CHAPTER TWO

ANEMIA AND AUTONOMY

The colonial relationship shaped by the U.S. military officers and subsequent colonial administrators reflected two dominant concerns. The first and most immediate concern surrounded the rural disorder and violence that accompanied the invasion. Although military officers relied on forceful metaphors, their soldiers were made up primarily of volunteers who soon shipped off to the United States. As a result, officers and colonial administrators tried to walk a fine line between their interest in distinguishing U.S. colonial from its Spanish predecessor and stabilizing a colonial order. They seemed to wobble in this balancing act when a devastating hurricane hit the island less than a year after the U.S. military government had been established on the island. Their authority was increasingly challenged by shifting political alliances and the increased worker mobilization. Recognizing that their authority was threatened at the local level, U.S. colonial administrators resorted to interventions on municipal governments in order to stabilize the U.S. colonial order. In order to implement these interventions, U.S. colonial authorities centralized key decision-making power, but worked with and selectively relied on native politicians, legislators, and administrators.

When U.S. officers established the military government, they treated the island’s sanitation conditions with emergency measures. More emergencies followed a year later, when the 1899 San Ciriaco hurricane wreaked havoc, resulting in extensive loss of life and property. The occupying military force implemented relief measures, including a provisional tent hospital, to deal with the wounded and the dramatic increase in disease. The emergency work of establishing colonial order was aided by the U.S. Army medic who headed this hospital, Dr. Bailey K. Ashford. He claimed he discovered the true scientific cause of “the Puerto Rican epidemic” and the source of Puerto Rico’s economic problems. For Ashford, the epidemic was the rural peasants’ anemia that made them weak, lazy and inefficient workers. The ensuing campaign to eradicate this epidemic, and the hookworm to which it was attributed, became the early colonial administration’s greatest success, winning approval among Puerto Rican medical professionals, colonial administrators, U.S. presidents and contemporary Puerto Rican historians.
The hookworm campaign became a symbol for a variety of transformations related to U.S. colonial rule. The parasite's appearance under the microscope ushered in the earliest large-scale medical intervention into the lives of what had previously been considered a largely inaccessible rural peasantry. The campaign's directors argued hookworm infection was particularly marked among the white peasants of the island's rural interior region where it seemed to suck not only the blood of its host, but also the fortunes of a region known for coffee production. The hookworm's appearance coincided with the disaster that compromised coffee production and accompanied U.S. colonial policies that undermined the industry's recovery. Similarly, the hookworm's hosts were made increasingly visible as patients in the field hospitals and dispensaries that structured the campaign. The microscope moved the worm from the coffee fields into the laboratory and represented an ideal of modern progress and efficient production. As the campaign's discourse on anemia developed across the island, it transformed the public health administration at the municipal level and undermined local claims for greater political autonomy.

In the late-nineteenth century, the strength of the coffee industry had tied Puerto Rico and its elites to Spanish export markets and delimited political claims for reform. This economic relationship distinguished the island's markets from its Cuban counterparts whose exports were built on sugar and depended on U.S. consumption. Unlike Cubans, Puerto Ricans' struggle for independence had been largely disorganized. Meanwhile, as the coffee industry expanded, land was increasingly consolidated under control of peninsular Spaniards. The 1868 Grito de Lares, an unsuccessful separatist revolt in the heart of a coffee-producing region, reflected the increasing discontent of small and medium-sized landowners who were overwhelmingly native-born criollos and experienced the unequal benefits of the industry's growth. These landowners shared concerns about the influence of peninsular Spaniards more broadly with other criollo elites and educated professionals who chafed under Spanish domination. In the wake of the revolt, organized political parties fought successfully to liberalize the island's politics and gain autonomy under Spanish rule.

In their struggle for autonomy, many liberal Puerto Rican elites treated the nation as diseased and anemia as a political cause. Elite physicians like Cayetano Coll y Toste blamed Spanish control for the peasants' poor diet. Coll y Toste protested Spain's control over food imports and the municipal tax structure, which he blamed for almost doubling the cost of meat.¹

¹ Taxes were based on income and “even day laborers were called upon to contribute with a third of their annual salaries” (Carrasquillo, 2006: 43).