

## Major Elements in the Geography of Puerto Rico

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The geography of Puerto Rico cannot be understood without an appreciation of the people's cultural outlook. Even after nearly forty years of separation from the mother country, their point of view is still more Spanish than American. This, however, is not strange as the Island has always been more intensely Spanish than any other part of Spain's vast colonial empire. For this reason, perhaps, Puerto Rico always was the favorite child of Spain and the loyalty shown in return by this, the favored daughter, was a matter of just pride to the mother country. Because of its position the island was looked upon by Spain as an outpost, strategically located for protecting and controlling the other possessions. The island was looked upon as the key to an enormously rich colonial empire and was guarded accordingly. Even far off Mexico had to help in *situados*, annual assessments, up to the time of the Mexican Revolution in order to build up the second strongest fortress in the New World and to help cover expenses for outfitting new expeditions.

In the most troublous times for Spain, roughly from 1810 to 1820, when through one successful revolution after another this vast South American empire was crumbling away into dust, Puerto Rico remained most loyal. This continued loyalty of the people of the island, even under the most adverse circumstances, is a striking anomaly in Spanish colonial relations. For this loyalty Puerto Rico was well rewarded, or perhaps it was this special consideration in superior treatment that kept the Puerto Ricans so loyal. Be that as it may, during this period of a shrinking empire the people were granted in 1815 what may be considered a special Bill of Rights. Though much less publicized in history than that of England and much less influential in later history, this *Cédula de Gracias* with its 33 articles was for its day like a proclamation freeing an Island people from slavery. It was a most amazing document of liberality, so unlike Spain's attitude toward her other colonies.

Again on February 9, 1898, just before the Spanish-American war, Spain granted to Puerto Rico *La Carta Autonómica*, another Bill of Rights, which gave the people practically complete autonomy, the thing they had worked and prayed for these many, many years. This hardly had gone into effect when world events over which Puerto Rico had no control, changed all. Only six short days after the principles of the *Carta Autonómica* had gone into effect the American Battleship Maine was sunk in Havana Harbor. On April 25, 60 days later, congress declared war on Spain and on May 12 Samson bombarded San Juan the capitol of Puerto Rico. On July 25 the first American troops were landed at Guánico, on August 13 hostilities were suspended, and on October 18 the official transfer of the Island took place. Thus in the short period from February 9 to October 18, 1898, all that the people had hoped for and had so joyously received was swept away because of a war in the cause of which they had no part and in which they had no home interest. It is not surprising that they say: "With the wind that unfurled

the American flag, Puerto Rican liberty was swept from the Island." In their congressional discussions, at the present time the United States is never referred to by name but as the *invador*, invader. It may readily be appreciated that American control had a most inauspicious start.

The change of sovereignty did change the form of government, from a Latin to an Anglo-Saxon form, but it did not add any new resources, or change the cultural outlook, nor did it add any wealth, economically or strategically, to the United States. Under such conditions the question naturally arises, can a foreign power enforce successfully, under democratic institutions, a form of government not to the liking of a people with a totally different outlook? It seems anomalous that a people who fought for and gained independence should try colonial control of an arbitrary sort and to curb like efforts for autonomy. Changing the form of government does not change a people's outlook or ambitions. The Puerto Ricans are still Spanish minded, not American, and the only hope for loyalty is when they of their own free will have chosen to be a part of the United States. The millions upon millions of dollars of American money spent on relief has not changed the situation one iota. Last autumn the chief of police was assassinated. This spring sixteen people were killed in Ponce and a host of others wounded in a Nationalistic demonstration, and on Easter Sunday troops parading the streets of Mayaguez prevented another outbreak. What solution is there? Have geographical studies anything to offer? I think so. That form of government is best which helps people to help solve their economic problems most effectively. These problems are rooted in very material things. Geographic studies can offer the premises from which correct conclusions may be drawn.

The problem of the poor rooted in the soil is a most serious one. The island truly "seethes with misery" because of this poverty. Six or ten or even more people may live in a windowless hut, not more than twelve feet to a side. There is no bed, no chair or stove in such a home. Over large areas on the island there is not a single inclosed latrine. Bush-covered, the hillside affords the only toilet facilities, and with each rain the streams become polluted. Chlorinization of all streams is impossible and typhoid outbreaks are common in spite of the vigilance of the sanitary department. Many a workman before sunrise trudges to work, when there is any to be had, with only a cup of coffee for breakfast, eats a little cold rice and a small piece of codfish at noon, a little more rice and coffee at night, then goes to sleep, not to bed, in the same clothes he wore during the day, and rises again the next day to repeat the performance for less than one dollar per day. No nation can hope to prosper where three-fourths of the population is so dreadfully poor. At one time during the depression nearly 90% of the people were on the government payroll, mostly in the form of relief, this under the rule of the richest nation on earth.

This great poverty is largely the result of the scarcity of food crop land. The food crop acreage to feed one and three-quarters million people is absurdly small: 70,000 acres in corn; 48,000 in yams and sweet potatoes; and 41,000 in beans. Not over one acre in ten of the island's 2,176,000 acres is given over to food production, and the poorer land at that. This means that each acre is expected to supply seven to ten people with food. The land needed to supply a decent standard of living, according to the U. S. Department of Agriculture is, roughly, two and a half acres per person. On this basis the people have only a twentieth or twenty-fifth of the needed amount. In cases of this kind food must be imported, but imported food is expensive and when there is no money the only alternative is to do without. The United States is looked upon as the wealthiest nation in the world with

seven percent of the people having about 45 percent of the world's wealth. Do not these million or more American citizens, with rarely enough to eat at any time offer a serious problem, as well as a challenge to our general point of view?

The growing of sugar is a strange problem. Although the most profitable money crop, it is far from being the most profitable crop for the people of the Island. With the transfer of possession the Island was placed within high tariff regulations. Sugar entered the United States free, at an advantage over other competitors. In addition to freedom from tariff regulations, was also the element of nearness to the greatest sugar consuming market. American investors were not slow to realize that fortunes were to be made from sugar in Puerto Rico. All sorts of intermediaries were used in buying up all land suitable for cane growing. At first land was bought at normal or sub-normal prices as many land owners had little faith in the future of the Island under American control. Soon those who held out were offered twice or even twenty times what the land owner thought the land actually was worth. The land owner sold, feeling assured that the land boom would collapse and he then could buy back the land at his own price. That time never came. Sugar cane has taken all the flat coastal lands and is reaching out over the low hills into the interior.

The problem which in a measure overshadows all others is the extraordinary increase in number. The Island was already over-populated when it came into the possession of the United States. At that time there were 953,000 people, a little short of a million for 4400 square miles of mostly mountainous terrain. The number rose to 1,110,000 in 1910; 1,300,000 in 1920; 1,544,000 in 1930; and 1,725,000 in 1935. In other words, in 35 short years the population nearly doubled when the doubling rate for the world is roughly 60 years. There is not only this terrific increase but the rate of increase has been growing. From 1920 to 1930 this rate per annum was 1.69 percent but from 1930 to 1935 the rate rose to 1.95 percent per year. Expressed in another way the density per square mile rose from 200 in 1899 to 330 in 1910, to 382 in 1920; to 454 in 1930; and to 507 in 1935. As there are practically no immigrants, the growth is due almost wholly to excess of births over deaths. With a birth rate that has no relations to possibilities for making even the barest living, the future for the young, especially, is not particularly promising. Emigration thus far has not proved successful. In an area with two people where only one should be and with the number increasing so rapidly, making two blades of grass grow where only one grew before, even if this were possible, cannot give a permanent solution to the problem.

These and a host of other problems are clamoring for solution. Solutions cannot be worked out on the Island. They are a function chiefly of the American government. Whatever plans are made they must include the development of a land-owning middle class with more favorable conditions for the accumulation of local capital. Whatever plans are made for the *rehabilitación de Puerto Rico* more understanding of fundamental conditions and less politics must be brought to bear in the solutions suggested. The people must be taught also that when four grains of sugar are necessary to keep four ants alive a certain number of days, eight ants will require twice the sugar or else some must do without or all must die.

Education, directly or indirectly, may be the solution in curbing this wild propagation of human beings into a world which can offer little other than poverty and misery to the newborn. The educational advances made under America's direction reads like a fairy tale, but it should be remem-

bered that due to poverty the third and fourth grades are still the upper limit for by far the greater number and that many children still never see the inside of a schoolroom because there are no schoolrooms for them to see.

In conclusion, a study of the physical features, the climate, and the general resources of Puerto Rico is meaningless without a larger point of view. A geographic study must not neglect the effect upon the people. A statistical study of the island since American occupation may be made to read like a fairy story of great success. The economic progress made is truly phenomenal, but the welfare of the vast majority of the people has not been improved; if anything it is worse. The island is mountainous, poor in resources. Sugar, due to tariff advantages, has become a highly profitable crop on the good, flat lands. Food crops as a result have been crowded back into the hills, grown on unusually steep slopes. These tropical hill slope soils are thin, highly leached, the grower too poor to buy fertilizer, and the yield abnormally low. With such a very dense population there is not enough food to go around. Bordering these hill slopes of poverty, ignorance, superstition, and misery are the rich, dark-green cane fields producing a "white gold" for investors in a foreign land, ignorant of the hardships and sufferings this income brings to another people, also American citizens but on a neighboring island. It is always relatively easy to find fault but infinitely hard to find even a semi-workable solution. To attempt to outline a course of action is beyond the scope and time of this paper. Too often, however, such solutions have a political rather than a geographic background, a sentimental rather than a factual approach.