

OBITUARY

Fernando Picó, SJ (1941–2017)



Photo by Pedro L. San Miguel

After enduring heart surgery in 2015 and a stroke in 2016, Fernando Picó, Puerto Rico's leading historian and a figure renowned all over the Caribbean, passed away on June 27, 2017, at the age of 75. Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Picó attended high school at the Colegio San Ignacio, where he received "the call" and decided to become a priest. In 1959, he joined the seminary of Saint Andrew-on-Hudson, Hyde Park, New York, and later went on to Loyola Seminary in Shrub Oak, New York, where he studied philosophy and theology. In addition, he earned a BA in History at Fordham University in 1965 and then an MA in 1966. In 1970, he received a PhD in Medieval History from Johns Hopkins University. His dissertation devolved around on what he jokingly called "the contentious bishops" of Laon, France, during the thirteenth century. He was ordained as a priest a year later.

This work seemed to augur that Fernando's research future would be in medieval history and that it would probe the intricacies of Catholicism. At the very beginning of his academic career, this was a very likely forecast. But not in vain do believers claim that "God works in mysterious ways." Just after obtaining his doctorate, Fernando received an urgent call from Fordham, the Jesuit university in the Bronx, which was a hub for Puerto Rican migrants to "*los niuyores*," as they called the United States. A group of students there was demanding a course on Puerto Rican history, but no professor was available

to teach it. Though reluctant, the young Puerto Rican Jesuit and brand-new historian became the instructor of such a course.

“¡La vida!” was conceivably Fernando’s initial remark to this unforeseen outcome. As he admitted years later, his knowledge of Puerto Rican history at the time was rather flimsy, to say the least. It was limited to the class he took at San Ignacio as a youngster! Rising to this challenge, Fernando took his usual stance in front of daunting events. Compelled to overcome his shortcomings, he rushed to La Librería, then a bookstore in New York, where he acquired a bunch of volumes on Puerto Rico. Thus began what he deemed as “falling in love” with the history of his country. Along with his hasty readings, the queries of his students, who yearned to give sense to their “Puerto Ricanness,” furthered Fernando’s enrapture with Puerto Rico’s past. Before long, he found ways to convey his infatuation.

In 1972 Fernando joined the University of Puerto Rico’s Department of History, where he taught for 45 years. His classes dealt mainly with European and medieval history, although he also offered courses on the theory of history and on historical research. This led him to the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, which became the cradle of his bountiful historical production. At first, he had no clear idea of where to direct his investigation, but eventually he surveyed the historical records of Utuado, a municipality in the interior of Puerto Rico that in the nineteenth century was one of the island’s main coffee producers. It had also been the hometown of Fernando’s grandmother.

The outcomes of this research were three pioneering books: *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo 19* (1979) —in my opinion, Puerto Rico’s historiographical masterpiece; *Amargo café* (1981); and *Los gallos peleados* (1983). In them, Fernando examined the consequences of the export coffee economy on day laborers, peasants, and the underprivileged in general. These were landmark works for several reasons. On the one hand, they introduced innovative research methodologies, including those that became the hallmarks of Fernando’s historiographical output: microhistory and prosopography. On the other hand, because they explored the lives of “common people,” these works offered an uncommon panorama of Puerto Rican history, a view that contested dominant interpretations which focused on political bosses (“*los próceres*”), and on legal and institutional history. These works were truly groundbreaking.

Indeed, Fernando, along with other dissenting scholars, became one of the founders of the New Puerto Rican History, which arose during the 1970s.

Grounding their arguments in a variety of intellectual currents—the French “Annales school,” British Marxism, US social and economic history, and Latin American “dependency theory,” among others—those maverick academics challenged the standard interpretations of Puerto Rican history and offered fresh insights. The Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña (CEREP), of which Fernando was a member, became the main forum for this group of questioning scholars, eager to contest intellectual interpretations as well as political and cultural outlooks.

However, Fernando’s contributions to the renovation of Puerto Rican historiography were not constrained to archival research and the writing of pathbreaking works. He also shined in the classroom, as advisor to student authors of countless theses and papers, and as backer of historians in the making. I, for instance, modified my unsympathetic view of medieval history thanks to a graduate course he offered at the University of Puerto Rico. In that class I first read, among other notable historians, Marc Bloch, who since has become one of my guiding stars. Later, in the 1980s, once we became colleagues at the University of Puerto Rico, Fernando virtually shepherded me in submitting my MA thesis to Ediciones Huracán, then the main publishing house in Puerto Rico.

For sure, it was not only me who benefited from his generous support. Several students were able to publish their research papers and monographs in *Anales de Investigación Histórica*, a mimeographed magazine put together by a small group of young professors at the university’s Department of History. Fernando was one of its editors and main sponsors, and unquestionably its champion. He acted, likewise, as the leading force behind *Historia y Sociedad*, the Department’s journal from 1987 until it stopped publication a few years ago. All along, he thoughtfully fostered the publication of the works of novice historians as well as those of noted graduate students.

Of course, he continued to research and publishing at a heart-pounding pace. His *Historia general de Puerto Rico* (1986) is one of the standard textbooks on the island’s history—it merited an English translation in 2006. The *Historia* was followed by *1898: la guerra después de la guerra* (1987)—also translated to English, in 2005—an unorthodox view on the effects of the US invasion of Puerto Rico. *Vivir en Caimito* (1989), a microhistory of a barrio in the outskirts of San Juan where Fernando lived for several years, and *El día menos pensado: historia de los presidiarios en Puerto Rico, 1793–1993* (1994), an impassioned reproof of the penal system, are among his most significant works in terms of his deepest social concerns. This is also the case with *Al filo del poder: subalternos y dominantes en Puerto Rico, 1739–1910* (1993), a collection of articles centered

on different subaltern groups, including day laborers, peasants, slaves, free blacks and mulattos, and maroons.

During the 1990s, he published several collections of essays on a variety of topics, from historical themes to social and cultural issues. *Don Quijote en motora* (1993) shows another side of Fernando: his quirky sense of humor. In a much different direction, *Puerto Rico Inside and Out: Changes and Continuities* (2008) is a compilation of his opinion pieces that appeared in the press over the years. He even authored some short stories! One of them, *La peineta colorada* (1992), he jokingly claimed, was destined to become his most lasting work. Revisiting his roots as historian, he penned *Historia general del Occidente Europeo, siglos 5 al 14* (1998), a textbook on medieval history.

The Caribbean was another focus explored by Fernando in his vast historiographical production. His books *One Frenchman, Four Revolutions: General Ferrand and the Peoples of the Caribbean* (2011) and *Vocaciones caribeñas* (2013) attest to his interest in the region. For decades, he was an active member of the Association of Caribbean Historians, serving as its president for two terms (1990-92 and 2010-11). Meanwhile, Fernando continued investigating the history of Puerto Rican counties. Between 2003 and 2014, he published studies on Carolina, Cayey, Jayuya, Ponce, and Santurce. At the moment of his passing he was working on a book on Guaynabo. Nonetheless, he always kept abreast of his broad discipline: his last published book, *Puerto Rico y la sequía de 1847* (2015), is an innovative work on ecological history.

Fernando's scholarly work earned him a well-deserved reputation in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, and numerous organizations acknowledged his work. In recognition of his research and publications on Utuado, he was declared an adopted son of the township, in 1984. In 2004, he was named Humanist of the Year by the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities, and in 2007-8, he was awarded the Eugenio María de Hostos honorary chair at the University of Puerto Rico. In 2010, he was designated distinguished professor at the University of Puerto Rico's Río Piedras campus. Fernando also received honorary doctorates from several institutions, including Lehman College of the City University of New York (2013). Also in 2013, the Caribbean Philosophical Association granted him the Frantz Fanon Lifetime Achievement Award. Not long after, in 2015, the Archivo General de Puerto Rico paid tribute to him in a public ceremony for his contributions to Puerto Rican history. With the consent of the honoree at that event, I had the distinction of presenting a lecture titled "Fernando Picó y la Nueva Historia Puertorriqueña".

Nonetheless, those familiar with Fernando know well that he was not prone to pomp, ritual, and solemnity. Though he accepted these honors and recognitions, I am most certain that he considered more worthy his involvement in a variety of social, cultural, and educational issues. Indeed, this short note would be incomplete if it did not point out this aspect of his legacy. For instance, at the University of Puerto Rico he acted as mediator between conflicting groups, encouraging dialogue and negotiation instead of enmity. In his public interventions, likewise, he always advocated a culture of peace, benevolence and inclusiveness.

This ethical stance was not expressed merely in words. Among his many other achievements, Fernando will be remembered for the educational program for inmates he created in the 1980s, and then served for decades following as its advocate and key mentor. Hundreds of young men benefited from this bold program, which combined two of Fernando's passions: learning and education, on the one hand, and social justice, on the other. Fernando will surely be missed by his students in this program, which gave hope to scores of them. They will remember him dearly, as deeply no doubt as do numerous other students, colleagues, and many others who had the fortune to meet and know this unrivaled human being.

In the name of them all, I thank him wholeheartedly. Quoting his customary words of farewell, "¡Nos vemos, viejo!"

*Universidad de Puerto Rico (profesor
jubilado) Río Piedras Campus*

PEDRO L. SAN MIGUEL