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The End of Slavery, the Beginning of Racism

It is often thought that racism is a result of slavery and that any place that has had a history of slavery is likely to have a history of racism too. This statement proves true in Puerto Rico. As a Spanish colony, Puerto Rico's main economic industry was sugar cane, an industry that greatly profited from the use of slaves. From 1776 to 1828, the number of African slaves brought to Puerto Rico by the Spanish grew from 5,037 to 32,000.¹ Despite this seemingly large increase, throughout all the years of slavery in Puerto Rico, slaves comprised a small proportion of the population as a whole (see appendix one). This small proportion is seen by some as "evidence of the benign nature of slavery in Puerto Rico."² The actual slaves may not have had the worst conditions in comparison to slaves elsewhere in the world. However, it seems that this was only the case as long as the landowners could control the slaves. In 1873, when slavery was abolished and slaves became *libertos* (freed slaves), they joined the free people of color (people of African descent who were never enslaved) to form a community of colored people. These people, legally free, were faced with racial prejudice and discrimination. In a sense, it was with the end of slavery that racism actually began. The racial prejudice and discrimination that began in the time of slavery has remained prevalent throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

It has been argued that Puerto Rico's is a relatively equal society that is not faced by the problems of discrimination and racism that are so rampant in other places. Puerto Rico

¹ Jay Kinsbruner, Not of Pure Blood (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 2.

² James L. Dietz, Economic History of Puerto Rico (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 38.

would seem to be conducive to equality because of the large number of free people of color, and also because the white population has never appeared to be threatened by the large colored population.³ It is important to note, however, that it is likely only the lower class whites who were not threatened by the black population. There are two possible reasons why whites did not feel threatened. The first reason is poverty, which has always served as an equalizer between the races in terms of their social relationships. Throughout Puerto Rico's history, there were few if any wealthy mulattos or blacks, but there was always a plethora of poor blacks and whites alike.⁴ The fact that these white people and black people were in the same economic position united them against the upper class white elite. The second reason is that whites, peasants in particular, had never lived in total racial separation in Puerto Rico. Although large-scale plantation development requiring large amounts of slaves did not occur until the nineteenth century, "a process of racial amalgamation with the group of much earlier imported slaves and their descendants, operating partly on the basis of sexual liaisons and partly on that of marriage, had been evolving for generations."⁵ Whites were not threatened by the high presence of blacks because they were used to living intimately with them for years.

In light of these reasons, it would seem that Puerto Rico would be a place of total racial equality, and that any inequality would stem only from differences in social class. That this is not the case is perhaps mainly due to government regulation. An example of government action leading to discrimination is Governor Prim's decree against the African race made in May of 1848. Governor Prim feared the possibility of ex-slave demonstrations

³ Kinsbruner, 29.

⁴ Anibal Gonzalez, "La Cuarterona and Slave Society in Cuba and Puerto Rico," Latin American Literary Review 8.16 (1980): 50.

and uprisings. As a preventative measure, he made decrees severely restricting those of African descent. For example, he decreed that any African person requiring a hearing, whether free or slave, would have his hearing only in military court. In addition, any free colored person who used a weapon against a white person would have his right hand cut off, even if the colored person was in the right.⁶ Prim felt that his decree was justified because “the free people of color were of the “African race” and therefore subject to extreme forms of discrimination.”⁷ To him, all people of the African race were the same. Because they looked different from white people, they were suspicious and not to be treated as normal citizens. Regardless of the fact that free people of color were as free as any white person, the fact that they had the same color skin as those ex-slaves who might start an uprising made them equivalent to those slaves in the eyes of Prim’s government and therefore subject to the same treatment. It is ironic that Prim and his followers believed that slaves were subject to severe discrimination because even before abolition a slave in Puerto Rico was often considered “an expensive and rare piece of equipment whose life and productive capacities had to be prolonged as much as possible.”⁸ If slaves were treated relatively well in Puerto Rico, they were still not to be trusted, and as soon as they were no longer slaves and no longer under tight control, the racism and discrimination began.

Although there were many people who shared Prim’s view, racism in Puerto Rico did take a different turn than the typical racist idea that whites are superior and blacks, as a whole without distinctions based on skin tone, are inferior. North American observers have said that it would not be possible to have the same type of racism in Puerto Rico as in the

⁵ H. Hoetink, Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 17.

⁶ Kinsbruner, 42.

⁷ Kinsbruner, 43.

United States, for example, since the high degree of race mixing there has made it impossible to draw a clear distinction between whites and blacks.⁹ Without such a distinction, it is impossible to discriminate because it would be constantly unclear as to who should be discriminated against and who should not. While it is true that such a distinction can not easily be made, this does not mean that Puerto Rico has an equal society. Rather, “racial discrimination exists, complicated by a confusion between the simple white/black dichotomy supposedly imported from the United States and the traditional, complex, native color scale.”¹⁰ The feeling of superiority of white skin is prevalent in Puerto Rico, and a hierarchy has been formed based on lighter and darker skin tones.¹¹ Because slaves had dark skin, a stigma was placed on those with dark skin, whether or not they were slaves. Even in post-abolition Puerto Rico, the whiter one’s skin was, the more desirable that person was in society, and the more chance that person had to advance up the social ranks of society. Three major groups emerged, from those with the lightest skin to those with the darkest: blancos, mulattos, and negroes.¹² Everyone was aware of the stigma placed on darker skin; free people of color were at a disadvantage in terms of their political, social, and economic performance throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ Although these people were never actually enslaved the way many other African people were, their lives were still affected by the prejudice stemming from the color of their skin. Slavery ended but the stigma did not.

⁸ Gonzalez, 49.

⁹ Hoetink, 105.

¹⁰ Raymond Carr, Puerto Rico: A Colonial Experiment (New York: New York University Press, 198) 246.

¹¹ Kinsbruner, 51.

¹² Minority Rights Group, No Longer Invisible (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1995) 139.

¹³ Kinsbruner, 16.

By 1820, there were 104,000 free people of color in San Juan, outnumbering the whites.¹⁴ Not only did they have a large community, but they often lived side by side with white people. The fact that free people of color lived interspersed with whites led blacks and whites alike to believe that they were living in a desegregated and equal society. On the surface, free people of color did not appear disadvantaged. They had full access to a market economy, they could live wherever they desired in the city, and they had social contact with whites.¹⁵ The problem was however, that underlying the whole façade of total freedom was the premium that was placed on whiteness. Although free people of color had access to almost everything that whites had access to, the degree to which they could achieve success was less than for whites. The only way for a person of color to advance to the level of a white person was to “transform” the dark skin into lighter skin based on increased income, influence and education.¹⁶ This transformation could take place because “class was such a powerful determinant of position that the attributes of class would often influence the definition of color, whatever the phenotypic characteristics shown by the individual.”¹⁷ If a person of color could somehow get himself into the elevated economic situation of an upper class white person, then he could lose his colored stigma. The logic behind this is somewhat circular, however, because the problem then becomes how to go about achieving greater income, influence and education when darker skin prevents equal access. This problem could not be overcome by many free people of color with the

¹⁴ Herbert S. Klein, African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 222.

¹⁵ Kinsbruner, 48, 50.

¹⁶ Minority Rights Group, 140.

¹⁷ Klein, 268.

exception of the lucky people whose skin was light enough. Discrimination served as a major impediment to the majority of the free people of color in Puerto Rico.

Prejudice was definitely a factor in Puerto Rican life, although it was not always noticeable upon first glance. There are several factors that assist in hiding the existence of racial prejudice in Puerto Rico. There were no significant political parties through which black people could find solidarity. Similarly, there were no black churches through which a solidarity movement could develop.¹⁸ The lack of a black solidarity movement could possibly be attributed to the lack of a need for one because the society was perceived to be so well integrated. Marriage statistics, however, give clear testament to the racism and lack of integration in Puerto Rico. Instead of a large number of intermarriages that one might expect from a thoroughly integrated society, racial prejudice has served as a restraint on mixed marriages. In most cases whites marry whites and free people of color marry free people of color.¹⁹ This practice in itself could ordinarily be attributed to cultural differences and not to prejudice, however “among colored people a very general aspiration was to become as light and to get as far away from slavery as possible.”²⁰ Free people of color are forced to attempt to identify as much as possible with white people so that they can receive better treatment by society. On the surface, all aspects of life for a free person of color in Puerto Rico appear to be the same as for any white person. It is only on deeper investigation that it becomes clear that the legacy of slavery affected all people of color and that they were not afforded all the same privileges as white people.

¹⁸ Kinsbruner, 81.

¹⁹ Kinsbruner, 88.

²⁰ Kinsbruner, 88.

As in the nineteenth century, so too in the twentieth century, there is a stigma attached to having darker skin; white Puerto Ricans in the twentieth century often deny “any tinge of Negro blood he himself may knowingly but secretly possess.”²¹ The legacy of slavery is such that it is remembered even in the supposedly more open-minded twentieth century. The potential advancement of a person of color had not become more advanced by the beginning of the twentieth century: “although either Negro or Mulatto Puerto Rican may ‘move up’ the social scale by his personal achievement, his movement is always relative; his final social position does not equal that of the white of similar achievement.”²² This had been true in the nineteenth century when less wealth kept free people of color from being able to maintain families as large as those of whites (see appendix two). It remained true through the 1940s, and more recent works also note the continued appearance of racism in Puerto Rico. According to census findings, the percentage of non-whites in Puerto Rico has decreased by half over the past one hundred years. This decrease is partially explained by the increased immigration of white people to Puerto Rico, but it is also because of the continuing absorption of the lightest mulattos into the group defined as white.²³ People are still hesitant to consider themselves as anything darker than as white as possible.

In the early days of the colony, “the Puerto Rican elite tended to assume that in the event of a slave uprising...the free mulattos and blacks would naturally side with the slaves; but in fact, quite often it was troops composed of free mulattos who put down the slave

²¹ Maxine W. Gordon, “Race Patterns and Prejudice in Puerto Rico,” American Sociological Review 15.3 (1950) 296.

²² Gordon, 300.

²³ Hoetink, 187.

rebellions in the island's sugar mills."²⁴ Sadly, it is probable that the same situation would likely occur today, on the eve of a new century. Anyone who was light-skinned enough to avoid being associated with darker people made it a priority not to identify with the darker people. Regardless of their skin color, mulattos and blacks alike were descended from the same people and it was their brethren who were oppressed as slaves. Slavery began as a necessity to strengthen and support an economy. As an institution, it is no longer necessary or acceptable. The ramifications that it has left behind, however, do not seem likely to disappear. No matter how hard they try to meld into society, darker skinned Puerto Ricans are still considered tainted by the legacy that slavery has left them.

²⁴ Gonzalez, 50.

Appendix One

Black Slave Population, Selected Years, 1776-1827

| Year | Number of Black Slaves | Percentage of Total Population |
|------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1776 | 6,537 | 8.1 |
| 1812 | 17,536 | 9.6 |
| 1820 | 21,730 | 9.4 |
| 1827 | 31,874 | 10.5 |

Source: James L. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, p.36

Appendix Two

Mean Nuclear Family Size by Race in San Juan 1823-1846

| Race | 1823 | 1828 | 1833 | 1846 |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|
| White | 3.7 | 4.3 | 3.5 | 3.8 |
| Free Colored | 3.6 | 3.1 | 2.9 | 3.5 |

Source: Jay Kinsbruner, *Not of Pure Blood*, p.106

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