



Puerto Rico in the Whirlwind of 1898: Conflict, Continuity, and Change

In none of the war theaters of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War, commonly misnamed the Spanish-American War, was the war more splendidly little than in Puerto Rico. Actual hostilities broke in the morning of 12 May 1898 as Admiral William T. Sampson's formidable naval squadron spewed a storm of metal and fire over the fortified walls of the ancient city of San Juan. The bombardment, the first military assault on Puerto Rico in more than a century, lasted three hours and left a toll of only one dead Spanish soldier. A blockade of the island ensued, and a military invasion followed ten weeks later when U.S. troops under the command of General Nelson A. Miles disembarked in the southern port of Guánica on 25 July. The fighting lasted only nineteen days, during which time only three U.S. soldiers lost their lives. Deaths on the Spanish side numbered only seventeen (1).

In sharp contrast with the brevity and relative bloodlessness of the war in Puerto Rico stands the dramatic and far-reaching impact of the island's change of sovereignty as Spain was forced to cede its oldest remaining New World colony to the emerging "Colossus of the North." Arguably, no other country or region participating in the conflagration of 1898 was more lastingly or profoundly impacted by the war's aftermath than Puerto Rico. Even the island's name endured mutation with the hope that its new rulers could more easily spell and pronounce the name "Porto Rico." In 1898 the floodgates opened to a new system and world view that clashed with those of Spanish colonialism. Their coexistence would shape the Puerto Rico of the new century.

The political, social, and economic transformations affecting Puerto Rico after 1898 involved a complex and shifting combination of imposition, resistance, and collaboration, and an interplay among the new colonial rulers, United States economic interests, old insular political and economic elites, and the dispossessed rural and urban masses. Manichaeic, good-and-evil and us-against-them perspec-

tives, which have dominated the Puerto Rican nationalistic understanding of the drama of 1898, have hidden the complexity of the transformations and have also concealed the many social and economic continuities between the Spanish nineteenth century and the twentieth century under the aegis of the United States.

The study of Puerto Rico's 1898, thus, demands careful attention to the construction of the historiographical edifice that emerged after the war. Much of what became the standard interpretation of the impact of 1898 on Puerto Rico contains critical and anti-imperialist views produced during the most traumatic period in Puerto Rico's recent history: the Great Depression. Puerto Rico's first generations of professional historians and social scientists, who dominated the historiography of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and much of the 1970s, failed to challenge this view. They held on to the crisis-ridden 1930s as a frame for comparison not only with the Spanish colonial past but also with the relative prosperity that followed the ascent to power of the Partido Popular Democrático in 1941 and the post-World War II years. Not until the emergence of Puerto Rico's new historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, with its critical perspectives on life under Spanish rule, did a less idealized portrayal of the nineteenth century emerge. With its emphasis on social and economic aspects, Puerto Rico's new historiography has recognized far more continuities between centuries than earlier generations of scholars were willing to concede (2).

Puerto Rico on the Eve of the United States Invasion

On the eve of the United States invasion, Spain granted Puerto Rico a new charter establishing an autonomous government for the island. This concession resulted from a combination of geopolitical factors and developments in Spain's domestic political arena. The offer of autonomy to Cuba and Puerto Rico was, on the one hand, a last minute response by the Spanish government to escalating pressures by the United States and a naive effort to appease Cuban

insurgents who had been staging an all-out war for independence since 1895. On the other hand, it was a political payback from Práxedes Mateo Sagasta in return for the support of Puerto Rico's liberals, who helped the Spanish Liberal Party establish a majority in the Spanish Cortes.

While Cuba's patriots rejected the offer of autonomy, Puerto Rico's autonomists, even the *barbosista* faction that had opposed the Sagasta pact, embraced it as the realization of long-time aspirations of self-rule within the framework of the Spanish monarchy. Although on paper the Autonomic Charter satisfied many of the goals of Puerto Rico's liberals, its true reach was never tested: United States troops invaded the island only six days after Puerto Rico's insular legislators took office (3).

Writing from the vantage point of the crisis of the 1930s and beyond, many Puerto Rican authors have viewed the Autonomic Charter of 1897 as the all-time high point of Puerto Rican self-rule and have exaggerated its scope and reach. Nevertheless, the Autonomic Charter did appease Puerto Rico's liberals and guarantee their loyalty to the Spanish crown. Autonomists in general, but those of the *muñocista* faction in particular, exhibited unwavering loyalty to Spain. When news of the death of Cuban patriot Antonio Maceo reached Puerto Rico in 1896, autonomists took the opportunity to publicly celebrate the event. From the pages of *La Democracia*, autonomists assured Spanish authorities of their loyalty in the event of a U.S. invasion. "We are Spaniards," autonomist Luis Muñoz Rivera wrote in 1898, "and wrapped in the Spanish flag will we die" (4).

Besides the autonomists, there was a separatist minority desiring the island's independence from Spanish rule and an annexationist group that aspired to turn Puerto Rico into a state of the United States. Despite their contending goals both groups found common ground in their anti-Spanish sentiments. Within the Puerto Rico Section of the New York-based Partido Revolucionario Cubano, these two factions collaborated under the leadership of annexationists José Julio Henna and Roberto H. Todd. Meanwhile, some three hundred Puerto Rican separatists fought Spanish troops on Cuban soil, but various attempts to extend the Cuban struggle to Puerto Rico failed due to lack of popular support (5).

The autonomy effort inspired cooperation between the colony and its ruler, and this trend was reflected by closer ties between the island and Spanish and European markets in the coffee trade. Sugar, which had earlier dominated the island's exports, was now the second export staple and was on the wane; consequently the island's economic ties with the United States, the traditional market for the region's sugar, weakened as well. On the eve of the United

States invasion, coffee accounted for 41 percent of the island's cultivated acreage while sugarcane comprised only 15 percent, and the total value of coffee exports was three times the value of sugar exports. In 1895 the United States absorbed little over 10 percent of Puerto Rico's exports while Spanish, Cuban, and European markets received 84 percent of Puerto Rico's export output (6).

The transition to agrarian capitalism and the shift toward coffee in the late nineteenth century brought many social dislocations and produced a marked deterioration in the material conditions of the rural working classes. Contemporary observers documented and dramatized the plight of Puerto Rico's peasants during the era of the

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@Rear-Admiral Sampson on the bridge of the flagship *New York*, by W. T. Smedley. (*Harper's Pictorial History of the War with Spain* [New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899], 203.)

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coffee boom (7). However, a contrasting picture emerged in the 1930s. The depression-era historiography painted a nineteenth-century Puerto Rico that had achieved prosperity and social harmony. The romanticization of the past reached its highest level of hyperbole at the hands of nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos who deemed the nineteenth century a time of “old collective happiness.” “Puerto Rico,” Albizu Campos claimed, “was the healthiest country of the Americas.” “It was rich,” he continued, and “figured at the vanguard of modern civilization” (8). Remarkably, these depression-era views, while far from accurate, marked the historiography of the next four decades and persist in some contemporary portrayals of Puerto Rico under Spanish rule. The new historiography of the 1980s and 1990s has challenged these views by depicting the nineteenth century as a time of violent social and economic displacements and rapidly deteriorating conditions for the bulk of the island’s laboring classes (9).

The bombardment of San Juan and the naval blockade that followed strangled the island’s economy and further aggravated the existing social tensions. As a result of the blockade, foreign trade came to a virtual halt, leading to a serious scarcity of essential consumer goods, widespread commercial speculation, and even starvation among the working population. The already profound monetary crisis deepened and placed agricultural loans beyond the reach of planters and farmers. Not surprisingly, during this period wide segments of the rural peasantry resorted to theft and other forms of social protest (10).

The War and the War Behind It

In the morning of 25 July the long-anticipated United States invasion of Puerto Rico began. The port of Guánica proved an excellent choice as a landing site for the invading troops because it was near the heart of the island’s southwestern region, where anti-Spanish sentiment had historically been strongest. Economically, the Southwest and its hinterland was the island’s most dynamic region, with coffee production booming, and because of the coffee boom, social dislocations and antagonisms had reached dangerously high levels.

The Spanish offered surprisingly little resistance to advancing United States troops. Throughout the island’s Southwest the response of the resident Creole elite was welcoming and festive.

Parades, fireworks, and the ringing of bells celebrated the arrival of General Miles’ troops. Members of the Creole elite collaborated with the invading troops, providing information, supplies, and field hands (11).

The recent historiography has paid detailed attention to the explosion of peasant violence during and shortly after the invasion. The *partidas sediciosas* or *tiznados* (as the armed bands of rural workers came to be known) raided, looted, and burned plantations and other sources and symbols of their oppression. Other acts of social vengeance included the burning of records of indebtedness and even the murder of some coffee planters. At first, U.S. officers welcomed the mobilization of armed bands of peasants who unleashed their rage against the remnants of Spanish colonial exploitation. After the armistice of 12 August 1898, however, U.S. troops actively sought to demobilize the remaining *partidas sediciosas* (12).

The Puerto Ricans’ lack of resistance to the U.S. invasion has long troubled the collective conscience of the Puerto Rican intelligentsia, particularly its most nationalistic exponents. Some have denied that this ever happened; others have recognized it as a chapter of national shame. Still others have attempted to neutralize it with a mythology of resistance that includes alleged anti-U.S. guerrilla activities (13). A 1983 incident clearly illustrates the lingering desire for turn-of-the-century national heroism. Luis López Nieves published a story in the pro-independence weekly *Claridad* which told of a Puerto Rican victory in May 1898 against U.S. troops in the mythical town of Seva. According to this fictionalized narrative, the United States concealed this military embarrassment, returning to Seva, destroying the town and executing the surviving population. A massive cover-up followed that included the destruction of all documents alluding to Seva and the founding of a new town, Ceiba, in the ashes of heroic Seva. Unsuspecting readers produced a torrent of angry letters demanding inquiries into the Seva cover-up (14).

The Aftermath of the War of 1898

On 18 October 1898 the United States military formally assumed the administration of Puerto Rico. Two months later, on 10 December, the Treaty of Paris was signed, formalizing the cession of Puerto Rico to the United States in exchange for a 20-million-dollar compensation for Spain. Thus ended four centuries of Spanish colonialism in the New World. Between October 1898 and May 1900 three military governors ruled over Puerto Rico: General John R. Brooke (18 October-9 December 1898), General Guy V. Henry (9 December 1898-9 May 1899), and General George W. Davis (9 May 1899-1 May 1900). On 1 May 1900 a civilian colonial government was finally in place under the provisions of the Foraker Act. Charles Allen became the island’s first United States civilian governor.

The overwhelming majority of Puerto Rico’s political actors responded to the new political circumstances by seeking the island’s annexation as a state of the United States. Muñoz Rivera, who had three years earlier denounced the annexationist option as “absurd, depressing and inconceivable,” stated in 1898: “We must move rapidly toward our identity. The Liberal Party desires that Puerto Rico become a sort of California or Nebraska” (15). The virtual unanimity

in favor of annexation resulted from the confluence of divergent agendas: to the old autonomist leadership, it was a means to retain insular political power within the federation of the United States; to sugar planters, it represented the opening of the insatiable North American market for their crops; to labor leaders, it represented the right to organize and the hope for more progressive labor laws.

As a package, the decrees of the military governors successfully dismantled the institutional foundations that Puerto Rico inherited from Spain and facilitated the island's incorporation into the territorial orbit of the United States. General Brooke's decrees included measures to cease state support of the Catholic Church and the substitution of old forms of taxation for new ones. Some of the measures—and the temperament—of his successor, General Henry, proved odious and controversial in the eyes of local interests and produced a bitter distancing between the leaders of the party of Muñoz Rivera and the military authorities. Included among Henry's measures were a moratorium on foreclosures against mortgaged farmland, which resulted in an unintended but catastrophic freeze on agricultural credit; the modification of marriage and divorce laws; and the declaration of the eight-hour work day. General Henry had the bad judgment to outlaw cockfights, the island's national pastime (16). Among General Davis' decrees were the establishment of trial by jury and the extension of the right of habeas corpus. He also proved diligent and genuinely caring during the crisis brought by the San Ciriaco hurricane (8 August 1899) which left more than three thousand dead and twenty million dollars in damages throughout the island, mostly in the coffee areas of the western central highlands (17).

The imposition by the United States government of the Foraker

Act in May 1900 further alienated broad sectors of the island's political and economic elites as it fell short of their aspirations. Initial hopes had by now turned to disillusionment. The Foraker Act offered less self-rule provisions than the Autonomic Charter under Spain. It organized Puerto Rico as an "unincorporated territory" of the United States and denied U.S. citizenship to the island's population, which overwhelmingly desired both statehood and U.S. citizenship. The Puerto Rican citizenship established by the Foraker Act was a legal fiction that lacked international recognition. Puerto Rican reactions to the Foraker Act were overwhelmingly critical. Even Henna, who had so ardently promoted the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico, referred to life under the Foraker Act in dismal terms: "No liberty, no rights, absolutely no protection, not even the right to travel" (18). Later measures, like the imposition of English as the means of instruction in public schools, further fanned nationalist opposition to United States colonialism.

The period between the invasion and the establishment of the Foraker Act allowed for the creation of the legal and constitutional bases of the far-reaching economic transformations of the next four decades. The economic provisions of the military governors and the Foraker Act formally incorporated Puerto Rico into the United States tariff and navigation system, established the rate of monetary exchange at sixty U.S. cents per Spanish peso, and limited land ownership by individuals and corporations to five hundred acres.

The sudden removal of Puerto Rico from the sphere of its traditional markets and its inclusion in the United States tariff and navigation system resulted in the penalization of Puerto Rico's coffee in the Cuban and European markets. The United States market did not absorb this loss because North Ameri-

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@The Landing at Gu@nica, @ by Howard Chandler Christy. (*Harper's Pictorial History of the War with Spain* [New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899], 394.)

can consumers preferred the cheaper, lower-quality coffee from Brazil. Puerto Rican sugar, on the other hand, received preferential access to the United States market: at first a 15 percent tariff, and tariff-free after 1901 (19).

These new tariffs had an immediate impact on Puerto Rico's economy and commerce. As early as 1901 coffee's proportion among exports fell to 19.6 percent, while sugar's rose to 55 percent. This trend continued during the balance of the decade. In 1910 coffee represented only 10 percent of the export output, and sugar reached 64 percent. In the process, the United States became the island's dominant trading partner, absorbing 84 percent of Puerto Rico's exports and supplying 85 percent of its imports (20).

Profound social transformations accompanied the changes in the economy. Gradually but surely, the island's traditional agrarian elite endured displacement and subordination at the hands of absentee corporate capital directly investing in sugar production. More immediate was the impact on the working classes. The new economic realities, particularly the shift away from coffee toward sugar, accelerated the proletarianization of the rural workforce and signaled losses in the autonomy and material conditions of the average worker. Prices of food and other essential items shot up and unemployment and poverty became more widespread. Emigration became the only option for tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans in the decades to come.

There is no question that many of the measures of the military governors and several provisions of the Foraker Act were a detriment to the people of Puerto Rico and benefitted certain interests within the United States economy. It would be an oversimplification, however, to view the legal-constitutional package of 1898-1900 as a concerted attempt to destroy the Puerto Rican elite, to impoverish the working classes, and to open the way for unbridled U.S. monopoly capital (21). It would be equally distorting to view the Liberal, later Federal, elites as champions of the oppressed masses. The drama of 1898-1900 is

far more complex. Some of the military measures like the eight-hour work day, the adoption of trial by jury, and the reduction of the voting age from twenty-five to twenty-one years were bitterly opposed by Muñoz Rivera, Severo Quiñones, and other so-called liberals (22). A recent work by Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles brings our attention to deep divisions in turn-of-the-century Puerto Rico and to the insular elite's classism and racism vis-à-vis the mulatto working classes of the coastal plains. These problems were neither new nor creatures of United States imperialism (23).

In Puerto Rico, the war of 1898 was a short one with a long aftermath. The whirlwind of 1898 brought into conflict two distinct worlds, a Spanish world tied to the past, and a North American world heralding the future. The feudal Spanish legacies of corporatist society, of inherited hierarchies, and of high regard for honor and prestige did not disappear with the arrival of a competing capitalist

North American set of values with its alternate, market-driven forms of exclusion. In the aftermath of 1898, the feudal forms of exclusion and exploitation persisted—and continue to persist—along with those of capitalism. □

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Market Day in Ponce. (Harper's *Pictorial History of the War with Spain* [New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899], 496.)

Endnotes

1. The term "Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War" is used by Thomas G. Paterson in *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (to 1914). (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1989), 381-414. A fine source on the actual war in Puerto Rico is Ángel Rivero, *Crónica de la Guerra Hispano Americana en Puerto Rico* (1921; reprint, New York: Plus Ultra Educational Publishers Inc., 1973). For information on casualties, id., 534-535.
2. For earlier evaluations of the Puerto Rican historiography on 1898, see Laura Náter Vázquez, "El '98 en la historiografía puertorriqueña: del político entusiasta al héroe popular," *Op. Cit.: Boletín del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad*

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3. Carmelo Rosario Natal, *Puerto Rico y la crisis de la Guerra Hispanoamericana (1895-1898)* (Hato Rey, P.R.: Ramallo Brothers Printing, 1975), 137-38. In the 1890s the Autonomist Party split into two factions, one under Luis Muñoz Rivera, another under José Celso Barbosa.
 4. Rosario Natal, *Puerto Rico*, 57-67; Edward J. Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico: 1898-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 64.
 5. Rosario Natal, *Puerto Rico*, 93-101.
 6. Laird W. Bergad, "Agrarian History of Puerto Rico, 1870-1930," *Latin American Research Review* 13, no. 3 (1978), 66-76; Berbusse, *United States*, 150; Thomas J. Vivian and Ruel P. Smith, *Everything about Our New Possessions* (New York: R. F. Fenno, 1899), 156-160.
 7. See, for instance, Eugenio María de Hostos, cited in José Luis González, *Puerto Rico the Four-Storeyed Country and other Essays* (1980, Spanish ed.; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 1993), 4; Salvador Brau, *Ensayos: (disquisiciones sociológicas)* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Editorial Edil, 1972); and Manuel Zeno Gandía, *La Charca* (1894; reprint, Barcelona: Ediciones Puerto, 1973).
 8. Albizu Campos cited in Fernando Picó, *1898: la guerra después de la guerra* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1987), 21-22 (my translation).
 9. Picó, *1898*, 39; also by Picó, *Amargo Café: (los pequeños y medianos caficultores de Utuado en la segunda mitad del siglo xix)* (Río Piedras, PR: Ediciones Huracán, 1981); and *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo xix* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1979); Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, *La hacienda azucarera: su crecimiento y crisis en Puerto Rico (siglo xix)* (San Juan: CEREP, 1981); Laird W. Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Guillermo A. Baralt, *Esclavos Rebeldes: conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795-1873)* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1982); Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).
 10. Fernando Picó, "La revolución puertorriqueña de 1898: la necesidad de un nuevo paradigma para entender el '98 puertorriqueño," paper presented at the 28th annual meeting of the Association of Caribbean Historians, Barbados, 14-19 April 1996, 3-18.
 11. Picó, *1898*, 74; Rosario Natal, *Puerto Rico*, 227.
 12. Picó, *1898*, chaps. 3-5; Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles, "*Subject People*" and *Colonial Discourses: Economic Transformation and Social Disorder in Puerto Rico, 1898-1947* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 1994), chap. 4.
 13. Manuel Maldonado Denis, *Puerto Rico: una interpretación histórico-social* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1973), 55; Gervasio Luis García, "Strangers in Paradise? Puerto Rico en la correspondencia de los cónsules norteamericanos (1869-1900)," paper presented at the Caribbean between Empires Symposium, Princeton University, 5-7 May 1994, 32; Picó, *1898*, 155-160; Rosario Natal, "El '98 puertorriqueño," 66-68.
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 15. Muñoz Rivera cited in Arturo Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 142 (my translation); and Muñoz Rivera cited in Luis E. Agrait, "Puerto Rico en el vórtice del '98: 'A prisa, a toda prisa, formemos la patria,'" in *La nación soñada*, 100 (my translation).
 16. For a summary of the military decrees, see Henry K. Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico* (1899; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975), 53-55.
 17. For a study on the government's response to the hurricane, see Stuart B. Schwartz, "The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics, and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899-1901," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (August 1992): 303-334.
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 19. María Dolores Luque de Sánchez, *La ocupación norteamericana y la ley Foraker (la opinión pública puertorriqueña, 1898-1904)* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1980), 45, 63, 78; Bergad, "Agrarian History," 75-85.
 20. Bergad, "Agrarian History," 75-87; Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, *Patricios y Plebeyos: burgueses, hacendados, artesanos y obreros* (Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 1988), 103.
 21. Schwartz, "Hurricane San Ciriaco," 333.
 22. Picó, *1898*, 137; Berbusse, *United States*, 119, 122.
 23. Santiago-Valles, "*Subject People*," 46.

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