Puerto Rico: A National History by Jorell Meléndez-Badillo is an extensive chronicle of Puerto Rico, focusing on its national and political history from the time of the indigenous peoples through Spanish colonization and American occupation to the present day and even touching on the author’s perspective of the future. The book begins by exploring the history and culture of the indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico, setting the stage for the events that follow. Then it explores Spanish colonization, delving into many incidents of hardship and challenges that Puerto Rico faced. The author transitions to American occupation and explores the many attempts of Puerto Rico to gain its independence.

Meléndez-Badillo gives a comprehensive overview of the numerous efforts toward achieving an independent Puerto Rico, documenting the aspirations and challenges of those who resist colonial status. He also discusses the pervasive racism, xenophobia, and prejudice faced by Puerto Ricans both on the island and abroad, analyzing the impact of these attitudes on their identity and social fabric. He also highlights the phenomenon of circular migration and diaspora, reflecting the complex relationship between Puerto Ricans and their homeland, influenced by economic and social factors.

Further, the author does an excellent job of tracing the changing definition of “Puerto Rico” from the time of Christopher Columbus’s arrival to the present day. He highlights the unique status of Puerto Rico as a US territory, the implications of this status for its residents, and the ongoing debates about its future. Meléndez-Badillo describes the people of Puerto Rico as torn between their identity as second-class American citizens who do not enjoy all the rights afforded to citizens in the US mainland and the desire for either independence or full integration into the United States. This duality is a source of ongoing debate within Puerto Rico, with some advocating for complete
autonomy to preserve and strengthen Puerto Rican culture and sovereignty. In contrast, others see becoming a state as the best path forward for economic stability and equal rights.

In critically examining Puerto Rico’s status as a colonized territory, Meléndez-Badillo demonstrates a remarkable honesty that balances the narrative between the perceived benefits and inherent disadvantages of such a position. He candidly addresses the complex notion that, as a colonized entity, Puerto Rico is entitled to aid and support from its colonizer, yet simultaneously grapples with the harsh reality that this dependence undermines its ability to self-govern effectively, especially in the face of financial obligations like debt repayment. This nuanced approach highlights the paradox of colonial dependency: while external support is necessary for the island’s survival, it also hampers its pursuit of autonomy and self-determination. Meléndez-Badillo’s frank discussion of these issues adds depth to the historical narrative, presenting the island’s colonial experience as a struggle for political identity and a complex interplay between economic dependency and the aspiration for sovereignty.

Crucially, the author enriches this analysis by weaving in a variety of cultural elements—pieces of songs, snippets from comedies, and personal family stories—that breathe life into raw political history. These elements serve not just to illustrate the tangible impact of political decisions on individuals’ lives but also to deepen the readers’ emotional engagement with the subject matter. Through songs and comedies, the author taps into the cultural expressions of resistance, hope, and identity. At the same time, personal stories from his family showcase the direct consequences of Puerto Rico’s political limbo on its people.

The book ends in chapter 15, titled “Broken Memories and Future-Oriented Histories,” which adopts a pessimistic tone regarding Puerto Rico’s future. This sentiment is attributed to many factors, including migration, natural disasters, colonial neglect, and the pursuit of a better life—elements that have, over time, shaped the island’s trajectory. The author characterizes foreign investors’ interests in Puerto Rico as driven by “colonial desires,” suggesting that such investments are not aimed at the island’s welfare but rather at exploiting its resources and people. The portrayal of foreign investors as modern colonizers critiques the ongoing economic exploitation that mirrors past colonial practices, suggesting that without significant changes, Puerto Rico’s future may remain bleak.

In Puerto Rico: A National History, Meléndez-Badillo contributes significantly to the growing body of scholarly literature on Puerto Rico history. As an academic with roots in Puerto Rico, Meléndez-Badillo delves deeply into the island’s national history, providing a nuanced perspective on its unique, complex, and evolving national identity. His expert analysis sheds light on the intricate interplay between cultural, political, and social forces that have shaped Puerto Rico over the centuries. I highly recommend this book for scholars and students alike, particularly those interested in Caribbean history, colonial studies, and the dynamics of national identity in postcolonial contexts. Meléndez-Badillo’s work stands out for its depth of insight and its honest examination of both the challenges and opportunities in Puerto Rico’s past and future.
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