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CONGREGATE AND CONTROL: THE PEASANTRY AND LABOR
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More than forty years after the publication of Eric William's *Capitalism and Slavery*, the study of transitions in modes of labor exaction, or more precisely, of passages into and out of slavery, remains at the core of historical writing on the Caribbean (Williams 1944; Solow and Engerman 1987). Prompted by Williams' stirring formulation of the West Indies' role in the development of Atlantic civilization, and inspired by the boom in slavery studies in the United States and elsewhere, students of the Caribbean have eagerly embraced the study of the rise and decline of the region's slave systems. While much of the scholarship on these issues refers, for obvious reasons, to the English- and French-speaking nations, scholars have paid considerable attention to the Spanish-speaking countries as well (Moreno Fraginals 1978; Scott 1985; Moreno Fraginals, Moya Pons & Engerman 1985; Scarano 1984; Paquette 1988).

Studies on Caribbean slavery stand on firm grounds, of course. Issues of great regional and national significance are at stake in the debates surrounding unfree labor: the peopling of the region by a massive forced migration from Africa; the perverse economics of the plantation system; colonialism and its heritage of neocolonialism and dependence; the segmented social, racial and ethnic milieus fashioned during the European conquest and colonization, and reinforced by successive migrations of different types across centuries; and many other vital contemporary problems. At the very least, then, the abundant slavery scholarship on the Caribbean can point to an impressive political achievement for, having flashed a mirror on the Caribbean past, it has vividly captured images and reflections that embody some of the region's most pressing problems, as well as some of its greatest promises.

It is apparent, however, that the discussion on slavery has overshadowed various noteworthy aspects of the history of Caribbean labor. This is especially true for the Spanish-speaking colonies of Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico. These countries, as is well known, did not tread on the slave plantation path like the British and French colonies did. In fact, as Mintz has observed, a sharp counterpoint describes the evolution of the two groups of colonies (Mintz 1965). Slave systems developed in the British and French possessions soon after the initial European settlement in the early seventeenth century. Transformed speedily into plantation enclaves, which supplied their metropolises with high-demand tropical commodities like sugar, these "classic" slaveholding colonies peaked in the late 1700s, only to decline abruptly after abolition in 1834 and 1848 in the British and French areas, respectively. Spain's possessions, on the other hand, were settled more than a century earlier and experienced a brief cycle of sugar and slavery during the middle decades of the sixteenth century. But after an abrupt collapse of the export economy in the late 1500s, they did not become significant exporters of plantation staples again until the final decades of the eighteenth century (Cuba) and the early years of the nineteenth (Puerto Rico).

The Spanish experience was clearly uncharacteristic, at least by the standards of the classic sugar colonies. Social structures and institutions took shape in Spanish areas in ways quite different from those of their neighbors. Whereas in the British and French colonies, slaves, mostly attached to plantations, comprised the vast majority of the population, in the Spanish islands throughout the 1600s and 1700s enslaved peoples constituted a relatively small minority. Few of them worked on plantations, while most either lived in the urban centers or worked in large, open ranches (*hatos*); in smaller, enclosed ranches called *criaderos* and *corrales*; in farms producing foodstuffs and cash crops like tobacco (*estancias*, *conucos*, and *vegas*), or in the seafaring trades. In each of these situations, moreover, slaves labored alongside free people, many of whom themselves descended from Africans. Because racial distinctions did not have to bolster and perpetuate the primary labor system, color lines were not as sharply drawn in this type of social climate as in the slave societies of the British and the French. Indeed, widespread miscegenation had occurred in the Spanish-occupied zones throughout the early colonial centuries, and by the 1700s free rural folk of African descent comprised the bulk of the islands' population. On top of this largely peasant substratum, there was a relatively small layer of urban artisans and a comparatively weak elite of cattle ranchers, a few sugar and tobacco farmers, smugglers, merchants, clergymen, high-level bureaucrats and military officers.

The Spanish islands therefore do not conform to Williams' schema of rising labor demands in the mercantilist era followed in the nineteenth century by economic decline and forced abolition of an expendable labor system, no longer profitable for the capitalist metropolises. Still, even though slaves were almost always a minority within the rural working population until the reemergence of sugar cultivation in the late 1700s, slavery has emerged as a central theme of Spanish Caribbean historiography in recent years. Inspired by slavery studies elsewhere, economic and social historians of Cuba and Puerto Rico have focused considerable attention on formal aspects of African bondage, whether economic, social or simply institutional in the traditional sense.

This focus, fruitful as it has been, may have exacted a price. Indeed, scholars have not paid an equivalent attention to the broader spectrum of unfree or less-than-free labor systems, of which slavery was but one case, though clearly the most notorious and morally detestable. Thus the focus on slavery may have produced, however unintentionally, a somewhat narrowing or reductionist effect on our understanding of social evolution in the two Antilles. Among students of rural history, inquiry into class dynamics *outside of the formal bounds of slavery* has been consigned to a position of secondary significance behind the analysis of slavery *per se* – that is, behind the study of the slave system in isolation of other social phenomena. The tacit assumption would seem to be that a system of labor with a clear legal definition – i.e., slavery – is socially more significant than competing or alternative systems, which may be less clearly delineated in law, and perhaps therefore less readily conceptualized. In particular, this notion may have impaired our understanding of laboring groups outside of formal bondage, especially of the peasantry. Although peasants of various types comprised the principal laboring rural groups for generations before the rebirth of the plantation system, few have studied them systematically. More broadly, scholars may have overlooked, or at best oversimplified, the manner in which Spanish Caribbean societies evolved from their predominantly peasant beginnings into the segmented, class- and race-stratified formations one encounters at the height of the slave plantation period in the mid-1800s.¹

It would be a fruitful exercise, then, to examine the rebirth of plantation slavery in a more encompassing light, in which property rights in man come into view as one of several competing forms of labor exaction. The need to explore peasant adaptations as part of a continuum of rural labor forms is even more sharply drawn for Puerto Rico than for Cuba. In the smaller of these two colonies, even at the height of the sugar plantation period, slaves were never more than 14 per cent of the population, compared

to more than 40 per cent in Cuba. Still, recent studies have shown for Puerto Rico how a slave-based sugar economy developed swiftly after 1815 in response to such factors as high prices, heightened immigration of foreign capitalists and skilled workers, and Spain's enactment of more liberal trade policies, especially in regard to the slave trade and to commercial relations with the United States. Hence, scholars have had to revise prior conceptions which regarded the island as a special case among Caribbean societies in the age of slavery, in that presumably the development of its sugar sector "owe[d] but little to African labor", in Noel Deerr's informed but now disesteemed opinion (Deerr 1949-50:1, 126). Newer scholarship has shown that before the slave trade ended around 1850, Africans and Afro-creoles in bondage supplied at least 90 per cent of total labor inputs in the more modern and efficient sugar *haciendas* and between 70 and 90 percent in the remaining plantations. Altogether, slaves accounted for the bulk of labor employed in the plantation sector, and only gradually did non-slave workers come to occupy significant occupational slots in the sugar work force. These findings, I might add, have run parallel to equally fruitful discussions of class relations in the coffee areas of the interior, and of related issues like the character of the colonial state and the rise of nationalism (Scarano 1977; Scarano 1984; Ramos Mattei 1981; Curet 1979).

Although historians now have a better grasp of the evolution of Puerto Rican labor systems in the age of expanding commercial agriculture, nagging questions remain: How does one explain the shift toward greater reliance on expensive, imported labor, when a large potential mass of workers existed in an island already densely populated? Why did the elite seem to waver throughout the nineteenth century between supporting slavery, on one hand, and on the other, searching to insure an adequate labor supply through other means, such as coercing peasants into plantation work? And why, if slavery proved so crucial to the most dynamic economic sector – sugar – were abolitionist sentiments so strong throughout the nineteenth century?

Scholars have only begun to address some of these issues, especially that of the rationale for slavery amidst an abundance of potential workers. The most compelling answer, formulated initially by the pioneer sociologist and historian, Salvador Brau (1882), and endorsed more recently by scholars like Mintz (1959), Bergad (1983), Scarano (1984), and Dietz (1986), addresses the issue in somewhat structural terms. The argument essentially states that an abundance of free rural dwellers does not automatically translate into an abundant *labor supply*. This view holds that peasants

would not willingly work on plantations if they could still get access to the land. The proponents of this thesis point to the persistence of a low ratio of farming to available land throughout the nineteenth century. There were, in the apt Spanish phrase, "*mucha gente, pocos trabajadores*" (many people but few workers).

This explanation casts the issue in terms of the familiar open-resources thesis advanced by classic theorists of slavery and imperialism (Nieboer 1900; Patterson 1977; Domar 1979). Where the land-labor ratio is high, the so-called Nieboer-Domar hypothesis goes, free people will not willingly work for low wages and hence laborers must be fixed to the land forcibly. Of course, scholars have modified this proposition to take into account special conditioning factors, such as the labor process itself and the workers' attitudes toward productive practices, processing technologies, and living and working conditions in a given industry or economic activity. Such clarification of the classic hypothesis on colonial slavery is essential for Caribbean studies, as it allows one to explain how the special association between sugar and slavery in the region originated and maintained itself even as the land-labor ratios varied considerably from island to island and from one epoch to another. Thus, ratifying what students of Caribbean history have long surmised, recent work in the demography of plantation life has revealed that it was the ecological and technological arrangements of sugar production which degraded workers the most. Sugar consumed human beings; it heaped excessive labor demands on them and submitted them to extremely arduous health and subsistence conditions attendant upon such labor demands (Higman 1976; Craton 1978; Higman 1984; Dunn 1987. That these human beings were slaves, and not people with choices concerning their residence and labor (and those of their kin), is explicable in light of the perpetuation of the old-style, voracious sugar-plantation labor process in the Caribbean area at least through the nineteenth century.

For an historian of Puerto Rico, the recent emphasis on the impact of the labor process of tropical sugar-making, and on the usefulness of this distinction for understanding the adoption of slavery in cane sugar areas, is especially welcome. For in studying the revival of that island's slave system in the nineteenth century, one is struck by how slavery came to be associated so closely – alas, almost exclusively – with sugar, in the context of a diversified economy and society that featured other export-agricultural activities (e.g., coffee and tobacco) and a large peasant sphere. Indeed, few cases illustrate the economic allure of the rights exercised by masters over their slaves better than Puerto Rico in the period 1815 to 1850. Likewise, in few other instances can it be demonstrated so clearly

how juridically free persons resisted being forced into the demeaning and quite simply dangerous conditions that prevailed on sugar plantations.

In this island during the sugar boom of the first half of the nineteenth century, beginning sugar planters faced a peculiar dilemma: either they adopted slavery, whose lifeline from Africa faced a serious legal challenge after the enactment of the 1817 Anglo-Spanish treaty to abolish the Spanish colonial slave trade, or they elaborated some way – presumably involving remuneration, coercion, or both – of organizing the labor of the abundant free population. In the short run, most planters chose the risks of contraband slave trading over the economic disadvantages of peasant labor. Peasants, the planters figured, were undependable and restless, and therefore unfit for the intensive labor imposed by time-proven cultivation methods and by the standard sugarmaking techniques and machinery. Since peasants viewed salaried labor as an adjunct or complement to independent cultivation, performed on their own or someone else's land, they naturally tended to work only for as much time as was necessary to reach their expected level of monetary income. Absenteeism, much loathed by planters and managers for its disruptive impact, consequently ran rampant among peasant laborers on Puerto Rican plantations. This was especially true of peasants who were employed in sugar production during the apogee of slavery, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Yet, while the Nieboer-Domar hypothesis, as complemented by the more recent discussion on the labor process in sugar, no doubt has considerable explanatory power, it presents certain difficulties to the historian. One of its shortcomings has been pointed out by Walter Rodney, O. Nigel Bolland and others, who have cautioned against using the land-labor formula too mechanically in trying to explain the rise of the peasantry in the British West Indies after Emancipation. These scholars rightly claim that the availability of land may be in itself a function of class relations and state-imposed restrictions (Rodney 1981; Bolland 1981; Scarano 1989). Moreover, for the late-developing plantation colonies of the Caribbean and, more specifically, for Puerto Rico, the thesis presents yet another difficulty. Not regarding the making of labor systems as a dynamic and imaginative social process, proponents of the structural explanation have yet to show in the Puerto Rican case how the shift toward slave-produced sugar after 1815 dovetailed with prior attempts by landholding groups to fashion a suitable work force from various constituents, particularly from the peripatetic native peasantry. There is, in short, too much emphasis on the structural factors and not enough on the historical ones.

In Puerto Rico there were attempts at labor control which mirrored the growth of export agriculture before the onset of the sugar boom proper.

The elites' project for new social relations in the countryside combined, moreover, with Bourbon reforms that in the waning years of the eighteenth century attempted to strengthen the colonial bond and thus ensure the stability of a colony regarded by military strategists as a key player in imperial defense. Invariably, the social agenda of landowners and bureaucrats became entangled with demographic and agrarian changes whose direction, velocity, and consequences few people could foresee and much less control.

I would argue that the discussion on Puerto Rican rural relations in general, and on slavery in particular, should not lose sight of these early efforts at experimentation with, and control of, peasant labor. I would further suggest that by looking at these initial steps in the direction of more effective labor control one begins to appreciate the complexity of the slavery issue in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico. In this light, the island's claim to peculiarity or uniqueness among slave societies would not seem to lie in its scant use of slave labor in the export sector, as some analysts have claimed, but in the delicate coexistence of mainly incompatible approaches to the problem of rural social relations – that is, in the rivalry between two visions or discourses, each one corresponding to a different model of labor exaction. I would suggest, finally, that this dichotomy originated in the later 1700s, a period widely regarded by historians as a prologue to the plantation-style developments of the post-1815 period. In looking at how social processes and imperial policies shaped these competing visions of rural life, the discussion that follows is perforce preliminary, since much of the requisite groundwork on the economic and social history of the period is still wanting.

In Puerto Rico the agrarian situation unraveled in fascinating ways during the second half of the eighteenth century. As in other so-called peripheral areas of the Spanish empire, the economic and demographic foundations of insular society underwent rapid changes during the climax of Bourbon reformism in the age of Charles III (Morales Carrión 1952). These changes, to be sketched below, entailed a reexamination of both landholding practices and social relations in the countryside. More significantly for our purposes, they gave rise to parallel but competing visions concerning the manner in which labor should be appropriated and organized in the export-oriented economic sector. It was in the second half of the eighteenth century that these two visions – the pro-slavery discourse, chiefly associated with the more powerful elements of the sugar bourgeoisie, and the discourse on peasant coercion, articulated by more traditional elements of the landholding groups – became fixtures of Puerto Rican elite ideology. In what follows, I will briefly look at how these visions emerged from the structural changes of the Bourbon period.

Until about 1750, Puerto Rico deserved its reputation as a backwater of the Spanish empire (Picó 1986; Sued Badillo and López Cantos 1986). Its scarce population of 20 to 40,000 at the time – already much larger than it had been in the seventeenth century – endured largely subsistence conditions. Scattered about the densely forested coastal plains and interior highlands, they dedicated themselves primarily to cattle raising, forestry, and yeoman farming. Commercial exchanges with Spain and its colonies were infrequent and largely undependable; it was more common for the islanders to trade with smugglers along the unprotected coasts than to observe the rules of Spanish imperial exclusivism.

While the vast majority of the people lived dispersed throughout the rural landscape, urban life was a privilege of the very few. Though colonists had organized several small villages in the late 1600s, only San Juan and San Germán existed as organized towns with city governments. This territorial division had not changed at all since the Crown had chartered the first municipalities at the time of the Conquest. The largest of the two towns was, of course, the walled and fortified capital city, one of Spain's primary defensive outposts in the Caribbean region. The colony's chief administrative and commercial, as well as military, center, San Juan was home to a motley assortment of bureaucrats and soldiers from various parts of the Spanish dominions, a growing number of whom elected to settle in the island at the conclusion of their service. The city also harbored a relatively small group of creole and peninsular landowners and merchants, a Puerto Rican version of the Spanish American colonial oligarchy. The landed group devoted itself chiefly to cattle ranching, although a few owned sugar-making haciendas that produced molasses and rum for internal consumption.

On the eve of the Bourbons' effort to place the colonial system on more rational, profitable, and secure grounds, one of the striking features of this semi-isolated colony was the highly idiosyncratic Puerto Rican rural folk which no doubt owed some of their peculiar features to the character of original settlement. Many of these rural inhabitants descended from persecuted or victimized people, occupants of the underbelly of the Spanish empire: fugitive *encomienda* and enslaved Indians, some of them native Arawak but most probably Caribs brought over as slaves from neighbouring islands after the aboriginal population had been depleted soon after the Conquest; African and Afro-creole maroons; Spanish soldiers who deserted from the feared and detested San Juan *presidio*, whose reputation was so hellish that in the early years of the seventeenth century, a military commander en route to the Spanish Main with a battalion of fresh troops exclaimed that he could not in good conscience force any of them to stay

in San Juan, for it would be like condemning them to “eternal slavery” (López Cantos 1975:221); and, finally, other Spanish deserters, mainly from the imperial fleets that used to stop over on the island’s western shore to take on water and provisions. Repeated attempts to capture and punish these fugitives had failed. By the middle of the eighteenth century, colonial officials tacitly understood that no matter how illegitimate these people’s claim to citizenship may have been at first, they were now a demographic asset. In an underpopulated strategic possession threatened continually by a tightening circle of adversaries, Spanish authorities obviously preferred settlement of any kind to no settlement at all.

Partly because of its peripatetic origins, and partly on account of certain features of the agrarian regimen that I will discuss shortly, a significant proportion of the Puerto Rican peasantry had evolved into a restless lot – indeed, a roving, itinerant mass of people. Members of this group, collectively known as *desacomodados* (literally, “those who lack accommodations”) roamed about the territory searching for land to squat on. Few stayed in one location for any length of time. They could not obtain land through legal means, as the usual practice was to grant usufruct licenses to powerful or well connected settlers; only rarely did the poorest folks receive the pertinent *mercedes*. Thus, paradoxically, there emerged in this fertile and sparsely cultivated island a sizable group of rural dwellers who were unable to secure permanent access to the land. Of course, some landowners made the best of the situation, allowing the landless to live on their holdings in exchange for occasional services. Cultivators living on someone else’s land in this manner were known as *agregados* (loosely, “hangers-on”).

As island population growth accelerated in the second half of the eighteenth century, the landless group multiplied. Between 1765 and 1800, the total population grew from 45,000 to 155,000, an advance which averaged a very high 3.55 percent per annum for the period.² The growth rate was highest for blacks and mulattoes, in both the free and the slave categories; hence, the population explosion affected the most those groups which would continue to nourish the ranks of the dispossessed peasantry. Because of the peasantry’s troublesome penchant for itinerancy and independence, its demographic increase in the late eighteenth century carried with it profound, if also contradictory, implications. For one, the population explosion raised the elites’ and imperial officials’ interest in the racially mixed, destitute peasantry as a potential source of labor, at a time of increasing opportunities for commercial farming. Second, the group’s mobility challenged the elites’ capability for social control. *Desacomodados* lived on the fringes of society. For the State, this meant that they were

outside the reach of militia conscription – a mounting concern after Spain's defeat in the Seven Years' War. At the same time, the peasantry's demographic upsurge worried Church leaders, who probably realized that rural folk would continue to live being influenced only minimally by the pitifully small secular clergy. These preoccupations converged in the second half of the eighteenth century around a larger socioeconomic problem: the antiquated nature of agrarian structures. To Spanish authorities, new modes of appropriating and using land seemed an appropriate response to the challenges posed jointly by the expansive landless peasantry, the opening up of commercial opportunities, and the international rivalries of the age.

Thus, in order to assess Puerto Rican efforts at recasting the rural population into a reliable work force and a dependable citizenry, one must examine the agrarian problem and its solutions as contemporaries conceived them. In the latter 1700s the agrarian issue essentially comprised three interrelated sets of problems: 1) land was too concentrated and underexploited; 2) population growth under existing rules of tenure and use strained the population's capacity to sustain itself; and 3) the preeminence of extensive animal husbandry strangled the more alluring forms of agricultural development (i.e., export agriculture). Antiquated structures prevented the resolution of these interconnected problems. Beginning in the first half of the sixteenth century, much of the island's productive land had been partitioned into *hatos* where herds of cattle roamed freely and into *criaderos* and *corrales* for raising *ganado menor* (pigs, goats, sheep, and other small animals) (Wales 1973; Gil-Bermejo 1970; Coll y Toste 1914). In 1775, the San Juan municipal council reported the existence of nearly 300 such *hatos*, a number that had not changed much in two centuries. Collective possession of *hato* lands was the norm. Most units had several shareholders, each of whom was entitled to raise a maximum number of animals, according to the value of his or her share. As was the case with all Puerto Rican landholding, *hato* titles did not confer property rights, which the Crown reserved for itself. For a fee, the cabildos of San Juan and San Germán allotted and legalized landholding through the concession of usufruct titles. This practice allowed cabildo functionaries, who for the most part were members of old elite families, to reward relatives, acquaintances and business partners with significant land concessions. By the early 1700s newly settled military officers and high clergyman received a large share of new land *mercedes* as well.

This agrarian scenario, in which *hatos* were predominant and property rights on land were not yet established, began to show signs of strain

as the first half of the 1700s progressed. By the latter part of the century, traditional land tenure and land use practices presented a spiny dilemma. Unable to adapt to new conditions, the *hato* system began to disintegrate. The challenge to traditional institutions came from several fronts. With the island population growing at a faster rate than ever before, there was a pressing need to expand the agricultural frontier in order to accommodate an increasing number of subsistence cultivators. Furthermore, new export opportunities arose with the development of trade with Spain and the sister colonies, as well as with Saint Domingue, other French, Dutch, and Danish colonies, and English-speaking North America. These opportunities related primarily to coffee, which showed alluring commercial possibilities soon after its introduction in the 1730s. The coffee bush adapted peculiarly well to the topographical and ecological conditions of Puerto Rico. Further, its cultivation suited the colonists' limited financial resources, given the low initial outlay required for its commercial cultivation. Under the weight of such pressures, both imperial functionaries and many colonists – including not a few enterprising *hateros* who wished to position themselves for a piece of the action in commercial agriculture – began to clamor for changes in the *hato* system, increasingly regarding the archaic tenure situation as an obstacle to agricultural growth. It became clear to them that neither the concept of open grazing, with its requirement that cultivators fence off their fields if they were to coexist with the herds, nor the practice of collective usufruct could accommodate farming particularly well. If the arable area were to expand, revenues increase, and the social situation stabilized, authorities would have to promote the break-up of *hatos* and the apportionment of their lands among individual farmers.

After 1750 a consensus gradually developed among landholders and policy-makers on the merits of dissolving *hatos* in prime lowland terrain and displacing the herds to less desirable highland areas. But such a project raised thorny procedural, philosophical and legal issues. At stake were questions of fair distribution of Crown assets, the size and quality of the labor supply, the potentially beneficial effects of agrarian development on colonial revenues, issues related to the military preparedness of the civil population, and Crown notions of social equilibrium and equitable distribution of the colony's resources. Having failed to apply in Puerto Rico its policy of *composición de tierras* or sale of titles over formerly occupied lands, the Crown decided in 1758 to grant its insular vasals the rights of property over their lands, though another 20 years would pass before such a grant actually became law. After 1778, property titles would be exchanged for a modest land tax to support the arming and clothing of the local militia.

The social dimension of these land tenure reforms comprise a fascinating, unexplored chapter in Puerto Rican history. Clearly, one of the Crown's main reasons for pushing land reform was a concern for the fate of *desacomodados* and *agregados*, whose eruptive population increase few could ignore by the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Officials on both sides of the Atlantic recognized this group's socially destabilizing potential. In 1751, for instance, members of the San Juan town council determined that it was in the public interest to break up two *hatos* in the highland sections of Manatí, a district several leagues west of San Juan, in order to redistribute some of their lands among the "many poor *desacomodados*" of the locale. And in a passing reference to social unrest, the cabildo mentioned that the need to reestablish peace and quiet among the district's inhabitants justified its decision, which injured the claims of the *hatos*' legitimate occupants (Municipio de San Juan 1954:4-5).

The Manatí affair prompted the earliest recorded declarations of concern over the unsettling potential of the *desacomodado* question. From that point on, governmental correspondence contained frequent allusions to the landless peasantry, usually phrased alarmingly in terms of the necessity for *medidas de policía* (literally "regulating measures") to forestall more serious trouble. Such pronouncements suggest that the government became increasingly nervous about the preservation of internal order and social equilibrium, though officials sometimes couched this concern in physiocratic language, which called for government action in nurturing the development and prosperity of a numerous class of small farmers.

At the time of the Manatí incident (1751), however, most *hateros* were not yet convinced of the wisdom of government efforts to distribute surplus – and understandably marginal – lands among *desacomodados* and *agregados*. Thus, when in 1758 the Crown attempted to confer on the colonists property rights on lands they occupied in usufruct, governor Antonio Guazo Calderón decided to keep secret the contents of the Royal Cédula until a commission which he had appointed to dispense "steeply graded and uncultivated lands" (*terrenos montuosos, é incultos...*) among landless families had finished its work. The Governor justified the action to his superiors in Madrid by playing on the theme of the *hateros*' greed, "for each one [of them]," Guazo wrote, "possessed by selfishness would like to own the entire island..."³ On account of the Governor's bold decision, the far-reaching royal grant was not published or enforced on this occasion.

As late as 1758, then, *hateros* resisted the idea of accommodating the landless in uncultivated and admittedly marginal lands on their estates. But this initial opposition to the government's redistributive policy gradually

diminished over the next twenty or thirty years, as the potential benefits of the formula became clear to the landholders. After 1765, as I have said, Puerto Rican agriculture entered a period of rapid expansion due to the easing of restrictions on trade with peninsular and other colonial ports, the spending of several million pesos on military construction in San Juan, a liberalization of the slave trade, and an intensification of commercial relations with the surrounding plantation colonies, particularly Saint Domingue. With coffee, tobacco and other cash crops becoming increasingly popular among farmers, the cry for land tenure reforms – the break-up of *hatos* and the obtainment of property titles – gathered momentum. By the mid-1770s many of the larger *hato* owners had come around to the idea that reform would be in their best interests. The proposed reforms would simultaneously allow them to extend the agricultural frontier and to obtain full property rights, and therefore better control, over their lands. The possibility of capitalizing on surplus acreage also piqued their interest. Since many *hateros* had gone into farming or were poised to do so by the 1770s and 1780s, the reform agenda appeared more desirable than before. The need for capital and labor now overcame the prior resistance.

But *hateros* began to see reforms as a blessing in disguise for another reason. When implemented properly, the proposed measures could permanently settle itinerant *desacomodados* in concentrated farming villages. *Hateros* were probably aware that such concentrated communities of cultivators would augment the labor supply, particularly if towns and villages evolved from them, as expected. True, questions on how to discipline a nonslave labor force for a harsh, plantation-style regimen remained unanswered. But any quantitative increase in available laborers had to be welcome, as demands for labor power had multiplied faster than landholders with modest financial means could fill with expensive, imported African slaves.

Furthermore, the *hateros'* acceptance of reform coincided with Crown efforts to promote concentrated, village living. When Marshall Alejandro O'Reilly visited the island in 1765, he had been shocked to see how acutely rural and dispersed the colonists were. He had discovered in dismay that most people lived beyond the reach of civil, military or ecclesiastical authority. This intolerable state of affairs threatened the security of one of Spain's valued strategic possessions and might even compromise the integrity of the Empire as a whole. O'Reilly proposed to reconcentrate the Puerto Rican population into a prudent number of towns and villages (O'Reilly 1970). The Crown, for whom O'Reilly became unofficial advisor on things Puerto Rican, enthusiastically embraced the idea. Thus, when

Charles III signed the second and definitive decree granting property rights on land in 1778, he authorized the creation of three new *villas* or municipalities and expressly instructed his officials to work toward chartering more parishes and towns. Some functionaries had already been working toward that goal; for example, governor Miguel de Muesas, who counted among his proudest achievements the founding of seven new towns during the six years of his tenure (Ortiz 1983). According to one observer, *desacomodados* constituted the settler majority in one of these new towns, Cayey de Muesas (named after the sitting governor); at the time of his writing (1775), these settlers “[gave] abundant evidence of industriousness (Miyares González 1957:89-90).” Other sources point to an analogous connection between town foundings and reconcentrations of landless peasants in other parts of the island.

As the *hato* system gradually disintegrated and farming began to dominate the Puerto Rican rural scene, then, the Crown and its once reluctant collaborators, the *hateros*, could point to some meaningful achievements in the area of labor control. Their cooperation had begun to turn the corner on peasant itinerancy and undependability. Turning that corner may have been a significant step for employers of labor who did not require constancy in work attendance and machine-like discipline in the performance of productive tasks. On the other hand, it may not have been good enough for the sugar plantations, an economic sector that, as we have said, due to its technical complexity, demanded uninterrupted inputs of labor and a stricter worker discipline. After 1815, when sugar cane began to emerge as the dominant crop in the lowlands, planters in Guayama, Ponce, and elsewhere employed peasant laborers to clear the original brush and plant the first crops (Scarano 1984). But the same planters quickly turned to the slave trade for a solution to their permanent labor demands, evidently because peasants were only willing to work for low wages and under extreme duress for short periods, when they needed cash. Once that need was satisfied, peasants preferred the relative autonomy of their own plots, where family labor filled essentially minimal consumption demands.

One must be careful, therefore, not to read too much success into the labor-control experiments of the late 1700s. For one, the thrust for agrarian change diminished in the waning years of the eighteenth century, so that the definitive break-up of the *hato* system had to await the early decades of the 1800s (in the lowlands) and even the middle years of that century (in the interior highlands). Second and more importantly, a significant portion of the Puerto Rican peasantry continued in its irrepressible old ways well after the Crown’s concern for the problem of rural indiscipline

in its Caribbean colony had abated. This was the impression, at least, of leading landowner spokesmen. When in 1809 Don Pedro Irizarri, on behalf of the San Juan *cabildo*, presented a species of *cahier des doléances* to Ramón Power, island representative to the Seville Junta, the question of agricultural labor occupied a lengthy part of his discussion (Ramírez de Arellano 1936). Irizarri condemned the *agregado* system as injurious to the welfare of the colony. But he fell short of endorsing slavery, a system which, in his opinion, carried the seed of its own destruction, as the experience of nearby Haiti tragically showed. Significantly, in expressing disapproval of the African slave trade, Irizarri alluded to the short-sightedness of the *bando negro* or “black camp”, a clear reference to opposing visions of how rural labor should be organized. In this patrician’s view, the solution to the problem of agricultural work was not slavery but immigration from the Canary Islands and New Spain, as well as the eradication of the *agregados*. To Irizarri and other contemporaries, the creole peasant adaptation seemed, now more than ever, a proper target of rural reform. Though it is doubtful that Irizarri had anything to do with it, only a few years later the government renewed its harassment of the landless peasantry. This time it launched a protracted campaign against the “parasitic” *agregados* which culminated in the compulsory labor law of 1849, the infamous *Reglamento de Jornaleros* (Dietz 1986:42-53; Gómez Acevedo 1970; Mintz 1951).

Thus the late eighteenth-century dynamic between *hateros* and bureaucrats, on one side, and *desacomodados* and *agregados* on the other, may well have originated and set the tone for a peculiarly Puerto Rican discourse of coercion and control (Duany 1985; González 1980). At a later date, that discourse would become a fixture of Puerto Rican upper-class ideology, a prime conceptual ingredient in the protracted insular debate over slavery and free labor.

NOTES

1. Although a colony of Spain until 1795, and again from 1809 to 1821, Santo Domingo was a special case due to the spill-over effects of the Haitian Revolution. Therefore, much of the discussion that follows focuses on Cuba and Puerto Rico.
2. The data on population are from a 1765 census compiled by *visitador* O'Reilly (O'Reilly 1970), and from annual summaries remitted to Spain by insular authorities in the final quarter of the century. Some of these annual censuses have been published (Gil-Bermejo 1970: 32-33, Abbad y Lasierra 1970:153; Brau 1906:199). A nearly complete set for the period 1779-1802 exists in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville.

3. Antonia Guazo Calderón to D. Julián de Arriaga, March 24, 1759, Archivo General de Indias (Sevilla, Spain), Indiferente General 1661.

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