

History of Puerto Rico

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The works selected for this issue of *HLAS* represent a robust field of historical scholarship. Applying a variety of theoretical approaches, methodologies, and sources, these works investigate key themes such as slavery, gender, sexuality, and colonialism. From microhistory to comparative history, from cultural studies to oral history, the theoretical and methodological repertoire informing current research challenges us to reconsider much of the conventional wisdom about Puerto Rican culture, society, and history.

Slavery continues to be a predominant theme in the historiography of 19th-century Puerto Rico. Drawing on slave census data, parish registers, judicial, criminal, and notarial records, researchers have scrutinized key aspects of slavery as a social and labor institution, advancing our understanding of the slave experience within Puerto Rico and the larger Caribbean region. Chinaea probes the discourse supporting chattel slavery, the distinctively racialized coerced labor regime that took root in the Americas ([bi2009000500](#)). The harsh slave codes, penal servitude, and antivagrancy laws introduced by Spain during the first half of the 1800s are the subjects of a piece by Santiago-Valles ([bi2009001656](#)). These penal policies impinged heavily on both slaves and the free racially mixed subordinate classes. Labor power was in great demand in the colony's expanding agroexport economy, and the penal policies pursued by Spain linked race to punishment as a method of labor-power extraction. Despite these state-led efforts to seek additional forms of labor, slavery continued to thrive in Puerto Rico until its definitive abolition in 1873. In their analysis of the 1872 *Registro Central de Esclavos*, Negrón-Portillo and Mayo Santana demonstrate that slavery was widespread throughout the island, including the central highlands, a nonexport region ([bi2010001612](#)). Furthermore, the pattern of slaveholding in Puerto Rico was characterized by ownership of small lots of slaves. This suggests that many people were involved in slavery, if only as holders of a few bond servants each. A similar pattern occurred in Brazil, Cuba, and the US, where a low ratio of slaves to masters was also the norm. Together with Negrón-Portillo and Mayo Santana, Picó expands on the theme of slave agency by studying family structures, extended kinship networks, and community ties among slaves and between slaves and the free population ([bi2010001594](#)). These dynamics enabled enslaved people to better withstand the oppression and constraints of life in bondage.

Influenced by postmodern and cultural studies approaches, a growing body of literature centers on women, gender, and sexuality. Significantly, this trend has made prostitution a focal point of scholarly interest. Political, medical, legal, and religious entities spared no effort dealing with the practice of female commercial sex in Puerto Rico, originally legalized in 1876 but suppressed in the late 1910s. This theme is addressed by Flores Ramos ([bi2010001614](#)) and Vázquez Lazo ([bi2010001616](#)) in their detailed monographic studies of prostitution in San Juan and Ponce, respectively. Flores Ramos's book is the revised version of a master's thesis in history originally presented at the Universidad de Puerto Rico in 1995. This seminal work established prostitution and sexuality as historical problems worthy of scholarly inquiry in Puerto Rican historiography, paving the way for later research by Eileen Findlay ([HLAS 60: bi00000484](#)) and Laura Briggs ([HLAS 64: bi2007000532](#)). In each of these works, the practices and discourses related to sexuality and prostitution serve as the lens through which larger issues in modern Puerto Rican history (gender, sexuality, class, race, citizenship, and nation) are brought into sharper focus.

Similarly, cultural studies has shed new light on central issues in the century-old history of US-Puerto Rico relations. The conventional focus on the structural dimensions of US domination (economic, military, and strategic) has given way to more nuanced analyses of colonial processes that highlight instances of contestation and negotiation. Arguing that the colonial interaction shapes both colonizer and colonized, Go demonstrates how Philippine and Puerto Rican political elites actively engaged the educational, electoral, and administrative policies introduced by the US ([bi2009003979](#)), sometimes accommodating, sometimes transforming these policies. Merrill, in an innovative study, presents tourism as a space for negotiating power relations, one that allows both insular government officials and non-state actors to define the parameters of American influence ([bi2010000876](#)). The rigorous comparative framework employed by these two authors is a welcome contribution, situating the island's colonial experience in a larger international perspective beyond the customary Caribbean context. Furthermore, Merrill's use of photographs points to the richness that visual sources offer the cultural historian.

Since the early 1970s, Puerto Rican historiography has developed in close dialogue with regional and international paradigms in historical research and writing. During the 1970s and 1980s practitioners of the so-called New History, or *nueva historia*, renovated the field with their works on economic, labor, social, and women's history issues. Since the 1990s, the shift toward cultural history has yielded revisionist interpretations of the Puerto Rican historical experience. In more ways than one, the general histories written by Fernando Picó, *Historia general de Puerto Rico* ([bi2010001605](#)), and César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century* ([bi2007003586](#)), exemplify the development of the historical discipline in Puerto Rico over the last several decades. A key figure in the New History generation, Picó originally published his *Historia general* in 1986, incorporating the contributions of the social and economic historiography then in vogue. The work's 20th-anniversary commemorative edition constitutes a milestone in the development of the field. For their part, Ayala and Bernabe have undertaken the challenge of incorporating current theories and methodologies of cultural analysis into a provocative new synthesis. In one of their central contributions, they engage directly with the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora, introducing innovative ways of thinking about transnational relationships.

In concluding this overview of current trends in historical research on Puerto Rico, encouraging developments in the publishing landscape should also be noted. In comparison to the 1970s and 1980s, a greater number of local, independent small presses have become actively involved in disseminating historical scholarship on Puerto Rico. Besides the well-regarded Ediciones Huracán—which exerted such a pivotal influence on the development of the New History—several new small publishers are supporting the work of both established and junior researchers. These include Ediciones Callejón and Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas, two of the most prominent publishers to appear in recent years. In tandem with these local efforts, several leading North American university presses have developed a strong interest in the Caribbean in general and Puerto Rico in particular. The lists of Duke University Press, the University of North Carolina Press, and the University Press of Florida (with its own distinctive “Directions in Puerto Rican Studies” monographic series) abound in invaluable scholarly contributions focused on Puerto Rico.

A noteworthy development in the field is the electronic dissemination of research content. Academic and cultural institutions have begun to explore electronic access as an alternative mode of disseminating scholarship. Three prominent academic journals in the field have successfully adopted electronic publishing: *Caribbean Studies* (ISSN 0008-6533) and *Op. Cit.: Revista del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas* (ISSN 1526-5323), published by the Universidad de Puerto Rico, and *Centro Journal* (ISSN 1538-6279), issued by the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at the City University of New York (CUNY). Their publishing strategies vary, however. While *Caribbean Studies* and *Centro Journal* have both joined the open-access international initiative known as the *Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal* (Redalyc/ <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/>), the history journal *Op. Cit.* is available only through *Infotrac ¡Informe!*, a fee-based full-text collection of Spanish-language periodicals created by the commercial vendor Gale Cengage. For its part, the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades has broken new ground by launching the fully searchable *Enciclopedia de Puerto Rico/Encyclopedia of Puerto Rico* (<http://www.encyclopediapr.org/>). Featuring contributions by prominent scholars, this free bilingual reference resource provides both textual and multimedia content, including images, audio, and video from archival collections.