

Labor and Sugar in Puerto Rico and in Jamaica, 1800-1850

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LABOR AND SUGAR IN PUERTO RICO AND IN JAMAICA,  
1800–1850

The islands of Puerto Rico and Jamaica, which lie roughly at the same latitude and less than 600 miles apart at their nearest points, share a number of remarkable similarities in general physical environment. Strikingly in contrast to the similarities in topography, climate, flora and fauna are the differences in the cultures of the two islands. One of the reasons for this cultural disparity has to do not with the cultures of the colonial powers, but with the persistence of a strong peasantry in one island (Jamaica), and a relatively weak peasantry in the other (Puerto Rico). This difference stems in large part from the individual histories of the two islands, histories predominantly determined by the colonial aims and policies of, in one case, Spain and Great Britain; in the other, Spain and the United States. The present paper purports to treat principally one brief period (1800–1850) during which a sharp divergence in the colonial objectives of the respective controlling powers affected the cultures of Jamaica and Puerto Rico accordingly. It was during this half-century that Puerto Rico repeated a historical experience which Jamaica had undergone nearly 150 years earlier: the development of a sugar plantation economy.<sup>1</sup>

History never repeats itself exactly, and every event is, of course, unique; but historical forces surely may move in parallel paths at the same or at different times. The comparisons of such parallels may reveal regularities of potential scientific value. To compare Puerto Rico and Jamaica during the first half of the nineteenth century is to compare two countries which, in their historical trajectories, were passing each other in opposite directions along a single continuum: dedication to the sugar plantation economy. Between 1800 and 1850, Puerto Rico was developing such an economy, while Jamaica was abandoning it.

In colony after colony in the Antilles, the sugar plantation economy had flourished wildly, had over-extended itself, over-borrowed, produced less and less, and had finally died. One of the basic factors responsible for its denouement was the gutting of the land; in every case, the colony which replaced its

<sup>1</sup> It need not be stressed that, although Spain had conquered and explored vast New World areas long before England, and had introduced sugar and slavery to the Caribbean, it was England which first developed a Caribbean sugar-and-slave empire. Not for nearly 150 years did the Spaniards repeat the English experiment. Cf. Bourne (1904).

failing predecessor was land-rich at the start, land-poor at the time of its eclipse. "Neither capital nor abundance of labour," wrote Merivale in 1839, "have ever been found to compete, in tropical cultivation, with the advantage of a new and fertile soil."<sup>2</sup> And Williams writes:

From Virginia and Maryland to Carolina, Georgia, Texas and the Middle West; from Barbados to Jamaica to Saint Domingue and then to Cuba; the logic was inexorable and the same. It was a relay race; the first to start passed the baton, unwillingly we may be sure, to another, and then limped sadly behind.<sup>3</sup>

Jamaica and Puerto Rico were both runners in this race; the effects of the races they ran live on in the contemporary societies and economies of the two islands.

Until 1655, both islands were Spanish possessions. Jamaica fell to Britain in that year, but Puerto Rico remained Spanish until the close of the nineteenth century. Before 1655, the development of both colonies had been minimal, for after an initial period in the Antilles, Spain had concentrated her energies on the mainland. Even after Jamaica became British, it was not until the rise of the sugar industry there that the two islands began to diverge rapidly in their economic development, in the character of their settlements, and in their importance on the colonial scene. Jamaica, although colonized by the Spaniards in 1509,<sup>4</sup> and reputedly making sugar in 1527,<sup>5</sup> never became a "sugar colony" under Spain. In the year of her conquest by the British, she had but three sugar works in operation.<sup>6</sup> As late as 1673, Sir Thomas Lynch could write that, "If Jamaica have easy government, be defended from enemies, and be supplied with negroes and servants, and have no privateering, in six years it may produce as much sugar as Barbados."<sup>7</sup> In 1673, Jamaica's 57 sugar works were producing 670 tons; in the period 1671-1679, the average yearly production had risen to 986 tons.<sup>8</sup> It was not until well into the eighteenth century, however, that Jamaica's fertile lands brought her ahead of all of her Empire competitors. Burn states:

The increase in the total population from some 87,100 in 1722 to nearly 236,000 in 1787 corresponded to the rise of Jamaica to the unchallenged leadership in sugar production among the British West Indian colonies, but its production was sluggish until it was stimulated by the increase in sugar prices in the later thirties of the eighteenth century. Then its vast reserves of virgin land told heavily in its favor.<sup>9</sup>

Jamaica enjoyed its golden age between the 1730's and the start of the nineteenth century. The relatively brief but rapid rise of its sugar-and-slave society has

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Burn (1951), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Williams (1944), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Deerr (1949), Vol. I, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Burn (1951), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Deerr (1949), *loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Burn (1951), p. 65.

been described in rich detail by such writers as Mathieson,<sup>10</sup> Ragatz,<sup>11</sup> and Williams.<sup>12</sup> During the later decades of the eighteenth century, the “West Indians” in Parliament wielded power out of all proportion to their numbers;<sup>13</sup> Jamaica was worth more to Britain at the time than were the thirteen colonies.<sup>14</sup> Yet Jamaica’s great importance within the Empire rested on rigid mercantilist foundations: the assurance that, whatever the consequences, the sugar market at home would be protected by the mother country from foreign competitors. At the same time, of course, Jamaica was not free to choose or to widen the markets for her sugar. The planter regime had hardly reached a pinnacle of power and wealth, in the later decades of the eighteenth century, when it began to decline. The causes were manifold: the rapid exhaustion of the soil, requiring larger-scale enterprise and heavier capitalization to make the plantation profitable; overspeculation and excessive interest rates, leading to bankruptcy and abandonment; the intensification of competition by other colonial sugar producers; and the growth of a new kind of merchant and manufacturing class in the mother country jealous of the West Indians’ power, and unwilling to protect the West India interests at cost to itself.

Many writers have argued that it was Emancipation that spelled the doom of the Jamaican planters. The indications are, however, that their doom was sealed many years before. Pitman reports that in 1775, Jamaica had 775 plantations; out of every hundred, twenty-three had been sold for debt, twelve were in the hands of receivers, and seven had been abandoned.<sup>15</sup> This was several decades before the end of the slave trade and almost half a century before Emancipation. Pitman’s figures and the materials assembled by other scholars suggest that, rather than Emancipation, it was ruined land and lack of access to capital, as well as the growth of new economic forces in the metropolis, which undermined the plantation economy in Jamaica. And it was these same factors, rather than lack of labor, which ensured the ruin of the economy in the years following Emancipation. Platt has pointed out that the introduction of East Indian contract laborers to Jamaica after Emancipation only partly alleviated the sugar industry’s problems.<sup>16</sup> Sewell’s comments, made less than fifteen years after Emancipation and based on an on-the-spot tour of Jamaica, are harshly revealing:

...many proprietors are really unable to pay for labor; that, although want of labor, that is, want of such a competition as would prevent labor being tyrannical, is one cause of the island’s scanty cultivation, yet another and more serious cause is want of capital. Money is the one essential thing needed by the Jamaica proprietary. They

<sup>10</sup> Mathieson (1926).

<sup>11</sup> Ragatz (1928).

<sup>12</sup> Williams (1944).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-97, 108-125.

<sup>14</sup> Williams (1951).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Williams (1944), p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> Platt *et al.* (1941).

have no money; they have no credit. The post-obits, drawn in the days of a flourishing plantocracy, have been long overdue, and they exceed in amount by a thousand per cent the actual value of the property owned. Money cannot be raised in Jamaica, and without money, or its equivalent, a country in these days is without labor, life, learning, religion. Everything must be paid for. Potatoes and principles have their market value. When the millennium comes, we may hope to get things for love.<sup>17</sup>

The picture is almost bewildering in the swiftness with which changes occurred. Jamaica, conquered by Britain in 1655, was turned into a sugar-and-slave economy beginning in the 1670's; it climbed to a position of unparalleled power by 1775, but began to fade within decades. By the time the end of the slave trade had been decreed for the British colonies, the end of the sugar economy was already in sight – although no one would admit it. Emancipation in 1838 did little more than confirm and reinforce the ruin of the planter class.<sup>18</sup>

The picture of Puerto Rico from the period 1655–1838 was dramatically different from that of Jamaica. Puerto Rico remained economically undeveloped in every way until as late as the start of the nineteenth century. In 1833, Colonel Flinter could write:

Notwithstanding all the advantages of soil and situation, which nature had so lavishly bestowed on the island of Puerto Rico, it was considered, for the space of three centuries, only as a place of banishment for the malefactors of the mother country. Agriculture had scarcely emerged from its primitive state of simplicity. The inhabitants led a pastoral life, sowing only provisions barely necessary for their support. . . . It can scarcely be said that, until these last twenty years, the fertile fields of Puerto Rico had felt the vivifying hand of cultivation.<sup>19</sup>

But during the span of three hundred years through which Puerto Rico had been lying undeveloped, its society had taken on a characteristic form. A substantial population had accumulated, a population which supported itself principally by squatter farming for subsistence. This population, composed of deserters from the military services, survivors of shipwrecks, colonists en route to the mainland but prevented by law or lack of opportunity from going on, the Spanish officialdom, etc., was mainly of European origin and was almost entirely free. In 1776, there were 70,260 persons in Puerto Rico, of whom only 6,487 were slaves.<sup>20</sup> By the start of the nineteenth century, the total population had grown considerably, but the slave population was less than seven and a half per cent of the total – 13,333 out of 174,192.<sup>21</sup> In addition to its slave population, the island had a very large number of free men of color. Puerto Rico at the beginning of the nineteenth century was unusual in the West Indies in these regards – an island almost entirely devoted to peasant agriculture; a population which was substantially of European rather than African prove-

<sup>17</sup> Sewell (1861), p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Curtin (1955).

<sup>19</sup> Flinter (1834), pp. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Deerr (1949), Vol. II, p. 281.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

nience, with a large group of free men of color; and a social system which did not rest on slavery and to which slavery was not of great economic importance. Needless to add, in all of these regards, Puerto Rico was the very opposite of Jamaica.

In 1815, Spain granted to Puerto Rico certain economic advantages which transformed the island. Spain's island possessions had been ignored almost entirely in the preceding centuries because of the vastly greater importance of the mainland colonies. But revolution on the mainland had caused the empire to shrink and the Crown, consequently, to value the Spanish Antilles more highly than before. The *Cédula de Gracias*, now famous as a turning-point in Puerto Rican history, was expressly designed to encourage the economic development of the Spanish islands. It energetically encouraged the expansion of the sugar industry by lowering duties and tariffs, granting new lands to sugar entrepreneurs, and otherwise favoring and facilitating sugar production.<sup>22</sup> The results were all that the Crown might have hoped for. Flinter was able to claim that the rich Puerto Rican soil was producing more sugar per acre than any British island,<sup>23</sup> and in 1833 he wrote that "...the number of sugar estates established within the last twenty years exceeds 200."<sup>24</sup> By the 1830's, there was ample evidence that Puerto Rico had embarked on her sugar-and-slave career. She would never approach the peaks achieved by Jamaica; correspondingly, however, her decline would prove less catastrophic.

As many writers have observed, Puerto Rico's economic development during the early decades of the nineteenth century was accomplished largely without the vast influx of slaves which had earlier marked a similar development in the British islands. Turnbull points out that in Jamaica, before Emancipation, the slaves formed about ninety per cent of the total island population, while in Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century the comparable figure only rarely rose slightly above ten per cent of the total.<sup>25</sup> The lack of sufficient slaves meant that some other source of labor supply had to be found. It was, in the form of the coercion of free but landless citizens to work on the plantations.<sup>26</sup> A whole series of laws was passed during the period 1815-1850 to exact more labor from landless freemen. Puerto Rico in this period presented the curious picture of a Caribbean colony where slaves were treated little worse than landless freemen.<sup>27</sup> The laws of 1824, 1837, and 1849, which tied the free but landless laborer of whatever physical type ever more tightly to the plantations, were paralleled by laws directed specifically against people of color, free or slave.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico*, vol. XIV (1927), pp. 3-24; López Domínguez (1927), p. 103; Mintz (1953), pp. 224-251.

<sup>23</sup> Flinter (1834), pp. 180-181.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>25</sup> Turnbull (1840), p. 555.

<sup>26</sup> Mintz (1951), pp. 134-141.

<sup>27</sup> The case is reminiscent of Barbados, early in its development, when indentured servants were used to produce sugar before the slave population had grown. Cf. Williams (1944), pp. 23-24.

General Prim's infamous "Código Negro" of 1843 empowered slave owners to punish their slaves without recourse to civil authorities and, for certain offenses such as bearing arms, made colored freemen and slaves alike subject to severe penalties.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that the expansion of the economy and the consequent increased need for labor should produce one set of laws which divided the free population into those who owned land and those who did not, in order to extract labor from the landless, and another set of laws which treated slave and landless freeman alike and which were intended to prevent any weakening of the institution of slavery, from within or from without.

These developments – the increase in the number of slaves, the decline of the civil liberties of the landless, and the repressive measures against all people of color – temporarily contributed to the improvement of the *economic* situation of the country as a whole: that is to say, the amount of land in cultivation increased and the production of sugar and other crops rose; the population nearly doubled in twenty years.

Events were proceeding quite differently in Jamaica. Final emancipation in 1838 was followed by a continuing decline in the apparent material wealth of the island, and the continued abandonment of more and more sugar plantations, once flourishing and now ruined. The new freedmen, no longer welcome on the estates and anxious to acquire land for themselves, engaged in a mass exodus away from the large properties and sought every means for becoming small proprietors. In this process of establishing the ex-slaves as an independent peasantry, the missionary churches played a very significant role.<sup>29</sup> By 1844, a mere six years after Emancipation, 19,000 families had been settled on their own land in 116 communities through the agency of the missionary societies.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the support rendered by the missionary societies, ex-slaves were able to acquire funds by restricting their own consumption, by part-time wage labor, and through marketing.<sup>31</sup> No longer faced with the problem of saving funds to purchase freedom, many were able to accumulate cash for the purchase of land. Motivation to get away from the estates and all they represented must have been very high among the newly freed: in 1859, Sewell estimated that there were already approximately 50,000 colored freeholders in Jamaica.<sup>32</sup>

The period following Emancipation in Jamaica, then, was a period of recovery from the whole epoch of slavery, marked by the growth of an independent, largely self-sufficient peasant population. Economically, the island was now of much less importance to the metropolis; but from the point of view of the masses of the Jamaican people, life unquestionably looked much better than before. The corresponding period in Puerto Rico was one of vast economic expansion and of unquestionable prosperity for insular and metro-

<sup>28</sup> Díaz Soler (1953). Cf. also Rosario and Carrión (1939).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Paget (n.d.), pp. 7-19. Cf. also Mintz (1958).

<sup>30</sup> Paget (n.d.).

<sup>31</sup> Hall (1954), pp. 149-169.

<sup>32</sup> Sewell (1861), p. 247. Cf. also Lopez (1948), pp. 298-301.

politan entrepreneurs. Yet the working population of Puerto Rico had no cause to rejoice. Squatter farmers were cleared from Crown and private land, and marshalled on the plantations to work in a state approximating slavery. Slaves and landless freemen alike could not leave the plantation without permission. The number of slaves increased, and colored freemen were warned to show no resistance to the stiffened control of the enslaved population. No wonder that Merivale, in comparing Puerto Rico and Jamaica in 1839, declared:

The tropical colonies of Spain were commonwealths in an epoch when those of most other nations were mere factories; they are now rapidly acquiring the degrading characteristics of factories, while ours, we may hope, are advancing toward the dignity of commonwealths.<sup>33</sup>

The decline of Puerto Rico's sugar industry in the late nineteenth century was not so stunning as Jamaica's had been some decades earlier. The Puerto Rican industry was still expanding after mid-century, but losing ground in the total world picture. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, coffee had begun to eclipse sugar, and it was only the United States Occupation in 1899 which restored sugar to first place, where it has remained ever since.<sup>34</sup> The decline of the sugar industry in Jamaica provided the opportunity for the formation of a peasantry which is still fundamental in the island's economy and society. In the case of Puerto Rico, the demand for plantation labor in the early nineteenth century destroyed much of the peasant population which previously had developed there, and the perpetuation of large-scale mechanized agricultural production by the United States, among other things, has prevented the regrowth of a peasantry of any real importance. According to the 1940 Census, there were 54,200 farmers, or an equivalent number of families, owning or renting their land in Puerto Rico, out of an agricultural labor force of 229,000.<sup>35</sup> In Jamaica (1943 Census), out of an agricultural labor force of almost the same absolute size (221,376), 49,201 farmers were operating holdings of ten acres or less; an additional 16,972 operators had larger holdings; and a very significant proportion of the agricultural labor force listed as wage earners was simultaneously engaged in cultivating owned land in plots of less than one acre, or cultivating rented land.<sup>36</sup> Although the absolute numbers of laborers engaged in agriculture were approximately the same in both Puerto Rico and Jamaica for the specified years, it is important to note that the population of Puerto Rico at the time (1940) was 1,869,255; the population of Jamaica in 1943 was 1,237,063, or 632,000 less than the figure for Puerto Rico three years earlier. Other comparative data could be presented to make the picture yet sharper – but it is sharp enough. Jamaica is still substantially a country of the peasantry; Puerto Rico is not.

<sup>33</sup> Merivale (1928), p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Crist (1948), pp. 183-184.

<sup>35</sup> H. Perloff (1950), pp. 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> G. Cumper (n.d.).

The present paper does not contend that the situation of the peasantries of Puerto Rico and Jamaica can be understood merely by reference to a single determining factor – the development of the sugar industry. The aim is rather to suggest that similar trends were at work in the two situations (but at different historical periods), resulting in certain significant similarities of process. The growth of the plantation economy in the early decades of British control over Jamaica was marked by the concomitant growth of a legally degraded society. Puerto Rico in the same period remained a yeoman colony with an internal frontier. The decline of the plantation economy in Jamaica was followed by the growth of an independent peasantry, reconstituted out of the slave population of the previous period. In Puerto Rico, the rise of the plantation system degraded slave and freeman alike, in the very years that the Jamaican people were getting their first taste of freedom. A comparison of these two cases offers compelling evidence of the relationship between economic forces and social relations. It suggests a qualification as well of the oft-cited assertion that ideological factors always ensured a humane quality to servitude in the Spanish colonies, setting them apart from their British, Dutch, and French neighbors.<sup>37</sup> In Puerto Rico (and much more dramatically, in Cuba), the intensification of the plantation system and the increasing centrality of that system in the nineteenth century almost made a myth of Spain's reputation for the humane treatment of the slaves. By the time the *hacendados* of Puerto Rico and Cuba were learning to apply the whip with enthusiasm, the populations of the British, Dutch and French colonies were already free. The way men were treated in these colonial societies, physically and politically, would appear to have been determined much more by the level of economic development, than by the ideologies, of the different metropolitan powers.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Tannenbaum (1947).

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## COMMENT

The West Indian area is one of the most attractive fields for comparative study. For, as Dr. Mintz has pointed out, it includes territories, generally similar in physical environment, which, nevertheless, differ in their individual histories. The marked divergence in the histories of Puerto Rico and Jamaica during the first half of the nineteenth century is only one instance among many which can be cited as worthy of attention. The interest of this particular case is that it raises the point in an acute form.

Obviously, physical environment cannot be an active, determining factor in the development of these two islands. If it were, their histories would not be so different. But this does not mean that the physical environment is without significance. Climate and the lay of the land are still important factors in deciding where "sugar" will grow, and particularly, where it will grow at a profit. Dr. Mintz considers the state of the land a significant element in the situation he analyses. It is worth emphasising that human use of the land, rather than its natural condition, was what mattered most both in Jamaica and