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# RACE RELATIONS IN PUERTO RICO AND THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

*By Eric Williams*

THE islands of the Caribbean differ in size, political affiliation, religious beliefs and language; but the basic difference is ethnic. Racially, the Caribbean falls into two distinct groups: the territories with a comparatively large white population, and the territories with a predominantly black or colored population.

In the 1940 United States census, the population of Puerto Rico was given as 76.55 percent white; the corresponding figure for the Virgin Islands was 9 percent. There are further divergencies within the Virgin Islands group. Only 3.2 percent of the population of the island of St. Croix was given as white, as compared with 15.8 percent for the island of St. Thomas. Charlotte Amalie, the chief city of St. Thomas, had a white population of 12.1 percent; the two chief cities of St. Croix had white populations of 2.2 and 4.3 percent respectively. This ethnic difference is the consequence of the particular economy developed in the various regions. Where the plantation economy based on sugar predominated, Negro slavery was essential and the territory automatically became black. The Virgin Islands fell in this category, together with Haiti and the British, French and Netherlands possessions. Where the small farmer survived, in a coffee or tobacco or livestock economy, white labor was predominant. Puerto Rico, Cuba and, to a lesser extent, the Dominican Republic were in this group.

The Negro made his appearance in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands as a chattel slave. But if Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have a common heritage of slavery, their economic development during the slavery period took divergent lines. Puerto Rico was always a white colony, a garrison rather than a plantation. The proportion of Negro slaves in Puerto Rico was never as high as elsewhere in the Caribbean, and never exceeded 14 percent of the population. Puerto Rico had a self-sufficient economy and its labor needs were satisfied by free men. Many of these free laborers were black or colored, but only for a brief period in the island's history did the non-white population exceed 50 percent of the total. The Virgin Islands, on the other hand, had plantation economies exporting sugar. St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands be-

came a free port rather than a sugar colony, however; hence its smaller Negro population. An ethnic map of the Caribbean would align Puerto Rico with the Spanish-speaking areas, and would group the Virgin Islands with Haiti and the European possessions, not because Puerto Rico was under Spanish rule and the Virgin Islands Danish, but because of their differing economies.

The plantation economy was notoriously harsher on the slave. It is no accident, therefore, that while slave rebellions were not unknown in Puerto Rico, those islands never experienced the convulsions that destroyed St. John in 1733, St. Croix in 1848, repeatedly visited the British islands, made Haiti independent, and produced revolts in Cuba in 1812 and again in 1843. It is an astonishing fact that in Puerto Rico slaveowners themselves petitioned for emancipation, against the wishes of the mother country. Emancipation in the Virgin Islands was a metropolitan measure introduced in the teeth of opposition from the local planters. Conditions for the integration of the Negro, after emancipation, were more favorable in Puerto Rico than in any other Caribbean territory except the Dominican Republic. But Spanish and Danish policies were in accord in one respect. In both territories the freeing of slaves was a relatively easy matter, and the numbers of free mulattoes and Negroes were larger than in many other Caribbean islands. Spanish legislation facilitated manumissions, and there was less excuse for denying freedom to slaves in Puerto Rico's coffee and subsistence economy than in the sugar economy of Cuba, with its slave gang.

These free people of color were usually, but not exclusively, light-skinned. Offspring of white fathers and black mothers, they were generally treated with indulgence by their fathers, often educated, and customarily left some property on the death of the father. In a society in which life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were the inalienable rights of a white skin, it was inevitable that they despised the distaff-side of their ancestry. Too light to work in the fields, as the saying went, they regarded themselves as superior to the black slaves. Official policy sanctioned this differentiation. Six years before the Declaration of Independence the governor of Puerto Rico decreed the admission of white and mulatto children to the public schools "without distinction."

The Danes divided the colored people into two classes. Those in the first category were made first-class citizens, with full rights, privileges and duties. They were placed on an equal footing with whites and were in every case to be treated as whites; in traveling

abroad, for example, they were not to be designated as "free colored" but as "Mr. So-and-So." Colored people in the second division remained second-class citizens, and the governor was empowered to "transfer" a citizen from one race to another. While this plan of changing racial status by decree was never carried out, it suggests the way in which the free people of color formed a flexible caste that served as a convenient buffer between whites and blacks. As the saying goes in Puerto Rico, the colored people were "the ham in the sandwich."

Thus, in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, when the sun of emancipation banished the last lingering shadows of a slavery that had been becoming increasingly unprofitable, certain characteristics of the new social order had already been established. Interbreeding, which relaxed the tensions of servitude, had taken place on a large scale. Moreover, the Negroes had shown themselves to be good Puerto Ricans. The schoolmaster Rafael Cordero, for example, taught children for 58 years without charging fees, thereby earning the approbation of the Economic Society of Friends of the Country. The shoemaker Miguel Enriquez was decorated by Philip V for bravery in battle against the Dutch and English and elevated to the rank of knight; in Spanish eyes he became so identified with Puerto Rico that a book published in Madrid described Puerto Rico itself as "the fatherland of Miguel Enriquez." Under the Danes, prominent colored people received invitations to official functions to which many whites were not invited. Thus was established the Caribbean tradition of race relations. Emphasis was on color, not race; and color was closely associated with class, and even determined by class.

In Puerto Rico today a population of close to two million people is crowded on a small island of slightly more than two million acres, less than half of which are arable. The population has doubled twice in the last century and is increasing at a net rate of 30,000 a year. The chief means of subsistence is the land, and the principal crop sugar. The sugar industry accounts for 60 percent of the total export trade, occupies 40 percent of all farm lands, employs 40 percent of the working population, and accounts for 90 percent of the freight hauled by the public railways. The industry achieved this supremacy by reason of tariff protection in the United States market, and without this tariff protection the crop would be almost eliminated. Its further expansion is prohibited by the quota system. Sugar has brought to the is-

land a phenomenal increase in wealth, but the average Puerto Rican is today a landless wage earner, ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed, living on an income of \$341 a year. Puerto Rico today has a subsidized economy. Federal contributions, direct and indirect, amounted to \$57,000,000 in 1942, or approximately \$30 per capita.

In the Virgin Islands a population of 25,000 people live on 85,000 acres, of which less than one-sixth is crop land. With 11,600 acres of cropland and 8,000 acres in cultivation, St. Croix, the agricultural center of the group, supports a population of nearly 13,000. Yet the population has declined by more than 50 percent in the last century; the decline in St. John is more than 70 percent, while for the group as a whole it is more than 40 percent. Large-scale emigration represented an unconscious effort to achieve some equilibrium between population and means of subsistence. In spite of such emigration, the Administrator of St. Croix estimates that the present population of that island is 25 percent greater than the island can support. The National Resources Planning Board is even more pessimistic. In its "Development Plan for the Virgin Islands," the Board frankly confesses its inability to see a way of providing for more than 60 percent of the population of the area. Sugar, the main crop of St. Croix, yields 10 tons per acre as compared with 30 in Puerto Rico. Without tariff protection the industry would collapse overnight. Before the war, tourist expenditures were the chief supplementary source of revenue. National defense projects have taken their place during the war. The average income in St. Croix is \$400 per year; the income of the working classes is much lower. Even this standard of living is achieved only by subsidies. Federal contributions in 1942 amounted to nearly \$1,000,000, or \$39 per capita.

It is in this concrete economic setting that we must view the question of race relations. The struggle for survival, by the community and by the individual, is a grim one.

## II

Legal discrimination in the two countries is unknown. Children of all colors meet on equal terms in the public schools, though discrimination is prevalent in private schools, even those which receive government grants. There are no segregated housing areas. Whites, blacks and mulattoes sit side by side in theaters, churches and public vehicles, and lie side by side in the cemeteries. The law

recognizes no differences based on race, color, creed, national origin or previous condition. Lynchings are unheard of.

This absence of legal discrimination against the Negro arises from the fact that racial differences are subordinate to those of class. Muñoz Marín, Puerto Rico's distinguished statesman and popular leader, tells the story of the white voter who was asked by a colored lawyer to vote for a certain candidate. The white voter replied: "You *blanquitos* ["little whites," not to be confused with the American term "poor whites"] have too much." The story is very revealing. "White" denotes class and status rather than color and race. In the Caribbean generally a man is not only as white as he looks. If by virtue of his position or his wealth he moves about in white society, he automatically becomes "white." An American student, Dr. Charles C. Rogler, has made an intensive study of a small Puerto Rican town, Comerío. He found that social distinctions were based on class and not race, and that the two coalesced merely because the Negro is never found in the upper class. "However," he adds, "if, to take a hypothetical case, a dark mulatto were to belong to the upper class, he would be socially defined as a white person." There is no unanimity as to who are Negroes and who are not. Some Puerto Rican families may have one child classified in the census as white, another as colored. It is well known that, in order not to antagonize some prominent family which does not wish to be identified with Negroes, the census officer would classify its members as white, and perhaps change the classification later. For this reason some observers believe that the percentage of colored people in the Puerto Rican census has been grossly underestimated. It is a notorious fact that these "white-minded Negroes," as they are called in St. Thomas, have colored ancestors. The mulatto in the United States Caribbean possessions thus has a much greater social mobility than his kinsfolk in the United States. It must be emphasized that this mobility is very largely a result of historical causes.

The mulatto's concern with color is understandable in a society where his handicaps increase more and more drastically as the pigmentation deepens. But the consciousness of legal equality tends to give the colored people confidence in social relationships. For example, within the last 70 years numbers of French people have migrated to St. Thomas from the French island of St. Barthélemy. Today this French colony has more than a thousand members, concentrated in a fishing village three miles west of Charlotte Amalie and in a community of farmers on the northern

side of the island. They keep very largely to themselves, speak a French patois though they understand and speak English, and are easily identified by the obvious signs of malnutrition they reveal. The islanders derisively call them *Chachas*. The attitude of the colored people to this French community is, indeed, one of unveiled contempt. Some of the French people send their children to the schools, wearing shoes. Some of the adults have taken to trade, and own grocery stores and liquor bars in the French district. But the prejudice against them remains, and the marriage of a colored girl to one of these Frenchmen is an occasion for endless gossip. The children, it is said, will always have "the Chacha look." The feeling is unmistakable in St. Thomas that "the Chachas are all right in their place." It is a complete reversal of the relationships that would prevail in other countries.

The Negro enjoys equality with the white man politically as well as legally. Negroes in Puerto Rico vote not as Negroes but as Puerto Ricans identified with one of the major parties. The Republican Party was founded by a colored Puerto Rican, Dr. José Celso Barbosa, one of the great names in Puerto Rico's history. Today colored Puerto Ricans are found in the Insular Congress and in municipal government, as well as in high administrative positions. Ramos Antonini, the colored deputy leader of the Populares Party, was elected as representative-at-large in the 1942 elections and polled the largest vote. In other words, he does not represent a Negro constituency nor are his supporters Negroes only. His color debarred him from becoming Speaker of the House of Representatives, however. Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa, another colored Puerto Rican, head of the maternity section of the Municipal Hospital, is one of the chief stalwarts of the Coalition Party. Until recently a prominent Negro lawyer sat on the Public Service Commission; another is Chief Examiner of the Civil Service Commission. In the Virgin Islands in recent years, very dark men have taken positions that were reserved, under the Danes, for Europeans or light colored people.

Thus it is that, by virtue of the absence of legal discrimination, the high degree of social mobility, the emphasis on class, and the political equality that prevails, unity among Negroes on the race question does not exist in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The word "Negro" is seldom used in the Caribbean, and, when used, is not a "fighting" word. All over the Caribbean it is either synonymous with "slave," or is a term of endearment, used colloquially by both whites and Negroes. The Spanish word for slave-

ship is, significantly, *negrero*, but there is no Spanish equivalent for "nigger" or "damned nigger." The militancy of American Negroes has no counterpart in Puerto Rico and St. Thomas. To repeat — the issue in the Caribbean is not one of race but one of class. Puerto Ricans talk not so much of "the colored race" as of "the colored class." The conflict is not between white and black but, as in St. Thomas, between those who live on one of the three hills on which the town is built and those who do not. Muñoz Marín puts the same idea in different words: there are in Puerto Rico only two classes, those who wear neckties and those who don't. The situation is the same in the British West Indies, where the mark of differentiation is the wearing of shoes rather than of neckties. It is to be noted that similar conditions prevail in Haiti where there is no considerable number of white people.

### III

Legally, the Negro is on a footing of equality with the white man. On the social level, however, race prejudice antedated the American occupation, exists today, and is increasing. It will be readily appreciated, however, that in the nature of things social discrimination does not affect the large majority of colored people. The entry of foreign capital has brought the practices associated with the countries of origin. It is not the influx of Americans as individuals but of American capital that has resulted in the recrudescence of the race problem. Social discrimination is most obvious in private employment in the upper brackets. Conventionally, none but white people or the fairest-skinned among the colored are employed by banks, sugar corporations, airlines and shipping companies, and the large department stores.

Discrimination is common in all the better hotels and restaurants. A few years ago a well-known restaurant in San Juan, then under non-local management, refused to serve people of color. The issue was taken to the District Court, where a decision in favor of the management was given. The Supreme Court upheld the verdict, and the practice continued until the establishment passed into Puerto Rican hands. In the leading hotel in Puerto Rico the patronage is almost wholly composed of whites from the United States. Colored people are never seen in the dining room or at the bar unless they are foreigners traveling on government missions. The outstanding hotel in St. Thomas, government-owned, and leased on a contract which specifically prohibited racial discrimination, refused to admit colored people until recently,



when it was turned over to a new manager who is colored. There is, however, another hotel which still refuses to serve colored people, on the plea that it is reserved for service men. Clubs in Puerto Rico are customarily classified as "first class" and "second class." Whites belong to both types of club, but Negroes belong only to "second class" ones. Cases have arisen in recent years of refusal by night clubs to serve colored people; in one instance the establishment was fined \$25. Such small fines are locally considered a joke. In the University of Puerto Rico, colored students, the majority destined to be schoolteachers, are freely admitted. Yet two members of the faculty, in a special study of the Negro in Puerto Rico, have brought to light a number of sayings about the Negro common to university students. The saying, "God made the Negro so that animals can rest," is an example.

Social discrimination has increased in Puerto Rico to such an extent that the legislature passed a Civil Rights Act in 1943 guaranteeing the right of all persons irrespective of differences of race, creed or political affiliation to enjoy the facilities afforded by public places, businesses and any agency of the Insular Government. The penalties decreed are a fine of from \$25 to \$100, or a jail term of from ten to a hundred days. Despite this law, however, colored people in Puerto Rico are very reluctant to visit certain hotels or night clubs.

## IV

The lower classes of Caribbean society look to America as the land of opportunity. They are the underdogs now, since they are black, and the left-handed racial egalitarianism of the United States, where one drop of colored blood makes one a Negro, gives them that feeling of equality with the colored aristocracy which is ruled out at home by the emphasis on status. To these people contact with the United States means material benefits, the opportunity of education and the monthly remittances from emigrants who have made good.

But the islanders are even more aware of racial distinctions than they were before American rule. This is not to say that the presence of large numbers of American troops, mostly colored, in the area has produced any serious change in the racial situation, as far as the masses are concerned. The rank and file of American troops have fitted into local society. Barred from officers' clubs, looked down upon by white and colored aristocracy, the enlisted

men have gravitated toward the people of their own social milieu, the colored middle and lower classes. Left alone, white soldiers and colored population can and will work out an adjustment of their own. It is particularly important that they should do so. One instance taken from Jamaica suggests the problem. On December 8, 1943, an advertisement appeared in *The Gleaner* of Jamaica for "help" at the American base. The advertisement specified: "White, Male and Female." The next day the same advertisement appeared, minus one word: "White." But Kingston was in an uproar. Letters and protests poured in, the Corporation met and passed a resolution vigorously condemning the "insult," and voted that a copy of the resolution be sent to President Roosevelt. The United States Base Commander made a public apology, but the tension continued. Discriminatory notices are, in fact, a common feature of the West Indian press. But the incident is a reminder of Caribbean sensitiveness on the race question and of the perils inherent in the situation.

The constituents of the race problem in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are, in short, a historical background that emphasizes class rather than race; an economic setting in which the problem of the Negro is merged in the larger problem of the community; the absence of legal discrimination against the black masses; and the pressure of social discrimination on the lighter-skinned middle class minority. There is no "solution" to such a problem. With the economic and social forces as they are it is difficult to see how there can be any substantial changes in race relations in the two communities. Ultimately, the shape of race relations in the United States will be the decisive factor in the relations between races in these colonies.

Some Puerto Rican sociologists advance as a solution the long tradition of interbreeding, which will, they believe, "whiten" the Puerto Rican Negroes in 75 to 100 years. But this is quite ridiculous, since the essential character of the present relations would prevent this "whitening" even if it were desirable and, within reasonable human expectation, possible. On the occasion of the Jamaican incident referred to above, a publicist advanced a more serious proposal. Americans, he said, must learn West Indian psychology. "It will not be enough for the Americans to say they followed the local custom."

There are many Americans in the islands who take these questions seriously. They must seek to understand that conditions in the West Indies are not like conditions at home. President Roose-

velt's directive to United States forces in the Caribbean to respect local customs has had good results, in this regard. All Americans in the area must recognize the particular racial background and historical development of the islands. The Administration must try to formulate policy and practice in accordance with the history and patterns of the area, and not allow itself to be influenced by the national traditions of the interests which it represents. Given the history and social sentiments of the island, it is not at all impossible for the United States Administration in Puerto Rico to strike blows at race prejudice and to try to develop an official attitude toward race relations in harmony with the aspirations and practice of the colonial areas. There are already signs that the American and British authorities recognize the necessity of action on this question. It is interesting to note that a special correspondent of the London *Times*, in two articles on the West Indies published on October 29 and 30, 1943, said that "it is time to consider whether Colonial Office officials should not in future be forbidden to belong to clubs which impose a color bar . . . sooner or later, the color bar which at present surrounds the higher administrative posts must be broken down."

Asked his views on the subject, Muñoz Marín replied simply: "More democracy." Even the colored opponents of this Puerto Rican leader agree that he and his party have given Negroes a square deal and opened positions to them, especially in the teaching profession and the higher ranks of the police force, from which they were conventionally debarred. The popular movement in these island possessions of the United States stands for "no discrimination," as opposed to what it considers the American trend toward greater discrimination. Similarly the Communist Party has consistently opposed racial discrimination. Recent events in Europe have shown that even liberty and racial rights which have been exercised for centuries are not safe except in a fully democratic order. In trying to base the struggle against racial discrimination upon the democratic aspirations of the people, Muñoz Marín is in harmony with the best thought and increasing practice of the age.