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The Coffee Hacienda in Puerto Rico

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GEOGRAPHY

The Coffee Hacienda in Puerto Rico

Before undertaking the description of the characteristics and the development of the coffee hacienda in Puerto Rico, it will prove valuable to investigate some of the background information concerning Latin American haciendas in general. This is necessary if for no other reason than that the hacienda system developed much more recently in Puerto Rico than in other areas of Latin America.

THE HACIENDA IN LATIN AMERICA

One of the most characteristic features of Latin American social and economic life are the haciendas. These are described as large farms owned and operated for the benefit of one man and his family, and worked by large numbers of landless people and their families. The hacienda system is a paternalistic system and one frequently referred to as feudalistic or semifeudalistic. Indeed, this system began in Latin America as an adaptation of that used in Spain and Portugal at the time of the discovery and exploration of the New World. Large grants of land which included the native Indian inhabitants were made to the *conquistadores*—the soldiers, plunderers and explorers. The large land owners became the economic, social and political powers within Latin America both before and after independence was secured from Spain and Portugal. Only during this century, and in a few countries—especially Mexico—has this system been basically challenged and changed, although the growth of the cities and of industry has weakened the landowners' control in many places.

THE HACIENDA AND THE PLANTATION

Another type of farm characteristic of parts of Latin America is the plantation. It is difficult to analyze all the contrasts and

similarities that exist between haciendas and plantations, but the general differences are clear. The plantation is a large farm usually designed to raise one commercial crop. Slave labor was originally used on such farms but wage laborers have now replaced this. Haciendas, on the other hand, were not necessarily or primarily commercial farms, and they were more than a unit of economic organization for farm production; they were a paternalistic, social organization as well. In reality, there are many cases of large farms of an intermediary type. Haciendas have often become commercially productive, especially in the case of coffee farms, while plantations have dealt with their workers on much more than a strictly economic employer-employee level.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COFFEE HACIENDA IN PUERTO RICO

The hacienda in Puerto Rico does not date back to the early days of Spanish control of the island; it became common throughout the island only 2 centuries ago. Furthermore, the spread of this system accompanied the spread of large scale commercial production of coffee, a crop which could, at least temporarily, be grown successfully in the interior of the small but rugged island. (Puerto Rico is 100 miles long by 35 miles wide, and the highest point is a little over 4000 feet.) Here, the hacienda system was established, at least partially, to meet the needs of those who wished to raise coffee. In this respect, the goal is more closely that of the plantation. In spite of the recent spread of the system, it did become strongly paternalistic, and a social as well as an economic institution. The landless workers, called *agregados* in Puerto Rico, were for the most part neither Indians nor the descendants of slaves. They were earlier migrants to Puerto Rico who were not fortunate enough to get control of land when coffee production increased.

In order to understand how this relatively recent development took place in Puerto Rico, some knowledge of the circumstances are essential. Puerto Rico was a neglected part of Spanish America from shortly after its discovery until 1800. In the decades immediately following 1800 attempts to develop the island increased greatly as Spain lost control of her colonies on the mainland, and as residents of the mainland who remained loyal to Spain moved to Puerto Rico. At the same time, coffee was more and more in demand in Europe,

especially the shade-grown type from the mountain sides. Some of the new migrants had money and the ability to start new coffee production—as did people coming out from the home country to win a fortune and retire to Spain. Large groups of workers were all that was needed. Slaves were still being used, but the practice was on the decline; it became illegal in Puerto Rico in 1873. In the interior of Puerto Rico at that time there were, however, a free, wandering group of people—the descendants of the earlier migrants from Spain—who had resorted to a life of shifting cultivation, gathering and hunting. Most of these people were not in a position to acquire land, but they were a possible source of labor if they could be settled permanently. Furthermore, their wandering habits began to conflict with the expansion of new land grants for coffee farms.

Two laws were especially instrumental in solving the new coffee farmers' labor and trespass problems and in spreading the hacienda system throughout the interior of Puerto Rico. These laws which made the hacienda system an enforceable arrangement were promulgated in 1837 and 1849. They required that anyone who did not have the property with which to provide his sustenance put himself in the employ of another person who would in turn allocate resources with which to take care of the workers' necessities (Baños, 1918). All of those without land were to comply with the laws or be fined. Further restrictions were placed upon the freedom of workers, once they had settled down, to move from farm to farm.

As a result of these two laws, the property owners who could supply the necessities were able to get the workers they needed, and the landless people were required by law to need the owners. What was necessary for life at a mere existence level, in effect, was offered by the owner in return for the work of a family. This meant a certain amount of security for the worker as well as the property owner, but it was a system which did not lead to the betterment of the lot of the majority at a time when the general income of the island was beginning to increase rather rapidly. Little responsibility or initiative was required of the workers, nor was anything but training in specific tasks desired. The *agregados* who had never known a life in which these qualities had been fostered did not object strenuously and the system became quite revered. The landowner

was often the godfather of the children of the *agregados*; there was mutual respect between owner and worker, but each had a role between which there was no bridge. One was an uneducated worker with what might have seemed an ample diet and housing, but working under conditions which led eventually to a state of ignorance and poor health. The other had the benefits of much that money could buy at the time and lived in a manner similar to that of the well-to-do of Europe. Some of the landowners were temporary residents of Puerto Rico who regarded Spain as their real home. Whatever may have been the background of the owners, they adopted their role of "lord" in a system which had become implanted in the social fabric of Puerto Rico. A recent commentary by a Puerto Rican on this subject comes to this conclusion: "This resulted, for the most part, in the almost complete subjection of the will of the *agregado* to the will of the owner of land, not only with reference to the sale of his work, but also in the other personal activities of daily life" (Puerto Rican Planning Board, 1949).

Under this system a small group of people prospered handsomely from the work of many, especially between 1850 and 1898, at which time the United States' acquisition of the island started to bring some changes. Surveys conducted under U. S. auspices in 1900 showed that most of the Puerto Ricans were in very poor health, undernourished and illiterate.

THE COFFEE HACIENDA IN PUERTO RICO DURING THE LAST SIXTY YEARS

After the transfer of Puerto Rico to the control of the United States a number of changes which affected the coffee hacienda have taken place. Alternative types of work have been made available—first on sugar cane and tobacco plantations and now in industry or through migration to the United States. Health and education have been improved, especially during the last two decades. Meanwhile coffee has disappeared from the eastern part of the island as an important crop, partially due to hurricane destruction, but also due to the loss of European markets after the U. S. occupation of the island. Coffee is no longer king of the export products; what is produced is normally consumed on the island. But coffee haciendas still occupy much of the sloping, non-sugar producing land of

western interior Puerto Rico. Workers must now be paid wages, however, and some have purchased small farms from the government. The idea remains, nevertheless, that the *agregado* is capable of nothing but generation after generation of toil for the farm owner, and many *agregados* still respect the landowners and look to them for guidance on all important questions.

A COFFEE HACIENDA TODAY

Hacienda Pico will serve to illustrate the characteristics of a coffee hacienda today. The hacienda occupies almost 1,000 acres of sloping hill land covered by a deep, laterized clay soil, typical of much of western interior Puerto Rico. The total farm population is close to 200, of which 190 are in *agregado* families. Farm operations center at a group of buildings which include the owner's home, or *casa grande*, two buildings for coffee storage and processing, a garage, a store (formerly run as a company-type store), and a large cement floor for coffee drying. Forty shacks of one or two rooms are scattered through the farm in clusters for the *agregados*.

Of the total farm acreage, a little more than 700 acres are in coffee and its shade tree canopy. Most of the rest of the land is in pasture for the dairy and beef herd and the horses. Each *agregado* family cultivates one-half to one acre of bananas and tropical vine and root crops for their own use, and there is a little unused forest land on the highest ridges—the land most exposed to hurricane damage.

The work of the farm centers around coffee. In October, November and December all able-bodied members of the 40 *agregado* families plus additional laborers are employed. Wages during this period are set by minimum wage laws at fifty cents per basket (32 pounds of coffee) picked (1950). At other times coffee laborers must be paid \$1.44 per day. This is less than the minimum wage required for other work in recognition of the fact that the *agregado* lives on another's land and derives some food from the hacienda. The coffee is depulped and dried on the hacienda and then sold to the government sponsored Coffee Growers' Cooperative for final roasting, grinding, packaging, and sale.

When it is not coffee harvest time less than half of the heads of the *agregado* families are employed continuously. Pruning of coffee

and shade trees, care of crops such as bananas and oranges interplanted with coffee, pasture maintenance, animal tending, weeding, and building and road repairs are some of the jobs that are carried on. Some members of the families get work elsewhere if available and known to them. The fact that alternatives have become known in recent years is evidenced by the fact that there is a labor shortage in the coffee areas when harvests are good.

The owner of Hacienda Pico and his family live very well. Any modern conveniences they lack are counterbalanced by the supply of almost free help they get from the *agregado* families. The *agregados*, on the other hand, work very hard for long hours on the damp and steep hillsides during harvest and then are frequently underemployed for the balance of the year. They subsist. Education beyond the third or fourth grade is not easily available for the children although improvements have been made. They are tied by very strong family and provincial ties to their home locality and hacienda. The owner is consulted concerning such problems as marital relations and fights. Occasionally a relative does go to the coastal sugar cane fields to work or to the cities. Then, perhaps, he may go on to the continental United States. Some financial support may come from such persons. At the same time the owner is now concerned over the high wages and the lack of sufficient labor for harvest. He is also coming to the conclusion that he must keep only his best *agregados*, a sign of the weakening of the traditional hacienda system.

CONCLUSION

The hacienda system in Puerto Rico, once it did get started during the last century, quickly became a tradition of subservient work for and under the guidance of the landowner. The system shows signs of weakening even in its last stronghold of western interior Puerto Rico; elsewhere on the island it has disappeared along with the decline in coffee production and the increase in importance of sugar cane plantations, the cities and the industries. Nevertheless its effects linger on just as they do in so many other parts of Latin America. If this is added to a recognition of the population and economic problems of the island, a better understanding can be gained of the task confronting Puerto Rico's leaders.

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