Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico (review)

David Martin Stark

The Americas, Volume 64, Number 1, July 2007, pp. 127-128 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2007.0121*

Sugar, Slavery, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico. By Luis A. Figueroa. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Pp. 290. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $55.00 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Puerto Rico's experience with slavery and its Afro-Caribbean heritage were once subjects few people acknowledged. According to Luis Figueroa, "a sort of broken historical memory of this past still permeates Guayama and Puerto Rico's society" (p. 45). We know more about the experiences of enslaved men and women and the vital role they played in the emergence of a plantation society on the island in the first half of the nineteenth century than we do about the transition from slavery to freedom, and from a system of forced labor to one of free wage labor during the second half of the nineteenth century. Questions such as what both freedom and free labor meant to *libertos* and planters alike remained unanswered. Thanks to the efforts of Figueroa, we have a better understanding of how libertos and planters reacted to abolition and negotiated the meaning of freedom in areas where a plantation economic model prevailed such as was the case in Guayama, Puerto Rico.

Traditional accounts of the transition from slavery to freedom in Puerto Rico typically present a picture of racial and class harmony. Figueroa argues against this and rather than smooth over race, class, and gender oppression, he recounts the struggle of slaves as well freedmen and women to overcome such oppression in an effort to create a space of their own. Ultimately planters' preoccupation, both before and after abolition, with ensuring their access to and control over a substantial, stable, and reliable labor force conflicted with the efforts of libertos to define the meaning of freedom and free labor on their own terms. How both libertos and planters reconciled these conflicting interests is the subject of this well-researched book.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first two describe the emergence of a plantation society in Guayama during the first half of the nineteenth century. Central to this process were "the contributions of enslaved Africans and Afro-Puerto Ricans to the development of sugar production . . . [and] their role as the producers of wealth" (pp. 16-17). Although overshadowed by sugar plantations in Ponce, Figueroa convincingly argues that Guayama's plantations were comparable insofar as size, output and technology to those found throughout the circum-Caribbean. Chapter 3 examines the extent to which Guayama's enslaved population engaged in proto-peasant activities of production and marketing, and the opportunities these afforded for manumission and *coartación* (self-purchase). Abolition is the subject of Chapter 4 and we are reminded it was not the "trouble-free, successful realization of inevitable economic laws and, especially, the 'gran obra' (great deeds) of enlightened liberal Spanish and Puerto Rican abolitionists" (p. 106), but rather a highly contested process undertaken in part to undermine the island's independence movement. In Chapter 5 the various ways libertos and planters sought to define the meaning of freedom and free labor are discussed. For libertos this often entailed occupational mobility moving from field labor to domestic labor, and taking advantage of labor scarcity

to negotiate better pay and non-monetary compensation under the contracting system that went into effect following abolition. In response, planters called upon colonial authorities to assure their continued access to and control of liberto labor by limiting their freedom of movement. Chapters 6 and 7 consider post-emancipation class formation among libertos. Sensing their inability to control liberto labor, planters instead sought to retain control over liberto behavior. Meanwhile libertos actively resisted the encroachment upon their freedom, in some cases by setting fire to the plantations. Such actions on the part of libertos reveal "internal conflicts in post-emancipation society" (p. 194) that scholars have previously overlooked.

The book's only drawback is the absence of maps, which is frustrating because of numerous references to geographical locations and topographical features. Notwithstanding, Figueroa's ability to situate both the emergence of a plantation economy in Guayama and the efforts of libertos and planters in responding to the challenge of negotiating contested meanings of freedom and free labor in post-emancipation society within the context of the broader Caribbean is to be commended. This study enriches our understanding of topics long overlooked within both the island and the region's historiography.

Grand Valley State University DAVID M. STARK
Allendale, Michigan

Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil. By Edward E. Telles. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. Pp. ix, 324. Tables. Map. Notes. References. Index. $19.95 paper.

Edward Telles has written a book distinguished by careful research and attention to the existing literature in Brazilian race relations and society, supplemented by astute personal observations and reflectivity. He has succeeded in disentangling some of the fog surrounding both academic and popular discussions of Brazilian race relations, by themselves or in comparison with other race relations "situations," notably the United States. Precisely because of a confusion or conflation between "racial" origins and color "appearance," dissecting race relations disputations in Brazil has had the appearance of a moving target with multiple heads: slipping and sliding from the existence or non-existence of "problems"; affirming the national and societal commitment to race mixture while negating the salience of races; underscoring Brazilian exceptionalism; surging from the relative paucity of "hard" data to a surfeit of such data; underplaying the relationships between formally and legalized "normalized" practices of racism; lauding the emergence of recent legislation to redress issues which, in the absence of legalisms, had ostensibly not been there in the first place. The latter becomes an example of the supposed importation of "foreign" models likely to destabilize hallowed beliefs and practices about cross-color conviviality: Brazil had to be "protected" from foreign contagion, especially of the U.S. variety.