A Panorama of Its People

History of Puerto Rico

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crucial question in a discussion of Puerto Rico's slave past is not whether slaves were well- or ill-treated, but the fact that they were stripped of the most basic rights in order to further the economic interests of their owners. Slaveholders perpetuated myths about Africans' intellectual and social capacities in order to justify the rapacious expropriation of the strength and the energies of their slave laborers. Racial prejudice was rooted in those visions of the other. Even if it is disguised today because it attracts criticism and contempt, racial prejudice still has a pernicious influence on our society. It distorts many attitudes, values, and perceptions among Puerto Ricans. From popular conceptions about what constitutes "good" or "bad" hair to the immoral prejudices of high society, there are echoes everywhere of a social system that allowed the fruits of the labor of the many to be appropriated to satisfy the needs and pleasures of the few.7

Racial divisions have a serious effect on the development of national identities.7 This is a problem that Puerto Rico shares with the rest of Spanish America, where there have been similar examples of prejudice against the indigenous peoples. But the desperate attempt to gain the approval of the leading cultural institutions in the metropolis led many Puerto Ricans to turn their back on their Caribbean reality, to assume exaggerated Hispanophile poses. For a long time our culture defined itself as Spanish.

That is why the attempts in the 1840s to highlight the Creole elements are so interesting.7 To begin to emphasize the cultural forms of the Puerto Rican highlands instead of continuing to imitate those of Spain, was a progressive step. In that initial, exuberant phase, the enthusiasm for everything Creole took on the appearance of a collective personality. Puerto Rico began to be conceived as a whole, different from Spain, original, natural and guileless. It was the view from the hacendado's veranda. The time would come when the hacendado would step down from that balcony to see the sordid misery of the huts and the double-dealing in the country store. When that moment arrived, the writings of Manuel Zeno Gandía, Nemesio Canales, Salvador Brau, Matías González, Miguel Meléndez Muñoz, and others would enable the hacendado to interpret the country from his perspective and he would attempt to moralize.

The following events mark a watershed between two periods in Puerto Rican history: the Spanish revolution which dethroned Isabella II, the gritos of Lares and Yara in Puerto Rico and Cuba, the worldwide fall in the price of brown sugar, the first Spanish Republic, and the abolition of slavery. Those years witnessed changes in Puerto Rico's political system and its economic base, which in turn foreshadowed the even more fundamental changes that would occur at the end of the nineteenth century. But the three decades between the Grito de Lares and the North American invasion are more than simply the final act of the drama of Spanish rule. They represent a significant shift in the center of gravity of the Puerto Rican economy. The population, credit, agrarian production, and social conflicts moved towards the highland districts. The country found that, for
The Population

A comparison between the censuses of 1867 and 1899 reveals the extent of the changes that had taken place in such a short space of time. In 1867 the three municipalities with the largest population in Puerto Rico were San Germán, Mayaguez, and Ponce. In 1899 they were Ponce, Utuado, and Arecibo. Although the island’s population rose by 45% in that period, that of the principal coffee-growing districts, with the exception of Lares, rose in greater proportion: Yauco by 71%, Ciales 169%, Adjuntas 134%, and Utuado 121%. Las Marías and Maricao achieved municipal autonomy in the 1870s. The future districts of Jayuya (1911) and Villalba (1917) acquired their urban centers in this period. At the time the mountains were the open frontier of the country.

Changes in population patterns did not relieve the deterioration in living conditions which affected the second half of the nineteenth century. The mortality rate for all of Puerto Rico in 1867 was 28.8 deaths per thousand inhabitants. In 1897 it was 35.7 per thousand. In some districts the balance between life and death was slight. In 1867 Camuy registered 56 deaths for every thousand inhabitants and 43.3 births. In Morovis there were 50 deaths per thousand and 40.2 births. That same year more people died than were born in San Juan, Quebradillas, Aguadilla, and Fajardo. In the 1890s the same was true for Aguadilla, Río Piedras, Cayey, Mayaguez, Ponce, Lares, Humacao, and San Juan.

Nevertheless, the calamitous course of public health for the period when sugar and coffee dominated agricultural production is better illustrated by long-range changes. All the data collected on the historical demography of Utuado, Humacao, Ciales, Río Piedras, and Cayey point in the same direction. Advances in the cultivation of sugarcane and coffee were linked to higher mortality rates. Malaria, schistosomiasis, and yellow fever proliferated in the irrigation channels on the coast. The humid coffee groves in the interior harbored leishmaniasis and tuberculosis. When the amount of land given over to the cultivation of plantains, bananas, and vegetables was reduced in favor of cash crops, the diet of the workers worsened.

The deterioration in living conditions is also reflected in the breakup of families. As the nineteenth century advanced, the proportion of children born out of wedlock rose in practically every district. Río Piedras was one of the more dramatic; by 1898 two out every three children baptized were born out of wedlock. But it was not merely a question of formalizing unions before the state or the church. The census also revealed the breakup of the households of working men. By 1860, the census taken in Camuy showed the absence of husbands who had migrated. In the following decades it became more common to find families abandoned by the father, children without a home, and servants aged 10 or 12 living in houses of well-to-do families.

One consequence of the reversal in family values was the appearance of other forms of solidarity. There were many foster children on the censuses and godparents took the place of deceased parents. It may be that the extended family was not a timeless institution which has endured until the twenty-first century, but a defense mechanism developed by the nineteenth century landless and smallholders for their mutual protection. Grandmothers and grandchildren lived under the same roof, and that guaranteed support for the aging as well as the education and support of the rising generation. Further studies on these patterns of solidarity and their relationship to the economic pressures suffered by the landless at that time would be useful.

On the other hand, the growing poverty led many to leave the
island. From the 1870s on, the possible destinations were Cuba and Santo Domingo, both of which needed cheap workers and were willing to recruit Puerto Ricans. There were also constant comings and goings between the coast and the mountains as canoe cutters went to the highlands for the coffee harvest during the dead season for sugar. Migration to the city, although it was gradual and was discouraged by the authorities, began to provide Ponce, Mayaguez, and Arecibo with a reserve of labor for construction, tobacco factories, dressmaking, the docks, and domestic service. By the 1880s the untitled lands in the interior had all been allocated. Only on the island of Culebra did there remain common land, and after 1879 there were systematic attempts to populate that island. The government distributed plots of land and the first town was founded there. Between 1881 and 1883 there was also a free port. In 1897 there were on Culebra 756 persons involved in cattle raising (with 2,215 heads of cattle) and subsistence farming and some tobacco cultivation. But the limited water supply discouraged agriculture and ranching, while fishing had a limited market in the absence of refrigeration.

The limited water supply hampered the settlement of the island of Mona. Nevertheless, there was ongoing exploitation of the guano deposits. Its use as a fertilizer meant that it could be sold at a good price.

### Sugar plays Second Fiddle

The Puerto Rican economy in the last three decades of the nineteenth century maintained a steady rate of growth, but it was not exempt from the cyclical and sectorial crises which required serious readjustment by producers. Sugar, which had been the main player at the beginning of the period, had to play second fiddle during the 1890s. Meanwhile coffee conquered the European markets and enjoyed high prices for a dozen years. The interest in both products affected the planting of food crops. It is in this period, as Luis Muñoz Marín noted in 1925, that Puerto Rico became the producer of the items consumed at the end of a meal—sugar, coffee, and tobacco—and would forget to produce the food itself.

In 1868 Puerto Rico exported moscadito (muscovado) sugar. The international markets had come to prefer more refined white sugar, either from sugarcane or from beets. Consequently the prices for Puerto Rican sugar remained at 2.9 cents a pound for the greater part of this period. This coincided with the triumph of abolitionism and the ending of slavery in Puerto Rico. Many hacendados believed they would be ruined by the low prices and by abolition. In fact, the money they received as compensation for the freed slaves offered some the opportunity to modernize their mills. Since slaveholders were indemnified for their former slaves, and since the credits for that compensation were as negotiable as any other form of exchange, some former slaveholders saw this as an opportunity to improve production. However, this was limited by several factors. The Spanish government objected to the credits or coupons for indemnification being acquired by foreign companies, and this significantly reduced the opportunity of financing the reforms. Another factor was that, in order to pay the compensation, additional export taxes were placed on sugar. In the end it was the former slaveholders who ended up paying a sizable portion of the cost of freeing their slaves.

In spite of these difficulties, some set out along the risky road to modernization. Some, like Leonardo Igaravidez, rushed to acquire machinery, the cost of which was never recovered from the price they could obtain for their crops. San Vicente in Vega Baja, the first Puerto Rican sugar mill to fail, made this mistake. But other investors preferred a more steady pace of change, culminating at the beginning of the 1890s in the installation of centrifugal machines for crystallizing sugar. The best known example is that of the Mercédita sugar mill, which has been studied by Andrés Ramos Mattel.

The concentration of the milling phase accelerated the consolidation of sugarcane farms into fewer hands. The poor prices, droughts, and the uncertainties of the tariff wars between Spain and the United States pushed many sugar producers out of competition, either because they went bankrupt or because they moved on to other economic enterprises. In fact, after reaching its export peak in 1878,
sugar's contribution to Puerto Rican trade was reduced in subsequent years. By the 1890s it had fallen off significantly in comparison with fifty years before.

Some observers then suggested that sugar could pull out of its crisis if producers joined forces to develop sugar mills. In that way, with a better product, they could obtain the higher prices paid for white sugar. But others believed that the key to lifting Puerto Rican sugar out of its stagnation was renegotiating tariffs with the principal market, the United States. But Spanish manufacturing and commercial interests were not interested in such a renegotiation. Thus some observers in the sugar sector thought that the problem would only be solved if Puerto Rico had the power to negotiate tariff matters pertaining to sugar directly with the United States. For some, that solution was equivalent to autonomy. But there were already those who thought that annexation to the United States would offer the best solution. In the same way that sugar production had been linked with slavery in a previous period, now it came to be intimately related to tariff policies and the public discussion of the role of the United States in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Café, s'il vous plaît

In the nineteenth century, the Europeans reveled in a marvelous social institution which had already gained some degree of importance in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. It was a place for family reunions, for conversation, for reflection, for rest, and even for study, preferably situated outdoors. On account of its principal item of consumption this place came to be known as the café. The "aromatic drink," as its promoters insisted on calling it, had some advantages over wine and liquor. It could be drunk at all hours and in all kinds of company, in the middle of a working day as well as at the start or end of work. It was also cheap, stimulating, and lent itself to interesting variants. While the English remained loyal to their imperial drink, tea, the rest of Europe became keen coffee drinkers. Both coffee and the favored place for its consumption acquired followers in all the great cities.

The Dutch developed their taste for coffee early on and had promoted large coffee plantations on their island of Java. Brazilian coffee was in great demand, and Cuba developed great coffee haciendas in the province of Oriente, spurred on by immigrants from Haiti at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These three areas were the main producers in the mid-nineteenth century. But, for different reasons, they were not able to satisfy the rising demand. What is more, two of them greatly reduced their production. Java suffered a blight that ruined its coffee groves and turned instead to cultivating rice. In Cuba, the Ten Years' War which started with the Grito de Yara was fought mainly in the coffee-growing area of Oriente. Eventually Cuba ceased exporting large quantities of coffee. Lastly, Brazil had to reduce production as the slaves in the coffee haciendas aged, coffee plantations fell into disuse, and transportation costs became prohibitive. Lacking workers and the necessary credit to launch new plantations, the existing Brazilian coffee growers experienced a reduction in their harvests in the 1880s. This favored coffee planting in other lands with the right soil and climate. Puerto Rico was in a good position to take advantage of the opportunity, because it had been producing coffee for a long time, although in moderate quantities for export. By the 1870s a series of circumstances that promoted the production and export of coffee coincided: the incentive of favorable prices, the accessibility of credit, the improvement in the road system, the opening up of new land, and above all, the availability of cheap labor. The highland farms began to concentrate on the production of coffee. Small neighboring coffee growers became subordinate to the large producers as they hankered in their harvests to pay off debts incurred in the hacendado's country store. Experiences varied from one district to the next. While in Yauco haciendas dominated production, in Utuado it was the small and medium-sized coffee farms that supplied more than sixty percent of the crop. But merchants, who were the ultimate providers of credit, were best placed to profit from the economic juncture. The need to extend the areas of cultivation and improve their processing equipment induced hacendados to continually incur debt with the merchants. For that reason, the crisis at the end of the century found them in a situation of extreme vulnerability.
Agriculture and Politics

In the 1880s and the 1890s Puerto Rico staged an intense debate on the direction, if any, of the country’s agrarian development. The sugar crisis and the boom in coffee exports were not the only subjects under discussion. José Ramón Abad and Fernando López Tuero argued in favor of government encouragement of the planting and export of alternate crops, such as cacao, pineapple, oranges, lemons, and corn. Furthermore, they alerted public opinion to the notable decline in production of foodstuffs for the local market. To depend on the favorable prices for cash crops on the world markets was to court disaster in terms of feeding the population. Diversification became their slogan. The scarcity during the North American blockade in 1898 and the famine that followed the hurricane on the feast of St. Cyriacus in 1899 showed how right they were.

Investment in the long-term development of agriculture for the benefit of the country came to be a high priority in the discussion of the country’s public affairs. But the clarity of thought of these late-nineteenth-century writers did not fundamentally alter investors’ priorities and governmental apathy. The history of agronomic thinking in Puerto Rico in the hundred years following the publication of José Ramón Abad’s work on the fair of Ponce of 1882 remains to be explored. It is possible that, in many cases, this reflection on the nature of the country’s problems had more value than the eloquent statements of politicians on the stump whose rhetoric has not always been matched by the originality of their ideas.

Commerce, Markets, Money, and Tariffs

But the course of agriculture in the 1880s was not so straightforward, that it could be changed by the mere decision of producers to experiment with new crops. The financing of agricultural development was closely linked to marketing. Merchants extended credit for commodities, and in this way they induced producers to hand over their harvests in payment. On account of the credit mechanisms, mer-

chants, for their part, were beholden to their European and North American suppliers.

The lack of banks and coinage was at the root of all these relations of dependency. On account of the close connection between financing and marketing, production was tied to the immediate exigencies of international demand. Meanwhile, long-term investment as well as the promotion and development of new markets and the introduction of technology remained subordinate to the need to liquidate accounts on the short term. The lack of a stable and abundant coinage subjected merchants to fluctuations in silver and the unfavorable prices for their exports in the face of the abundant merchandise from the North Atlantic. Circulation problems accentuated the structures of personal dependency and discouraged any fundamental change to production.

All of this turned trade into a hazardous occupation and ultimately intensified the flight of capital. The merchant who retired preferred to invest his savings in real estate or in enterprises in Spain, than risk incurring losses in businesses that were no longer under his control. In that way, each generation denied the next one access to the capital which had accumulated on the island. This reduced commercial wealth, and as a result, led to complications and the scarcity of credit facilities.

Another factor was added to the uncertainty surrounding commerce. The fact that Cuba and Puerto Rico depended mainly on the North American market for the sale of their sugar led both islands to increase their acquisition of manufactured and agricultural products from the United States. But the development of Cuban and Puerto Rican trade with North America deprived Spanish manufacturers of the full enjoyment of markets that they considered to belong to them. Thus pressure grew on the Spanish government to raise tariffs for North American imports to the Antilles. In United States there was a vehement reaction to these measures. North American diplomats threatened in turn to raise the tariffs on Antillean sugar. Naturally, the sugar interests of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Minnesota favored these raises, as this would better protect their cane and beet sugar. North American investors in Cuba lobbied to defend their interests.
Although Spain had at various times yielded to tariff pressures from the United States, in 1895 a serious confrontation occurred. Both nations raised their tariffs. The rise in the price of commodities from the United States and the difficulty of selling their sugarcane harvest provoked a crisis in Puerto Rico. Never before had the island's powerlessness to solve its basic problems been so obvious.  

Eventually the crisis found a diplomatic solution, but the memory of commercial bankruptcies and labor protests in 1895 left a deep impression in public opinion. If political structures were not modified, the crisis could repeat itself. In this dramatic way the question of the relationship between Spain and Puerto Rico, and between Puerto Rico and the United States, came under consideration.

Conflicts and Solidarities

If the urban strikes and closing of commercial houses in 1895 brought the island's political tensions to the surface, there were even deeper social conflicts which repeatedly manifested themselves in the public consciousness. The antagonism between rival sectors of society assumed different forms: from open violence to the different shades of social differentiation. All of this delayed the formation of a collective sense of identity. As long as slavery lasted, a sector of the population had remained beyond the consideration of those Puerto Ricans who attempted to define a common purpose for the people. When the legal traffic in slaves ended, the majority of the last generation of slaves had been born on the island. That perhaps explains the changes in the forms of resistance to slavery in its last years. Rather than slave conspiracies, it was individual acts of resistance against abuse, along with escapes, which were common during that final phase of slavery. But abolition did not guarantee the totality of civil liberties to those who were emancipated. Thus began the long and painful process of claiming the rights which were now denied them by the invocation of outdated privileges.

The integration of the freed slaves into the ranks of the free laborers was not without its frictions. Many of the former sugar mill operators possessed skills that were now valued more highly by the labor market than the free day laborers. The freed slave, who stood out among other workers on account of his degree of specialization, also experienced problems with his employer, often his former master, who wanted to bind him to a salary scale that did not recognize the demand for his working skills.

But the most critical conflict in the post-emancipation period revolved around labor that was contracted on the basis of indebtedness, of which day laborers were the victims. The chain of debt binding the merchant houses on the coast to local traders, and farmers to the latter, had its final and weakest link in the worker. As he did not own property, he could offer only his labor as a pledge for what he bought on credit in the farmers' stores. But the network of tariffs, interest, money exchange, freight, and the cost of foreign goods raised the price of consumption so high that the worker was always in debt for his purchases. This meant a reduction in the compensation for his work.

Indebtedness was in fact the basic premise of the relationship between employer and worker. As long as he worked he ensured the prolongation of his credit. It could be the labor of the head of the household or that of his wife and children. It could be work during the harvest or domestic chores in the hacienda's house. That relationship, which included and bound the whole family, sometimes took on the appearance of paternalism that purported to lessen the innate injustice of the situation. But the cohesion of a society based on such weak foundations could not last. At times social relations became strained. It was then that hacendados carried their shotguns and large guard dogs deterred people from passing through their property.

Rural workers were not as passive as some folklorists, nostalgic for the lost agrarian society, would have us believe. One can detect movements of resistance in the legal files and private correspondence of the period. The sugar sector, shaken by the crisis of the 1890s, witnessed some strikes for higher wages in that decade. In the mountains, where working conditions limited the possibility of strikes, other forms of resistance appeared which revealed fundamental social
conflicts. When the exploitation became too blatant, workers and smallholders threatened to use fire and machetes on the stores and the houses of the hacendados. In the novel *La Charca*, Manuel Zenón Gandía portrays a society with tensions that could not be assuaged by the law or the interplay of bonds of solidarity.

The existence of intermediary sectors between the great hacendados and the workers meant that social conflict in the rural areas did not have a markedly class-conscious aspect. Farmers, hucksters, artisans, muleteers, professionals, teachers, rural guards, and priests played changing roles in the rural struggles. In particular, the large number of small- and medium-sized property owners prevented a marked polarization in social relations.

For this reason, the social conflicts at the end of the 1880s and in the 1890s, whether overt or covert, may have been categorized too readily as antagonism between Creoles and Spaniards. Such a definition of the problem prevents the adequate examination of the nature of the conflict. When one examines the legal files for specific cases of conflict, one sees that hacendados and merchants, Creoles as well as Spaniards, are involved in these struggles. Only the bands of the *tiznados* of 1898–99 resorted to attacking “the Spaniards.” Of course there were also Creole hacendados among those attacked by the bands.54

In the towns the social conflicts did not yet involve the large numbers which create mass movements out of the protests, marches, and strikes that were beginning to be organized.55 Typesetters, a group which generally had some education and some political consciousness, were at the forefront of the salaried workers who protested. Artisans, who had a long experience of urban life and who also had experience of joint action through association, began to map out the course of the incipient labor movement.56

At the time, in addition to the urban labor struggles, were other clashes which merit further study. This includes those between landlords and tenants, consumers and storekeepers, the military and civilians in San Juan, immigrants from the rural areas and long-established urban residents, and the professionals who studied outside the island and the members of the elite who hired their services.

A Creole Bourgeoisie?

Not all conflicts in Puerto Rican society were along class or sectorial lines. Among the economically dominant groups, there were less visible but no less acute conflicts. Besides the frictions between merchants and hacendados there were ongoing quarrels among members of each group.57

The most obvious clash was between Spanish merchants and Creoles. The stereotypical view that all merchants were Spanish loses credibility when one examines the municipal rosters of the principal commercial taxpayers. Puerto Ricans appear alongside Catalans, Corsicans, and Asturians. Occasionally distrust and competitiveness surfaced, and in moments of crisis, such as in 1886–87, the additional support of steady clients was sought.58

More detailed studies of these rivalries are needed, because it has been assumed too readily that they are merely clashes of nationalities. Not all foreign merchants became the object of boycott and ridicule. Not all Creoles were involved in the disputes. Why? Was it a question of a clash between wholesale merchants attempting to corner the market in some key commodities? Or were the conflicts generated by municipal tradesmen competing among themselves for clients who hesitated in times of crisis over which of their creditors should receive their coffee crop in payment? What importance should be attributed the denial of credit to storekeepers when unexpected crises force them to go to their creditors, the wholesale dealers, to request extensions for payment?

The hypothesis of a creole bourgeoisie rests on the premise that there was a degree of homogeneity among the dominant sectors which facilitated the definition of a national identity based on their common interests. But racial, regional, and occupational factors produced diverse, rather than unified, ways of feeling Puerto Rican. Above all, the fact that Puerto Rican nineteenth-century elites did not prevail over the rest of society weakens the hypothesis of the crystallization of a Creole bourgeoisie.

Marriages and the institution of godparents may offer clues to the social interplay of merchants and hacendados, whether Spanish or
Creole, wholesalers or storekeepers, coffee growers or sugar producers, autonomists or assimilationists, white or black, Catholic or freemason. Thus one might find Creole merchants with Spanish sons-in-law and vice versa, and Creoles and Spaniards being godparents or witnesses at the weddings of each other's children. They belonged to the same recreational associations, they attended the same celebrations and feasts, their children had the same tutors. In the cloistered environment of town life, where recreational facilities and social activities were few, it was not unusual for the families of the merchants to socialize together. National differences that might perhaps have kept their parents apart did not last into the second generation. Today, in many towns, the families that are considered "old" were in their first generation in the 1880s. Their claim usually derives from the intermarriage of second generations with families who were formerly socially prominent.

**The Political Cauldron**

In the last three decades of Spanish rule, the political changes in the peninsula had more rapid repercussions on the public life of Puerto Rico than in previous eras. It was now easier to travel between Spain and Puerto Rico by steamship. The Spanish press and continual correspondence meant that political life on the island began to be dominated by the great political debates in Spain. Those debates aroused great interest, since the economic and fiscal problems of the island were linked to shifts in peninsular politics.

The dethronement of Isabella II following the revolt of 1868 ushered in a particularly fertile period for political debate. The Constituent Assembly, which was convened to deliberate on the future of Spain, included representatives from Cuba and Puerto Rico. In successive regimes—the monarchy of Amadeo of Savoy, the Republic, and the Restored Bourbon Monarchy—delegates from Cuba and Puerto Rico participated as members of the Cortes.

The political life of both islands between 1868 and 1873 was centered on two very different, but not unrelated, debates. For Cuba, the main question was the war of independence that had begun with the Grito de Yara in October 1868, and which would continue until the Pact of Zanjón in 1878. But for Puerto Rico the main order of business was the abolition of slavery. Sugar played an important role in both situations. In Cuba, the war would be ended in the name of sugar interests. In Puerto Rico, in consideration of those same interests, abolition would be decreed with indemnification to the slave owners. But the consequences were different. In Cuba the solution to the problems of the Ten Years' War would be postponed, while in Puerto Rico the abolition of slavery ended one debate to open up political discussion at another level.

Between 1870 and 1873 Puerto Rico experienced the greatest political liberalization of the whole of the nineteenth century, although these liberties did not appear simultaneously. The Spanish constitution of 1869 and subsequent legislation were applied gradually on the island. An example of this process is the belated implementation of the legislation concerning the election of mayors and members of the town councils.

One reason behind these delays was the opposition of the conservatives, who had initiated a debate with the liberals about the applicability to the island of the political reforms in Spain. The discussion had the effect of polarizing public opinion into two opposing camps. The existence of relative freedom of the press in those years allowed the differences between liberals and conservatives to be publicized, defined, and reinforced. The debate also enabled the public to know whom the spokesmen for each side was. From that moment on, the open political debate was developed in the island which has continued uninterrupted to the present day.

Although different channels, such as the elections, the press, the debates in the provincial Deputation, and formal and informal meetings, were available for reaching a decision on controversial issues, the trickery and manipulation of former times lingered. One representative incident was known as the Estrellada de Camuy. Cayetano Ríos, a Dominican and longtime resident of Camuy and a landlord in the Zanja de Agua ward, received an anonymous warning that his house would be attacked by some bandits at night.
Another anonymous note advised the Civil Guard that an armed conspiracy was brewing in Estrella’s house. The patrol which went that night to investigate Estrella’s house was met by gunshots. The patrol fired back. The incident resulted in the loss of several lives. Estrella and his relatives were arrested and put in prison in Arecibo until the matter was cleared up. Apparently, the purpose of the anonymous notes was to create uneasiness and suspicion, so that people would believe that revolution was being planned in a district that had once been involved in the Grito de Lares. The intention may have been to provide obstacles for the bill abolishing slavery which was under consideration in the Spanish Cortes.

Abolition

In the 1860s continued resistance by slaves to the work regime imposed on them and to the deprivation of their basic human rights took different forms. These included isolated acts of violence against foremen and overseers, escapes, robbery, and slacking. A few slaveholders had seen the necessity of providing incentives to slaves in the form of some kind of remuneration. The government itself instituted an annual lottery awarding freedom to a deserving slave chosen from a list of names submitted by the slaveholders. A number of slaves saved enough to buy the freedom of their children at the baptismal font. According to a disposition introduced by Pezuela, they had to pay 25 pesos for the emancipation of the newly born.

Evidence of the victims’ repudiation of slavery shows that abolition was not only the result of the will of the rulers, but responded to urgent demands by the slaves themselves. Public punishments, rumors of flight and of fights with overseers, sensitized public opinion about the outdated nature of a system which treated people as if they were things. In the Gaceta, the government’s official journal, one can find examples of popular sympathy for the slaves. In 1858, for instance, twenty-two people in a ward of Manati were fined for harboring a fugitive slave. The interesting thing about the list is that it comprises a great variety of men and women, from landholders to freedmen, to Modesto the slave, for whom his master had to pay the fine. Obviously a whole neighborhood was complicit in helping the unnamed fugitive. Other fines appearing in the Gaceta are no less revealing. In January of 1844 a hacendado from Naguabo had to pay a fine because his foreman had given seven slaves permission to go to Ceiba, play bomba, on Epiphany eve and ask for Christmas tips. In Yabucoa, Don Ramón Cintrón held a card game in his house, and among the participants appeared not only several “dons,” but also several slaves. These and many other examples show that people continually undermined the laws relating to the slaves. The government sought to keep the slaves apart from the rest of the population, but daily interaction ignored the governors’ circulars. The state did not achieve consistent vigilance over and management of the slave population.

The seed of abolitionism had a chance to sprout among the Puerto Ricans who had lived outside the island. Residence in foreign countries, especially for study, gave young Puerto Ricans a wider perspective from which to reject slavery as an Institution. The return of these young students to the island and the impact of seeing the slaves working at harvest time led some of them to take sides in support of abolition. By then freemasons had begun to found a series of lodges throughout the island. The period from 1870–73 was a particularly auspicious one for the lodges recruiting militant members from among the liberal and abolitionist youth. The proclamation of a republic in Spain following the abdication of Amadeus I at the beginning of 1873 provided a favorable juncture for abolition. The United States and Great Britain were applying diplomatic pressure on Spain. The Puerto Rican delegation at the Cortes advocated approving the measure, even if the Cuban deputies united to back the universal emancipation of the slaves. The Spanish liberal leadership, still euphoric from the proclamation of the republic, helped to pass the bill. On March 22, 1873, the Cortes decreed the emancipation of all slaves in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, the condition of working under contract to an employer for three years was imposed. The former masters would be indemnified for the value of their slaves in installments to be paid annually over ten years.
In Puerto Rico the news of abolition was received with much rejoicing. There were celebrations and public festivities everywhere. But the freed slaves soon discovered that becoming waged did not solve many of their problems. In theory they had the option of free contracts, but in reality the vast majority had to choose to be contracted to their former masters. One must remember that by the time of abolition, more than 90% of the slaves had been born on the island. Their ties of solidarity were in the districts where they had been born and worked, and it was in those places where they were well-known that, with the few resources at their disposal, they had the best chance of obtaining reasonable accommodation and working conditions.⁴⁸

The First Spanish Republic

It was not too long ago that old people in Puerto Rico would rebuke children with the question: "Do you think this is a republic?" The allusion was to the First Spanish Republic (1873–74) and the spate of freedoms that it made possible in Puerto Rico. For the liberals it was an occasion to participate in the exercise of power, especially through the Diputación Provincial and the town councils. Freedom of the press, of assembly, of worship, and of association allowed for experimentation with new forms of expression, which up until then had been offered only by the printed word. But the tensions between conservatives and liberals and the political agitation that erupted in 1873 were sufficient for subsequent periods to associate the notion of republic with disorder.

If the changes under the Republic were sudden, even more so was its 1874 collapse as a result of the military revolt that eventually brought Alfonso XII, son of Isabella II, to the throne of Spain. The governor charged with implementing the restoration of the monarchy in Puerto Rico was José Laureano Sanz, who had already been governor in 1869. The arbitrary manner in which Sanz behaved during his second period of governorship prompted Labor Gómez Acevedo to dub him "Promoter of Separatism in Puerto Rico."⁴⁹

Sanz was consistent in his objective of concentrating Puerto Rican legislative and executive initiatives in the hands of the governor once again. Teachers were one of the sectors most affected by his measures. A number of Creole teachers were deprived of their posts and replaced by Spanish teachers, who were, in theory, better educated. Sanz's offensive against Creole teachers turned the schools into instruments of control where lessons in Spanish patriotism were taught along with catechism and grammar.⁵⁰

The Province

Under the new statutes drawn up by the restorers of the monarchy, Puerto Rico in theory had the status of a Spanish province. However, legislation approved in Spain did not automatically apply to the island. This reluctance to make the island's situation equivalent to that of other provinces in Spain reinforced the fact that its relationship with Spain was a colonial one.

The effective limitation of suffrage to the wealthier male taxpayers made the fictitious nature of the island's provincial status even more obvious. Although several laws regulated electoral participation in Puerto Rico, in every case the right was limited to a minority, which at times was tiny. For instance, in the 1885 election for deputy to the Cortes for the district of Río Piedras, Loíza, and Río Grande, out of ten thousand inhabitants in Río Piedras, barely thirty had the right to vote, and only sixteen actually exercised it. In this way it was possible to send a triumphant candidate as Puerto Rican deputy to the Cortes with a total of forty votes. The candidate was a Spaniard who did not live on the island. In the face of that evidence, it is absurd to speak of democratic elections in Puerto Rico in the 1880s.⁵¹

Between 1874 and 1886 a factional quarrel developed as a result of this inequality. The Liberal Reformist Party, born in the heat of the struggles from 1870 to 1873 to extend the freedoms enacted in Spain to Puerto Rico, lost ground. Confronted by a situation in which the vote was restricted to major taxpayers and in which the governors arranged the election of non-resident deputies who were aligned with
the ruling party in Madrid, it became difficult to achieve representation in the Cortes for broad sectors of Puerto Rican society. Even the liberal deputy to Cortes from the Sabana Grande district, Raffael María Labra, was never a resident of the island. Labra was a Cuban who lived in Madrid for many years where he steadfastly defended Puerto Rican interests, and he was elected by the only district in Puerto Rico which the conservatives were not able to win.  

Who were these conservatives who managed to control the elections to the Spanish Cortes and to the Provincial Deputation for such a long time? Some studies of their leaders present an interesting paradox. In nineteenth-century Europe, those who were interested in modernizing trade, manufacture, and agriculture generally identified themselves with political parties of liberal tendencies. They considered excessive regulation and supervision of the enterprising sector to be anachronistic and a hindrance, so they advocated less governmental control of the economy. But in Puerto Rico the conservative groups chose notable merchants and hacendados as their leaders. These were the ones who resisted liberalization and wanted strong government. Why this apparent contradiction between their economic interests and their political ideology?

It is generally assumed that the conservative leadership placed their identification with Spain ahead of economic interests. Pablo Ubarri and José M. Fernández, the Marquis of la Esperanza, were examples of defenders of national interests at all costs. If the only criterion was personal allegiance to Spain, the argument might seem convincing. But if one considers the wider context of the island's socioeconomic reality, the perspective changes. Then the opposition by the economically dominant sectors to a substantial modification of the colonial regime appears more rational. The increasing interference of the United States in the Puerto Rican economy meant that those who advocated economic change on the island were sidelined. Moreover, the liberalization of the political structures facilitated that greater degree of interference. In other words, maintaining Spanish control over exports and credit, making foreign investment more difficult while easing the import of cheaper goods, and reinforcing the dependence of farmers and shopkeepers on the chief merchants would help to avoid serious economic disruption. The conservatives saw the development of the Spanish market as fundamental. They guaranteed the ties of dependency by aiming to appoint those who were identified with the colonial relationship as government officials. They also blocked the development in Puerto Rico of a nationalist sentiment which would overturn the colonial system of checks and balances.

During the period of their ascendancy, conservatives believed that the principal threat to the system would emerge not from the Puerto Rican political scene, but from a change in the ruling party in Spain. For that reason, one of the pillars of their politics was to support any governor arriving in Puerto Rico, regardless of his political affiliation in Spain. Naturally, the governors found it convenient to count on the backing of the majority party on the island, which they could use to prop up their own party in the Cortes. This pragmatic reconciliation between the powers, however, began to diminish on account of the political evolution of the Spanish parties, whose ideologies were less and less in tune with that of the conservatives in Puerto Rico. It was also affected by the growth of greater political consciousness in Puerto Rico, as new generations educated outside the island returned to join in the political debate.

It was mainly in the press that the major issues of Puerto Rican politics were discussed after 1880. At that time the liberal press was weak, a victim of arbitrary censorship, threats of closure, and low literacy rates in the country. But almost all municipalities had their own newspaper. These were publications of four pages, with editions of some 300, and they tended to survive for only five or six issues. Even so, they succeeded in raising awareness and generating discussion. Even those who did not read could hear about the latest major debate from conversations in the town square or the botica.

The Reforms

In the 1880s a series of reforms was implemented in Puerto Rico which promoted economic growth and helped mitigate the obstruc-
The reform of the Civil Code, which extended to Puerto Rico the procedures of the Spanish tribunals, established basic terms for contracts, and assured the supremacy of property rights. Other aspects of the Code, such as the removal of the sale with a clause of resale if a debt was not paid, an abusive device which had been used to dispossess smallholders, represented a significant advance over former legal practices. But the implementation of the Spanish Civil Code in Puerto Rico before the U.S. invasion above all ensured the continued enforcement of Spanish law and the Roman legal tradition in Puerto Rican jurisprudence.

In May 1880, the Property Registry began operations. Besides signifying an enormous advance in terms of property titles, the Registry also provided a mechanism for the verification of successive mortgages, rights of way and other obligations, divisions, and sales. Although the process of registering a large part of the real estate in Puerto Rico was exceedingly slow, the new measures simplified the procedures for obtaining financing and for transferring property rights.

In 1880 the governor, Eugenio Despujols, also launched a reform of education. Although this reform did not immediately achieve its aims, in the long run it produced a significant increase in the number of schools and in the literacy rate. The sectors which up until then had been neglected by the public education system—girls, the rural areas, and the secondary level (equivalent to what would later be known as the intermediate school)—benefited greatly from these reforms. The population census of 1910 also demonstrates their effectiveness. In the towns more than half of those born after 1880 were literate.

The setting up of the Population Registry in 1885 was another welcome reform. Up until then Catholic priests had been in charge of registering births, marriages, and deaths. Many people took a long time to become aware of their obligation to register newborns. When one compares baptismal records from the 1890s with births registered at the Population Registry, the totals for baptisms are noticeably higher than those for births. But by the first decade of the twentieth century a greater proportion of the children born are registered. The need to obtain a certificate for burial forced families to register the deceased.

In Puerto Rico there were several attempts to reform municipal law. By the 1880s the municipal law in force in Spain was implemented, but with provisos making the governor the arbiter of municipal debates. Even so, the municipalities' functions were defined and procedures were regulated. All these reforms implied the regimentation of life in accordance with the requirements of a state that attempted to guarantee its own interests. But in the latter part of the 1880s, the Spanish state in Puerto Rico had entered a critical phase which ended with its dismantling after the U.S. invasion of 1898.

The Autonomist Movement

A general financial crisis shook the countries that produced tropical crops in 1886–87. The resulting economic recession revealed the Spanish government’s inability to protect the economies of Cuba and Puerto Rico and the powerlessness of the islands’ elites to protect their own interests. At the same time the effects of the crisis heightened social conflicts.

An influential segment of public opinion in Puerto Rico believed that in order to avoid such alarming developments in the future it was necessary to modernize agriculture and the related industrial activities. But in order to carry out such changes it was necessary for Puerto Rico to have control over decisions relating to tariffs, customs duties, taxes, the export and import of commodities, and agricultural and industrial development. The autonomist ideology was based on an appreciation that the fundamental issues of the country are economic in nature and that their solution was linked to the political capacity to guarantee the entry of Puerto Rican products onto foreign markets.

The weakness of the Liberal Reformist Party in the mid-1880s prevented it from being the appropriate instrument to further the objec-
tives of the modernizing sectors. The liberals' struggles had revolved around the need to implement in Puerto Rico the reforms passed in Spain. As a basic premise, it was desirable that the political structures of the island and those of Spain were homogeneous. But what now entered into the discussion was the specificity of Puerto Rico's problems. Although they approached it from different perspectives, it was the same argument that the conservatives had made for maintaining the colonial structures.

Preliminary discussions among liberals interested in these proposals led to the convocation of an assembly held in Ponce at the beginning of 1887. Out of that assembly emerged the new Autonomist Party, whose leading light was Román Baldorioty de Castro. People from different ideological positions joined the Autonomist Party and from the beginning the fundamental issues of the country were defined in different ways. In the end, the diversity of interests and of strategy occasioned intense internal debates which eventually led to divisions.

The Autonomist Party immediately became organized at the municipal level, and its initial force alarmed extremist elements within the conservative movement. Many voters had stopped exercising the electoral rights they held by virtue of their taxed income. Now they gave signs of wishing to join the autonomists, which could produce a new political balance among the deputies elected to the Spanish Cortes and to the Diputación Provincial.

Extremist conservative sectors considered the appearance of what seemed to be the beginning of open hostility directed at the commercial houses owned by Spaniards as an even more terrible development. In some districts there was a boycott of the Spaniards' stores and this was attributed to the orders of secret societies, such as the Torre del Viejo, which were encouraged by the autonomists.

These extremist elements succeeded in making an impression on General Romualdo Palacios, the new governor. They convinced him that the rise of autonomism represented a serious threat to Spain's interests. They argued that separatist interests were behind the efforts of the new party. They informed him about the threat of the secret societies whose influence was growing in the rural areas.

Governor Palacios had a summer residence in Aibonito. In the summer of 1887, convinced by the denunciations of the activities of the secret societies, he unleashed a wave of repression on the entire island. The districts of Juana Díaz and Ponce were particularly affected. During the following weeks, arbitrary arrests, the torture and abuse of those arrested, and threats against the press and against free expression proliferated. The state's efforts to spread panic throughout the countryside led some conservatives to carry out their own investigations and acts of aggression. Everywhere the institutional order fell into abeyance. Local leaders exerted their influence, either to persecute enemies or to protect friends, and the state's inability to guarantee and maintain public order became evident.

Besides testifying to the arrogance of a colonial power, the compontes, a term that was coined to refer to torture during that period, showed that the colonial state was incapable of governing its own territory according to its own laws and procedures. The government that had introduced the Penal Code was providing an example of its violation. The Terrible Year of '87 may have been a much more decisive factor in Spain's loss of Puerto Rico than the U.S. invasion of 1898.

The main autonomist leaders were jailed in Ponce and then sent by ship to San Juan to be incarcerated in El Morro. Some observers feared that Palacios' arbitrariness would lead him to put the autonomists before a firing squad, following a court martial without adequate guarantee of due process. However, the fact that those accused were prominent members of society served to protect them. But many peasants on the southern coast, anonymously accused of backing the boycott against Spanish commerce, suffered beatings which in some cases resulted in death.

A cable dispatched from St. Thomas informed Deputy Labra and the Spanish authorities of the abuses perpetrated in Puerto Rico on the governor's initiative. The extremist conservative sectors waited too long to present a defense of the governor who had so efficiently reacted to their insinuations. The government relieved Palacios of his command on November 9.
The Political Parties, 1888–1898

Palacios’ replacement did not bring an end to the difficulties faced by the new Autonomist Party, but these took a different turn. Following a weak showing in the initial electoral contests, the Autonomist Party became involved in a long series of internal wrangles. Although the disputes ostensibly revolved around the appropriate method of obtaining autonomy, the real and important issue was the kind of autonomy that was desired. For the proponents of autonomism, their ideal was the different models of home rule which some dependencies of the British Empire had achieved or were pushing to achieve. Since 1867, Canada had enjoyed the status of a dominion, which guaranteed self-rule within the British Commonwealth. In the 1880s Ireland debated the desirability of a status which guaranteed self-government while allowing free access to English markets.

Some autonomists considered that the model to follow was that of Canada, which enjoyed the full extent of self-government within the legal framework of common institutions with Great Britain. For others, what was desired was simply the flexibility to reach tariff agreements with the United States. Within those extremes was a plurality of models for autonomy.

Balderioty, ailing, prematurely aged, and impoverished, resigned the leadership of the autonomist movement and died shortly afterwards. None of the leaders who succeeded him would enjoy as much unchallenged authority over the party. Around 1892, a young newspaperman from Barranquitas called Luis Muñoz Rivera began to promote the idea that autonomy could be attained by means of an alliance with one of the main Spanish parties. In exchange for offering their support to candidates for the Cortes, the autonomists would obtain the assurance that Puerto Rico would be granted self-government.

Muñoz Rivera initially met with much opposition to his project, but at the start of 1897, along with other autonomists, he obtained a specific commitment from the Liberal Monarchists, led by Práxedes Sagasta. This promise was valuable because Sagasta had a real chance of becoming the prime minister of Spain.

A group of autonomists did not accept this arrangement, which was endorsed by the party’s assembly. They argued that, by entering into an alliance with the monarchists, they were compromising their republican principles. Nor did they want obtaining autonomy to depend on Sagasta’s fulfilling his promises.

This division came to a head in 1895 and led to the establishment of a “pure” and “orthodox” autonomist movement, centered on San Juan and its surrounding districts. Among its leading exponents was José Celso Barbosa, a doctor from Bayamón who was a graduate of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and a fervent believer in republican institutions of government.

In the summer of 1897 the Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo was murdered by an anarchist. The Queen Regent invited Sagasta to take up the post of prime minister. On November 25, 1897, by the decree of the regent, Puerto Rico was granted autonomous status. This did not fully meet the expectations of more radical autonomists, but it guaranteed the island its own parliament, cabinet, and municipal councils elected by the people.

The autonomous cabinet was installed on February 9, 1898. It was composed of a president and a number of secretaries for the departments of Justice and Government; Treasury; Public Education; Public Works and Communications; and Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. These officials took up their posts on February 11. On March 27, elections were held and the autonomists, led by Muñoz Rivera, won a majority in the new parliament. The start of the Spanish-American War meant that this parliament did not meet until July 13. The municipal elections under the autonomous charter were never held.

The Origins of the Spanish-American War

The economic crisis of 1895 led to strikes and unprecedented popular demonstrations in Puerto Rico. In Cuba it sharpened political discussion and led to the resumption of the War of Independence. Coordinated and well-armed, the Cuban revolutionaries seized the
initiative in their old power bases on the eastern side of the island and managed to extend the war to the western region.  

According to the ideas of José Martí and other pro-independence leaders of the Cuban revolution, the war had as its aim the independence of both Cuba and Puerto Rico. More than a hundred Puerto Ricans participated in the actions of the Cuban war between 1895 and 1898. Several Puerto Ricans advocated that the military operations be extended to Puerto Rico. From Paris, Betances maintained a steady correspondence with the revolutionary committee in New York and with Cuban revolutionary agents in other parts.

In May 1897 there was an attempt to start a rising in Yauco, but the vigilance of the Spanish authorities succeeded in suppressing it. The failure of the “intentona de Yauco” did not discourage Puerto Rican revolutionaries who were active in Cuba, some of whom, like the poet from Arecibo, Pachín Marín, lost their lives fighting for Cuban independence. The Spanish government redoubled its vigilance, especially in the area between Mayaguez and Yauco, which was considered to be less loyal to the Spanish government.

The government of the United States had tolerated the activities of Cuban revolutionaries in New York and Florida, but from 1895 on it was urged to intervene in Cuba. The great sugar interests had their investments concentrated on the western part of the island, a prime sugar-growing area. As the revolution spread towards the west, these interests began to suffer losses. The Spanish policy of concentrating the population of the eastern provinces in camps guarded by troops offended the humanitarian sensibilities of world public opinion. The sensationalist North American press condemned the Spanish administration of Cuba and began advocating direct intervention by the United States. William McKinley, elected president in 1896, increased the North American pressure on Spain.

Everyone was uneasy with the idea of a North American intervention in the Cuban war, but no one knew how to avoid it. In February 1898, an explosion in the boilers of the battleship Maine, anchored in Havana, accelerated events. The United States accused Spain of being responsible for the loss of the ship. The Spanish government, using all the diplomatic means to hand, insisted on resolving the confrontation with the United States. Nevertheless, diplomacy failed and the war began on April 21.

Puerto Rico’s Nineteenth-Century Cultures

In his frequently discussed essay, El país de cuatro pisos, José Luis González has advanced the thesis that four cultures have been superimposed in Puerto Rico since the sixteenth century. According to this scheme, each stage would reflect the economic changes that led to the crystallization of successive dominant cultures.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the cultural worlds of the black, the jíbaro, and the Europeanized Creole existed side by side with a precision that social fissures would reveal. The fourth story, that of Americanized Puerto Ricans, had not yet begun.

In spite of the social divisions, Puerto Rican cultures in the nineteenth century proved to be mutually permeable, as evidenced by patterns of solidarity, the codification of social norms, popular religiosity, the spoken language, music, poetry, and religious iconography. It is true that Europeanized creoles succeeded in imposing their culture as the dominant one and that most of them valued only those forms that imitated the creative trends then fashionable in France and Spain. But the creativity of the peasants and the workers from the mountains and from the coast triumphed over the disdain of the elite. This change in attitudes has been gradual and has not yet resulted in the effective synthesis of the competing values.

It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the influence exercised by popular cultures on the dominant one has remained implicit, and that only now is it being uncovered and valued. In the case of the danza, the formal nineteenth-century Puerto Rican ballroom dance, Federico Cordero and others have attempted to demonstrate how European and Afro-Caribbean elements came together to develop this musical form. The bomba and the plena, whose rhythms are patently African, today barely retain remnants of the African languages which originally resounded in their verbal expressions. They have been hispanialized in the same way as the descendants of Africans have
become creolized, and they incorporate social concepts and turns of phrase from the Puerto Rican scene. Thus music became a vehicle of criticism and of social celebration and its playing spread beyond the specific communities which created it.

Painting found patrons among the owners of houses built in towns as a result of the sugar and coffee booms. We move from the religious themes that displayed the genius of Campeche and filled the solemn living rooms and sacristies of San Juan in the eighteenth century to the portraits of the new Ponceño dynasties. The aristocratic portraits that adorned the halls and offices substituted for lineage and provided evidence of their owners' social success. The portrait painter had a specific task, but if he was a rebel educated in Paris, like Francisco Oller, he would spend his moments of forced leisure persistently observing the landscape and the light which Creole lattices attempted to keep out. A talent for capturing social realities did not prevent his accepting commissions to paint haciendas and cane fields. Oller gave an illusory quality to those tracks and paths over which sugar wealth was carried. On the walls his impressions of landscapes hung, like moral warnings.

El velorio (The Wake) dominates the totality of Oller's work and Puerto Rican painting with the same naturalness as those who wield inherited power. The heart-rending topic of the dead jíbaro child—an incident which seemed commonplace at the time as it was a daily occurrence—is portrayed by Oller with the irate cynicism of one who still wants to believe. The technical aspects of the painting have been extensively studied in sketches of its component parts, but what is more important is that this technique is at the service of a vision of society that goes beyond the subject of the eternal juxtaposition of life and death. All the characters are there on account of the child's death, but this does not bring them together. Each one follows his own path and his own interests. All gazes avoid the body. Life has been briefly interrupted by the ritual of the wake and each symbolic detail underscores the general indifference. The painting sums up the dilemma of Puerto Rican formal art at the end of the nineteenth century. The artist can only be faithful to his creative vocation by pointing towards what goes on outside the houses of the powerful, but in doing so, he is met with indifference by those who could offer him patronage.

The Ateneo

The need for a meeting place to promote and discuss the country's cultural activities led to the foundation of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño in 1876. Manuel Elizaburu and the cofounders of "the learned house" had in mind the type of cultural association found in Spain. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century there was still no university in Puerto Rico, nor were there many opportunities for openly discussing the important topics of the day. The Ateneo met those perceived needs in San Juan and came to play a wider role than that of similar institutions in Spain.

The Ateneo has for a long time been identified with the literary culture of the country. Although its statutes and internal structure dictated that scientific matters form part of the ordinary agenda of the institution, after 1898 literary and philosophical matters dominated those related to technology and the natural sciences. In the end, this unfortunate cultural division was a reflection of the limited exposure of engineers and doctors to the humanities. This was typical of the North American education they received. Only those who had philosophical and literary interests beyond those of their profession found the Ateneo a place to experience enlightened debate. But in general, professionals represented a new breed of people who had little in common with the Ateneo men of letters. A study of the universities chosen by the leading families for their sons before 1898 shows the split which developed between two dominant cultures: Latin and North American. Neither the Ateneo nor any similar institutions were able to prevent the subsequent dispersal of the intellectual talent of the country.

The institution of the Ateneo offered at least one of the leading sectors an alternative to the cultural politics of successive governments. But the diverse manifestations of popular culture did not have similar institutions to promote and preserve their creative works.
Religious Manifestations

The Catholic Church, which for over three centuries had held the monopoly on permitted public worship, was rejected by some sectors of the Puerto Rican community in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

With the immigration of Europeans from Protestant countries, their respective denominational churches also entered the country. The currents of liberalism which characterized the period from 1870–73 promoted the tolerance of groups that had been practicing their religions in private. The establishment of the first Episcopal church in Ponce in that period opened up a new period in the country’s religious history.82

The old Christian churches of Europe found favorable ground for expansion in Ponce, Mayaguez, Aguada, Vieques, and other districts. Meanwhile, some members of the country’s elite dabbled in belief systems and ethical principles which had an affinity to Christianity but were derived from the esoteric discussions then common in France, Great Britain, and other industrialized countries. Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, spiritualism, and other movements began to gain a following among many of the island’s elite. A more detailed study of such groups and of their publications during that period would be worthwhile.

One would also need to study in greater detail the expressions of popular religious syncretism, both in regions which had significant African influences, such as Guayama and Arroyo, as well as isolated regions in the mountains where pre-Christian European traditions blended with Christian elements from different Hispanic and European traditions.

Puerto Rico Becomes a Vast Sugar Plantation

The United States invaded and occupied Puerto Rico in 1898. The Treaty of Paris, which marked the end of the war between the United States and Spain, forced the latter to cede its rights over Puerto Rico and the Philippines to its adversary.

The United States and the Hispanic Caribbean

The United States’ interest in acquiring control over one of the Greater Antilles predated the Spanish-American War. Thomas Jefferson, third president of the U.S. (1801–1809), believed that the Greater Antilles were destined to spin in the orbit of the new nation. James Monroe, the fifth president (1871–1825), expressed concern