César J. Ayala & Laird W. Bergad, *Agrarian Puerto Rico: Reconsidering Rural Economy and Society, 1899–1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xvii + 307 pp. (Cloth US\$ 99.99)

César Ayala and Laird Bergad set out to revise a crucial aspect of agrarian economy and society that is often insisted upon in Puerto Rican historiography: that the impact of U.S. rule after 1898 and large-scale U.S. sugar corporations wrought landlessness and rural impoverishment. Their earlier work—on coffee in the nineteenth century (Bergad) and sugar in the early twentieth (Ayala)—had led them to question this. Bergad found land concentration alongside landlessness, subsistence *agregados*, and a laboring class in the central coffee-producing *cordillera central* long before 1898. Ayala, for his part, documented fluidity with *colonos* growing most of the cane on farms of all sizes in coastal U.S. sugar *centrales* in the period under scrutiny in this, their collaborative study.

Their joint venture goes far beyond that one aspect, providing a nuanced analysis to unpick homogenizing generalizations. Analyzing sugar, coffee, and tobacco, Puerto Rico's expanding third major sector in the U.S. orbit, they mount impressive arguments to debunk a plethora of long-held conceptions—some of which, for tobacco, Teresita Levy had earlier challenged in *Puerto Ricans in the Empire* (2014). From hitherto unused tax records in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, they amassed statistical data to assess ten municipal districts, comprising the largest sugar coastal areas, western coffee highlands, and eastern tobacco highlands, covering 73,256 properties, for the years 1905, 1915, 1925, and 1935. Their objectives were to compile a statistical profile of agrarian structures and compare this with data from U.S. census records for 1899, the censuses of 1910, 1920 and 1930, and the special census of the Puerto Rican Administration in 1935. They also mined recently available data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series for Puerto Rico for 1910, 1920, and 1930 to construct demographic patterns.

In the process, Ayala and Bergad unearth answers to key questions. For example, analyzing methodologies used for data collection in the decennial census reports, it became clear that the supposed 1910–20 decline in small farms did not occur. Census takers were simply instructed not to count farms of less than three acres producing less than \$100 in value. The 1899 census had indicated that there was not then an extensive smallholder farming class, and the tax records corroborated no significant change over 1899–1935.

More broadly, they grapple with the overarching question of rural continuities and discontinuities in Puerto Rico's transition from colonialism under one empire, Spain, to neocolonialism under another, the United States. They estab-

lish that landholding patterns dominating rural society carried over after 1898, and both large property owners and small farmers benefitted from a U.S. tariff-free regime for sugar and tobacco, while coffee also managed to recover, even though landlessness and rural impoverishment remained widespread.

Of the many conundrums left for others to study is why the myth of *la desaparecida legión de propietarios*, to which they dedicate an opening chapter, should have persisted. They allude to eroding usufruct rights and exploitative credit and crop delivery regimes; political agendas, including among historians; and “memory loss,” which would take us into the realm of culture, beyond the reach of their primarily quantitative approach. Three chapters contain succinct, *longue-durée* histories of coffee, sugar, and tobacco, respectively. The remaining chapters switch tenor, providing a thematic cross-sector, in-depth breakdown of economic transformation and demographic change, land concentration/fragmentation, land ownership, and land tenure patterns. Densely documented as they are, they inevitably contain repetition, but this does not detract from their intrinsic value.

At the outset there is welcome contextualization of Puerto Rico vis-à-vis the Hispanic Caribbean territories of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and also the Philippines—which likewise transitioned from the Spanish to the U.S. orbit after 1898. As a historian of Cuban tobacco, however, allow me to comment on four interrelated aspects that drew my attention in their incursion into tobacco agriculture. First is the downplaying of the vulnerability of the tobacco farm sector to the continuing power of landed property and prevalent dealer exclusivity and malpractice. Second is that smallholder tobacco farming might evince male ownership or tenure, yet women and children were actively involved; a gender and familial analysis regarding tobacco and other farm and household activities crucial to the smallholder economy is missing from their account. Third is that their important analysis of food and livestock alongside tobacco again contains no gender analysis. Fourth, beyond the scope of their study, is the absence of agency in the tobacco farm sector to maneuver and resist, which has been so well documented by, for example, Teresita Levy and Juan José Baldrich (in *Sembraron la no siembra* [1988]).

Notwithstanding, there can be no doubting that this rigorous study throws down the gauntlet for future scholarship.

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