UC Berkeley
UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The Transition to Free Labour in Puerto Rico: Class, Race and Politics in a Nineteenth-Century Colony

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72z7q2xg

Journal
Journal of Latin American Studies, 55(2)

ISSN
0022-216X

Author
Ayala, Diego C

Publication Date
2023-05-01

DOI
10.1017/s0022216x23000251

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

The Transition to Free Labor in Puerto Rico: Class and Politics in a Nineteenth-Century Colony[1]

Diego C. Ayala

Ph.D. Student, Sociology Department

University of California, Berkeley

diegoca@berkeley.edu

Abstract: This article analyzes the abolition of slavery and the transition to free labor in late-nineteenth century Puerto Rico, seeking to understand the terms and timing of Puerto Rican abolition and the nature of society in its wake. Especially important in Puerto Rico, it argues, was the intertwined nature of slavery and other forms of forced labor as well as the predominance of foreign merchants and planters in the island's economy, which created uneasy alliances between working-class Puerto Ricans and creole elites. These class dynamics interacted with events in the metropole to influence the terms of labor on the island.

[1] I would like to thank Johanne Kjaersgaard, Samuel Farber, three anonymous peer reviewers, my mentors and peers at the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF) at Princeton University, as well as Prof. Isadora Mota and my peers in her research seminar on slavery and abolition in Latin America at Princeton University, for their comments on various drafts of this article.

The Transition to Free Labor in Puerto Rico: Class and Politics in a Nineteenth-Century Colony

Upon visiting Puerto Rico in 1834, George Dawson Flinter, an Irish-born liberal officer in the Spanish army, expressed optimism about the prospects of the abolition of slavery on the island. “Three-fourths of the produce consumed in and exported from the island,” Flinter claimed, “is cultivated by free labour… The friends of human nature, the friends of rational liberty, the advocates for the prudent emancipation of the West India slaves, must rejoice in the triumph of this practical experiment of free labour.”[2] Thirty-three years later, in 1867, Ernest L’Épine, a liberal bureaucrat at the French *Cours des Comptes*, wrote a similarly enthusiastic account of the systems of labor on the island. After visiting Puerto Rico as part of a trip to the Caribbean in the capacity of “delegate to the island of Cuba,” L’Épine wrote that Puerto Rico’s free people of color were “hardworking,” and that the island was “solving the problem of slavery in substituting forced labor with free labor little by little, without shocks, without disorder.”[3]

Flinter and L’Épine’s arguments, though written three decades apart, expressed a common enthusiasm for Puerto Rico as a showcase of “free labor” in a post-emancipation world. Both authors suggested that slavery was likely to die a natural death sooner than in other bastions of the institution (the West Indies for Flinter, Brazil and Cuba for L’Épine). The inevitability of a more gradual abolition process in Puerto Rico was a concept that carried into academic studies well into the twentieth century, including in the works of data-driven economic and social

[2] George Dawson Flinter, *An Account of the Present State of the Island of Puerto Rico: Comprising Numerous Original Facts and Documents Illustrative of the State of Commerce and Agriculture, and of the Condition, Moral and Physical, of the Various Classes of the Population in That Island, as Compared with the Colonies of Other European Powers; Demonstrating the Superiority of the Spanish Slave Code,--the Great Advantages of Free Over Slave Labour, &c* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1834), 263–64. On Flinter himself, see “Flinter, George Dawson (d 1838),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.013.9751.

[3] Quatrelles, *Un Parisien dans les Antilles* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1883), 63–65. For L’Épine’s biography, see “L’ÉPINE Ernest Louis Victor Jules,” in *Dictionnaire historique, généalogique et biographique (1807-1947)* (Cour des comptes), https://www.ccomptes.fr/fr/biographies/lepine-ernest-louis-victor-jules.

history that characterized the field both in Puerto Rico and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Among the arguments that were marshalled were that the expansion of European beet production in the 1850s put productivity pressures on Puerto Rican sugar production that made slavery on the island unprofitable; that abolition was the result of a low-tech plantation sector reaching inherent contradictions as its territorial expansion exhausted itself; and that rapid population growth on the island during the nineteenth century provided an abundant supply of cheap labor that made slavery unnecessary for plantation profitability.[4]

These works of social history on abolition in Puerto Rico, both in the mainland United States and in the *Nueva Historia* movement on the island,[5] provided refreshing perspectives on everyday life and social structures. However, scholars came to challenge two key aspects of these studies' assumptions. The first was the notion that slavery in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, at least in its sugar industry, was unprofitable. In his seminal work on the plantation economy of the southern municipality of Ponce, for example, Francisco Scarano demonstrated not only that Puerto Rican sugar plantations were profitable well into mid-century, but also that profits were based on a particularly intensive exploitation of enslaved labor.[6] In fact, although Puerto Rican sugar production did eventually begin to stagnate in the 1880s and 90s in the face of tough international competition and lower prices, sugar exports actually peaked in value in

[4] Andrés Ramos Mattei, "El liberto en el régimen de trabajo azucarero de Puerto Rico, 1870-1880," in *Azúcar y esclavitud*, ed. Andrés Ramos Mattei (Rio Piedras, PR: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1982), 97; José Curet, "De la esclavitud a la abolición: transiciones económicas en las haciendas azucareras de Ponce, 1845-1873," Working Paper, Cuadernos (No. 7) (San Juan: CEREP: Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña, 1979), 13, 19–20; Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, "The Transition from Slave to Free Labor: Notes on a Comparative Economic Model," in *Between Slavery and Free Labor: The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Frank Moya Pons, and Stanley L. Engerman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 263.

[5] In the 1970s and 1980s, Puerto Rican historiography experienced a shift toward social history heavily influenced both by Marxist analysis and statistical methods. On the *Nueva Historia* movement, see James L. Dietz, "Puerto Rico's New History," *Latin American Research Review* 19, no. 1 (1984): 210–22.

[6] Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800-1850* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

1878-1879—5 years *after* abolition.[7] The second major flaw of the early social history was its implication that it was mainly economic and demographic factors, rather than political struggles, that led to abolition. Quite to the contrary, historians like Laird Bergad and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara have demonstrated that on the eve of abolition Puerto Rico was the site both of complex class conflicts and of a strong transatlantic abolitionist current.[8]

Despite several decades of advances in the historiography, the endeavor of *explaining* the social forces behind Puerto Rican abolition and the subsequent transition to free labor is still incomplete. In part, this is due to a tendency for studies to divide regionally along the lines of the two agricultural export economies prominent on the island in the mid and late nineteenth century, sugar and coffee. Corresponding to this agroecological divide was a social one: Puerto Rico was unique in the Caribbean in the success of the colonial government in systematically coercing free peasants, including those categorized as "white," into plantation labor through a passbook system, the *libreta*, which was implemented in 1849 and abolished along with slavery in 1873. Relatively few studies focus specifically on this passbook system itself,[9] and since

[7] E.D. Colón, *Datos sobre la agricultura de Puerto Rico antes de 1898* (San Juan, PR: Tipografía Cantero, Fernández & Co., 1930), 289–91; Cayetano Coll y Toste, *Reseña del estado social, económico e industrial de la isla de Puerto-Rico al tomar posesión de ella los Estados Unidos*, Reprint, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2003 (Puerto Rico: Imprenta de la Correspondencia, 1899), 9–10. Total annual sugar exports averaged about 3.6 million dollars between 1864-1866, rose to 5.8 million by 1876-1878, and fell back to 3.6 million in 1890-1892. Total annual production in these three periods averaged about 108 million, 146 million and 127 million pounds, respectively— Colón, *Datos sobre la agricultura,* 289-291. Assuming that all production was exported (Colón's data only lists export earnings and total production volume, not export volume) this would yield average sugar prices of 3.4 cents per pound in 1864-1866, 4 cents in 1876-1878, and 2.9 cents in 1890-1892. It seems, in other words, that the fall in sugar prices occurred in the 1880s, after abolition in Puerto Rico.

[8] Laird W. Bergad, "Toward Puerto Rico's Grito de Lares: Coffee, Social Stratification, and Class Conflicts, 1828-1868," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 60, no. 4 (November 1980): 617–42; Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

[9] The only monograph on the *libreta* is Labor Gómez Acevedo's *Organización y reglamentación del trabajo en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX* (San Juan, PR: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1970). For shorter studies that consider the comparative importance of the *libreta*, see "Slavery and Forced Labor in Puerto Rico," in Sidney W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1974), 82–94; and Francisco A. Scarano, "Congregate and Control: The Peasantry and Labor Coercion in Puerto Rico before the Age of Sugar, 1750-1820," *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide* 63, no. 1 (1989): 23–40.

slavery was more predominant in coastal sugar areas while *libreta* labor was more dominant in the coffee areas of the interior, there has been a tendency for studies of the abolition of slavery to focus solely on sugar areas, while studies of the coffee sector focus on the *libreta*.[10]

There is a need, then, for an analysis of abolition in Puerto Rico which examines *both* the intersection of internal and transatlantic struggles, *and* the intersection of slavery and the *libreta*. How did those subjected to enslavement and the *libreta* interact to influence the timing and outcome of abolition? How did their struggles intersect with those of elite creole abolitionists described by scholars like Schmidt-Nowara? And finally, how did social struggles around abolition carry into the post-abolition world, where former *libreta* and enslaved workers had to negotiate the terms of labor in a now "free" market?

This study follows in the footsteps of others that have taken similar perspectives on abolition struggles in different parts of Afro-Latin America. Scholars like Anne Eller and Andrew Walker have examined the complex long-term social and political reverberations of the Haitian Revolution,[11] and Sidney Chalhoub's work on the "precarity" and "ambiguity" of freedom in Brazil echoes the emphasis taken here on moving the study of (un)free labor beyond just the abolition of slavery itself.[12] Closer to the time and place studied here, Rebecca Scott has

---

[10] On sugar, see Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico*, which focuses on Ponce; and Luis A. Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), which focuses on the sugar-producing region around Guayama. On coffee, see Fernando Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX: los jornaleros utuadeños en vísperas del auge del café* (Rio Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1979), which focuses on Utuado; as well as Laird W. Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), which focuses mainly on Lares and Yauco.

[11] Anne Eller, "Rumors of Slavery: Defending Emancipation in a Hostile Caribbean," *American Historical Review* 122, no. 3 (2017): 653–79; Andrew Walker, "All Spirits Are Roused: The 1822 Antislavery Revolution in Haitian Santo Domingo," *Slavery & Abolition* 40, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 583–605.

[12] Sidney Chalhoub, "The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century)," *International Review of Social History* 56, no. 3 (August 26, 2011): 405–39; Sidney Chalhoub, "The Politics of Ambiguity: Conditional Manumission, Labor Contracts, and Slave Emancipation in Brazil (1850s–1888)," *International Review of Social History* 60, no. 2 (August 2015): 161–91.

analyzed the effects of complex class struggles involving the enslaved and formerly enslaved as well as small farmers and peasants squeezed by sugar capitalism on the movement against Spanish colonialism in late-nineteenth century Cuba.[13]

This article argues that in order to understand the terms and timing of Puerto Rican abolition and the nature of society in its wake, we must examine the complex class dynamics of the island and the ways these intersected with social struggles and political shifts in the metropole. The argument proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the development of a plantation system on the island in the first half of the nineteenth century. The second section uses documents of Puerto Rico's rural police and published communications of the colonial government and the press to paint a picture of political struggles surrounding the abolition of forced labor in 1873. The final section fast-forwards to the American occupation in 1898, examining working conditions and labor resistance as documented in hearings and testimony compiled by the new colonial authorities. All of these sections suggest that abolition and post-abolition society in Puerto Rico were fundamentally shaped by the struggles of an emerging multi-racial working class and a creole petty bourgeoisie often inclined toward working-class struggles. These two emerging class forces took advantage of shifts in the colonial metropole to advance a general agenda of free labor, greater political freedom, higher wages and better working conditions.

Puerto Rican plantation society: slavery, *libreta* and the foreign plantation elite

[13] See especially Rebecca J. Scott, "Class Relations in Sugar and Political Mobilization in Cuba, 1868-1899," *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 15–28.

In the 18th century, Puerto Rico was a periphery of the Spanish empire. Rural production focused mainly on the rearing of livestock and food crops. Direct trade with Spain and other Spanish American colonies was legally prohibited, but a flourishing contraband trade existed through which Puerto Rico supplied draught animals, meat, hides and food crops to the slave-based sugar economies of the non-Hispanic Caribbean.[14]

Agricultural production on the island was organized mainly on large cattle ranches, or *hatos,* as well as smaller productive units, or *estancias.* The *hatos* were collectively owned, often by several family groups, and were not subdivided through inheritance.[15] In this context, there were relatively ample opportunities for the island's multiracial and mostly free population to survive as independent peasants. Often, they settled on abundant Crown lands without property titles, or lived as dependents (*agregados*) on the lands of other settlers, tending their cattle in profit-sharing arrangements and planting subsistence crops.[16]

Slavery in Puerto Rico during this period did not resemble the institution in the sugar plantation economies of the non-Hispanic Caribbean. First of all, the enslaved rarely worked in large concentrations.[17] In the northern agricultural community of Arecibo between 1708 and 1764, for example, seventy percent of the enslaved lived in households where there were three or fewer enslaved people. Unlike in other parts of the Caribbean, where the extreme conditions of sugar slavery resulted in high mortality rates that exceeded birth rates among the enslaved, in the eighteenth century there was natural growth among the enslaved population in Puerto Rico.

[14] David M. Stark, *Slave Families and the Hato Economy in Puerto Rico* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 29–30.

[15] Fernando Picó, *Amargo café: los pequeños y medianos caficultores de Utuado en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX* (Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1981), 43, 45–48.

[16] Sidney W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1974), 85–89.

[17] I have chosen to use the word "enslaved" rather than "slave" throughout this article, because the former emphasizes a *relation of exploitation* rather than a static or inherent condition. For a helpful summary of recent debates on terminology, see Katy Waldman, "Slave or Enslaved Person?," *Slate*, May 19, 2015, https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html.

Analyzing parish birth and death records, David Stark finds that in 1790 the birth rate among the enslaved was 4.1/100, while the death rate was 1.8/100.[18]

Starting in the late eighteenth century, however, Puerto Rico experienced rapid agricultural commercialization and immigration, both encouraged by colonial authorities. In 1765, Spanish authorities instituted a policy of "free commerce," which expanded the prospects for trade directly with peninsular Spain.[19] Between that year and 1800, the population of the island exploded, from 45,000 to 155,000.[20] In the early nineteenth century, the Haitian Revolution and the Spanish American wars of independence, which drastically interrupted the flow of commodity exports to Europe, redirected the impetus of commercial agriculture toward Puerto Rico. From about 5,000 acres in 1814, the amount of land planted in sugar cane on the island doubled to 11,000 acres in 1830 before skyrocketing to 55,000 in 1862.[21]

What were the impacts of this economic transformation on the class structure of the island? Three major effects are of note. First of all, there was a rapid expansion in the *number* of enslaved people on the island, which increased from 13,000 in 1802 to a peak of 51,000 in 1846.[22] Importantly, the *percentage* of enslaved people within Puerto Rico's total population did not increase during this period; in fact, during the century between 1776 and the abolition of slavery on the island in 1873, the percentage of enslaved people in the total population of Puerto Rico actually fluctuated relatively little, reaching a high of about 12 percent in 1834 and a low of

---

[18] Stark, *Slave Families and the Hato Economy*, 64, 137.

[19] Stark, 39.

[20] Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism*, 3–4.

[21] Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800-1850* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 5, 7. Note that most figures for land area cited here are given in the traditional Puerto Rican unit, *cuerdas*; however, since 1 *cuerda* equals approximately 0.97 acres, I have changed units to acres for ease of analysis with the assumption that this does not significantly change the quantities.

[22] Laird W. Bergad, "Agrarian History of Puerto Rico, 1870-1930," *Latin American Research Review* 13, no. 3 (1978): 63; and Luis A. Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 48.

6 percent on the eve of abolition.[23] This proportion was small when compared to the other quintessential cases of nineteenth century Latin American plantation slavery, Cuba and Brazil; around 1820, enslaved people constituted 40 percent of Cuba's population and a third of Brazil's.[24]

However, the *nature* of slavery in Puerto Rico did change. Whereas in the eighteenth century enslaved people usually lived in small groups— often in households with only one slave — and were inserted into the livestock ranching economy of the time, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a true plantation complex developed that employed the labor of large groups of enslaved people. Slave labor on Puerto Rico's nineteenth-century sugar plantations was particularly intensive; Francisco Scarano estimates that productivity per worker in Ponce's large sugar plantations might have been three times as high as on French and British plantations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[25] Moreover, whereas in the eighteenth century Puerto Rico's enslaved population had been overwhelmingly made up of creoles,[26] in the nineteenth century the percentage of African-born people in the total enslaved population increased significantly. Scarano estimates that by 1838, more than half of Ponce's 3,341 enslaved people were African-born.[27] Similarly, Pedro San Miguel finds that in 1841 there were 342 African-born enslaved people working on the sugar *haciendas* of the northern community of

[23] Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 48.

[24] Laird W. Bergad, *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9, 18.

[25] Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico*, 70.

[26] David Stark tries to ascertain the percentage of African-born among the enslaved in the eighteenth century by comparing the number of infant baptisms to adult baptisms, and finds that 30 percent of slave baptisms in San Juan between 1672 and 1727 were among adults, 7 percent in Arecibo between 1708 and 1764, 17 percent in Caguas between 1730 and 1765, and 4 percent in Coamo between 1701 and 1722— see Stark, *Slave Families and the Hato Economy*, 87.

[27] Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico*, 137.

Vega Baja versus only 58 creoles.[28] Particularly in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, a burgeoning contraband trade supplied plantations with enslaved workers from Africa.[29]

A second salient feature that emerged from the economic transformation of Puerto Rico in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the composition of the planter class. The island's nineteenth-century plantation boom never produced a creole elite that even remotely rivaled those of Cuba, Brazil, or eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. In 1845, of 86 sugar *hacendados* in the prosperous southern port of Ponce, only 22 were Puerto Rican-born. In contrast, 18 were peninsular Spaniards, 15 were French (including those from the former Saint Domingue and the French West Indies), 8 were Dutch, German or British and 9 were from the former colonies of Spanish South America. Peninsular Spaniards, and particularly Catalans, were especially dominant in the merchant circles surrounding the plantation economy, were relatively endogamous, and often had connections to government officials.[30] The situation in highland coffee production was essentially similar. Here, although *hacendados* were more likely to be creoles, capital was also controlled by foreign merchants. In 1848, 75 percent of the merchant capital in the highland coffee municipality of Lares was controlled by non-creoles.[31] Non-creole dominance of the plantation economy distinguished Puerto Rico from the two bastions of

---

[28] Pedro San Miguel, "Tierra, trabajadores y propietarios: las haciendas en Vega Baja, 1828-1865," *Anales de Investigación Histórica* VI, no. 2 (December 1979): 30.

[29] Joseph C. Dorsey, *Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition: Puerto Rico, West Africa, and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean, 1815-1859* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2003).

[30] Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico*, 82. On Peninsular merchants see pp. 91-94, 155. Eastern Cuba also received a large influx of planters from Saint Domingue fleeing the Haitian revolution: see the chapter titled "Foreign Implants" in Adriana Chira, *Patchwork Freedoms: Law, Slavery, and Race beyond Cuba's Plantations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022): 66-104. I would argue that this commonality with Puerto Rico reflected the weakness of Eastern Cuba's *domestic* planter class, as compared to Western Cuba.

[31] Laird W. Bergad, "Toward Puerto Rico's Grito de Lares: Coffee, Social Stratification, and Class Conflicts, 1828-1868," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 60, no. 4 (November 1980): 620.

nineteenth-century plantation slavery in Latin America, Brazil and Cuba, in which there were more powerful *domestic* planter classes controlling the commanding heights of production.[32]

The third major result of the plantation boom in Puerto Rico was that the peasant subsistence economy that existed relatively unperturbed in the eighteenth century began to be encroached upon. In 1819, colonial authorities created the *Junta Superior de Terrenos Baldíos* to distribute land titles and encourage agricultural production. For landless peasants, this made the process for obtaining land titles more onerous; it now required traveling to San Juan to obtain the title, and could involve years of delays.[33]

Colonial authorities also began to use various measures to coerce peasants into market dependency, either as direct producers for the market or as wage laborers. Foremost of these were anti-vagrancy laws. Evidently, anti-vagrancy laws had already begun to take effect in the 1820s. For example, between 1824 and 1827, the number of *agregados* almost tripled, from about 14,000 to 39,000[34]— these *agregados*, now forced into dependent relationships with titled landowners, likely had formerly been peasant squatters. Throughout the nineteenth century, the colonial government issued *Bandos de Buen Gobierno*, or public ordinances, that placed increasingly strict requirements on "free" people to enter wage labor or dependent farming arrangements if not titled to land. The *Bando* of 1824 contained one of the first such ordinances, in which the governor called "particularly on the town governments [*Ayuntamientos*] and other judges [to] prosecute idleness, seeking that all should live from their labor, and gathering all

[32] On Cuba see Antón L. Allahar, "The Cuban Sugar Planters (1790-1820): 'The Most Solid and Brilliant Bourgeois Class in All of Latin America,'" *The Americas* 41, no. 1 (1984): 37–57. Schmidt-Nowara argues that "Brazil's planter class was the ruling class of an independent state," and that while Cuban planters "remained defiant" against abolition efforts virtually until abolition itself, the class power of Puerto Rican planters was weaker as evidenced by the fact that "in Puerto Rico, such planter resistance was less successful"— Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 137, 148.

[33] Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre*, 147–49.

[34] Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 91.

loafers and beggars."[35] More explicit vagrancy laws were passed in 1832, 1833, and 1834, while the first effort to regulate the work of *jornaleros*, or wage laborers, as a particular category came in the *Bando* of 1838.[36]

However, large landowners continued to complain of labor shortages in Puerto Rico in the 1830s and 40s, particularly given the success of British efforts to curtail the Atlantic slave trade. The main complaint was one of "*mucha población, pocos trabajadores*"— many people, but few workers.[37] The result was the promulgation, in 1849, of the infamous *Reglamento de Jornaleros*. The *Reglamento* required peasants without written land titles to either enter formal rental contracts as *arrendatarios* or wage labor as *jornaleros*. Any free man aged 16 to 60 who neither rented nor was titled at least 4 acres of land— plus 1 additional acre for each member of his family— was forced to work for a wage as a *jornalero.* Municipalities were required to keep registers of *jornaleros* in their area, updated yearly, and to issue *jornaleros* a *libreta*, or passbook, in which employers would record their work and behavior. *Jornaleros* were required to obtain permission from local authorities before changing employer. Failure to keep the *libreta* could be punished by labor on public works at half pay. Important notes— like those recording bad behavior— were to be entered in the municipal register.[38]

The *Reglamento* had a rapid effect on Puerto Rican society. While the coffee-producing highlands came to rely the most on *jornalero* labor in the decades following the promulgation of the law, there was also a rapid shift to the employment of *jornaleros* on sugar plantations. By

[35] Cayetano Coll y Toste, ed., "Bando de Policía y Buen Gobierno de 1824," in *Boletín histórico de Puerto Rico*, Kraus Reprint Edition (New York, 1968), vol. 2 (San Juan, PR: Cantero, Fernández & Co., 1914), 33. The governor at the time, Miguel de la Torre, seems to have issued several other anti-vagrancy ordinances in 1824— see Pedro Tomás de Córdova, *Memorias geográficas, históricas, económicas y estadísticas de la Isla de Puerto Rico*, [facsimile of original 1833 edition] (Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1968), vol. IV, p. 283.

[36] Gómez Acevedo, *Organización y reglamentación del trabajo*, 88–89.

[37] Gómez Acevedo, 52.

[38] The original *Reglamento* is reprinted in "Proyecto de 'Reglamento de jornaleros', 14 de junio de 1872," *El proceso abolicionista*, 1:70–76.

1864, there were more than four times as many *jornaleros* as enslaved persons in the coffee town of Utuado and ten times as many in the town of Lares.[39] Meanwhile, whereas in 1845 80 percent of the labor force on Ponce's sugar *haciendas* was enslaved, by 1869 this had decreased to 50 percent.[40]

The importance of the *libreta* regime— a form of class struggle from above— cannot be overemphasized, particularly when taken in comparative context. Forms of coerced labor other than slavery certainly existed in other parts of the plantation world in the nineteenth century. Both Brazil and Cuba imported significant amounts of immigrant laborers, often indentured, in response to the rapidly declining availability of enslaved Africans in the mid to late nineteenth century.[41] What set the *libreta* apart as a system of coerced labor, as Sidney Mintz argues, is the extent of its use, and the fact that it involved the coercion into plantation labor of such a large number of formerly free peasants, *including those characterized as "white," in situ*. Here the "objective" factor of geography was probably important. Puerto Rico was large enough, and land plentiful enough, that an ample supply of cheap wage labor for planters was not forthcoming. But it was also small enough that— unlike in Cuba or Brazil— peasants, if coerced into wage labor, could not easily resist pressures by fleeing to a frontier.[42]

---

[39] Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism*, 126.

[40] Curet, "De la esclavitud a la abolición," 2.

[41] For example, by 1872 there were 58,400 Chinese laborers in Cuba, 60 percent of whom were indentured servants, vs. about 287,600 enslaved people— Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 87, 101. Brazilian planters also imported European peasants during this period to work on plantations as contract workers, or *parceiros*— see, for example, Isadora Moura Mota, "Cruzando caminhos em Ibicaba: escravizados, imigrantes suíços e abolicionismo durante a Revolta dos Parceiros (São Paulo, 1856-1857)," *Afro-Ásia*, no. 63 (2021): 291–326. See also Chapter 4, "An Experiment in Free Labor," in Warren Dean, *Rio Claro: A Brazilian Plantation System, 1820-1920* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 88–123.

[42] On the significance of the eastern frontier of peasant settlement in Cuba compared to the relative absence of a frontier in Puerto Rico, see Chapter 6, "Labor and Migration," in César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 148–82.

Not all peasants impacted by the *jornalero* law became *jornaleros*, at least initially. Many were able to become direct producers, either as tenants (*arrendatarios*), or as proprietors. Whereas in Utuado there were 840 *jornaleros* registered in 1849-50, immediately following the promulgation of the *Reglamento,* by 1853 this had decreased to 131. In the meantime, the number of proprietors increased from 479 in 1848 to 922 in 1855. Meanwhile, the percentage of land in farms of less than 100 acres increased significantly from 15 percent in 1833, before the *jornalero* law, to 26 percent in 1866.[43] A similar trend was evident in Lares, where the percentage of land held in farms of less than 20 acres increased gradually from just 1.7 percent in 1836 to 10.4 percent in 1885.[44]

Nevertheless, over the decades following the *Reglamento*, the number of *jornaleros* multiplied. As Picó explains, the main reason was that peasants lost titles to their lands through bankruptcy. In coffee regions, the economy was highly commercialized and the market moved quickly, so producers often took on credit that they were unable to repay. Moreover, land taxes had to be paid in cash, which forced peasants to enter market relations. This was also a source of bankruptcy, especially when authorities began to crack down on tax collection around 1868, resulting in a spike in bankruptcies.[45]

The statistics given so far paint a rather fragmented picture of class structure on the island in wake of the economic boom. The Spanish Census of 1860, which was also taken in Puerto Rico, provides a useful *overall* picture of class categories on the island roughly a decade after the implementation of the *libreta* system and thirteen years before abolition. The total population of

---

[43] Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre*, 39n, 84; Picó, *Amargo café*, 61–62.

[44] Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism*, 47, 105.

[45] Picó, *Amargo café*, 57–59, 61. See also Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre*, 40–73; and Laird W. Bergad, "Coffee and Rural Proletarianization in Puerto Rico, 1840-1898," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15, no. 1 (1983): 89–92, esp. notes 24 and 32, and 95n42.

was found to be just short of 600,000, of whom 41,738 were enslaved, 282,775 were categorized as free people of color, and 300,406 as "white." The Census of 1860 provides data on professional categories among free people on the island by race, categorizing the employed as either "*blancos*" or "*de color*." The total number of people for whom a profession was recorded — 80,680 *blancos* and 54,845 *de color*— was considerably lower than the total population recorded in each racial category. However, the resulting ratio of "employed" to total population was not far out of the range among Spain's peninsular provinces, in which the figure varied widely from as low as 27 percent to as high as 60 percent.[46]

Professions, Puerto Rico, 1860[47]

Profession	***Blancos***		***De Color***	
Clergy	159	0.20%	—	—
Empleados (public employees)	923	1.14%	—	—
Militares (military personnel)	11,250	13.94%	53	0.10%
Propietarios (proprietors)	8,835	10.95%	4,563	8.32%
Labradores (farmers)	17,395	21.56%	9,642	17.58%
Comerciantes (merchants)	3,091	3.83%	321	0.59%
Fabricantes (manufacturers)	26	0.03%	6	0.01%
Industriales (industrialists)	871	1.08%	512	0.93%
Profesores de todas clases (teachers)	451	0.56%	15	0.03%
Jornaleros (laborers)	18,833	23.34%	21,775	39.70%
Pobres de Solemnidad (destitute)	853	1.06%	672	1.23%
No Contribuyentes (non-taxpayers)	17,993	22.30%	17,286	31.52%
Total	**80,680**	**100.00%**	**54,845**	**100.00%**

Several trends are of note from the 1860 data. First of all, the inequality between whites and free people of color seems to have been concentrated in two areas. First of all, whites

[46] Vicente Gozálvez Pérez, "El censo de la población de España de 1860: notas de propedéutica sobre la población ocupada," *Cuadernos de Geografía*, no. 100 (2018): 80–81.

[47] See "Profesiones, Artes y Oficios (Puerto Rico y Cuba)" and "Resumenes Generales (Puerto Rico)" in *Censo de la población de España, según el recuento verificado en 25 de diciembre de 1860 por la Junta General de Estadística* (Madrid: Imprenta Nacional, 1863), www.ine.es.

essentially monopolized government positions and liberal professions: virtually all of the clergy, public employees, military personnel and teachers were white. On the other end of the class hierarchy, people of color were significantly more likely to be *jornaleros* (39.7 percent) than whites were (23.3 percent). To put it another way, people of color constituted just over half (54 percent) of all *jornaleros*, despite being less than half of the total free population. However, there seems to have been more equality in what we might call the "middle" sections of free society: in the percentage of *propietarios* or proprietors (11 percent of whites vs. 8.3 percent of people of color), *labradores* or farmers (21.6 percent vs. 17.6 percent), and *industriales* or small-scale manufacturers (1.08 percent vs. 0.93 percent).

Puerto Rico thus developed a distinct class structure between the *Reglamento* of 1849 and abolition in 1873. A sizeable enslaved population continued to work on the island's plantations, and people of color were more likely to be *jornaleros* than whites were. However, Puerto Rican class structure was also defined by both a multiracial mass of dispossessed and coerced laborers *and* a multiracial middle class of small farmers, proprietors, artisans and merchants. These latter aspects of Puerto Rican society were to play a key role in the struggles surrounding abolition and the transition to "free" labor.

Abolition: struggles align in the colony and the metropole, 1868-1873

The importance of two aspects of Puerto Rican plantation society—a non-creole plantation and merchant elite and a coerced labor force not entirely composed of enslaved persons— became clear between 1868 and 1873, a period marked by social turbulence on the island. These two factors produced an uneasy alliance between a marginalized creole petty bourgeoisie on the one hand and enslaved and *libreta* workers on the other against the

intertwined forces of peninsular political oppression and foreign economic dominance, both of which were seen by the enslaved and *jornaleros* as the source of labor coercion. The political program, expressed either as independentism or liberal reformism, held a common set of "reforms" in mind: more political power, an expansion of suffrage, greater civil liberties and the abolition of forced labor.

It is important to note that, although conservative Spanish officials— the main sources available— portrayed all working people and people of color (regardless of class) as a monolithic mass at the behest of liberal or independentist radicals, these groups acted with clear agency during the turbulence of the 1860s and 70s. Already in 1866 British consular officials on the island were noting that the abolition of slavery in the United States had created a "general feeling" that abolition was on the horizon. This "feeling" was not lost on the enslaved. "Between the slaves themselves," the British Vice-Consul in Mayagüez noted in February of that year, "there is a common belief that they are already liberated by the government in Spain, but that the Authorities here keep the corresponding Royal Decree."[48] This was more than a simple "belief," however. Six months later in that same year, police in Mayagüez reported an insurrection on the Hacienda Restauración, where the enslaved had risen against overseers and beaten them.[49] Given that scholars have noted the relative rarity of such open insurrection under slavery, particularly when compared with the post-abolition period,[50] the timing of this event suggests that the

[48] "Despacho del Vicecónsul británico en Mayagüez, 6 de febrero de 1866," in *El proceso abolicionista*, 1:48–51. Printed in original English.

[49] "Sublevación de esclavos en la hacienda 'Restauración' de Mayagüez (Puerto Rico)" (August 21, 1866), Signatura 5154.12, Archivo General Militar de Madrid (henceforth AGMM) / Archivo Digital Nacional de Puerto Rico (henceforth ADNPR). All of the documents of the AGMM used here are digitized and can be found by catalog number (*signatura*) at the ADNPR's website: http://adnpr.net/.

[50] Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 190.

enslaved were well aware of political tension in the atmosphere and that many were not willing to wait passively for freedom.

The tension in the air came to a breaking point in 1868, a pivotal year both for Puerto Rico and the Spanish empire as a whole. On September 23, somewhere between 600 and 1000 men, including *jornaleros* and enslaved workers, took the town of Lares, led by creole coffee *hacendados*. They took peninsular merchants as prisoners, confiscated their property and declared Puerto Rico an independent republic. In addition to burning *libretas*, the rebels declared free any slave who joined the cause, but— notably— did not actually proclaim the abolition of slavery during the course of the (relatively brief) revolt. We may wonder why— whether they were intending to do so upon victory and were simply concerned in the moment with adding soldiers to their cause, or whether there was a deeper suspicion among the landowners who led the revolt as to the implications of abolition. Either way, a certain contradiction was evident in the revolt itself. The uprising was clearly under the control of landed elites, some of whom were enslavers. Yet even if it was led by creole landowners, the revolt still inverted social hierarchies; one disgruntled merchant, for example, would later take care to note that hundreds of the rebels confiscating peninsular goods during the revolt were "*de color*."[51]

The Lares revolt for independence was a product of the unique nature of Puerto Rican plantation society. On the one hand, the resentment of creole elites toward merchant capital, to which they were heavily indebted, helped fuel the revolt. On the other, a perception of the *Reglamento* as a peninsular invention, as well as the traditional patron-client relations that resident creole landowners kept with their peons— in contrast to foreign merchants, who were

[51] Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim, *El grito de Lares: sus causas y sus hombres*, trans. Carmen Rivera Izcoa (Rio Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1985), 166–79.

urban, socially endogamous and maintained links with Europe— helped garner the creole landowners support among the working classes in the revolt.[52]

The *Grito de Lares* was followed by state repression, under which liberals and independentists alike were put under suspicion. The conservative governor of the island, José Laureano Sanz, installed two new repressive apparatuses: a rural police force, the *Guardia Civil*, and a military corps of volunteers, the *voluntaries*.[53] Yet conservative peninsular repression could only go so far: the year 1868 saw not only the *Grito de Lares*, but also the Glorious Revolution in Spain, where liberals toppled Queen Isabel II and replaced her with the Italian prince Amadeo of Savoy.[54] The Revolution had important ramifications for Puerto Rico. In 1870, the Spanish Cortes passed the Moret Law, which declared all children born to enslaved mothers in Cuba and Puerto Rico after 1868 to be free once they reached adulthood.[55] In 1869, Puerto Rico held its first elections since 1836 and was allowed to send deputies to the Spanish Cortes. The elections were followed by the enactment of a new constitution and electoral law for Spain in 1869, which expanded the franchise. As a result, whereas only 3,718 people were eligible to vote in the Puerto Rican elections of 1869, which handed conservatives an easy victory, in June 1871 this expanded to almost 20,000, out of a total population of 650,000, of whom 16,000 actually voted— still small, but a significant change. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the expansion of suffrage, liberals swept the elections.[56]

---

[52] Bergad, "Toward Puerto Rico's Grito de Lares," 631, 636–40.

[53] Fernando Bayrón Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos de Puerto Rico*, 4th ed. (Mayagüez, PR: Editorial Isla, 1989), 52.

[54] Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 126–27.

[55] Ramos Mattei, "El liberto en el régimen," 102–3. According to the law, children born after 1868 would begin to earn half of the wage of free laborers at age eighteen and be fully emancipated at age twenty-two— Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 114.

[56] Bayrón Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos*, 45–48, 51–54, 65, 347. The Liberals received 9,773 votes while the Conservatives received only 1,004.

Peninsular colonial officials were alarmed. In July of 1871, the *Regente* of the colonial *Audiencia* of Puerto Rico wrote an indignant letter to the Spanish minister in charge of the affairs of the overseas provinces, the *Ministro de Ultramar.* He claimed that since the provincial and Cortes elections the previous month, "conducted for the most part by blacks and mulattoes, many of whom were taught to write for the event, the Island began to feel an effervescence that gave a sense of the proximity of some conflict." Several days prior, the popular classes of San Juan had gathered in a "*comparsa de máscaras*"— a traditional masked dance— and the energies of the crowd had turned violent, with people throwing rocks at the military marching band and at the windows of peninsular-owned businesses. The government had declared a lockdown and the unrest had taken two hours to quell. The *Regente* was adamant— no doubt with a considerable dose of exaggeration aimed for metropolitan authorities— that these events continued the work of the Lares revolutionaries. He insisted that anti-Spanish propaganda in Puerto Rico was worse than in Cuba, where he had lived for 15 years— with the only difference that Puerto Rican revolutionaries lacked "the large and heavy mountains" behind which their Cuban counterparts could hide. If full political freedoms were granted to the island, he warned, "Independence will be gained on its own, surely, and will be followed by the immolation of the Spaniards by that semi-savage phalanx of blacks and mulattoes," the "docile instruments of the so-called liberals."[57]

The unrest in San Juan described by the *Regente* would come to be called the *Motín de las Pedradas*— literally, "the stone-throwing riot."[58] It is important to note the *Regente*'s

---

[57] "Informe de la Audiencia de Puerto Rico al Ministro de Ultramar, 27 de julio de 1871," in *El proceso abolicionista*, 1:168–70. This report, at least as reprinted in *El proceso abolicionista*, is signed simply with the surname "Mendoza."

[58] "Narración Histórica: La Estrellada, por C. Coll y Toste," in Cayetano Coll y Toste, ed., *Boletín histórico de Puerto Rico*, Kraus Reprint Edition, New York, 1968, vol. 6 (San Juan, PR: Cantero, Fernández & Co., 1918), 359.

connection of the events to the elections of the previous months. Given that free people of color and the enslaved combined made up just over half of Puerto Rico's population at the time, it is unlikely that "blacks and mulattoes," as defined by patterns of racialization on the island, made up the majority of the electorate in the elections of 1871 as the *Regente* claimed. What is likely, however, is that the expansion of suffrage that followed the events of 1868 brought free men of color to the polls — perhaps the more modest proprietors, merchants and artisans who qualified under the still-restricted franchise— who had hitherto been excluded from political participation, and who helped sweep the Liberal Reformists to victory.[59] Free people of color— at least those who were members of the creole petty bourgeoisie— were participating in politics in a way never seen before, and they were evidently throwing their support behind the liberals.

This tense atmosphere continued in the years leading up to abolition. A few months later, in September of 1871, rural police in the town of Ciales, in a report to their superiors regarding a dance among "those of the so-called second class" where the crowd had turned violent and beaten several policemen, repeatedly emphasized the town mayor's "complete indifference" toward their efforts to find the guilty parties.[60] Evidently, the *Guardia Civil* fretted over a perceived friendliness to popular revolt among creole elites. One final major recorded outbreak in the run-up to abolition was particularly revealing of the complex social cleavages running through the island at the time. In early February 1873, members of the *Guardia Civil* repressed what they claimed was a planned insurrection in the northwestern town of Camuy, based at the

[59] Suffrage in the 1871 elections was limited through tax payment and literacy requirements— see Gervasio L. García and Angel Quintero Rivera, *Desafío y solidaridad: breve historia del movimiento obrero en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1982), 28. However, the Census of 1860 had already recorded 6,572 literate people of color as well as 4,563 proprietors, 321 merchants (*comerciantes*) and 512 small-scale manufacturers (*industriales*) of color on the island. It is thus likely that a not insignificant number of people of color qualified to vote in the elections of 1871.

[60] "Desorden ocurrido en Ciales (Puerto Rico)" (Expediente, September 1871), Signatura 5157.40, AGMM/ADNPR.

home of local landowner Cayetano Estrella. The commander on watch in the town on the night of the 14th claimed that there were some 150 to 200 insurgents at Estrella's house that night— armed with machetes and emanating shouts of "*viva Puerto Rico libre*" and "*muera España*"— and that he had only been able to repress them with reinforcements totaling 22 men, leaving three insurgents dead and one *guardia* wounded.[61]

The conservative press was quick to sensationalize the event. The *Boletín Mercantil* called it a repeat of Lares. Liberal newspapers— including *El Progreso*, *La España Radical*, *La Razón* and *Don Simplicio*— quickly cried foul. Cayetano Estrella and his family had been framed, having received an anonymous threat several days before. Preparing for attack, Estrella had gathered family, friends and "various peons" to defend the house on the night of the 14th. "The greatest fatality for our Party," the Liberals complained, "is the mantle covering the events of Lares and the heavy load that has been thrown over the process of the *Pedradas* of July."[62] Twentieth-century historical interpretations of the event argue— although most rely on press accounts and few, if any, on police documents— that the *Estrellada* was at least clear evidence of the tense atmosphere between Liberals and Conservatives in the run-up to abolition, and probably an event orchestrated by the Guardia Civil and their reactionary planter allies in Arecibo to give metropolitan officials the illusion of disorder and stall a perceptibly imminent abolition process.[63]

---

[61] Capitanía General de Puerto Rico; Ministerio de Ultramar, "Sublevación en Camuy (Puerto Rico)" (Expediente, 1873), Signatura 5595.10, AGMM/ADNPR.

[62] "Lo de Camuy, por el 'Boletín,'" and "Lo de Camuy, por la Prensa Liberal," in Coll y Toste, *Boletín histórico de Puerto Rico*, 6:365–66, 366–69.

[63] "Narración Histórica- La estrellada, por C. Coll y Toste," in Coll y Toste, 6:360; Fernando Picó, *Contra la corriente: seis microbiografías de los tiempos de España* (Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1995), 54–55; Bayrón Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos*, 65. Arecibo, a plantation city in the northwest, was known as a "bastion of antiabolitionism"; see Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom,* 111.

Understanding the events of the *Estrellada* requires context about the town of Camuy and Cayetano Estrella himself. Camuy was a marginal municipality dominated by subsistence agriculture rather than plantations, and it provided cattle and food products to the neighboring plantation city of Arecibo. It was also the Puerto Rican municipality with the most dispersed distribution of land and where the highest percentage of the population owned some land— most often small plots of 5 to 20 acres. If it is true that Arecibo reactionaries plotted the *Estrellada*, Camuy would make sense as a locale. It was where the *Grito de Lares* had initially been planned to take place. Liberals were the predominant force in local politics, and, as in Lares, indebtedness, in this case particularly to merchants in Arecibo, was common.[64] In fact, as historian Astrid Cubano Iguina has noted, peninsular immigrant merchants— Basques, Catalans and others— were particularly prominent in Arecibo's nineteenth-century plantation economy, including at the time of the Estrellada.[65]

In this milieu Estrella was something of an exception. He was actually from neighboring Santo Domingo, emigrating in wake of the unification of Hispaniola under Haitian forces in 1822. Estrella owned a large amount of land by the vicinity's standards: by 1860, he already owned over 150 acres in Camuy, mostly in pasture, and 11 enslaved people (6 of whom were small children); by 1867, he claimed 240 acres. On the other hand, Estrella had been involved in local politics as a liberal; his status as a rancher, not a planter, more closely resembled the

[64] Fernando Picó, *Contra la corriente: seis microbiografías de los tiempos de España* (Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1995), 61–65.

[65] See Astrid T. Cubano Iguina, "Economía y sociedad en Arecibo en el siglo XIX: los grandes productores y la inmigración de comerciantes," in *Inmigración y clases sociales en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX*, ed. Francisco A. Scarano (Río Piedras, P.R: Ediciones Huracán, 1981), 67–124.

stereotypical profile of the eighteenth century creole elite, and it seems he had gotten into legal trouble with peninsular officials before.[66]

This was the man who in 1873— at 80 years old, no less— would be a radical independentist according to reactionaries and, for Liberals, a victim of a plot to stall the abolition of slavery. Regardless of which account is empirically correct, Estrella's place in the story seems contradictory. Yet it makes sense if we see Puerto Rico in the late 1860s and early 70s as the site of a complex set of class conflicts— between creole debtors and foreign creditors, between workers and planters, between creole landowners and peninsular officials— as well as uneasy alliances. As a small-scale slaveholder, it is not difficult to believe that Estrella might have been more resentful of creditors in Arecibo than he was intent on perpetuating the institution of slavery. On the other hand, regardless of whether Estrella was a full-fledged *independentista* or simply a liberal, enslaved workers and *peones* might have holed up in his house not simply out of a sense patrimonial deference, but also out of a clear interest in promised "reforms," especially the abolition of slavery and, perhaps, the *libreta*.

The balance in the tensions of 1868-73 would be shaken precisely during the same week of the *Estrellada*. On February 17, the governor of the island made a proclamation regarding the restoration of order after the confusing events of the previous days, signing off with "*¡Viva España! ¡Viva el Rey!*"[67] Evidently, he had not yet received the news that six days prior, king

[66] Picó, *Contra la corriente*, 56–61. Note that, unlike Haiti or Venezuela, which contributed to Puerto Rico's non-creole plantation elite, Spanish Santo Domingo, from which Estrella emigrated, was not a cash-crop plantation society in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Instead, the two most important sectors in its agrarian economy were a particularly strong smallholding peasantry and a livestock-ranching elite, which resented unification with Haiti not as much because it led to abolition as because it threatened the fragmentation of large-scale property: see Pedro L. San Miguel, "La economía y la vida campesina (fines del siglo XVIII-c1870)," in *Historia general del pueblo dominicano*, ed. Roberto Cassá, vol. 3: La eclosión de la nación (1790-1880) (Santo Domingo: Academia Dominicana de la Historia, 2019), 214–15.

[67] Capitanía General de Puerto Rico; Ministerio de Ultramar, "Sublevación en Camuy (Puerto Rico)."

Amadeo had abdicated and radical liberals had declared the First Spanish Republic.[68] Social struggles finally aligned on the island and the peninsula. In March and April, Puerto Rico saw the extension of numerous reforms, including the legal protection of freedom of the press and association, an expansion of suffrage and, most importantly, the abolition of slavery.[69]

After abolition: class struggle and alliances at US occupation

The abolition process in Puerto Rico, as outlined in the law of March 1873, was supposed to be gradual and indemnified. The law required the formerly enslaved, or *libertos*, to find employment until 1876 and allowed them to change their contract only with the permission of their employer during that period; it also offered to compensate enslavers for the freedom of the formerly enslaved.[70] However, both indemnification and the practice of forcing *libertos* to contract for three years met limited success. In April 1873, the Republic installed Rafael Primo de Rivera as governor of the island.[71] Primo de Rivera was a radical liberal; while not friendly to collective bargaining, he took seriously the concept of freedom of contract. In a letter to the Marquis of Salisbury, British Consul Charles Bidwell would note retrospectively in 1879 that Primo de Rivera did not enforce the policy of forced contracting for *libertos*.[72] In July of 1873, Primo de Rivera went further, abolishing the *libreta*.[73]

---

[68] "Narración Histórica- La Estrellada," Coll y Toste, *Boletín histórico de Puerto Rico*, 6:360.

[69] Bayrón Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos*, 65, 69.

[70] Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 118–19; "Consul Pauli to the Earl of Derby, May 12, 1875," in *The Slave Trade, 1858-1892: British Foreign Office Collection 541*, microfilm (10 reels) (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1977), vol. 20, reel 5, no. 429, p. 521.

[71] Bayrón Toro, *Elecciones y partidos políticos*, 65.

[72] Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 123–24; "Consul Bidwell to the Marquis of Salisbury, April 30, 1879," in *The Slave Trade*, vol. 47, reel 9, no. 258, p. 201.

[73] Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 167.

How did *libertos* and former *libreta* workers negotiate the terms of "free labor" in wake of abolition? *Libertos* seem in many cases to have been particularly well-placed to exert their power in the labor market. Many had acquired skills in sugar milling under slavery that *libreta* laborers had not because the latter "refused" to work in the mills. *Libertos* were also disproportionally represented among *paleros*— technicians who surveyed the slopes of sugar-growing terrains and maintained irrigation systems— as well among other artisan professions linked to the sugar industry, such as carpenters and masons.[74]

Existing evidence suggests that prevailing daily wages in the immediate post-abolition period— the mid-1870s— ranged from about 50 to 65 cents,[75] depending on the area and on workers' age, sex and skills.[76] Bergad finds that in 1873 *libertos* in the coffee plantations of Lares were paid 5-7 pesos a month— less than *libertos* in sugar regions, but likely compensated by non-cash pay such as land usufruct rights.[77] British Consul Pauli claimed that "to retain their [the *libertos*'] skilled labour after the expiration of the term of the contract, some owners of estates give them small plots of land, which they gradually bring under cultivation, and on which they feed a horse, cow, pigs, poultry &c, bought by their savings."[78] That planters were taking such measures to attract *libertos* into labor on their plantations suggests that the latter were reasonably successful in leveraging their labor power, and undermines the notion of an automatic labor surplus after abolition.

[74] Ramos Mattei, "El liberto en el régimen," 95, 105; Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 114.

[75] Cents existed as a unit of currency throughout the period discussed in this article. However, the currency itself changed various times during this period. These changes and their broader significance are discussed below.

[76] See Ramos Mattei, "El liberto en el régimen," 114, 112; and "Consul Pauli to the Earl of Derby, May 12, 1875," *The Slave Trade*, 521–22, 524.

[77] Bergad, "Coffee and Rural Proletarianization," 94.

[78] "Consul Pauli to the Earl of Derby, May 12, 1875," *The Slave Trade*, 522.

Information on labor conditions in the late 1870s and 1880s suggests a mixed labor system: widespread wage labor coexisted with continued access to land. On the one hand, the coffee economy of the highlands saw increased wages, increased coffee prices, and a pattern of inland migration from the coast. Here the *jornalero* population grew relative to the population of resident peons with land usufruct rights, such that the latter became a sort of privileged group among plantation workers because of their access to land. By 1879, *jornaleros* constituted 60 percent of the landless population in the coffee-producing municipality of Yauco, while *arrendatarios* and resident peons constituted the other 40 percent.[79]

On the other hand, access to land among the working classes had by no means disappeared. That same year, 1879, Consul Bidwell would write regarding the "Gibaros" of the central highlands that "these people live in a manner as primitive as did the aborigines. They cultivate a few yards of ground near their hut, and with its produce and perhaps one or two days' work in a week, a whole family is supported."[80] Similarly, Mintz claims in a study of a large *hacienda* in the sugar town of Santa Isabel that in the 1880s the *hacienda* was home to over 100 *agregados*, of all races, who had rights to land plots of up to 5 acres, woodlands for timber, common plots planted in plantains and *malanga,* and pasture on which to graze their animals.[81] Evidently many Puerto Rican workers were able to maintain a set of customary rights to land.

Few studies exist projecting the conditions of *libertos* in the immediate post-abolition years forward into the 1880s and 90s, for the simple fact that once *libertos* were released from forced contracting in 1876, they ceased to appear in records specifically as such.[82] Yet given the

[79] Bergad, "Coffee and Rural Proletarianization," 95.

[80] "Consul Bidwell to the Marquis of Salisbury, April 30, 1879," in *The Slave Trade*, vol. 47, reel 9, no. 258, p. 202.

[81] Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*, 109–10.

[82] Ramos Mattei, 123. Figueroa actually does do some of this specific tracking in his seminal work on the municipality of Guayama; see Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 151–73. Bergad does the same with the

intertwined natures of slavery and *libreta* labor before abolition, information on labor conditions during this period still provides valuable knowledge. The best such information clusters around 1898, the year of the US occupation. By this time, Puerto Rico had undergone some major economic transformations in the preceding two decades. While the sugar industry stagnated in the face of falling prices and increased international competition, coffee had surpassed sugar as the island's main export, as the 1890s in particular saw a significant increase in coffee prices.[83]

Almost immediately after taking the island, the US government commissioned both a census and a series of qualitative reports, based on hearings and interviews, directed by Henry Carroll, President McKinley's "Special Commissioner for the United States to Porto Rico [sic]." These reports, which contain testimony from planters, government officials, teachers and even some agricultural workers, paint a fascinating picture of labor conditions at the time of US occupation. Diverse evidence from testimony contained in the reports suggests that wages in 1898-99 were more or less what they had been in the 1870s. Joaquín Cervera, a sugar planter in San Germán, claimed he paid wages of 50 cents, "provincial money," with skilled laborers obtaining "higher wages."[84] Benigno López Castro, a "professor of elementary instruction" who claimed to be "representing small planters and field laborers"— note the inclusion of the two in the same category— thought wages on the island were about 38 to 50 cents a day for field laborers.[85]

---

libreta in Lares, tracking the development of *arrendatarios* into *jornaleros*, *peones* etc.; see Bergad, "Coffee and Rural Proletarianization."

[83] See Colón, *Datos sobre la agricultura*, 289–91; Coll y Toste, *Reseña*, 9–10.

[84] "Crops and Markets" (Hearing, Arecibo, January 14, 1899), in Henry Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico; Its Population, Civil Government, Commerce, Industries, Productions, Roads, Tariff, and Currency, with Recommendations, by Henry K. Carroll, Special Commissioner for the United States to Porto Rico.* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1899), 74.

[85] "Artisans of San Juan" (Hearing, San Juan, November 4, 1898), in Carroll, 715, 721.

However, two factors undermined the value of workers' wages. The first was the practice of paying workers partly or wholly in *vales*, tickets redeemable at plantation stores, rather than in cash.[86] The Carroll report mentioned numerous complaints from workers about the (technically illegal) practice, and several workers even presented their *vales* to the commission along with demands that the practice be abolished for good.[87] Two unnamed laborers on a coffee plantation in Coamo reported wages of 25 to 37.5 cents, paid in "orders which any store will take," and said they also received a house and one meal a day, but no plot of land. One of the laborers remarked that payment in orders "is worth half to me."[88] During hearings in the eastern town of Yabucoa, the commissioner interviewed "two colored laborers, Justo Lindo and Hermann Oquendo," employed on the plantation Sucesores de Ballecillo. When asked his reason for coming to the hearings, Lindo replied, "they pay us in vales here, and we want to see if we can not obtain money instead of vales." Lindo reported that he got about 60 to 65 cents a day, half in *vales* and half in cash— all planters in the area except one Don José Vicente Cintrón paid at least partly in *vales*. Lindo also qualified, "I am paid according to the work I do, but laborers generally receive about 50 centavos [cents] a day"— perhaps Lindo was an example of the predominance of skilled labor among *libertos* and their descendants noted by Ramos Matthei and Mintz.[89]

In the same hearing, one Gavindo Velázquez, a self-identified "agriculturalist on a small scale" and "owner of a piece of property," said he came "to protest, in the name of all the laborers," against the practice of paying wages in *vales*. The laborer, Velázquez protested, "had to accept them [*vales*], no matter what the law ordered, because he had against him the civil guard, the magistrate, the judge, and the owner of the estate." What led Velázquez to take the

[86] Bergad, "Coffee and Rural Proletarianization," 98–99.
[87] Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 50.
[88] "Work, Wages and Meals" (Hearing, Coamo, February 6, 1899), in Carroll, 742–43.
[89] "Pay of Field Hands" (Hearing, Yabucoa, February 2, 1899), in Carroll, 734–35.

side of laborers, as an “owner of a piece of property”? We can only guess, but it seems reasonable to suppose that he was part of a class of creole proprietors who were marginal in Puerto Rico’s late nineteenth-century agrarian export economy. Indeed, Velázquez invoked the hated troika of Spanish colonialism— the Guardia Civil, colonial officials and (peninsular) planters.[90] Perhaps Velázquez used very little wage labor, perhaps none at all, or perhaps he hired himself out for wages to supplement his farm income; perhaps he was indebted to foreign merchants or large *hacendados*.

Severo Tulier of Vega Baja, who came “in behalf of the peons” of Puerto Rico, presented a similar case. Tulier claimed his family had a coffee estate in the northern town of Vega Baja but that it had abandoned cultivation. He explained that he had come to San Juan to learn a trade; the report noted that he “had the appearance of a poor country laborer.” Tulier described low wages and poor working conditions among the plantation laborers of Vega Baja: usually “25 centavos [cents] and breakfast” and 37.5 to the “better class of workmen”; some skilled laborers got 50 cents, but in *vales*.[91]

In addition to the issue of *vales*, another contested issue in the commission hearings was the devaluation of the currency itself, which also undermined workers’ wages. Beginning in 1876, authorities allowed the circulation of Mexican pesos, which were not on the gold standard. *Hacendados* thus were able to sell on the international market in (higher-valued) gold-anchored currencies and pay wages in (lower-valued) Mexican pesos.[92] In 1895, Spanish authorities

[90] “Pay of Field Hands,” Carroll, 736.

[91] “The Field Laborers” (Hearing, San Juan, January 6, 1899), in Carroll, 724–25.

[92] Ramos Mattei, “El liberto en el régimen,” 119–20; Biagio Di Venuti, *Money and Banking in Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, PR: University of Puerto Rico Press, 1950), 9. Several currencies were used in Puerto Rico during the nineteenth century, including Venezuelan macuquino silver coins from 1813 to 1857, Spanish silver pesos from 1857, Mexican silver pesos from 1876 to 1895, and special provincial Spanish coins from 1895— see Di Venuti, 6-9. In this context, the tension between gold and silver represented a tension between, respectively, anti-inflationist and inflationist monetary policy and, in turn, a clash of various class interests. Farmers and debtors had

ordered the replacement of the Mexican silver pesos with provincial Spanish silver pesos, which did not fix the problem of devaluation of the island's circulating currency and may have even worsened it.[93]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the possibility of an impending conversion from silver pesos to US gold-anchored dollars hung over the hearings, and planters seemed to know that the terms of conversion would profoundly affect their labor costs. Carroll noted in a report to the Secretary of the Treasury that "the continuation of the native money pleases the planters." He also remarked that "the peon has heard of the 'strike,'" and wondered whether, "under the freer conditions prevailing since American occupation," would "decide to see whether he can not use it [conversion] to obtain higher wages."[94]

Planter and merchant elites seemed quite convinced that this was already the case. Antonio Figaros of Arecibo, from Rosas & Co., "one of the mercantile houses" of Puerto Rico, remarked that "another difficulty here now is the tendency of the peons to demand better wages. I think it would be a sufficient concession to them if they were paid in gold what they are now paid in silver." An unnamed planter in Arecibo affirmed that "whatever we pay in silver we would have to pay in gold after the exchange of the currency."[95] When Carroll asked Adolf Bahr and Bernardo Huicy, from the Arecibo municipal council and presumably sugar planters, a seemingly logical question— why could they not explain to workers that a numerically lower wage in gold would be worth as much as a larger wage in silver— Huicy responded, "we will have to try it, but the chances are that it will not succeed and they will strike, and strikes mean fires. There

an interest in a silver currency and inflation because it devalued their debts; creditors and wage workers had an interest in a gold currency because it increased the value of their assets and wages, respectively.

[93] Coll y Toste, *Reseña*, 14–15.

[94] "Effect of the President's Order," Carroll, 497.

[95] "Crops and Markets," Carroll, 71–72.

have been two instances here of that. On two estates they cut down wages 10 cents, and that same day the two estates were burned."[96]

Although conversions were already being made at rates of up to 1.9 pesos per dollar, starting in 1899 US authorities set a formal process for the withdrawal of silver pesos from circulation and their conversion to dollars at a rate of 1.66 pesos per dollar.[97] And it seems that the monetary conversion ultimately forced planters to pay in gold dollars the same numerical wages that they had paid before in silver pesos. A 1902 study by planter José Ferreras Pagán, which surveyed sugar plantations across the island, recorded wages— depending, again, on region and the age, sex and skills of the workers— of as low as 25 cents and as high as 75 cents, with the major difference that these wages were now in gold dollars. Indeed, Ferreras noted this change as one of the problems facing sugar planters.[98] It should be noted that a wage of 50 cents in 1902, with the conversion, would have a value equivalent to 83 cents in silver pesos in 1898. Even considering the practice of paying partially in *vales*, this was a significant wage increase for workers.

---

[96] "Exchange and Free Trade" (Hearing, Arecibo, January 14, 1899), in Carroll, 468–69. Fires were an established tactic of class struggle on Puerto Rican plantations, particularly after abolition. Luis Figueroa finds that between 1871 and 1887, criminal investigations were initiated into 30 plantation fires in the southern towns of Guayama, Arroyo, Patillas, Maunabo and Salinas alone, of which only 2 took place before abolition. These fires affected a total of 16 haciendas, so at least some of them were affected more than once— see Figueroa, *Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom*, 70.

[97] Di Venuti, *Money and Banking in Puerto Rico*, 17–22.

[98] J. Ferreras Pagán, *Biografía de las riquezas de Puerto Rico*, vol. 1: Riqueza azucarera (San Juan: Tipografía de Luis Ferreras, 1902), 8, 16, 77–79, 89–91, 99. Ferreras Pagán's study, despite its obvious partialities as the work of a planter, is an undervalued and underused one in Puerto Rican historiography; see Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, "Riqueza azucarera: una fuente olvidada para nuestra historia," *Caribbean Studies* 13, no. 3 (October 1973): 103–9. Ultimately, the situation of the planters was greatly alleviated by the inclusion of Puerto Rico behind US tariff walls in 1901, which granted the island free access to the US market and afforded Puerto Rican sugar producers the same tariff protection as mainland producers (see Bergad, *Agrarian History of Puerto Rico*, 75). Planters petitioned for free access to the US market in the Carroll hearings in 1899. Yet, from Ferreras Pagán's complaints, it seems the effects of this access had not yet been felt at the time of his writing in 1902, while the effects of the money conversion, effected three years prior, were (see *"Exchange and Free Trade"* in Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico,* 468-69, and Ferreras Pagán, 7-8).

Clearly, just as they had in response to political changes in Spain in the late 1860s and early 1870s, Puerto Ricans were acting in tandem with events in the metropole and exploiting the contradictions of colonialism to their advantage. But we should be cautious of concluding that this kind of working-class struggle was simply a product of the American occupation. Already in mid-April of 1898, for example, three months before the US occupation in July, officials in San Juan, Carolina and Río Piedras variously described a strike of 230 workers— referred to as "peones"— for higher wages at the Hacienda Buena Vista and Factoría Canóvanas in the northern town of Loíza.[99]

Another important trend to note is one Ramos Matthei claims was already evident in the 1870s: the organization of Puerto Rico's artisans. In Carroll's introduction to the commission report, he noted that he had received eleven leaders of the island's "gremios, or unions." "Nine of the eleven," Carroll noted, "were colored men," and they represented "painters, tinsmiths, silversmiths, bookbinders, cigar makers, printers, masons, carpenters, bakers, shoemakers and boatmen."[100] Carroll noted here another trend argued by Ramos Matthei: that people of color, and particularly the formerly enslaved and their descendants, were well-represented among artisans, and that many of them seem to have transitioned to urban labor in wake of abolition. Indeed, in the census undertaken on the island by US authorities in 1899, 64 percent of blacksmiths, 52 percent of carpenters, 77 percent of masons, 44 percent of "gold and silver workers," 37 percent of printers and lithographers, 36 percent of "cigar factory operatives," 62 percent of tailors and

[99] "Huelga de trabajadores en Loíza y Carolina (Puerto Rico)" (Expediente, April 1898), Signatura 5162.23, AGMM/ADNPR.
[100] Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 51.

42 percent of tinsmiths were recorded as "colored"— as compared to 38 percent of the general population.[101]

Carroll described the artisan guild leaders as "neatly dressed, well-appearing, intelligent men," and noted that "all except one wrote his name and occupation in the stenographer's notebook"— a signal of literacy in a society in which only 143,472 out of a population of about 658,691 aged 10 and over, or about 22 percent, were recorded as able to read and write.[102] Santiago Iglesias, of the carpenters' guild, reported prevailing wages to be $1 to $1.50 among workers in the guild. Since the American occupation, they had been paid in gold, a "60 percent premium" in value over their previous wages in pesos.[103]

Conclusion

The transition from coerced to free labor in late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico was shaped by a complex set of social struggles and alliances. Coerced and later free agricultural laborers, marginalized creole proprietors, colonial officials and foreign planters and merchants hashed out a struggle that was heavily influenced by events elsewhere, and particularly by struggles against the monarchy in Spain in 1868-1873 and the change of colonial powers in 1898. Only by examining the intersections of these struggles on and off the island can we understand the timing of abolition and the evolution of agrarian society in its wake.

One broader implication of the Puerto Rican abolition process as a case study concerns the nature of colonialism, as Puerto Rico was the penultimate case of colonial abolition in the

---

[101] Lt. Col. J. P. Sanger, Inspector-General (Director) and Henry Gannett, Walter F. Willcox (Statistical Experts), *Report on the Census of Porto Rico, 1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 327–28, 56.

[102] Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 51; Sanger, Gannett and Willcox, *Report on the Census*, 48, 73.

[103] "Artisans of San Juan" (Hearing, San Juan, November 4, 1898), Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico*, 715–16.

Americas before Cuba. The process described above should dispel any understanding of colonialism as a simple dynamic between "colonizers" and "colonized." Instead, colonialism in Puerto Rico involved a complex class dynamic which dictated the way struggles before and after abolition were carried out. This dynamic explains why creole workers and marginalized proprietors struck an alliance that characterized the whole period under study, an alliance which effected major social changes when met with sympathetic interventions by either Spanish republicans hostile to planter elites or US colonial officials indifferent to them.

A second implication of the Puerto Rican case concerns the salience— or lack thereof— of race as a cleavage of social mobilization. In 1902, General George Davis, after serving as Military Governor of Puerto Rico from 1899 to 1900, reported to his superiors in the federal government that "If the disenfranchisement of the negro illiterates of the Union can be justified, the same in Porto Rico [sic] can be defended on equally good grounds, for the educational, social, and industrial status of a large portion of the native inhabitants of Porto Rico is no higher than that of the colored people." He also took care to note, however, that disenfranchisement should not stop at illiterate people *of color*: "If the latter are disfranchised, as is being done at home, the electoral franchise should be withheld from the poor and ignorant peones, who are classed as whites, but who differ from the negroes in no material or moral respect."[104] Evidently, the multiracial nature of class oppression and coercion in Puerto Rican history was deeply rooted enough not to be lost on American colonial officials. For Davis, illiterate workers of color should be politically disenfranchised like in the US South, but so should the "poor and ignorant"— and "white"— *peones*.[105]

[104] George W. Davis, *Report of the Military Governor of Porto Rico on Civil Affairs* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 115.

[105] To the author's knowledge, the term *peón* never carried an explicitly racial connotation in Puerto Rico. The fact that Davis evidently thought it did might have been because a *majority* of those considered "peones" at the

Just as revealing as Davis's words themselves is the fact that they never even came close to becoming a reality. After decades of struggles, unqualified universal male suffrage had been attained months before the US invasion of 1898, a situation which would never be overturned. Exactly *why* is a question somewhat outside of the chronological scope of this article. However, the analysis provided here should provide some clues. For decades, a multiracial coalition of creole workers and petty bourgeois had fought against forced labor, the privileges of peninsular colonial officials and the dominance of immigrant agrarian elites, and in favor of expanded political rights. The fact that forced labor in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico cast a net that transcended racial boundaries, as well as the salience of a divide between foreign landed and merchant elites and marginal creole landowners, regardless of race, are important factors to consider in analyzing the role of race in Puerto Rican society over the *longue durée*. In short, for those interested in studying abolition, race and colonialism in comparative perspective, the Puerto Rican case suggests the importance and complexity of *class* relations in defining these social processes.

---

time— just as the majority of the general population— were probably also considered "white."