

A Puerto Rican in Oñati: Reflections on a formative year



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In September of 2010, I arrived at Oñati to pursue a Master's Degree in the Sociology of Law. Little did I know then that the time I spent in Oñati would have such a profound impact on the way I now perceive law, particularly taking into account that by then I already had two graduate degrees in law: one from a law school in the United States and another one from a law faculty in the United Kingdom. My initial law degree was pursued in Puerto Rico, the Caribbean archipelago that is a colony of the United States of America.

One of the highlights of the program is its size. The fact that it is a very small program (in my year we were a group of sixteen students) helps to assure that students will be able to have unusual access to the professors of the courses. Because the professors live in the same residence hall as the students, there are plenty of opportunities for communication and academic exchanges. During the year that I was there, we also benefitted from the visits of visiting scholars and researchers who came to Oñati to take advantage of its spectacular and beautiful library on Sociology of Law. Many of them presented their work to us, the students. We were able to learn about a wide range of diverse topics within the field of Sociology of Law.

The diversity of both the student body and the professors is also one of the advantages of the program. In my year (2010-2011), we had students from Italy, Colombia, Canada, Perú, Argentina, Bangladesh, Indonesia, China, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Spain and myself, from Puerto Rico. The students had different academic backgrounds: many had degrees in law, but other had degrees in economics, sociology and criminology, for example.

The first course that we took was a one-week workshop with professor Ulrike Schultz about how to successfully make an oral presentation. The Institute is a great place for people who wish to pursue or are already pursuing an academic career. It is also a space for people to prepare themselves for careers with the government or with NGOs.

I had never had to write so many different papers in such a short amount of time (six months) before in my academic career. Out of the fourteen courses that I took in six months (a new course every two weeks), only one had an exam as a final evaluation. In all of the other courses, the final evaluation consisted of a final paper, which really helped students to improve their writing skills. The two-week courses are very intensive. They meet daily and require a substantial amount of reading and writing, as I already mentioned. It is a wonderful opportunity to have fourteen different professors read and evaluate one's essays (plus the Scientific Director of the Institute), from different

academic backgrounds. I am referring here not only to the diversity in terms of the country of origin, but also in terms of the academic disciplines.

The process of writing the thesis is also a highlight of the program. Students take two courses on methodology: one on quantitative methods and another one on qualitative methods. Additionally, they all have to participate in the thesis writing workshop, led by the Scientific Director of the Institute, to help them with research design and the structure of the thesis. The final six months of the Master's Degree are devoted to the research and writing of the thesis. Finally, we defend our thesis, either orally or in writing. Students get to choose a thesis supervisor, who must be authorized by the Scientific Director, to guide and support them through the thesis writing process. It is a quite a challenge to write a thesis in such a relatively short period of time, but the discipline that is slowly created throughout the intense six months of courses and the writing for those courses serves as a preparation stage for the final six months of extremely hard work.

I will forever be indebted to my classmates for encouraging me to return to Puerto Rico to continue my work with low income communities and return to academia. Prior to coming to Oñati, I had suffered a great injustice within academia due to my work with low income communities in Puerto Rico. My evaluation was also permeated with gender stereotypes. I decided to go to Oñati so that I would have the opportunity to reflect about my work in Puerto Rico and continue my formation as a scholar by looking at my work from a different discipline.

I had studied Jurisprudence, that is, Legal Theories, and had embraced critical legal theories openly, before coming to Oñati. Studying sociology served to better understand the huge gap that exists between the way that law is usually taught, in a formalist way, stressing its alleged "objectivity", "neutrality" and "autonomy" and the way it works "in action".

When I think about my time in Oñati I remember what was learned, not only in the classroom, but also during the time that all of us, students and professors, spent together at the beautiful Residencia Antia. I think particularly about the communal kitchen and dining room, where we had wonderful conversations about both academic and non academic topics and were able to learn and taste delicious food from different countries, cooked both by professors and students.

The town itself is extremely beautiful. We took many long walks in the countryside surrounding it and took advantage of the many cafés, restaurants and bars where we,



the students, created wonderful memories together, had fun and learned so much from each other.

We were also supported in learning about Oñati and the Basque Country by the Institute. The Institute's Friends Program links students from the Master's Program with people who live in Oñati. My host, who was also the host of another student from my year, became a true friend to both of us. She showed us Oñati and its surroundings and answered our questions about Basque culture. The people in Oñati are very hospitable, welcoming and supportive of the students. I will never forget the spectacular welcome dinner that a local gastronomic society organized and hosted for us, which ended with some of us singing a song or reciting a poem from our countries.

Students were also encouraged to learn Basque and to visit the "Casa de Cultura" in town, which had a library and a great collection of movies and documentaries for rent, in addition to serving as the local movie theatre. We were also motivated to participate in local festivities and festivals related to Basque culture.

While in Oñati, I was able to take a course about the Basque language, which helped me to learn short phrases that were useful in order to communicate better with people and to show appreciation for their language and culture. The Institute also organized a visit to Mondragón, an internationally renowned cooperativist project. Since I had studied about Mondragón in a "Law and Social Change" class that I had taken while in law school in Puerto Rico, this is something that I still particularly cherish about my time in Oñati.

When I look back at my academic career I think of Oñati as a turning point. It helped me to find my current space as a scholar. Before Oñati, I had started in academia as a clinical law professor specializing in community lawyering and also taught an introductory course for first semester law students called "The Legal Profession" and an elective course called "Law and Poverty". After Oñati I felt that I could delve deeper into my interest in Legal and Political Theories. The background that I acquired in Sociology of Law allowed me to more fully understand the deep internal criticism that critical legal theories make about Law. Looking at the law from an outsider and practical perspective – the Sociology of Law – and complementing it with my background in legal theory, more specifically, in critical legal theories, has helped me to find a space where I can teach and write not only about my clinical work, but also about the role of law and lawyers with and in social movements. I will be forever indebted to the IISL for this. The course that I took with professor Yves Dezalay called "Lawyers, Empire and Globalization", as well as the course titled "States, Markets, Society and Global Governance", taught jointly by

professors Noé Cornago and Igor Filibi, were crucial in allowing me the opportunity to reflect about the role of lawyers in this age of neoliberalism.

More recently, in December of 2020, I had the opportunity to teach an online course in the Master's program. It is a course that I was able to develop precisely because of what I learned during my Master's in Sociology of Law. The course that I taught at the IISL was called "Legal Activism and Social Movements". It was an adaptation of a course that I created in 2014 at Inter American University of Puerto Rico School of Law (where I am currently an Associate Professor) called "Lawyering and Social Movements". At Inter American it is an elective course on Legal Theory. As far as I know, I was the first professor, and still am the only professor, to teach this course in Puerto Rico. In Oñati I had fifteen students from different countries: Basque Country (Spain), China, Colombia, Ecuador, Iran, Finland, Ukraine, Germany, Palestine (living in the Basque Country) and Australia. It was an enriching opportunity for me to be able to teach students from so many different countries and academic backgrounds. Once again, I could attest that one of the great virtues of the program is the multidisciplinary that students bring to the classroom experience.

Higher Education should be a space for intergenerational dialogue. When multiple cultures and multiple disciplines are added to the dialogue, the result can be a space like the IISL, which can transform a person's pedagogy, her role as a scholar/researcher, and her activism.