

Confronting the Crisis of the Slave-Based Plantation System in Puerto Rico: Bureaucratic Proposals for Agricultural Modernisation, Diversification and Free Labour, c. 1846–1852*

JORGE L. CHINEA

Abstract. By the late 1820s, Puerto Rico and Cuba had become Spain's only remaining colonies in the Americas and its major source of colonial returns. A decade later, however, the slave-based plantation system in Puerto Rico was beginning to show signs of stagnation due to the convergence of a number of domestic and international forces. In the late 1840s the Iberian colonial bureaucracy initiated a series of proposals to stimulate Puerto Rico's transformation into an agriculturally modern, diversified, free-labour economy. This initiative failed due to an adverse economic environment, administrative confusion and rivalries, and the failure of officials on the island to enlist the support either of local planters or those at the lower levels of society. This paper explores the reasons for this failure in detail.

Keywords: plantations, sugar, commercial agriculture, tropical exports, Spanish Antilles, Spain's Second Empire, Puerto Rico

After nearly 200 years on the margins of the Spanish American empire, by 1840 Puerto Rico had become one of the largest producers of cane sugar worldwide.¹ By mid-century it was the Caribbean's second major exporter of the sweetener.² At first glance it seemed that a prosperous future was at hand for the island's presiding plantocracy and mercantile elite. Taking into

Jorge L. China is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for Chicano-Boricua Studies at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Wayne State University. Email: jchina@wayne.edu.

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¹ Guillermo A. Baralt ranked it tenth among world sugar producers in 1840: see Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes: conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico, 1795–1873* (Río Piedras, 1981), p. 163.

² Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800–1850* (Madison, 1984), p. 6.