

History of Puerto Rico

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If one accepts that the preoccupations of the present generally inform or give shape to the retrospective gaze of historians, one can perhaps begin to understand the overriding interest of scholars of Puerto Rico in interrogating the Caribbean nation's modern history from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives. The centennial of the enactment of the Jones Act of 1917 prompted conferences and publications that examined historical, social, political, and juridical aspects of the landmark, yet controversial legislation granting US citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico. *CENTRO Journal* and *Op. Cit.*—leading academic journals in the field of Puerto Rican Studies—dedicated special issues to the timely topic ([bi2019000530](#) and [bi2019000539](#), respectively).

A growing body of literature deals with the contributions of prominent political leaders and intellectuals to the formation of modern Puerto Rico. On the one hand, these works are heavily concentrated on *autonomismo* and *estadismo*, two of the main political currents in 20th-century Puerto Rican politics. On the other, this scholarship explores key aspects of the history of the Estado Libre Asociado (or Commonwealth of Puerto Rico), established in 1952. A reprint of selected writings of Luis Muñoz Rivera, the influential *autonomista* leader, appears in *Campañas políticas* ([bi2018001318](#)). The Centro Interamericano para el Estudio de las Dinámicas Políticas (CIEDP) at the Universidad Interamericana maintains a vigorous research agenda on political elites. Recent volumes focus on Antonio Fernós Isern ([bi2018001328](#)), the intellectual architect of the Estado Libre Asociado, and Rafael Martínez Nadal ([bi2018001320](#)), a leading advocate of the Puerto Rican statehood movement during the 1920-1940 period. As is customary in these publications, the volumes contain extensive appendices of ancillary materials, including select speeches and personal correspondence. The creation of the Estado Libre Asociado continues to generate scholarly interest. Carlos Zapata Oliveras addresses the intense constitutional debates and contested political negotiations between Puerto Rican leaders, particularly Luis Muñoz Marín and Antonio Fernós Isern, the US executive office, and the US Congress over the creation of the political system that granted a degree of self-rule to the people of Puerto Rico ([bi2018001315](#)). Fernando Bayrón Toro provides a comprehensive history of elections and political parties in Puerto Rico dating back to the early 19th century ([bi2019000528](#)).

The lens of culture has provided insightful analysis of understudied aspects of modern Puerto Rican society and politics. This line of inquiry has also elucidated the contributions of intellectuals to the formulation of government policies. In a study of sugar industry reforms introduced by the Partido Popular Democrático during the 1940s, Rubén Nazario Velasco examines the critical role of leading intellectuals in the development of an agrarian discourse that challenged the domination of sugar interests on the island ([bi2019000537](#)). Martín Cruz Santos highlights the figure of Águedo Mojica Marrero, an organic intellectual who gave shape to cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico ([bi2018001327](#)). The intersection of sports, culture, and politics has been fertile ground for historical inquiry. Antonio Sotomayor shows how the athletic development project introduced by the Partido Popular Democrático dovetailed with the ruling party's political and economic program ([bi2016001980](#)). The sports program generated broad-based support from the citizenry for the government, ultimately reinforcing colonial bonds between Puerto Rico and the US. As a US territory, the Cold War had far-reaching political, economic, and social repercussions in Puerto Rico. A stimulating volume by Manuel Rodríguez Vázquez and Silvia Álvarez Curbelo takes us beyond the conventional accounts of the Cold War as a predominantly binary struggle between world powers ([bi2019000529](#)). In their everyday life, people in Puerto Rico experienced the Cold War in complex and contradictory ways, suggesting that high-stakes conflicts for global power had a manifestly local, cultural dimension.

Critical engagement of photographic discourse has advanced the knowledge of relations between Puerto Rico and the US since the era of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898. In her landmark book-length study of the representations of the Caribbean region, particularly Cuba and Puerto Rico, in the photographs and captions of *National Geographic*, Laura Muñoz Mata argues that photographs are complex, polysemic records that do not simply reflect, but at times serve to shape and influence, US relations toward the countries of the Caribbean ([bi2019000534](#)). In a journal article published in 2017, she continues this research agenda, focusing on the Caribbean sugar industry ([bi2019000533](#)). The visual discourse of sugar estates in the photographs in *National Geographic* suggests both modernization led by North American capital investments in technology and infrastructure and shifts in US political interests toward the Caribbean over time. Jorge Luis Crespo Armáiz's article complements the work of Muñoz Mata ([bi2015004435](#)). For historian Crespo Armáiz, the textual and visual representations of Puerto Rico in the pages of *National Geographic* challenge the magazine's manifest editorial line on scientific objectivity, suggesting that these representations are in line with shifts in the economic, political, and military interests of the US in Puerto Rico. Another work by Crespo Armáiz, *Estereoscopia y sujeto colonial*, makes a significant contribution to colonial photography studies ([bi2019000526](#)). Drawing on largely untapped sources—collections of stereoscopic photographs—he examines the construction of a colonial visual imaginary of Puerto Rico since 1898. The scholar also shows how this imaginary was extensively consumed in North American schools, universities, and libraries in the form of teacher's manuals during the first decades of the 20th century.

Using an array of oral and archival sources, scholars have documented the personal experiences of ordinary people in Puerto Rican society. The late anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz provides an insightful reflection on the use of oral history and life history as appropriate methodologies for the study of modern agrarian societies ([bi2016001986](#)). His now classic *Worker in the Cane* (1960), translated into Spanish as *Taso, trabajador de la caña* (1988; see [HLAS 52](#);

[bi92014617](#)), pioneered the use of life history methodology in anthropological research on rural workers. Carmelo Rosario Natal unearths the story of Juana Agripina, a creole slave woman from Ponce, based on the extant case file she lodged to claim her freedom in 1865 ([bi2019000538](#)). This remarkable legal document sheds new light on the agency of enslaved people in 19th-century Puerto Rico. Similarly, Raquel Rosario Rivera wrote the first scholarly biography of Mariana Bracety, a woman leader of the Grito de Lares rebellion against Spain in 1868 ([bi2018001324](#)). Rosario Rivera recovered important information on Bracety's life from the previously untapped resource of a recorded interview with Bracety's long-time female household companion.

Migration to and from Puerto Rico has also been the subject of stimulating research. Ivette Pérez Vega provides a prosopographical study of the foreign-born merchant class of Ponce during the early decades of the 1800s ([bi2018001325](#)). Merchants were key actors in the transformation of the southern municipality into a booming sugar-producing economy based on slave labor. José Lee-Borges traces the history of the first Chinese migrants to Puerto Rico ([bi2018001326](#)). Arriving during the 1860s from the Dominican Republic and Cuba, the Chinese were brought in as prisoners by the Spanish colonial authorities to work on road construction and public works projects. This work by Lee-Borges fills a gap in the historiography of Caribbean immigration. Drawing on records of the Puerto Rican government Department of Labor, Edgardo Meléndez shows the government's active role in the development and implementation of a well-planned migrant workforce program from the island to the US mainland during the 1940s and 1950s ([bi2019000536](#)).

In the mold of social, economic, and diplomatic history research, recent scholarship has deepened the understanding of Puerto Rico's past and present. Kathryn Renée Dundy explores the experience of free people of color in early 19th-century Puerto Rico ([bi2016001371](#)). She argues that the Puerto Rican case introduces nuances into the understanding of race and race relations in colonial societies in the Black Atlantic. Focusing on the Ministerio de Ultramar, established in 1863 to oversee Spain's overseas territories, Adel Ben Othman analyzes the foreign relations of Spain with Cuba and Puerto Rico, the last colonial possessions of the former European power in the Americas ([bi2018001332](#)). Edwin Borrero González studies the history of the coastal railway network, documenting its development and eventual decline in the 1950s ([bi2018001316](#)). Research on the once dominant sugarcane industry continues to command scholarly interest. Heriberto Medina Vera examines the social composition and political discourse of the forces opposing the sugar reforms introduced by the New Deal program during the 1930s ([bi2018001329](#)). Not only native capital, the scholar argues, but also cane growers and workers mobilized against these reforms. Javier Alemán Iglesias writes on the historiography of the *colonato*, the class of growers who supplied sugarcane to the modern central mills (*centrales*), in 20th-century Puerto Rico ([bi2019000531](#)). In a microhistory of Guayama, a southern sugarcane growing region, Alexis Oscar Tirado Rivera analyzes local struggles not only against the expansion of North American absentee investments in the sugar industry and transportation, but also against US government policies promoting the use of English in schools ([bi2018001330](#)). Jorge Duany provides an accessible, yet authoritative introduction to Puerto Rico's modern history, covering topics such as national identity and Americanization, the Puerto Rican diaspora in the US, the current debt crisis, and other relevant issues in US-Puerto Rican relations ([bi2019000535](#)).

Examination of resistance continues to attract scholarly attention. Focusing on the slave conspiracy of 1812 in Puerto Rico, Antonio Pinto traces connections between this historical event, the Aponte rebellion in Cuba, and the slave plot in Santo Domingo during the same year ([bi2016001992](#)). A unifying feature of these slave plots was the collaboration between slaves and free people of color. Jorell Meléndez-Badillo combines social and cultural history approaches to explore the largely autonomous, grassroots mobilization of agricultural workers during the historic 1905 strike in the sugarcane fields of southern Puerto Rico ([bi2017003539](#)). Both studies highlight agency on the part of slaves and workers in these struggles.

Also of note is research in the burgeoning fields of environmental studies and food studies focusing on Puerto Rico. Fernando Picó delves into a largely forgotten chapter in 19th-century Puerto Rican history, the severe drought of 1847, investigating the social impact of a so-called natural disaster ([bi2018001323](#)). He places the local case in the global perspective of a drought, propelled by the weather phenomenon known as El Niño. A significant contribution to environmental studies, this work was the preeminent historian's last book-length publication before his untimely passing in 2017. April Merleaux investigates the shifts in patterns of sugar consumption in the US market and the attendant transformation of the diet of people in Puerto Rico as the outcome of policies established by the US government during the New Deal era and WWII ([bi2019000527](#) and [bi2019000532](#)).

Welcome reflections on historiographical and anthropological writing about Puerto Rico appear in Gervasio Luis García's book ([bi2018001319](#)) and in a special issue of *Op. Cit.* dedicated to the late Sidney W. Mintz ([bi2019000540](#)). Among other subjects, García analyzes the discursive strategies that 19th-century intellectuals used to circumvent the censorship of Spanish authorities. The journal special issue includes the Spanish-language translation of Mintz's seminal article "The Caribbean as a Socio-cultural Area" (1966), a biography, and two additional essays: one reviewing the intellectual context at the time his essay was written, and the other assessing Mintz's scholarly contributions to the field of Caribbean Studies.