David M. Stark

Slave Families and the Hato Economy in Puerto Rico. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. xi + 251 pp. (Cloth US\$ 74.95)

In this important book, David Stark proposes that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the Spanish Caribbean, slavery played a key role in a “hato economy”—an economy centered on live-stock production, in contrast to the Caribbean’s sugar-based plantation regimes. In the absence of adequate archival data and plantation accounts, he mined parish records on slave baptisms, marriages, and deaths—the de facto civil registry of the Spanish colonies—covering diverse zones of the island.

The first chapter presents an overview of the hato economy: large open-range ranches, often owned collectively by families linked by marriage, diversified agriculture (sugar, tobacco, coffee, food crops), woodcutting, and extensive maritime contraband with the nearby “sugar islands.” Chapter 2 focuses on the demography of the hato economy and its labor regime. Using studies on other slave economies as a framework, Stark depicts a smaller and less regimented labor force than in sugar production, with a more balanced sex ratio, more favorable conditions for marriage and family life, a preponderance of natural reproduction, and infrequent imports through the slave trade. He looks particularly at Arecibo, the island’s main livestock region, and Coamo, which led in tobacco, foodstuffs, and coffee production. Slaveholding was relatively widespread (25 percent of households in Arecibo, 35–40 percent in Coamo) but averaged only three and four slaves per household, respectively.

Chapter 3 focuses on the low volume of the slave trade to Puerto Rico and its diverse ethnic origins. On the late eighteenth century, Stark draws out important questions from inconsistent data on slave imports, the interisland trade, slave population growth, individual and multiple baptisms of African-born slaves, and the ratio of black to mulatto slaves. Chapters 4 and 5 present the core of Stark’s argument on the importance of slave marriage and natural reproduction. Through detailed statistical analysis, he addresses the frequency and stability of slave marriages, spousal selection, and childbearing patterns in formal and consensual unions, establishing a significant frequency of slave marriage and stable consensual unions with several children.

Stark’s “back-door” approach to the history of Puerto Rican slavery, largely based on parish records, yields useful estimates on a number of issues where previously there had been only informed speculation. He is well aware of the limits of his research strategy, and notes its drawbacks—including the records’ silence about the cultural meanings of baptism and matrimony for slaves and slaveowners. He also reports data that do not conform to expectations, for

instance a higher incidence of slave marriages in municipalities that led the development of sugar production.

Stark is quite correct in rejecting characterizations of Puerto Rico (and the Spanish Caribbean generally) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as merely “backward,” instead portraying an active, diverse “hato economy” where slavery played an important role. Yet a closer look at the Spanish Caribbean would also reveal that Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico were actually *not* “hato economies.” Pinning the overall characterization of these societies on the hatos overstates their importance and may replicate the ways in which “plantation economies” were approached before scholars in recent decades demonstrated their complexity (including crops beyond sugar, varied forms of slave resistance, peasant social relations, cattle-raising, and exogenous contraband circuits). A more promising approach might foreground *estancieros* (small and medium landholders), *agregados* (tenant laborers), *desacomodados* (nominally landless) and, indeed, medium and large landholders partly of hatero origin. This budding livestock-sugar sector promoted the rapid growth of sugar production in the late eighteenth century and opened the way for the development of a major slave-based sugar industry in the nineteenth.

In the eighteenth century, however, Puerto Rico was not yet a “slave society” ... if it ever became one. Ninety percent of its population was free and mostly mixed-race. Stark argues that slaves played a prominent role in livestock, tobacco, and coffee, but the low proportion of slaves in the general population is manifest. In Puerto Rico as in the rest of the Spanish Caribbean these matters await contextualized local/regional studies that can make the best of limited archival evidence. In the absence of such research, coupling slavery and the slave family with an overly abstract “hato-economy” model may underestimate the significance of various historical actors and processes.

Using innovative research strategies, Stark underscores the significance of slavery in the island and clarifies many important aspects of slave life and labor in seventeenth- and (particularly) eighteenth-century Puerto Rico. He also documents important slave-family patterns, questions Caribbean slave-plantation models, and furthers discussion on alternative conceptualizations. In doing so, he has significantly advanced our understanding of Spanish Caribbean society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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