵ Hamberg and Coyula, “The Case of Havana, Cuba,” 9-11.

of the city. Shantytowns remained heavily populated by Afrodescendants.⁹⁴⁶ Despite the continued presence of shantytowns in Havana, however, new informal settlements were relatively limited compared to other Latin American capitals, largely because of the city's slow population growth. By focusing on regional development, state authorities successfully reduced growth in the capital. While Havana had a population similar to Santiago, Chile and Bogotá in 1960, by 2015 Santiago's population was nearly three times as large as Havana's. Bogotá contained nearly four times as many people.⁹⁴⁷

7.2 THE SPECIAL PERIOD AND BEYOND

During the economic crisis of the 1990s, state control over Havana's growth weakened, and national debates over shantytowns reappeared. Prompted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and heightened trade restrictions from the US, Cubans faced severe hardships. In response, leaders announced a "Special Period," legalizing US dollars and launching other reforms. By 1997, the concentration of dollars in the capital led to internal migration more than 500,000 people, along with growth in informal settlements unrivaled since the 1950s.⁹⁴⁸ With the urban infrastructure strained, the government prohibited these new arrivals. In spite of their illegality, however, many found the means to stay.⁹⁴⁹ New migrants were often referred to as "palestinos," (Palestinians), a pejorative term that played on their status as a people without

⁹⁴⁶ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 313.

⁹⁴⁷ Violich, *Urban Planning for Latin America*, 214, 263; CIA, *The World Factbook*; Hamberg and Coyula, "The Case of Havana, Cuba," 4.

⁹⁴⁸ Rodríguez, *Los marginales*, 91-94; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 328-29.

⁹⁴⁹ De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 328; Hamberg and Coyula, "The Case of Havana, Cuba," 11.

land.⁹⁵⁰ Their settlement in the capital breathed new life into old discussions of race, crime, marginality, and spatial inequality. Recent works like the 2011 feature film *Habanastation* or Silvio Rodríguez's *Canción del barrio* (2014) demonstrate that urban poverty in Havana cannot be ignored. Capturing significant audiences, these works have sought to make urban poverty and informality issues for national debate once again.⁹⁵¹

The terms of this debate are, in some ways, similar to those analyzed in this dissertation. In 1931, for example, the government articulated a basic framework for dealing with urban poverty: illegal land occupations were to be prohibited, so long as the state could meet its obligations to address urban poverty in other ways. In a new millennium, migrants to the capital have justified their presence in similar terms, by pointing out that because of the crisis their economic necessities are not met in the provinces. This justification has deep resonance in Cuban society, and in many cases the state has permitted residents to stay.⁹⁵²

As these debates continue, then, it is worth considering “*palestinos*” alongside the historical connotations of “indigence” and “*barrios de indigentes*,” both before and after 1959. Currently, the state faces pressure to either legalize or prohibit new settlements in the capital. There is precedent for each type of action in the respective cases of La Hata and Las Yaguas. In both cases, state solutions have had merits, but in other ways both have fallen short. This dissertation has critically analyzed policies towards the urban poor from a number of angles, highlighting the respective dangers of paternalism, private investment, and neglect. In spite of its critical lens, my motivation has not been to argue against new forms of action from the Cuban state. Instead, my goal has been to place the political history of the urban poor into conversation

⁹⁵⁰ Rodríguez, *Los marginales*, 108.

⁹⁵¹ Ramírez, *Canción del barrio*; Padrón, *Habanastation*.

⁹⁵² Rodríguez, *Los marginales*, 109-10.

with such actions, in the hope that local politics are considered in future plans for Havana. In the Revolution of 1959, shantytown leaders found a powerful vehicle to express collective demands on a national stage. However, the same Revolution contained policies designed to silence such demands. More than 50 years later, the Cuban government remains uniquely situated to address urban poverty in its capital city—but it also faces unique pressures to make poverty invisible. My hope is to offer historical context for an open discussion among policy makers and stakeholders, including the urban poor, concerning the role of the state in impoverished urban settlements in Havana. In an age of reform, old solutions are inadequate to the challenges of the present.

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