

A GLIMPSE OF SOCIAL ECONOMICS IN PORTO RICO

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Among many other problems, the School of Tropical Medicine is studying the food supply and nutritional condition of the people of Porto Rico; and in this connection, the writer was invited to spend the latter half of February there, giving evening lectures on the chemistry of nutrition at the School and devoting long days to field studies of food and nutrition conditions throughout the island in company with Dr. Donald H. Cook, head of the department of chemistry of the School and uniquely qualified as a student of the food conditions of the island. An ideal "guide, philosopher, friend," and interpreter, he enabled the writer to learn in days what would ordinarily require months or years. As the Island is only about one hundred miles long and thirty-five miles wide, it was possible, in the course of about seven hundred miles of carefully planned driving, to make a rapid first-hand survey of practically its entire area.

Topographically, it consists of a hilly interior with many steep mountains rising to heights of around 3,000 to 4,000 feet, surrounded nearly, but not quite, everywhere by a coastal plain. The dense population has nearly deforested the island; there are no very important mineral lands, nor distinctly industrial districts; economically, the entire area is classified primarily in agricultural terms.

The fertile, level lands of the coastal plain are practically monopolized by sugar cane, sometimes with a narrow fringe of cocoanut palm groves on what would otherwise be barren, sandy beaches; the eastern part of the interior with its wider, more open valleys is chiefly devoted to the growing of tobacco; and the western interior of closely packed hills with hardly any valley land, is the coffee country. Until recently these "three big cash crops" have been the Island's only important sources of income. Of late the exports of fruit and of needlework (especially hand-made lace and embroidery) are attaining economic importance. Grapefruit and pineapples are grown on lands not too steep for cultivation nor sufficiently level and fertile to be monopolized by the sugar industry, and sufficiently accessible to San Juan to permit of placing the fresh fruit promptly and economically upon the steamer for the North. Bananas and mangoes are widely grown for home consumption, but only on a small scale because of the prohibitively high price of land. As the

coffee bushes must be shaded by trees, the large "cooking banana" (plantain or *plátano*) is considerably grown in the coffee country, which now sends down an appreciable amount of this fruit for consumption in the cities on the coast and for shipment to the Porto Rican colony in the upper east side of New York City.

It is estimated that, in the one generation since the Spanish-American war, the population of Porto Rico has grown from about 900,000 in 1898-1900 to about 1,500,000 in 1930; while at the same time it has contributed about 100,000 to the population of New York City.

The same period has seen a rapid industrialization of the agriculture of Porto Rico, particularly in the growing of sugar and tobacco. The planters of these crops have had the advantage (especially over their Cuban competitors) of enjoying duty-free entry for their products into the American market and have thus been enabled to extend their operations at the expense of the area available for general farming. No other farming can support the capital investment needed to meet the prices which the sugar planters pay for land. Thus, along with increase of population, there has been a decrease in land area available for the growing of food for home consumption.

It is estimated that following the Spanish-American War the actual number of farms decreased by 30,000 while the large sugar and tobacco plantations increased their acreage by buying out the neighboring small farmers. In a sense, of course, the small farmers were not compelled to sell. They sold because the large tobacco growers, and in still higher degree the sugar planters, were able to offer, under the American tariff regime, unprecedentedly high prices for land. Having sold his farm, the small farmer, faced by rapidly rising land values on an island already thickly populated, was unable to buy another farm; and usually was unable to find a steady job, for the large planters naturally tend to the use of labor-saving machinery.

Absentee or incorporated *entrepreneurs* immune to local public opinion but served by local lawyers and intent upon extending their areas of exploitation, are apt to find ways of getting what they want. For a small farmer to attempt to hold out against the "logical economic development" of the sugar or tobacco industry, is to put himself in much the position of a pedestrian attempting to hold the right of way against a steam roller. But developments which are logical from the standpoint of business economics are not always

socially beneficial. "Agriculture is not only an industry, but also a way of life."

Thus the decrease in the number of farms meant that at least 150,000 people (for Porto Rico families average large) were shifted from occupancy of owned land and ability to raise their own food to the casual labor group buying food at increasing prices and seeking jobs in competition not only with the preexisting proletariat but with this increased by about 600,000 souls in thirty years!

The commercial-economic advantage of inclusion within the American tariff territory has brought, or at least has largely contributed to, the social-economic disadvantage that the present employment in the Island's fixed area affords only half enough jobs, and only half-adequate subsistence, for its people. So rapidly that we have not realized what has been happening, there has occurred under our own flag and in our own generation such a demonstration of exploitation by absentee landlordism¹ and resulting pressure of population upon food supply as we are accustomed to associate only with other civilizations—far away or long ago.

A particularly well-informed Porto Rican has summarized the present conditions of his countryman somewhat as follows:

One-fifth, perhaps, may be said to be economically independent; a second fifth have fairly steady employment but with pay insufficient to support a fair standard of living, and little if any prospect of opportunity to get ahead—the competition for their positions is too great; below them is the middle fifth, able to find only seasonal or irregular jobs and those at starvation wages—of necessity they live in dire poverty; and still below this are two-fifths of the population of whom only God knows how they live at all.

Doubtless the majority both of superficial observers and of fiscal experts would paint a different picture. One typical tourist impression is that the poor people are picturesque rather than poverty stricken; but a closer view reveals the fact that many a picturesque cabin is practically devoid of furniture, bedding, or cooking utensils, and that while the laboring people keep themselves, their children, their scanty clothing, their cabins, and their dooryards clean and neat, a great proportion of them are seriously undernourished. Another prevalent tourist impression is that the people don't do what they might to feed themselves by planting gardens; but investigation discloses the fact that even in the open country the landlords economize their costly acres by permitting the erection of tenant-

¹The excellent welfare work which is being developed at the Fajardo central under the leadership of Señor Bird should be mentioned as a brilliant exception to the generally prevailing methods of treatment of employees upon the large sugar and tobacco estates.

workers' cabins only in places where nothing will grow, or so close together that there is absolutely no space for gardening. If cabins are built on the edge of a cane field, the growing cane is often literally in contact with the back walls of the cabins; and the sides of the latter are so close together that the space between them is narrower and darker than an old-law tenement house "well"—an utterly impossible place in which to plant anything. To step out of doors is to step into the road. Fortunately, there is usually enough sunshine in the road so that Porto Rican children regularly escape rickets—even the pinched, anemic features, the emaciated chests and the flabby "pot bellies" of the sadly undernourished and malnourished children are almost always supported by good straight legs. That the children are thus more shapely than the malnourished children of the North are apt to be, is doubtless another reason that the tourist, or even the American who lives on the island, is apt to underestimate the frequency among Porto Rican children of such seriously deficient nutrition as must necessarily handicap their future efficiency.

Another reason for failure to realize the seriousness of the poverty in Porto Rico is the evidence of liberal expenditure upon internal improvements there: in the capital, many new public buildings; throughout the Island, good roads; and in nearly every village, a good school house, evidently built within the last thirty years. And, the business man may ask, how could Porto Rico, if it were not prosperous, borrow money at lower interest than can most of our States? At the moment of writing, there comes to hand a municipal bond circular which quotes San Juan bonds at prices to yield the investor 4.40 per cent, while such prosperous cities as Detroit, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, and Tucson must pay 4.45, 4.50, 4.60, and 4.65 per cent on their corresponding securities.

We have, indeed, been slow to grasp the fact that under our flag and practically just off the shores of our mainland, social-economic conditions can be so different from anything that we know or have ever known in the States. We have had no previous experience of, or responsibility for, a situation in which the government can be so prosperously solvent and the people so starvingly poor; of a community whose "favorable trade balance" can be so high while the condition of existence of the majority of its people is so low, or where agricultural land values are so high while agricultural wages are so low; in short, where the profits of a rich land go into so few pockets (largely those of absentees) and the people

who work the land are not only kept so poor in money but are also so inadequately fed and housed and so completely excluded from the possibility of raising any food for themselves and their children.

Since Porto Rico ceased to be a Spanish and became an American "possession", the fiscal control of insular government finance, by Federal officials, the cooperation of the Bureau of Insular Affairs in the floating of Porto Rican loans in our money markets, and the confidence inspired in investors by the extent to which "Washington stands back of" the obligations of the Insular Government have combined to make it easy for the Island to bond itself for such internal improvements as roads, schools, and other public buildings. The money voted by the Porto Rican Legislature for these good works came chiefly through Wall Street and went chiefly through Porto Rican contractors. So long as the time for the repayment of principal was still remote, and until the hurricane losses made difficult the collection of taxes, it is natural that money should have been somewhat freely spent for purposes so commendable from the American point of view as school houses and good roads. But it is a mistake to suppose this easy public money meant any general diffusion of prosperity among the people.

The money which came into the Island as the result of the sale of bonds in the States, the inflation of land values which followed the privilege of sending Porto Rico sugar and coffee duty-free into the American market, and doubtless, other factors have resulted in the handling of more money by many individuals than they would otherwise have had; but because the demand for labor has not kept pace with the growth of the population, there is less chance now than ever before for the average Porto Rican family to acquire a small farm or even enough ground for a garden. Probably both a larger number and a larger proportion of Porto Rican children are malnourished today than when the island was a Spanish province.

The average earnings of a Porto Rican workman are estimated at sixty cents a day. The needlework of the wife and daughters may possibly raise the family income to six or seven dollars a week (if all are hard-working and fortunate in keeping their jobs against the competition of their poorer neighbors); families average larger than in the States; food prices are about the same; it takes no elaborate calculation to show that the great majority of the people of Porto Rico must live almost entirely upon whatever food will satisfy hunger at the expenditure of the fewest pennies.

Usually this is rice and beans. The beans furnish vitamin B

and so prevent the beriberi which has frequently afflicted people compelled by poverty to live too largely upon rice. Mangoes growing by the roadsides, and such other local fruits and vegetables as sometimes come within the reach of the poor, seem to supply enough vitamin C to protect them from scurvy.

The abundant sunshine evidently produces enough vitamin D in the children themselves to protect them from rickets. But, chiefly for lack of milk and eggs, these children are growing up with calcium-poor bodies and undernourished with respect to vitamin A, even if they get enough rice and beans to meet their needs for calories and protein.

In view of the evidence furnished by the nutrition research of recent years, we cannot doubt that the inadequate and ill-balanced food supply of the majority of Porto Rican families is as great a detriment to their efficiency as is hookworm or malaria and is perhaps the most serious of predisposing causes of tuberculosis. The extremely crowded housing, even in the country, which also doubtless tends to keep the tuberculosis rate so high in Porto Rico, is a product of the same general social-economic conditions which have resulted in the present inadequate food supply.

It must be emphasized that the food supply is inadequate as well as ill-balanced, for it would be a tragic error to try to reduce their supply of rice and beans in order to balance their diet. They are not getting too much of rice and beans; but they are getting too little of other foods.

Especially great is the need for milk which, for some time to come can probably best be met chiefly by shipping canned and dried milk from the States. The development of milk production on the island itself is handicapped, first by the fact that under present conditions sugar and tobacco tend to monopolize the land which might be good for dairy farming; and second, by the perpetual summer climate of Porto Rico, which seems more favorable to the parasites that they prey upon than to the cattle themselves.

The need of supplementary feeding of the Porto Rican children is being recognized. The governor has mentioned it frequently. The situation is being systematically studied by representatives of the American Child Health Association. In some localities the feeding of orphans is being provided for by church committees, but there is an immense amount of semi-starvation in working-men's homes. The health commissioner contemplates using certain limited funds available in the budget of his department for the prevention

of tuberculosis by supplementary feeding at early ages. And the commissioner of education is very actively pushing the development of school gardens for vegetable growing and the use of such vegetables to improve and extend the school lunches. Parent-teacher associations are increasing in popularity and are actively supporting the school lunches—in some cases devoting their entire receipts from membership dues to this purpose. Visiting the Corozal "second unit" school at lunch time, we found all the children being provided with a luncheon based upon their popular menu of rice and beans, but with the "bean dish" developed into a most excellent stew, containing, along with the usual beans, a wide, appetizing, and scientifically commendable variety and proportion of green and yellow vegetables from the school garden. And we also found that the forty children who seemed to need it most were being given a breakfast of milk and bananas by the local organization at the beginning of each school day.

Since the above was written aid has come through the American Relief Association and the Golden Rule Foundation, and the school lunch system is beginning to be extended to preschool children also.

Thus, there is active interest already manifest and much is already being done, and done well. But financial assistance from our wider public will probably be necessary if the need is to be fully met. And an understandingly sympathetic attitude toward things Porto Rican in general should certainly be extended to these new-made fellow citizens as they work out their social-economic salvation under the tribulations which in this case have accompanied the trade which follows the flag. The situation is grave and difficult but rich in hopefulness and inspiring opportunity.

The nutritive factors especially needed to make adequate the present diet of the majority of Porto Rican children are such as can be transported without appreciable loss in the form of canned and dried foods; and also they are factors which the body can store so that any period of better feeding, even if only temporary, can be depended upon to bring to these children a permanent benefit.

Since we now know nutrition to be such a potent force in the development and maintenance of health and efficiency, we would be as negligent in failing to apply this nutritional knowledge as that of an infectious disease. We cannot be satisfied that schools under the American flag should be largely attended by children who are half starved through no fault of their own or of their parents. The

vicious circle of poverty, undernutrition, and impaired efficiency can and must be broken.

Along with the hookworm and malaria campaigns which are already being actively prosecuted in Porto Rico and the more complete segregation of open cases of tuberculosis for which preparations are now being made, there should be an insistence upon the adequate feeding of the children as a factor of coordinate importance in the restoration of Porto Rican health and welfare. And just as the physician will practice his profession only in full accordance with its accepted standards, so in the work of nutritional rehabilitation we should strive to make possible the means for feeding the children of Porto Rico according to the same standards that we teach in the States.