

## Restudying *Cañamelar* of *The People of Puerto Rico*

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*This article discusses an unknown restudy of one locale of the People of Puerto Rico Project—my own. From 1980 to 1982 the author did ethnographic fieldwork in Bo. Jauca, Santa Isabel, the research site of Sidney Mintz. Building on Mintz’s work, my goal was to take our shared historical materialism further, into a broader analysis of capitalism, colonialism, class, politics, and power. Where Mintz framed his study within production units, such as Colonia Destino and Central Aguirre, my study began with analysis of the oligarchic structure of the United States sugar industry as a whole, and how it shaped colonial policy. Where the People of Puerto Rico Project reconstructed insular class and political patterns as context for local studies, the restudy took islandwide class structure and political positions as a focus of analysis in itself. Where the earlier work chronicled the rise of a plantation system and rural proletariat, the later study explored their decline—why did the Puerto Rican sugar industry collapse, and how did seemingly homogeneous Jauquenos differentiate into a graded system of stratification? The years from 1948 to 1982 saw other class transformations, as the rural proletariat was recast into the larger, more diffuse, and less politically potent category of “the poor” and life circumstances of all Jauquenos became more individuated and dependent on state power centers in San Juan and Washington.*

*Key Words:* Canamelar, sugar, class, colonialism, capitalism, power

This article is about my own restudy of Jauca, Santa Isabel, the village studied by Sidney Mintz as part of the People of Puerto Rico Project (Steward et al. 1956). I lived in Jauca for fifteen months in 1980–1982 and conducted a few additional years of library research after that. The dissertation *Class Transformations in Puerto Rico* (Ferguson 1988) covered events from the colonial period to 1960, reaching 676 pages, where my advisor Robert Murphy told me STOP! I also wrote a report for a funding agency, “Four Decades in the Life of a Puerto Rican Community,” covering 1940 to the time of my fieldwork (Ferguson 1982).

I saw, and see, myself as coming from the same tradition of anthropology as Mintz, with a similar approach to understanding the world and how it works. History helps one understand what *is*, by how it

*became*. Wanting the maximum amount of historical information, I chose Jauca, because of Mintz's work with the project, and after (e.g., Mintz 1974). With his foundation, combined with the work of other scholars, I could establish a deep basis of understanding and then follow events forward to explain what happened later.

What I hoped to do was to expand Mintz's and the project's focus for a broader investigation of capitalism, colonialism, class, politics, and power. Unlike the earlier work, structures and processes above the village level were taken not just as context for local developments but as arenas of struggle that should themselves be explained. In this article I can only touch on some major points, centered around the period of the project, but also looking before and ahead in time. The first part deals with capitalism and colonialism, with a focus on the sugar industry. The second leaps over discussion of insular politics—which make up much of the dissertation—to focus on class, as seen from Jauca.

Before getting into the larger structures, I want to anticipate one question: is this anthropology? I think so. Around the time of the People of Puerto Rico Project, anthropology was grappling with the study of local communities within larger societies. This was seen as different from established research among tribal peoples, because in those groups—supposedly—the entire social system could be seen in front of the ethnographer's eyes. In retrospect, it was those earlier studies that were of questionable character. In reality, local tribal communities were deeply enmeshed in larger, colonial relationships. They were "part societies" too. Anthropology just screened that out. My thinking was, and still is, that if anthropology involves analyzing the interaction of different social subsystems, that can and should be done for large-scale societies, using written sources in place of informants. This approach is broadly consistent with Steward's idea of levels of sociocultural integration.

Mintz's culture history focused on major production units operating within Santa Isabel: first, on different phases of the hacienda that dominated Jauca, and then, on the United States Central Aguirre Corporation that supplanted it. With that and other research in hand, I expanded study of capitalist sugar production upward and outward, encompassing the United States sugar supply system as a whole.

Sugar had been one of the great trusts, partially broken up by federal action in the early twentieth century. But it remained an oligopoly and an extremely powerful one. It formed a cartel, in a sense like that of OPEC. Like OPEC, the perennial problem was oversupply, which drove prices down.

The domestic United States sugar system was demarcated by the tariff wall. Puerto Rico came within that wall in 1901. The essential

division of United States sugar was between mainland and offshore suppliers. Offshore included the Philippines, Hawaii, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Mainland interests were of three types: cane sugar growers in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas; refiners of raw cane sugar along the East Coast; and sugar beet growers spread across the northern Midwest and western states, which also produced refined sugar.

The three mainland divisions were tight because they had complementary interests. Southern cane growers produced raw sugar at relatively high cost. Refiners processed their sugar but needed much more raw sugar than growers in the South could produce. The refiners and beet growers were united against any other source of table sugar reaching the market. The offshore areas provided the huge volume of additional raw sugar required for United States consumption but would not be allowed to cut into the market or the profitability of southern cane or beet sugar. The sugar cartel turned common market interests into solid political positions through interlocking directorates among governing boards. The combined congressional representation from all the domestic sugar producers made them a nearly unstoppable political force. Offshore producers had a voice in Congress only to the extent that their interests coincided with the committed spokesmen of mainland producers.

World War I led to a sugar drought. United States beet, Cuba cane production, and mainland refining capacity exploded with a favorable market and government policies. Postwar, huge price swings and oversupply led to raising the tariff walls for sugar. Puerto Rico was inside, Cuba outside, but a 20% tariff reduction for Cuba, combined with its basement-level production costs, let its raw sugar come in. The rest of the world was out! Still, production capacity swelled far above market needs. So the tariff was raised to limit Cuban sugar. Under these conditions, Puerto Rican production (also Hawaiian and Philippine) soared. The early 1920s were a time of great expansion by the United States corporation that dominated life in Santa Isabel, Central Aguirre.

Mintz describes Aguirre as the pinnacle of rational, capitalized sugar production. That it was, compared to other Puerto Rican producers (because of favorable ecology and other things). But pinnacles are relative. Hawaiian sugar was a story in itself—outside the cartel and battling for market on the West Coast. Hawaiian capital investment left Aguirre far behind, as in the crucial factor of developing more productive varieties of cane. Aguirre did *some* labor replacement, but its main line was to control more land and squeeze every last drop of blood out of its workers. Making labor cheaper lowered the incentive for increasing productivity. Compared to Hawaii at that time, Puerto Rico and Aguirre were profitable but remained labor intensive.

As oversupply grew in the 1930s, efforts to restrict raw sugar imports by the cartel and its congressional allies pushed the Philippines toward independence and Cuba toward chaos. Cuba was a real issue, for three reasons: it was a big market for United States goods, it was a major arena of United States investment, and the political consequences of a social upheaval could be enormous. So a new system was devised, of assigned quotas dividing up United States market share. Cuba, like Puerto Rico, got a quota. Then, and evermore, assigned quotes consistently favored mainland producers. Although quota limits on Puerto Rican sugar lifted during World War II, there was no longer any chance of long-term expansion of insular production.

The heady, liberal time of the early Roosevelt administration initially did not bring a New Deal to Puerto Rico, but that soon changed. Evidence of economic deprivation was blatant, beyond that of United States dust bowls, and the potential of political unrest was turning into action. Future Governor Rexford Tugwell was sent to investigate island conditions in 1934 and worked with Chancellor Carlos Chardon of the University to develop plans for major structural changes. Soon federal administration of the colony shifted from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior, under liberal Secretary Harold Ickes. Soon, federal policy was about breaking the sugar corporations' hold and implementing a planned economy. At this moment, the United States sugar corporations in Puerto Rico were weakened because they were on the outs with the domestic cartel, and their loud complaining about federal action annoyed the Roosevelt administration. So real changes seemed in store. Then two things happened. First, for various reasons, United States corporations in Puerto Rico got back on the *inside* of the cartel. Second, the Nationalists stepped in, pushing for independence. Events culminating in the Ponce massacre, where nineteen were killed by police and more than 200 wounded, led to a conservative clampdown from Washington. Reform shut down.

World War II brought many changes in Puerto Rico. For colonial policy, the braying concerns of any sugar producers came in behind both preventing uprisings on the island and—the larger goal—creating a postwar Caribbean free of English colonies yet under United States hegemony. Puerto Rico's social conditions and status were a glaring colonial sore, so reform was back on. Tugwell was sent as governor. He quickly established a working relationship with Luis Munoz Marin, whose new Popular Democratic Party, first barely, then solidly, controlled the legislature.

A strike by sugar workers in 1942 was a pivotal moment in the history of Puerto Rico, with martial law a real possibility. Munoz Marin persuaded the men to go back to work. Radical reform geared up,

including enforcement of the long moribund law limiting sugar holdings to 500 acres. Island government sued for divestment of some corporations. Proportional profit sugar farms were started up—just like in the Volga Valley, critics said. The goal of a planned economy and government-run industry was back. In 1943 Tugwell floated the concept of a Commonwealth. It would not fundamentally change the terms of the existing colonial relationship, yet Washington could crow decolonization. But by the late 1940s more “socialist” ideas, such as government-run factories using local materials for a local market or government-administered sugar plantations, disappeared or withered without support. In its place and with much fanfare came Operation Bootstrap, which used tax incentives to attract outside manufacturers to the island but which were unconnected to local materials or markets. Why the change?

In Washington the liberal thrust of the New Deal turned into a retreat approaching route. Congressional conservatives conjured up Socialism in Puerto Rico as their whipping boy. The reaction was championed by Congressman Fred Crawford, a beet sugar manufacturer from Michigan and a member of the Committee on Insular Affairs. He saw the Puerto Rican experiment as not merely a threat to United States sugar corporations on the island, which currently were in good favor with mainland United States sugar interests, but as a clear and present danger sign of making *all* United States sugar production a government-run public utility. The line was drawn. Crawford personally blocked a bill for an elected governor in 1943. Then he took up the cause of overturning all reform laws passed by the *Populares*, to just annul the progress of the War Years.

But in 1945 something critical occurred. That summer, Munoz Marin visited Washington where he conferred with Crawford. Suddenly everything changed. Crawford became Munoz Marin’s biggest backer in Congress. That year, Crawford *sponsored* a bill he had blocked two years before to give Puerto Rico an elected governor—Munoz Marin. I see no other interpretation than that Munoz Marin and Crawford cut a deal. For Munoz it was either that, have the colonial power cancel out five years of progress, or what? From this moment on, while legal divestment proceedings already in the legal pipeline continued, no *new* actions were initiated to enforce the 500 acre law. Aguirre was in the clear.

To understand the development reorientations of the *Popular* government, union politics and party maneuvering over independence and other issues must be foregrounded. But all the ins and outs are far too complicated to go into here. To cut to the chase, it was the new-found support of conservative Republicans that paved the way for the

status plebiscite and the invited-industrial-development program of Fomento. (Teodoro Moscoso, who created Operation Bootstrap, spoke to a supportive Crawford about tax-break development in 1943!) After Munoz Marin and Tugwell, no individual is more important for understanding mid-twentieth century colonial policy than the beet man from Michigan, Fred Crawford.

To wrap up the sugar story, it took some time for United States supply to rebound, during which Puerto Rican production reached its zenith. Then it hit the quota ceiling. Inexorably thereafter, island production fell. As wages rose above their old starvation level, it was price competition that brought down the labor-intensive industry.

Other United States suppliers, especially beet producers, were capitalizing heavily. Aguirre too took steps in that direction. Mintz reports that new machinery in 1948 was seen as the beginning of "the terror"—although the impact would be diffused by migration. Aguirre's sugar production remained high through the 1950s. But it was too late for even Aguirre to catch up with other more capital-intensive areas of the United States system. Plus, the insular government and local capital markets gave it no encouragement all. The writing was on the wall.

A primary goal of my restudy was to show all the links from these (and other) changes in capitalism and colonialism; I examined shifting alignments in insular social divisions and politics to be able to get down to the local level and go back up again, with local reactions affecting larger developments. For this brief exposition I have left this out to focus on a key issue for Mintz's work: class structure in Jauca.

Class is an essential but difficult concept. In the 1940s the Marxian view of classes as collective agents shaping historical process (*für sich*) was a world apart from the North American sociological image of classes as nominal categories within finely graded strata of socioeconomic status. It seems an insuperable theoretical gulf. When Mintz arrived on the South Coast in 1948, the people of Jauca were a Marxian vision. When I got there in 1980 stratification looked much as sociology imagined it—though heavily weighted toward poverty—with great individual differentiation and an unmistakable middle class. Asking how that transition occurred allows theoretical interrogation of the classic question: what is class?

In 1948 *Jauquenos* belonged to a rural proletariat. Nearly every man worked in sugar, and those who didn't were close to it. Leaving out some details—a minority owned their own houses and the plots they stood on—they were landless and propertyless. Most lived in company houses. They barely survived on near-starvation wages from an advanced corporation. They bought mostly from a company store and often owed it unto death. Culturally, they shared practices of

consensual marriage, domestic life, and lifestyle in general. My reconstruction of local culture differs from that of Mintz on the two issues: an absence of religiosity, which was present although it cut out the organized Church; and the relative equality in gender relations, which seem to me to have remained patriarchal. Otherwise, what he wrote checked out.

There were certainly divisive factors in local life, especially in vertical ties to employers, piecework, and strike-breaking. Yet *Jauquenos* were united by extensive ties of family and neighborhood, formally bound in *compadrazgo* and very strong values of equality and unity. Frequent mobility (often forced) and a respectful interpersonal etiquette allowed those fleeing an oppressive boss elsewhere to fit in and helped build solidarity with other sugar communities. The enemy was clear: Aguirre. *Jauquenos* were overtly class conscious. It was *obreros contra capitalistas*. They were ready for class struggle.

In 1980 that world was gone. Aguirre was part of the government, though few *Jauquenos* had anything to do with it any longer. Agriculture still dominated local land but not local life. Cane land was displaced by foreign-run cultivation of fruits and vegetables for export. Many people had no or little work; they survived on food stamps and slight other support from distant capitals. Yet a substantial minority in Jauca was doing well; they worked in education, health, factories, and government.

The structured dependency of bare survival on government payments greatly influenced political attitudes, especially in status. Many asked: how would the poor survive without Washington's *cupones*? Independence came to be seen as a noble dream, but economically impossible. For the middle class, government jobs, including those in education, were thoroughly political. Personnel and policies changed with elections and reflected the spoils of victory. For many trying to make a living, it seemed better to keep quiet and just go along with whomever had the power.

The new, relatively stable, nonagricultural jobs created Jauca's middle class, many members of whom lived in two urbanizations. A major distinguishing characteristic of this middle class was that one of the two working spouses in a household usually held one of those newer, cleaner, better paying jobs; working wives were rarely agricultural workers or dependent on government aid. One clear marker of having arrived in the middle class was the ability to get a credit card, which depended not just on income but on type of work. Although in 1980 *Jauquenos* still clung to an ideology of equality, they had become highly differentiated in their life circumstances and interests. No longer could they act together as a political or historical collective.

How did this differentiation happen? Much is obvious for anyone who cares to look. Major elements involved the collapse of the sugar-based living circumstances; veteran status; the sequential rise and fall of other sorts and circumstances of employment; migration—first seasonal and then long term; variation in years of education, which keyed into employment opportunities, often favoring women; the rise of evangelical religions and a more formal Catholicism; and the steady penetration of partisan *politiquería* into everyday relationships. I am happy to note that race did not become a dividing factor in 1980, any more than it had been in 1948. Also making people different were aspects of domestic life between the dual-earning middle-class families and the poor. It was the rise of a middle class that intrigued me. How did *Jauquenos* sort out from the seeming homogeneity of the rural proletariat?

Within the 1940s sugar proletariat there was a social divide between those who had somewhat better, somewhat more skilled, and more stable year-round work, such as mechanics or ditch diggers, and those who were ordinary field laborers. Although the two layers were not all that different in their living conditions, it was an important distinction. Marriage patterns, for instance, were largely endogamous within layers. As work opportunities changed, the new, good jobs that began in the 1950s went almost without exception to individuals of the upper layer. Once employed, they brought in the people they were closest to, including their spouses. If *compadrazgo* ruled in the 1940s, it was *padrinaje* that ruled from the 1960s onward (as in the often-repeated saying, "If there is no godfather, there will be no baptism"). With this economic and social differentiation, marriage became even more endogamous, effectively closing out opportunities for local upward mobility among the poor.

What does this comparison of 1948 and 1980 show about class, theoretically? I concluded that to understand social classes and their historical significance, it is not enough to look at their internal characteristics, such as those just described. The reality of class at any time is the way local social patterns—similarities, differences, ties, and divisions—articulate with the overall class structuration of society. In contrasting the highly differentiated, politically immobilized class positions of 1980 with the historically potent agents of 1948, four dimensions of articulation must be considered:

1. *Uniformity*. Similarity of place in the social division of labor is critical, but similarities in subcultural lifestyle characteristics have great importance in shaping a common sense of identity.



2. *Distinctiveness* from other class-like groups in an absence of intermediate positions and/or formal barriers to mobility. This applies to both horizontal layers and vertical divisions of types of production.
3. *Common interests*, most importantly in practical material issues, but extending to other life concerns. The more intense these are, the more they will contribute to class character.
4. *Common enemies*. This is related to common interests, but it brings in social conflict. A clear "them" for "us" to work against is more class-defining than impersonal socioeconomic forces.

Between 1948 and 1980, all of these dimensions of insular class and political structure became individually differentiated for *Jauquen*os. It is not merely that their personal situations made them relate to each other in new and different ways, but as individuals they related differently to the insular political economy. The less they shared in how they connected to the world beyond Jauca, the less cohesive they were back home. That is how a radical rural proletariat was transformed into a politically docile status hierarchy in one generation. This is the great dialectic of class: the character and political potential of class positions are a product of a dialectic of local and larger social relations.

But there is one more dimension of a different sort that is crucial for the politics of class: what people know or do not know about larger socioeconomic and political alignments. I argued earlier that Munoz Marin made a deal with Washington reactionaries in 1945, scuttling land reform. That was kept secret. He was still running on land reform in 1948. In Jauca that is what people believed he stood for. There was no doubt from my interviews: those who gave Munoz Marin his great electoral victory as Governor thought he was still on the "socialistic" course that he had abandoned three years earlier.

It was this great *Popular* mobilization campaign, brilliantly propagated through radio and the party newspaper, that reshaped the consciousness of people such as *Jauquen*os from being "workers in the cane," to being part of "*los pobres*." As "*obreros*," they were practiced in radical struggle. At first, their union leaders could act independently and sometimes contrary to Munoz Marin. But once those radical elements were purged from the hierarchy and replaced by Popular loyalists, sugar workers could be yoked together with other island poor from the mountains or the cities, who had no concern with conditions in the cane fields or mills. They all put their faith in the benevolent father Munoz Marin and gave him unchallengeable political power within the island as he led Puerto Rico to the promised land of tax-break dependent development, in a colony called Commonwealth.

## Notes

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