

Puerto Ricans in the Empire: Tobacco Growers and U.S. Colonialism

By Teresita A. Levy

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Most studies of Puerto Rico's relations with the United States have focused on the sugar industry, recounting a tale of victimization and imperial abuse driven by the interests of U.S. sugar companies. But in*Puerto Ricans in the Empire*, Teresita A. Levy looks at a different agricultural sector, tobacco growing, and tells a story in which Puerto Ricans challenged U.S. officials and fought successfully for legislation that benefited the island.

Levy describes how small-scale, politically involved, independent landowners grew most of the tobacco in Puerto Rico. She shows how, to gain access to political power, tobacco farmers joined local agricultural leagues and the leading farmers' association, the Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños (AAP). Through their affiliation with the AAP, they successfully lobbied U.S. administrators in San Juan and Washington, participated in government-sponsored agricultural programs, solicited agricultural credit from governmental sources, and sought scientific education in a variety of public programs, all to boost their share of the tobacco-leaf market in the United States. By their own efforts, Levy argues, Puerto Ricans demanded and won inclusion in the empire, in terms that were defined not only by the colonial power, but also by the colonized.

The relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States was undoubtedly colonial in nature, but, as *Puerto Ricans in the Empire* shows, it was not unilateral. It was a dynamic, elastic, and ever-changing interaction, where Puerto Ricans actively participated in the economic and political processes of a negotiated empire.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Puerto Ricans in the Empire* provides an excellent introduction to Puerto Rico’s crucial tobacco industry, with fascinating material on farmer organizations and agricultural research."
(Herbert S. Klein *Gouverneur Morris Professor Emeritus of History Columbia University*)

"Levy shows that even within the framework of U.S. colonialism, tobacco farmers proliferated, prospered, and advanced their interest, and were thus makers of their own history. This is a salutary correction to the one sided vision of the colonial regime of previous scholarship."
(César Ayala *University of California, Los Angeles*)

"Levy offers a well-documented, nuanced revision of post-1898 Puerto Rican economic history. By focusing on tobacco rather than sugar cultivation, Levy argues, Puerto Rican tobacco farmers, despite clear power imbalances, did influence certain aspects of US colonial policy, including the political structure, changes in legislation directly affecting the island, and the transfer of technology. She effectively exposes the silences produced by a historical narrative that until now has focused mainly on the unilateral action of the US. Highly recommended."
(*Choice*)

About the Author

TERESITA A. LEVY is an assistant professor of Latin American and Puerto Rican studies at Lehman College, City University of New York, and the associate director of the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies at The Graduate Center of CUNY.

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