

'Tobacco Growers and Resistance to American Domination in Puerto Rico, 1899-1940'

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October 2010

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**Commodities of Empire
Working Paper No.17**

ISSN: 1756-0098

Tobacco Growers and Resistance to American Domination in Puerto Rico, 1899-1940

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The influx of capital and technology that began after Puerto Rico was incorporated into the United States' new colonial empire in 1898 set off a series of economic and political processes that altered the existing patterns of life on the island. In the agricultural sector, the inclusion of Puerto Rico in the tariff structure of the United States guaranteed the free entrance of many island products into the mainland and dramatically accelerated the existing production of agricultural commodities. Tobacco leaf was included in this tariff exemption, and Puerto Rican farmers in the highland regions of the island made the cultivation of tobacco for the American market their most important economic activity during the first four decades of the twentieth century.¹ Puerto Rico's absorption into the United States also created new and dynamic political opportunities for the island's farmers, opportunities that tobacco growers exploited for their economic benefit. The study of the highland tobacco regions, therefore, provides a unique opportunity to examine how a local population adapted to a new colonial regime, resisted unilateral political decision making and redefined global (or in this case American) commodity production.

Scholars of Puerto Rico have, since the 1930s, described the effects of the American occupation as a simple dichotomy based on colonial relations of production between the island and the mainland. Some scholars argue that American imperialism created economic and social chaos, resulting in the pauperisation of the farmer and in the exclusion of Puerto Ricans from their own government. Puerto Ricans were a victimised and docile population incapable of confronting a rapacious imperial control. Others argue that Americans 'saved' Puerto Ricans from a backward society, making the ideals of democracy, freedom and economic progress a reality for the island. Here, Puerto Ricans were the grateful yet passive recipients of the material and political benefits derived from benevolent policies emanating from Washington.² Additionally, although there was a myriad of agricultural products cultivated on the island, the focus of much of the scholarly discussion of commodity production has been on the cultivation and processing of sugar cane. This 'sugar narrative' is, by and large, a story of victimisation and imperial abuse, where economic, social and political decisions made by colonial administrators were designed to protect the capitalist interests of American sugar companies, often at the expense of the Puerto Rican farmer. One fundamental problem with these arguments is that Puerto Ricans are invisible: either victims of an abusive imperial power or an indifferent colonial elite, or observers of phenomenal changes in their daily lives. Another is that such a narrow focus on the cultivation of sugar omits alternative relations of production that existed throughout the island.

¹ The highlands of the island cultivated 89% of all tobacco *cuerdas* and produced 91% of all tobacco leaf in Puerto Rico from 1910 to 1940 (Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1913, Statistics for Puerto Rico, Vol. 3, pp.72-7; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1922, Vol. 6, Part 3, Agriculture, pp.408-15; *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1932, Outlying Territories and Possessions, pp.232-37; *Sixteenth Census of the United States. Reports for Puerto Rico: Census of Agriculture*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1942, p.60.

² For a sophisticated analysis of the historiography of Puerto Rico, see César J. Ayala & Laird W. Bergad, 'Rural Puerto Rico in the Early 20th Century Reconsidered: Land and Society, 1899-1915', *Latin American Research Review* 37:2 (2001), pp.65-97.

This paper attempts to include tobacco cultivation in the discussion of how the unprecedented expansion of commodity production for the American market altered existing economic, social and political patterns of life on the island. Tobacco farmers were neither victims nor passive observers. Instead, tobacco farmers accepted or resisted the changes in the tobacco sector, all with the intention of increasing their possibilities of economic success. In contrast to the sugar economy, with its high degree of absentee ownership and concentration of production, tobacco cultivation was a Puerto Rican owner-operated, small-scale commercial enterprise, even in the face of massive influx of private and corporate American capital into the industrial portion of the tobacco sector. Tobacco growers chose to participate in an economic sector that provided both monetary rewards and sustenance, and by doing so became contributors to the productive wealth of the island.

The paper also discusses the political participation of Puerto Rican tobacco growers in an attempt to widen the debate of Puerto Rican accommodation and resistance to the American colonial regime. Puerto Ricans took advantage of the democratic guarantees provided by the colonial government to become advocates for change. In the highland tobacco regions, growers chose to become involved in democratic organisations to exert control over their economic sector and influence decisions that directly affected their economic interests. Through their participation in local agricultural societies, island-wide cooperative societies and the *Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños* (AAP), tobacco growers became an effective political force. They constantly applied pressure by participating in protests, strikes, political campaigns and lobbying efforts in Washington and San Juan to demand fair prices for their product, economic incentives and social programmes. In return, insular and federal officials responded to such pressure by altering legislation, providing economic relief, and including Puerto Ricans in their decision making. This suggests that the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, rather than being one-sided, destructive and abusive, was instead nuanced, complicated and constantly redefined.

Tobacco production in Puerto Rico

Although commercial tobacco cultivation existed in Puerto Rico throughout the Spanish colonial period, it expanded rapidly after 1898, when new colonial economic policies made Puerto Rican tobacco economically advantageous for American cigar manufacturers.³ Puerto Rican tobacco was appreciated by American smokers for its smoothness, aroma and distinctive taste and admired for its similarities to Cuban tobacco.⁴ Precisely because of these characteristics, the island's leaf was used for the manufacture of cigars at all price points: blended with American filler tobacco for cheaper cigars, and used alone or blended with

³ A *decreto real* of 1614 permitted tobacco cultivation for commercial purposes and production expanded consistently thereafter. In 1828, almost 2.5 million pounds of tobacco were produced on the island and production continued to increase for the remainder of the nineteenth century, with an average yearly production of 4.5 million pounds. Tobacco cultivation in the Spanish colonial period peaked in 1880, when Puerto Rico produced over 12 million pounds of leaf (Tobacco Institute of Puerto Rico, *Tobacco Institute Report. Fiscal Years 1941-42, 1942-43*, San Juan: Real Hermanos, 1945, p.88, Table VI). See María Cadilla de Martínez, 'El tabaco', *Revista de Agricultura de Puerto Rico* (29 July 1937), pp.110-3.

⁴ Over 95% of the total island tobacco crop was filler tobacco of the Virginia No. 9 and Utuado X varieties of tobacco classified as Type 46 (Charles E. Gage, 'The Tobacco Industry in Puerto Rico', *United States Department of Agriculture, Circular 519*, Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1939, p.16). See also Jorge Serrallés, Jr. & Martín Vélez, Jr., 'Precios del Tabaco en Rama al Agricultor en Puerto Rico del 1907 al 1940', *Boletín de la Estación Experimental Agrícola* 60 (June 1941), p.2.

Cuban filler tobacco for more expensive cigars.⁵ The added economic incentive for using Puerto Rican tobacco was that it was not subjected to a tariff when it was imported into the United States: a colonial advantage not granted to the tobacco of an independent Cuba.

The new colonial relationship between the island and the mainland also allowed for the easy flow of American capital into the island for the establishment of tobacco manufacturing plants. In 1899 the Porto Rican American Tobacco Company (PRATC) was incorporated in New Jersey.⁶ The PRATC purchased two tobacco-manufacturing companies in Ponce and San Juan from Luis Toro and the firm Rucabado y Portela, thereby formally establishing the presence of American capital in the tobacco sector.⁷ Unlike what would occur in the sugar sector, American investment in the tobacco sector remained largely in the manufacturing area, leaving the agricultural process in the hands of the Puerto Rican farmers.

Puerto Rican farmers rapidly increased production to meet American demand for the aromatic leaf; perhaps this explains why the United States did not massively invest in its cultivation. In fact, the number of farms on the island that reported the cultivation of tobacco leaf more than doubled from 14 percent in 1910 to 30 percent in 1940.⁸ Small-scale farms, which were the predominant unit of production in the highland regions, already produced tobacco for the international market under Spanish colonial rule, and so were well equipped to accept expanded opportunities for their crop. Known as the 'poor man's crop', tobacco could be cultivated on very small tracts of land, required no major capital investments in machinery, and farmers produced a crop for the market after just one season. Tobacco farmers earned most of their cash income from the sale of tobacco, even before 1898. Tobacco, however, occupied the land for only several months out of the year, which meant that the tobacco harvest was usually followed by the planting of corn, green beans, rice and sweet potatoes.⁹ Some of these crops were sold on local markets, but most were used for family consumption and had a major effect on the wellbeing of the families in the highlands.¹⁰ Thus, the motivation for farmers in the tobacco regions to meet rising demand for their product appears clear: a potential increase in cash income without the loss of food crops for family sustenance or for sale in local markets.

⁵ Ramón Colón Torres, 'Financing Low Income Farmers in Puerto Rico', *Journal of Farm Economics* 34:5 (December 1952), pp.944-48. Also in Gage (1939), p.16.

⁶ Gage (1939), p.16. The PRATC was a subsidiary of American Tobacco Company.

⁷ José R. Corrales Corrales, *La Cámara de Comercio de Puerto Rico como factor de desarrollo económico nacional, 1913-1933*, PhD thesis, University of Puerto Rico, 1997, p.171.

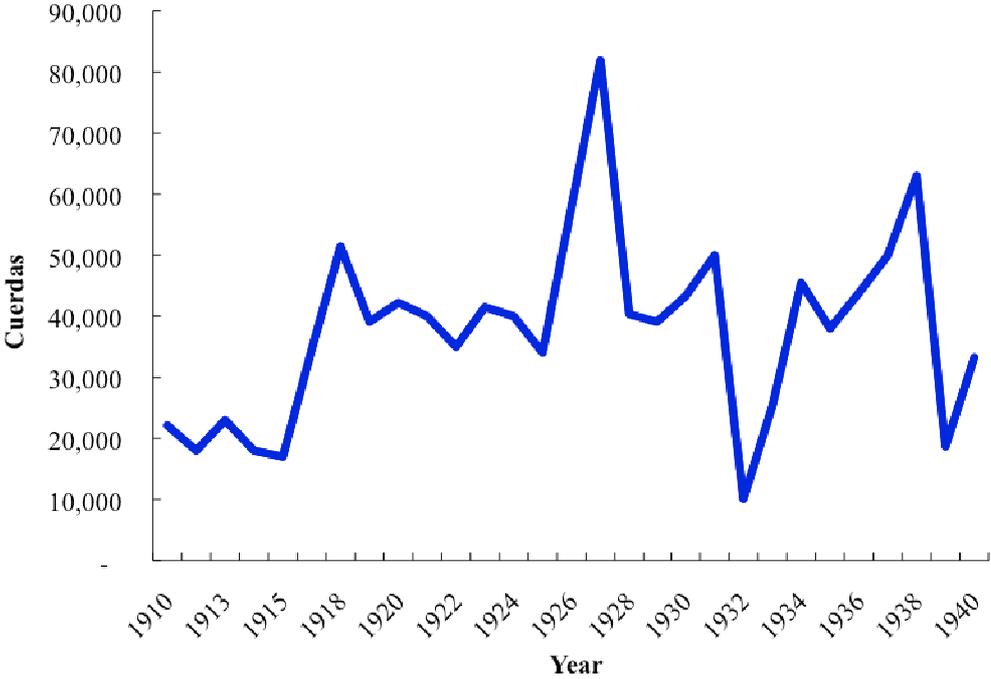
⁸ Bureau of the Census, (1942), p.181.

⁹ From the soil preparation for the seedbeds to the final harvest, the tobacco-cultivation cycle would last from six to seven months, usually from June-July to December-January, depending on weather conditions and the initial planting date. The tobacco-cultivation cycle was endlessly commented upon in the local press and by insular and federal government representatives. See, for example, F. H. Bunker, 'El tabaco: semilleros, preparación del terreno, abonos y cultivos', *Revista de Agricultura de Puerto Rico* 1 (1918), p.33; and Gage (1939), p.22.

¹⁰ An examination of the income and expenses of the average tobacco farm between 1936 and 1938 illustrates how, by combining cash earnings from tobacco and food sales with consumption, families in the tobacco regions lived better than their counterparts in other agricultural regions. Although families in the tobacco regions often earned less cash income than families in the other economic zones, the benefit of food-crop production for tobacco farmers was, literally, a lifeline. See, for example, Ramón Colón Torres, 'Estudio económico de 270 fincas de tabaco en Puerto Rico, 1936-37', *Boletín de la Estación Experimental Agrícola* 50 (1939), p.12; Manuel A. Pérez, 'Living Conditions among Small Farmers in Puerto Rico', *Research Bulletin on Agriculture and Livestock* 2, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing and Transportation, 1942; and Roberto Huyke & Ramón Colón Torres, 'Costo de producción de tabaco en Puerto Rico, 1937-38', *Boletín de la Estación Experimental Agrícola* 56 (1940), pp.3-28.

The tobacco economy of Puerto Rico experienced periods of expansion and contraction between 1898 and 1940. The growth of the sector from 1898 to 1917 both in terms of *cuerdas* planted and in terms of total production in pounds was steady. Land under tobacco cultivation increased from over 22,000 *cuerdas* in 1910 to over 34,000 in 1917. Production in pounds followed a similar pattern, increasing 35 percent from 1910 to 1917 with slight yearly fluctuations. After 1917, Puerto Rican tobacco growers responded to the widening demand for American tobacco due to the end of First World War by significantly increasing plantings. An astounding 51,000 *cuerdas* were planted in tobacco throughout the island in 1918, an overall increase from 1910 of 132 percent. This second wave of expansion culminated in 1927, when farmers prepared 81,900 *cuerdas*, the largest number of *cuerdas* ever prepared for a growing season. The planting produced an enormous crop of over 50 million pounds, an excessive amount that the American tobacco market was unable (and unwilling) to absorb. The economic consequences of this bumper crop, which led to falling prices for tobacco leaf, were immediately aggravated by the economic depression that began in 1929 and a shift in smoking preferences from larger, heavier and more expensive cigars, to smaller, lighter and cheaper cigars and cigarettes. After the peak of 1927, the number of *cuerdas* under cultivation fluctuated yearly until 1940, with an overall downward trend (see Figure 1 and Table 1).¹¹

Figure 1
Tobacco Cultivation in Puerto Rico, 1910-1940



¹¹ Antonio Rojas, *Preliminary Plan to Stabilize the Tobacco Industry Submitted for Consideration to the Planning, Urbanizing and Zoning Board of Puerto Rico*, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing and Transportation, 1944, p.4.

Table 1: Tobacco cultivation in cuerdas and production in pounds in Puerto Rico, 1910-1940

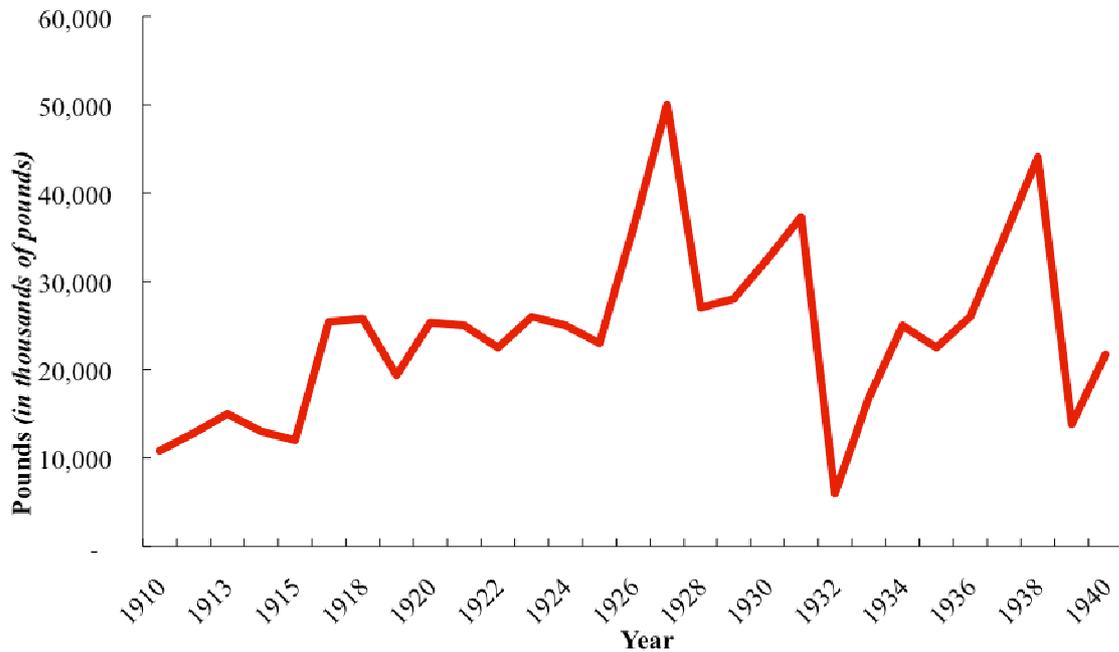
Source: Bureau of the Census (1913), Statistics for Puerto Rico, Vol. 3, pp.72-7; (1922), Vol. 6, Part 3, Agriculture, pp.408-15; (1932), Outlying Territories and Possessions, pp.232-7; & (1942), p.60.

Year	Cuerdas	Production
1910	22,143	10,828,000
1912	18,000	12,800,000
1913	23,000	15,000,000
1914	18,000	13,000,000
1915	17,000	12,000,000
1917	34,540	25,410,000
1918	51,444	25,772,000
1919	39,067	19,363,000
1920	42,232	25,339,000
1921	40,000	25,000,000
1922	35,000	22,500,000
1923	41,500	26,000,000
1924	40,000	25,000,000
1925	34,023	23,000,000
1926	58,000	36,000,000
1927	81,900	50,000,000
1928	40,345	27,000,000
1929	39,075	28,000,000
1930	43,312	32,500,000
1931	50,000	37,300,000
1932	10,079	6,000,000
1933	25,300	16,783,000
1934	45,500	25,000,000
1935	38,000	22,500,000
1936	43,809	26,000,000
1937	50,000	34,983,000
1938	63,000	44,069,000
1939	18,688	13,825,000
1940	33,265	21,713,000

Through the 1930s, Puerto Rican tobacco began a calamitous decline, although there was some recovery in yearly production and *cuerdas* under cultivation from 1933 to 1938 largely because of Agricultural Adjustment Administration programmes to aid farmers and improved credit facilities.¹² In fact, the second most productive year occurred in 1938 when the island's tobacco harvest was slightly over 44 million pounds. By 1940, however, the value of the tobacco sector had fallen to levels below those of 1917 and would never again recover (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

¹² The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) was the federal agency responsible for the enforcement of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 12 May 1933, a New Deal programme that paid farmers to reduce the size of their crop area and leave fields unplanted. The Act was extended to Puerto Rico.

Figure 2
Tobacco Production in Puerto Rico, 1910-1940



Tobacco exports, as can be expected, followed a similar pattern of expansion and contraction. Most of the leaf tobacco produced on the island was exported to the United States for manufacturing into cigars and cigarettes in American factories.¹³ The finished product would then be re-exported around the world. Export figures from 1900 through 1902 indicate that tobacco-leaf exports from Puerto Rico to the United States averaged 664,000 pounds. In 1903, exports increased by more than 300 percent to reach almost 2.4 million pounds. From that year until 1917, there was a slow and steady increase in the volume of leaf exported to the United States. Thereafter, the opening of markets in Europe after the end of the First World War resulted in a sharp rise in demand for tobacco from the Americas. From 1917 to 1918, there was an 85 percent increase in the quantity of tobacco leaf exported from Puerto Rico to the United States, and between 1917 and 1921 tobacco exports increased by 56 percent in volume and by over 126 percent in value (see Table 2 and Figure 3)

Rising demand after the First World War resulted in increased prices, which fuelled the interest of farmers in the highland regions to dedicate more land to tobacco. From an average price of 31 cents per pound from 1900 to 1917, export prices paid for Puerto Rican tobacco increased to 52 cents per pound in 1918 and 1919 and to 65 cents per pound in 1920.¹⁴ A year later, in 1921, because of a reduced crop, tobacco sold for an average of 93 cents per pound, the highest export price ever paid for Puerto Rican tobacco (see Table 2 and Figure 3).

¹³ In 1939, the United States received 93.2% of the tobacco cultivated in Puerto Rico. This was the lowest percentage of tobacco received by the US from 1920-40. Most other years, it was close to 100% (Tobacco Institute of Puerto Rico, 1945, p.83).

¹⁴ Manuel Camuñas, 'Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor of Porto Rico, 1921', in *Report of the Governor of Porto Rico*, Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1921, p.448. Also in Serrallés & Vélez (1941), p.37.

Table 2: Exports of leaf tobacco from Puerto Rico to the United States, 1900-1940

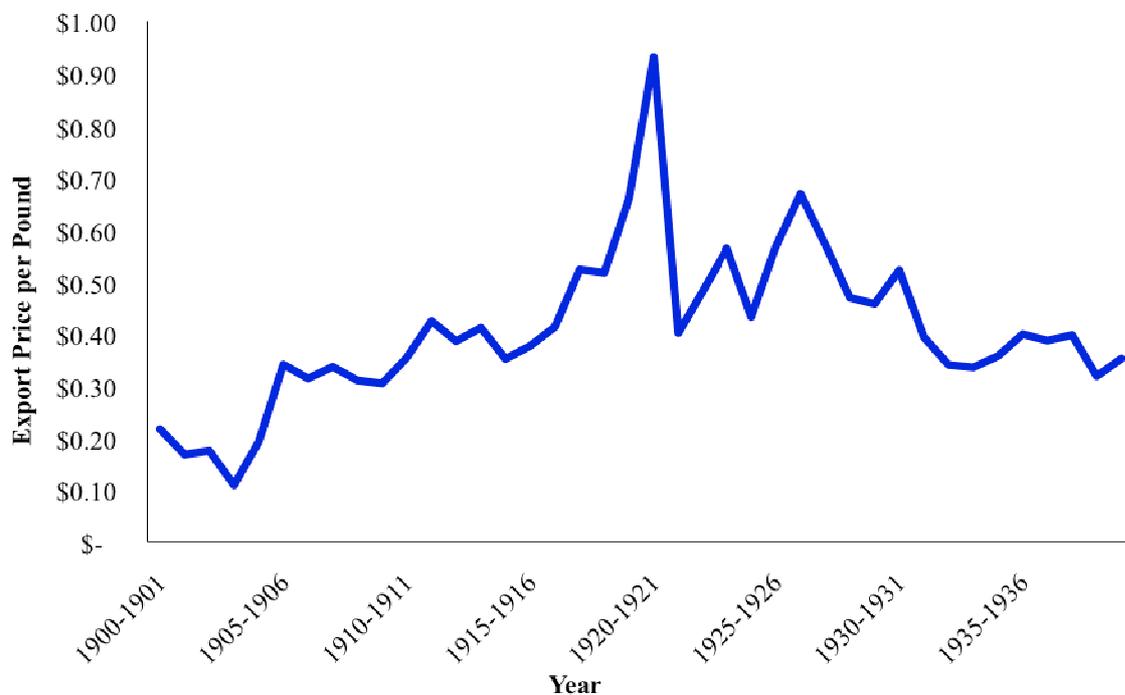
Source: United States Department of Labor, *Puerto Rico: The Leaf Tobacco Industry*, Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1941, p.4.

Year	Quantity (in pounds)	Value	Price per Pound
1900-1901	557,000	\$121,000	\$0.22
1901-1902	666,000	\$112,000	\$0.17
1902-1903	770,000	\$135,000	\$0.18
1903-1904	2,386,000	\$261,000	\$0.11
1904-1905	2,196,000	\$422,000	\$0.19
1905-1906	1,397,000	\$477,000	\$0.34
1906-1907	3,681,000	\$1,157,000	\$0.31
1907-1908	4,979,000	\$1,678,000	\$0.34
1908-1909	3,868,000	\$1,202,000	\$0.31
1909-1910	4,120,000	\$1,255,000	\$0.30
1910-1911	4,362,000	\$1,547,000	\$0.35
1911-1912	5,457,000	\$2,320,000	\$0.43
1912-1913	8,150,000	\$3,148,000	\$0.39
1913-1914	7,534,000	\$3,104,000	\$0.41
1914-1915	9,052,000	\$3,187,000	\$0.35
1915-1916	8,021,000	\$3,026,000	\$0.38
1916-1917	9,256,000	\$3,829,000	\$0.41
1917-1918	17,114,000	\$8,968,000	\$0.52
1918-1919	15,664,000	\$8,111,000	\$0.52
1919-1920	20,173,000	\$13,318,000	\$0.66
1920-1921	14,564,000	\$13,552,000	\$0.93
1921-1922	22,370,000	\$8,994,000	\$0.40
1922-1923	19,574,000	\$9,459,000	\$0.48
1923-1924	23,298,000	\$13,170,000	\$0.57
1924-1925	22,721,000	\$9,838,000	\$0.43
1925-1926	24,521,000	\$13,945,000	\$0.57
1926-1927	30,730,000	\$20,580,000	\$0.67
1927-1928	29,807,000	\$17,062,000	\$0.57
1928-1929	27,410,000	\$12,881,000	\$0.47
1929-1930	26,014,000	\$11,914,000	\$0.46
1930-1931	25,180,000	\$13,165,000	\$0.52
1931-1932	17,035,000	\$6,714,000	\$0.39
1932-1933	12,928,000	\$4,403,000	\$0.34
1933-1934	18,846,000	\$6,329,000	\$0.34
1934-1935	19,974,000	\$7,146,000	\$0.36
1935-1936	23,157,000	\$9,254,000	\$0.40
1936-1937	23,581,000	\$9,135,000	\$0.39
1937-1938	20,699,000	\$8,239,000	\$0.40
1938-1939	23,208,000	\$7,398,000	\$0.32
1939-1940	17,087,000	\$6,029,000	\$0.35

Exports peaked, both in pounds and dollars, during the 1926-1927 season, when over 30 million pounds of leaf valued at 20.5 million dollars left the island for the mainland. Tobacco farmers expected that the market would continue to expand and chose to dramatically increase the acreage under cultivation for the 1927 season. The American market, however, only absorbed about the same quantity as in 1926, leaving a stockpile of tobacco that reduced prices by 15 percent for the next several seasons.

The worldwide depression that began with the stock-market crash of 1929 exacerbated the decline of tobacco exports, which bottomed out during the 1933 season. Close to 13 million pounds of leaf were exported to the United States, a reduction of 58 percent from the amount exported just six years previously, with a loss in value of over 78 percent. Export prices were just 34 cents per pound of leaf, prices that had not been that low since 1909. Prices recuperated slightly in 1935 to 40 cents per pound (the price of tobacco paid in 1921), but this was due mostly to parity payments paid by the federal government to reduce supply and guarantee a minimum standard of living to farmers. Exports and prices remained low until 1940, when the tobacco sector began a permanent decline.

Figure 3
Export Price Per Pound of Tobacco Leaf, 1900-1940

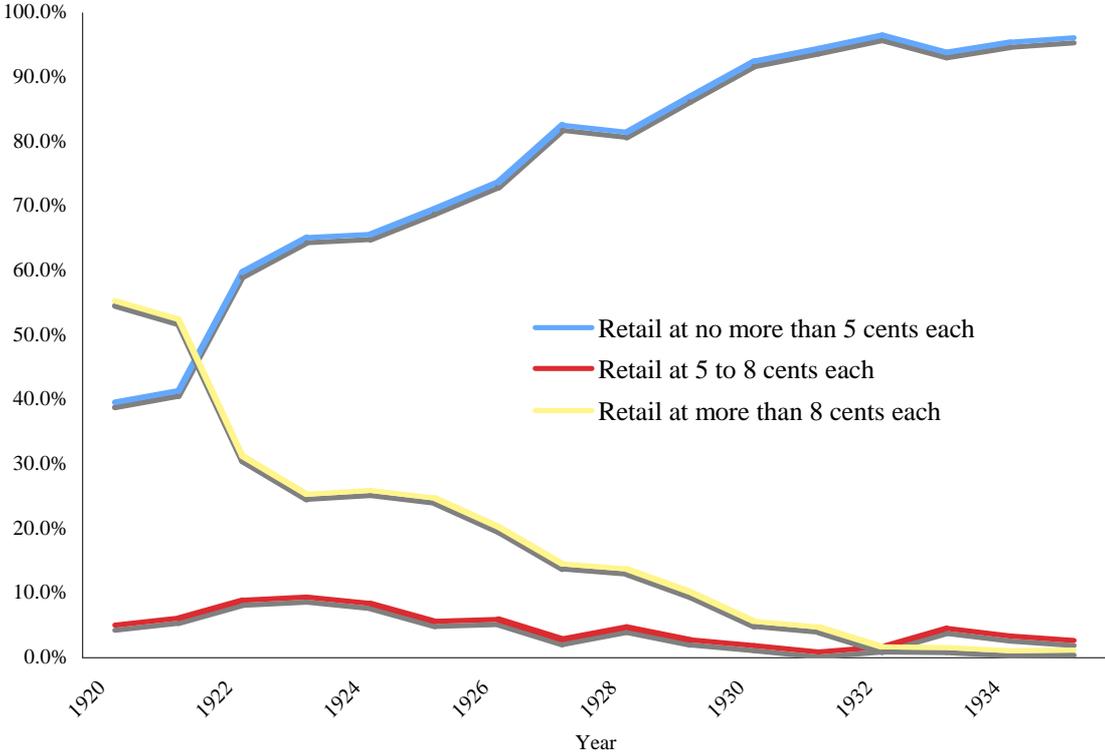


The quantity and value of exports also correlated to American consumption patterns, and these, in turn, impacted not on the type of tobacco grown in Puerto Rico, but the price paid for that tobacco. Beginning in the 1920s, smoking preferences had shifted considerably from heavy, large and expensive cigars to lighter, smaller and cheaper cigars and cigarettes. The financial hardship that began in 1929 made that shift a permanent one. Consumption of more expensive cigars in the United States fell from 80 per person in 1920 to 42 per person in 1939, a decline of 48 percent. Demand for cigars priced over 5 cents, which accounted for 62 percent of the total of manufactured cigars in Puerto Rico between 1920 and 1925, fell to 11 percent of the total between 1935 and 1939.¹⁵ Conversely, sales of cheap cigars (5 cents or less) accounted for less than 25 percent of all sales from 1920-1925, but increased to more

¹⁵ Serrallés & Vélez (1941), pp.32-3.

than 80 percent by 1940.¹⁶ The result was that the same well-regarded Puerto Rican tobacco that had been used for cigars priced between 8 and 15 cents each began to be used in cheaper cigars priced at 5 cents or less (see Tables 3 and 4, and Figure 4).¹⁷ Consequently, tobacco farmers saw a significant drop in the price received for their product. Farmers were paid an average of 27 cents per pound for their tobacco from 1920 to 1929 and only an average of 15 cents per pound from 1930 to 1939, a decrease of 43 percent.¹⁸

Figure 4
Percentage of Cigars According to Price, 1920-



¹⁶ Carlos Jr. Esteva, *Annual Reports of the Tobacco Institute of Puerto Rico. Fiscal years 1939-1940 and 1940-1941*, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing and Transportation, 1942, p.5. Also in E. B. Hill & Sol L. Descartes, 'An Economic Background for Agricultural Research in Puerto Rico', *Bulletin of the Agricultural Experiment Station 51* (1939), p.31.

¹⁷ Gobierno de Puerto Rico, *La industria del tabaco en rama*, San Juan: Negociado de Materiales, Imprenta y Transporte, 1942, p.48.

¹⁸ Serrallés & Vélez, (1941), p.5.

Table 3: Number of Puerto Rican cigars according to price for the US, 1920-1935

Source: Gage (1939), p.46.

Year	<i>Cigars costing no more than 5 cents</i>	<i>Cigars costing 5 to 8 cents</i>	<i>Cigars costing more than 8 cents</i>	Total
1920	58,134,000	7,410,000	81,243,000	146,787,000
1921	51,533,000	7,583,000	65,406,000	124,522,000
1922	100,904,000	15,020,000	52,655,000	168,579,000
1923	91,411,000	13,176,000	35,550,000	140,137,000
1924	122,560,000	15,681,000	48,310,000	186,551,000
1925	141,810,000	11,483,000	50,459,000	203,752,000
1926	109,508,000	8,826,000	30,136,000	148,470,000
1927	116,209,000	4,033,000	20,405,000	140,647,000
1928	119,967,000	7,020,000	20,267,000	147,254,000
1929	122,503,000	3,876,000	14,305,000	140,684,000
1930	148,243,000	3,022,000	8,985,000	160,250,000
1931	92,467,000	828,000	4,612,000	97,907,000
1932	58,709,000	1,046,000	1,036,000	60,791,000
1933	57,565,000	2,781,000	958,000	61,304,000
1934	56,504,000	2,006,000	665,000	59,175,000
1935	49,343,000	1,369,000	599,000	51,311,000

Table 4: Percentage of Puerto Rican cigars according to price for the US, 1920-1935

Source: Gage (1939), p.46.

Year	<i>Cigars costing no more than 5 cents</i>	<i>Cigars costing 5 to 8 cents</i>	<i>Cigars costing more than 8 cents</i>	Total
1920	39.6%	5.0%	55.3%	100.0%
1921	41.4%	6.1%	52.5%	100.0%
1922	59.9%	8.9%	31.2%	100.0%
1923	65.2%	9.4%	25.4%	100.0%
1924	65.7%	8.4%	25.9%	100.0%
1925	69.6%	5.6%	24.8%	100.0%
1926	73.8%	5.9%	20.3%	100.0%
1927	82.6%	2.9%	14.5%	100.0%
1928	81.5%	4.8%	13.8%	100.0%
1929	87.1%	2.8%	10.2%	100.0%
1930	92.5%	1.9%	5.6%	100.0%
1931	94.4%	0.8%	4.7%	100.0%
1932	96.6%	1.7%	1.7%	100.0%
1933	93.9%	4.5%	1.6%	100.0%
1934	95.5%	3.4%	1.1%	100.0%
1935	96.2%	2.7%	1.2%	100.0%

The shift in preference to cheaper cigars coincided with an overall shift in consumption from cigars to cigarettes.¹⁹ Cigar consumption fell continuously after 1929, and the data in Table 3 indicate that cigar exports to the United States decreased from 160,250,000 in 1930 to 51,311 in 1935. Cigarette manufactures, which had been an important piece of the tobacco sector in Puerto Rico, had moved to the mainland, and so the total number of cigarettes manufactured on the island also declined (see Table 5).

Table 5: Cigarette manufactures in Puerto Rico, 1920-1935

Source: Gage (1939), p.48.

Year	Total
1920	417,455,000
1921	436,709,000
1922	420,303,000
1923	408,868,000
1924	424,108,000
1925	375,522,000
1926	354,454,000
1927	390,244,000
1928	304,382,000
1929	260,396,000
1930	231,701,000
1931	175,912,000
1932	127,226,000
1933	98,127,000
1934	77,004,000
1935	74,310,000

Tobacco cultivation expanded rapidly after 1898, experiencing periods of expansion and contraction until its permanent collapse after 1940. The farmers of the highland regions of Puerto Rico took advantage of free access to the American market and increased their plantings, making tobacco the second most important product after sugar for the island.²⁰ Tobacco growers had to adapt to economic forces, both in the island and the mainland, that affected the number of *cuerdas* under cultivation, total production and the prices paid for tobacco leaf. To do so, tobacco farmers became political actors in the new colonial regime.

¹⁹ The agricultural press was well aware that the change from cigars to cigarettes was occurring. *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* often published tobacco reports from around the world, noting shifts to the market, consumer preferences and opinions about Puerto Rican tobacco. On the discussion regarding the increase of cigarette consumption, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 28 February and 15 April 1929. On the decline of cigar manufacturing on the island, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 31 March 1931.

²⁰ From 1907 through 1917, tobacco was the third most important commercial crop produced on the island after sugar and coffee; but in 1918, tobacco surpassed coffee. The export value of tobacco on the island peaked in 1920, when tobacco surpassed sugar and represented 38% of the total value of commercial crops (sugar accounted for 25%). From 1921 to 1940, tobacco remained the second most important commercial crop after sugar. See Esteva (1942), p.7. The importance of the tobacco sector as a source of revenue for the insular government is discussed by Rafael Menéndez Ramos, *Informe Anual del Comisionado de Agricultura y Comercio correspondiente al año fiscal 1932-1933*, San Juan: Departamento de Agricultura y Comercio, 1933, p.210.

Tobacco Growers and Cooperative Societies

Farmers' political participation and activism was most evident through their involvement in cooperative societies and agricultural organisations.²¹ Initially, cooperative societies operated as local marketing agencies and tobacco banks, and were moderately successful in securing higher tobacco prices for their members.²² Economic, political and natural factors that began in 1926, however, created a 'perfect storm' that pushed tobacco farmers first to affiliate in greater numbers, and then to expand the goals of their organisations from economic access to social and political equality.

In preparation for the 1926 harvest, farmers increased the number of *cuerdas* they planted in tobacco to 58,000 *cuerdas* for 1926 (from 34,023 for the 1925 crop year), partly due to reports that tobacco supplies from other parts of the world would be limited and of inferior quality.²³ In July of that year, however, the western-central portion of Puerto Rico was devastated by Hurricane San Liborio. Damages were calculated at over two-million dollars and the greatest losses were reported among coffee and tobacco plantations.²⁴ Throughout the tobacco regions, 65 percent of all tobacco-curing barns were destroyed. As a result, it was estimated that the tobacco crop for 1926 would be 30 percent lower than the previous year.²⁵ A reduction in available tobacco on the island after the hurricane, together with correct predictions of a reduction in tobacco stock from around the world, resulted in a 34 percent increase in prices paid to farmers (38.17 cents per pound) over the previous year.

The unexpected success of the 1926 crop in a year of hurricane destruction made the farmers overly confident. Expecting that prices would continue to rise, farmers once again increased the acreage planted for the 1927 season. There were also consistent reports that the tobacco harvest in Santo Domingo would be "considerably reduced", from 50 million pounds in 1926 to an expected 15 to 20 million pounds in 1927, due to heavy rains followed by an extended drought.²⁶ Tobacco of inferior quality, which translated into low demand and prices, was also projected to be the result of the 1927 season in the Philippines. In addition, plantings in the United States were reportedly 4 percent lower than the previous year, and the

²¹ Cooperative societies were legally approved in the Extraordinary Legislative Session of the Puerto Rican legislature of 1920 as 'Act No. 3, For the Incorporation and Regulation of Cooperative Associations of Production and Consumption' (described in Insular Experiment Station of Puerto Rico, *Tenth Annual Report of the Insular Experimental Station of the Department of Agriculture and Labor of Puerto Rico. Fiscal Year 1919-20*, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1920, p.5).

²² An important impetus for tobacco farmers to establish cooperatives was the extension to Puerto Rico of Title I of the Agricultural Act of 1923, a federal law that established Federal Intermediate Credit Banks to provide loans to cooperative associations, banks and other credit institutions (G. C. Henderson, 'The Agricultural Credits Act of 1923', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 37:3 (May 1923), pp.518-519; and V. P. Lee, 'The Intermediate Credit Banks', *Journal of Farm Economics* 7:4 (October 1925), p.425). News of the establishment or flourishing of cooperative societies filled the pages of *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, the magazine of the *Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños* (29 May, June 19, 3, 20 & 24 July, 7 & 14 August 1926; 15 March, 15 April, 15 June 1927).

²³ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 23 January 1926.

²⁴ Farmers in Comerío, for example, reported up to \$60,000 in losses; and those in Barranquitas, \$26,000 (*El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 7 August, 1926. Reports made by tobacco farmers across the region are evidence of the severity of the situation. Feliz Jiménez, a tobacco grower from Aibonito, lost seven ranches and calculated that his available crop would be reduced by 40%. Nicolas Ortiz Lebrón expected a reduction in his crop of 35% and Anastasio Noriega expected 50% less tobacco from his farm, although they both planned to rebuild some of their lost ranches immediately (*El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 July & 7 August 1926).

²⁵ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 21 August 1926.

²⁶ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 25 September 1926.

Cuban harvest suffered from both the fury of a tropical storm and a drought.²⁷ Farmers in Puerto Rico, therefore, increased their plantings with the assumption that they were fulfilling a need that other countries would not be able to meet. In fact, the tobacco sector was so optimistic in their outlook for the 1927 market, that *refaccionistas* (local financiers) willingly increased the amount of money available for production credit.²⁸

Tobacco farmers increased the total acreage under cultivation in 1927 to 81,900 cuerdas, a rise of 41 percent from the previous year. The planting season was uneventful and the harvest was a resounding success. Production totalled in excess of 50 million pounds, an increase of 39 percent over 1926.²⁹ What began as a season of high hopes ended in disaster, however, when it became clear that tobacco reductions in other countries were not as low as had been expected. The American market could not absorb such an enormous increase in supply from Puerto Rico, nor did it need to, since they could circumvent Puerto Rican sellers if the price was not agreeable to them. Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, had no other purchasers due to trading restrictions set in place by the colonial charter.³⁰ Prices paid to tobacco farmers, consequently, dropped dramatically to 19.84 cents per pound, a decrease of 48 percent, making the 1927 crop a ruinous one for tobacco farmers across the island.³¹ The local tobacco cooperatives were not strong enough in either membership or capital, and could do nothing about the resulting severe price declines. To aggravate the situation, it was clear that much tobacco remained in warehouses across the island. If tobacco growers wanted to stabilise prices, they would have to take dramatic action.

In response to this financial crisis, tobacco growers established insular cooperative societies: the larger the cooperative, the stronger the alliance against reductions in purchase price or increases in loan interest. The *Cooperativa Insular de Tabacaleros de Puerto Rico*, an insular tobacco cooperative that combined five existing local cooperative societies, was established in 1928.³² By 1929, the *Tabacaleros de Puerto Rico*, as it was known, was meeting regularly and was being visited by insular agricultural administrators and representatives from the insular legislature.³³

Tabacaleros de Puerto Rico was an attempt to create a sophisticated financial organisation by becoming involved in every aspect of the production and distribution of tobacco leaf.³⁴ *Tabacaleros* assisted their members from the very beginning of the cultivation process by purchasing all materials needed, such as seeds, fertilisers and farming tools. The cooperative then promoted cultivation methods that would guarantee a high quality product.

²⁷ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 February 1927.

²⁸ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 11 December 1926.

²⁹ Serrallés & Vélez (1941), p. 7.

³⁰ Puerto Rico was prohibited from trading with countries other than the United States under the Foraker Act of 1900. This provision, even under heavy criticism, was restated in the Jones Act of 1917 and is a part of the 1952 constitution of the *Estado Libre Asociado* that still binds the island to the mainland.

³¹ Carlos Chardón commented on the “fever” that had gripped tobacco farmers in 1927 and the resulting saturation of the tobacco market in *Informe del Comisionado de Agricultura y Trabajo al Honorable Gobernador de Puerto Rico, 1926-1927*, San Juan: Negociado de Materiales, Imprenta y Transporte, 1928, p.58.

³² Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico (CIH), Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 19 July 1927. Resolution also reported in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 July 1927. The members resolved that the Executive Board of the AAP should designate someone to study the possibility of establishing an insular cooperative. This study included a meeting with farmers from all tobacco-growing municipalities. The first meeting of the cooperative is detailed in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 January 1928.

³³ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 February 1928.

³⁴ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 February 1931.

Once the tobacco was harvested, the cooperative would assist their members in the curing, storage and classification of the leaf. Finally, the cooperative packaged the leaf to sell to the market, advertised in industry publications, and organised transportation to deliver the leaf once sold. *Tabacaleros* supported existing tobacco banks, lobbied elected officials both in Puerto Rico and the United States, and maintained relationships with agents from the federal banks. This was the most comprehensive mission for a cooperative society thus far and it was successful in helping its members secure better financial returns.

The 1928 season began with an often volatile debate on whether the number of acres dedicated to tobacco production should be reduced in an attempt at avoiding another catastrophic year. The *Tabacaleros de Puerto Rico* led the acreage-reduction campaign, with the cooperation of the *Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños* (the island-wide farmers' association), and the insular Department of Agriculture. The result was that a little over 40,000 acres were prepared for tobacco, a slightly more than 50 percent reduction in acreage from 1927. Hurricane San Felipe II swept through the island on September of 1928, resulting in financial losses calculated at one-hundred million dollars. In the tobacco regions, newly planted seedbeds and curing ranches were destroyed.³⁵ Ironically, the damages caused by San Felipe II had a positive effect of farm prices. Together with the reduction in acreage spearheaded by the *Tabacaleros*, the consequently smaller harvest of 27 million pounds, and the hurricane, there was an increase of 20 percent in the price paid to farmers for the 1928 harvest.³⁶ This slight recovery, however, was quickly annulled by the stock-market crash in the United States in October of 1929, which reduced the farm price of tobacco to 19.18 cents per pound.

In September 1932, Puerto Rico was hit by the most devastating hurricane of the century: San Ciprián. Over 3,000 people were injured by the storm across the island and more than 400,000 lost their homes. Property damages alone were calculated at over 40 million dollars.³⁷ The tobacco sector was once again devastated. A government worker in Caguas sent to survey the damage done by San Ciprián, commented:

All of the tobacco ranches that this agent has seen, and all others that he has received information about, have been completely destroyed... This agent knows of 3 tobacco seedbeds that were completely destroyed. He has been informed that in another two *barrios*, all seedbeds were also destroyed.³⁸

The effects of the storm were acknowledged by Rafael Menéndez Ramos, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce at the time: "Farmers are mentally depressed because of the losses... Tobacco farmers lost one million dollars in ranches and equipment during the hurricane."³⁹ The losses greatly affected the final crop, making 1932 the least productive year, measured in either total *cuerdas* under cultivation or quantity produced. A little over 10,000 *cuerdas* produced 6 million pounds, a decrease of approximately 80 percent in both from 1931.

³⁵ In total, 6,316 tobacco ranches were destroyed at a loss of over 1.4 million dollars, and 25% of seedbeds throughout the island were completely lost (*El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 January 1929; Carlos Chardón, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor Submitted to the Governor of Porto Rico, 1928-29*, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1930, p.632).

³⁶ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 September 1928.

³⁷ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 October 1932.

³⁸ Archivo Histórico Municipal de Caguas, Secretaría/ Beneficiencia/ Expedientes y Documentos/ Huracanes Caja 13, Sobre 1932B, 'Informe preliminar del ciclón de 27 de septiembre de 1932 San Ciprián'.

³⁹ Menéndez (1933), p.16.

Unlike the price recovery that occurred after the previous two hurricanes, farm prices after San Ciprián plummeted to 11.7 cents per pound, the lowest they had been since the initial expansion of the sector in the early years of the twentieth century. Local tobacco dealers and US companies had purchased as much available stock as they could in the previous years to prepare for eventual hurricanes. When they were faced with such a dramatic reduction in the 1932 crop, they were still able to meet export demand: although 6 million pounds of leaf were harvested in 1932, over 17 million were exported to the United States, indicating that there was plenty of stock to meet demand.⁴⁰ For the tobacco farmers, the losses caused by San Ciprián were devastating; for the tobacco dealers and the American manufacturing companies, it was hardly a bump in the road.

Once again, tobacco growers attempted a redefinition and reorganisation of their cooperative organisations, and the harsh living conditions after San Ciprián fuelled a renewed passion for an island-wide, far-reaching cooperative organisation. The result was the establishment of the Puerto Rico Tobacco Marketing Cooperative Association, perhaps the most successful tobacco cooperative society. *La Marketing*, as it became known, was founded in 1934 to find new markets for Puerto Rican tobacco, improve the living conditions of tobacco farmers, and secure needed services for their members:

It is our mission to concern ourselves with the progress of our tobacco industry, to adequately contribute to the improvement of our agricultural economy, and to inspire and assure the man who works in the tobacco field.⁴¹

The Commission to Protect the Tobacco Industry of Puerto Rico granted *La Marketing* a \$24,000 loan to establish a bank with the assistance of the Federal Farm Credit Bank of Baltimore and the Baltimore Bank for Cooperatives.⁴² By 1938, it was the largest cooperative society in Puerto Rico (see Table 6).

Table 6: Membership and capital report of *La Marketing*, 1934-1940

Source: *La Marketing* (1956), p.10.

Year	Members	Capital
1934-35	1,326	\$35,904.87
1939-40	4,832	\$66,324.00

La Marketing provided the most comprehensive member services of any cooperative society in the island, including life, fire and hurricane insurance, lower interest loans, and seed-distribution programmes. It also supplied cultivation materials, such as zinc, cloth, insecticides and fertilisers.⁴³ In addition, *La Marketing* consistently paid members better prices for tobacco than what buyers paid throughout the island (see Table 7).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ US Department of Labor (1941), p.4.
⁴¹ *La Marketing: un logro del tabacal. Organización y vida de la Puerto Rico Tobacco Marketing Association*, Santurce: Publicaciones Yocauna, 1956, p.1.
⁴² *La Marketing* (1956), p.8.
⁴³ Agricultural loans carried interest rates from 7 to 10%, but *La Marketing* would lend at no more than a 5.4% interest rate (*La Marketing*, 1956, pp.13-8).
⁴⁴ The exception was the crop of 1936-1937, when prices were lower than those paid by outside buyers (*La Marketing*, 1956, p.17).

Table 7: Price report of La Marketing, 1934-1940

Source: *La Marketing* (1956), p.17.

Year	Prices Paid by Private Buyers	Prices Paid by <i>La Marketing</i>
1935	\$17.41	\$19.39
1940	\$15.74	\$17.13

The affiliation of farmers into cooperative societies was not only occurring in the tobacco regions; sugar planters, coffee farmers, and fruit and vegetable producers were also establishing their own cooperatives. Although these cooperatives were supportive of each other, farmers throughout the island recognised that their power would be greatly expanded if they united. The result of these activities was the formation of the *Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños*.

The Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños (AAP)

The AAP was established in June of 1924, with the intention of being: “a defender of agricultural interests, a servant to the farmers, a promoter of the union of all those who work the land, a sentry of his rights and the spokesman of his being.”⁴⁵ Among the ambitious goals of the AAP were to foster the mutual assistance and protection of all members, to bring together all “agricultural forces for the purpose of obtaining scientific agriculture based on modern methods [of cultivation],” and to “promoting, implementing and developing, on the farmer’s initiative and with the Government’s cooperation, credit and production cooperatives.”⁴⁶ The AAP was interested in not only supporting the farmers, but also in securing the progress of the rural areas of Puerto Rico by demanding the development of a solid rural infrastructure that would include roads, schools, medical services, mail routes, telegraph, public safety and hygiene.⁴⁷

It is a testament to the importance given to the AAP by insular and federal government officials that a year after the AAP was established both the Resident Commissioner in Washington, Felix Córdova Dávila, and the Governor, Horace Mann Towner, attended the meeting of 12 July 1925. Governor Towner addressed the participants, expressing his support for the goals of the AAP.⁴⁸

Every year, the AAP held a general assembly in which members analysed economic and political issues affecting farmers, discussed problems specific to a particular crop, and organised lobbying efforts, both in Washington and with local politicians. The first general assembly occurred on 20 December 1925 in Ponce. The AAP had 60 local committees and 6,000 members by this time. Fifty-five of those local AAP committees were represented at

⁴⁵ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 12 December 1925.

⁴⁶ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, ‘Asamblea Organizadora de la Asociación de Agricultores de PR’, 27 June 1924.

⁴⁷ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 29 May 1925.

⁴⁸ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 19 December 1925.

the general assembly.⁴⁹ The main issue before the membership in 1925 was concern over a scheduled visit to Washington by Governor Towner and several local legislators. The AAP was concerned that these officials would “deceive the federal authorities with their tales of grandiose progress of the island.”⁵⁰ Members argued that since “the power doesn’t lie in Puerto Rico, but in Washington”, a commission of farmers representing the AAP should join the Governor and “truly represent the economic situation in the island”.⁵¹ This commission should also lobby for the extension of federal economic laws that would be favourable to Puerto Rico, in particular, the Curtis-Aswell project, which was being debated in the US legislature at the time and would allow the creation of cooperative marketing societies and more importantly, would give cooperatives the power to limit production.⁵² It was also determined that the commission should ask for federal sanctions so that the 500-acre law would be respected.⁵³ Finally, the commission should negotiate AAP’s affiliation with the American Farm Bureau Federation.⁵⁴ The membership would raise \$3,000 to cover the expenses of the trip.⁵⁵ The AAP requested that Governor Towner support the commission. So determined were the members to be successful in their petition, that the organisation committed itself to a negative public relations campaign in the event that the governor ignored the request.⁵⁶ Governor Towner heeded the request and such a campaign was not necessary. The AAP commission visited Washington in April of 1926 and met Secretary of War Davis and General McIntyre.

The AAP publicised every detail of the commission’s visit to Washington in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, the official publication of the AAP. The members of the commission presented their formal report at the general assembly meeting held on 11 July 1926.⁵⁷ The fact that a commission of Puerto Rican farmers was able to meet with the Committee of Insular Affairs, General McIntyre, and representatives of the Department of Agriculture suggests that rather than a one-sided colonial relationship, there was participation from the Puerto Rican population affected by federal laws. The record of the conversations between all the parties concerned show remarkable candidness and a no-holds barred attitude on the part of the AAP representatives to make the situation in Puerto Rico known to US officials. For example, Enrique Landrón spoke of the extreme levels of poverty in the island. He then criticised the level of taxes paid by the Puerto Rican taxpayer when compared with the American taxpayer, arguing that for Puerto Ricans this amount represented a hardship and a heavier burden than for their American counterparts.⁵⁸ Later in their visit, the commission

⁴⁹ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 12 & 19 December 1925.

⁵⁰ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 5 April 1926.

⁵¹ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 19 December 1925; and CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 19 July 1926.

⁵² The Curtis-Aswell project (Senate Bill No. 2844) “created an Interstate Farm Marketing Association. Its purpose was to promote and stimulate the orderly flow of agricultural commodities in commerce; to remove burdens and restraints on such commodities; and to provide for the processing, preparing for market, handling, pooling, storing, and marketing of agricultural commodities through co-operative marketing associations” (speech of Charles Curtis accepting the Nomination for the Vice Presidency, Topeka, Kansas, 18 August 1928, at <http://www.vpcharlescurtis.net/ksstudies/speech.htm>). Association members would have the power to decide “the increase or decrease of production necessary to provide an adequate supply,” meaning that the cooperatives would be allowed to limit planting as they saw fit (John D. Black, ‘The Role of Public Agencies in the Internal Readjustments of the Farm’, *Journal of Farm Economics* 7:2 (April 1925), pp.153-75).

⁵³ The 500-acre law, enacted in 1900 and included in the Jones Act of 1917, stipulated that no corporation could own more than 500 acres of land. There had been no enforcement of the law.

⁵⁴ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 26, February 1926.

⁵⁵ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 5 April 1926.

⁵⁶ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 2 January 1926.

⁵⁷ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 8 May & 24 July 1926.

⁵⁸ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 8 May 1926.

met with Lloyd S. Fenny from the Bureau of Rural Economies to lobby for an agricultural survey of the island.⁵⁹ The Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the federal Department of Agriculture eventually conducted and paid for the survey.

Visits to Washington and to US politicians by members of the AAP became a regular occurrence. In 1926, the AAP requested that any time the Committee for Insular Affairs decided to hold hearings regarding Puerto Rico, the AAP should be notified. A few months later, the AAP received a letter from Edgar A. Kieso, chairman of the Committee for Insular Affairs, stating that he would grant a public hearing to any commission that came from Puerto Rico.⁶⁰ In 1927, José L. Pesquera gave a detailed report of his meeting with President Coolidge and Secretary of War Davis.⁶¹ This suggests that federal and insular officials recognised the importance of the AAP and that, rather than making decisions without consultation, there was a willingness to discuss repercussions and examine alternatives.

The AAP leadership, with the support of the general membership, lobbied both insular and federal politicians and bureaucrats to secure the funds, laws, or commitment they needed to carry forward their agenda. They had great success. In 1928, an extraordinary session of the AAP was held to discuss the devastation after Hurricane San Felipe II hit the island on 18 September, causing a great deal of destruction to many agricultural districts. It was decided that a cable would be sent to Washington describing the dire situation of the island and to “solicit that the American Congress approve legislation to liberally extend credit to Puerto Rican farmers to save the only source of wealth for the country.”⁶² A few months later, the AAP received a visit from Senator Hiram Bingham, Chair of the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions to witness the effect of the hurricane and relief funds followed shortly thereafter.⁶³

A resolution was passed during the 1930 general assembly to solicit the US Congress to immediately approve the extension of the Smith-Lever and Purnell laws to Puerto Rico.⁶⁴ The Smith-Lever Law would create agricultural extension services and the Purnell Law would provide support to the agricultural experiment stations. Both programmes enjoyed widespread support from the farmers, and both laws were extended to Puerto Rico shortly thereafter. An AAP commission travelled to Washington in 1931 to solicit additional funds for economic recovery after San Felipe. Their efforts resulted in the creation of a rehabilitation commission with an appropriation of \$6 million in agricultural rehabilitation loans, \$2 million for repairs to schools and roads, and \$100,000 for the purchase and distribution of seed to farmers.⁶⁵ In addition, the commission lobbied successfully for temporary tax reductions for those affected by the hurricane. These examples suggest that farmers were not only involved at all levels of the island’s governmental structure, but had learned how to skilfully lobby and influence the policies of the US government that directly affected their interests.

⁵⁹ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 8 May 1926. Also CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 21 January & 26 February 1926.

⁶⁰ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 26 February & 5 April 1926.

⁶¹ José L. Pesquera was one of the founding members of the AAP. He was later elected President of the AAP and in 1932 became the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico in Washington, D.C. The report of his meeting can be found in CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 6 June 1927.

⁶² CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 21 September 1928.

⁶³ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 20 November 1928.

⁶⁴ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 January 1931.

⁶⁵ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 December 1931.

The AAP agenda was not only concerned with agricultural issues. It also dealt with matters that affected everyday life in rural Puerto Rico, including improvement in roadways, fair and uniform valuation of rural property, workers' compensation programmes for farmers, regulations for women and children's labour, the creation of a rural police force and the construction of new schools. From the meeting minutes of the AAP and the articles and reports published in *El agricultor puertorriqueño*, it is clear that the members of the AAP were heavily involved in economic issues. For example, in 1925, the AAP asked local committees to gather farmers to protest unjust appraisals of rural property, which would lead to higher taxes. The insular government, facing a budgetary crisis, had decided property appraisals should occur throughout the island. Residents would then pay taxes according to the new valuations assigned to their properties. The AAP expected that these values would be much higher than in the past, placing an additional burden on the already struggling farmers. The AAP began a campaign criticising the property reappraisals, declaring that the association would not "support any government [expenditure] earmarked for improvements exclusively in the urban zones, forgetting the needs of the countryside."⁶⁶ In addition, the AAP drafted a detailed proposal for the legislature in which they specified how any reappraisal should be conducted: land values should be the same within categories (i.e. all tobacco lands should be worth the same, all sugar lands the same, etcetera); corporations should not have special appraisals; farmers should be represented in all taxation committees; and that any new taxation should only be imposed once all property has been reappraised.⁶⁷ The plan was presented to the insular legislature at the end of 1926.⁶⁸ Although the AAP did not succeed in suspending the reappraisals, subsequent communications between insular government officials and the AAP demonstrate that the development of the rural areas remained central to government policy.

The AAP was equally involved in the political arena, although the official AAP mission statement stated that it was not a political organisation. In 1927, the AAP became involved in several political campaigns, supporting candidates who were friendly to farmers. An attempt at creating a political platform was made that same year. At the general assembly on 25 March 1928, the membership agreed that the AAP should support "their men" in the upcoming elections for the insular Senate and the House of Representatives. These men would serve with the:

principal objective to promote the wellbeing of the agricultural sector, and by extension of the country, free of political compromises when [legislation] is incompatible with the prosperity of the agricultural class.⁶⁹

The AAP went as far as declaring that they would put all of their economic resources and political influence at the service of the political party which best represented the interests of the farmers.⁷⁰

Evidence of the complex relationship between the AAP and the insular and federal government can be found in the pages of *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*. The AAP openly criticised the Governor, other insular elected officials and the federal government when decisions seemed unfair. This candour seems remarkable within the context of a government

⁶⁶ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 January 1927.

⁶⁷ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 15 November 1926.

⁶⁸ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 January 1927.

⁶⁹ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 April 1928.

⁷⁰ For a detailed explanation of the AAP political platform, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 April & 31 December 1928.

which has been considered part of an oppressive colonial system by most scholars, undermining the democratic space created by Puerto Ricans within the colonial system to effectively comment on critical issues facing them in their daily lives. Editorials in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* called both the insular and federal government uncaring, abusive, unfair and willing to sell out the farmers when politically convenient.⁷¹ Governor Towner's administration was not well liked. After the 1927 tobacco harvest, when it became apparent that tobacco growers were facing financial difficulties, the AAP requested that the Governor convene an extraordinary session of the legislature to discuss possible solutions. Governor Towner declined the request. The editors of *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* criticised the Governor for refusing to deal with the tobacco crisis and accused him of being unethical:

Of he who directs the displacement of Puerto Ricans, with the criminal complicity of the political fanfare, nothing can be expected except an indirect contribution to the bankruptcy of Puerto Ricans. Governor Towner's administration should receive no gratitude for any rebuilding of our meagre riches. Instead, he leaves us a mortgage of fifty million... with which he capriciously manipulated our political establishment.⁷²

Governor Towner and the legislature had to respond. The result was Law #53 enacted on 23 March 1928 that created the Commission for the Protection of Puerto Rican Tobacco.⁷³ The Commission would fall under the jurisdiction of the insular Department of Agriculture and Labor and would be financed by the issuing of a \$3 million bond. It would then be supported by a contribution of one cent per pound of tobacco grown, processed or sold in Puerto Rico, to be paid by farmers, manufacturing companies, and tobacco buyers. The Commission was charged with providing credit for tobacco cooperatives, acting as the intermediary between growers and buyers, and regulating the acreage of tobacco plantings. The law also required that all "persons, firms or corporations that are dedicated to the financing of the cultivation of tobacco... must be authorised to do so with a license issued by the Commission."⁷⁴ Those operating without said license would be fined between \$100 and \$1,000 per infraction. Governor Towner vetoed the law. It was once again enacted by the insular legislature on 18 February 1929 only to be vetoed again in a "new destructive action" by the Governor.⁷⁵ This time, however, the Governor's veto did not stand and the Commission was established.

The influence of the AAP on local legislators was crucial in the enactment of this law. The inclusion of five tobacco growers, to be chosen from a list of fifteen candidates submitted to the Governor by the AAP on behalf of a general assembly of tobacco growers, was a triumph for the AAP and for tobacco growers throughout the island. Unfortunately, the Commission was unable to meet the goals of the law, mostly because the required contribution proved too costly for already struggling farmers. In addition, tobacco manufacturers actively resisted the application of licensing fees, which would have

⁷¹ For an example, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 26 December 1925, where the editors criticise the lack of governmental concern about land owners losing their farms because they could not afford taxes. See also *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 1 May 1926. Governor Towner had recently submitted his 1926 report where he cited the low valuation of the land (and the low taxes paid by owners) as a budgetary problem.

⁷² *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 30 September 1927.

⁷³ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 30 April 1928. The details of the tobacco growers' assembly where the members of the Commission were elected can be found in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 August 1929.

⁷⁴ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 30 April 1928.

⁷⁵ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15 May 1929.

guaranteed operating funds for the Commission.⁷⁶ Although it remained operational for a few more years, the Commission proved ineffective and was dissolved.

The AAP continued its struggle on behalf of tobacco growers and in 1935 it pressured the legislature to establish the Tobacco Institute, an organisation dedicated to conducting scientific research that would address tobacco's cultivation problems.⁷⁷ The Institute was also charged with assisting farmers in the implementation of improved cultivation methods. Unlike the Commission for the Protection of Puerto Rican Tobacco, the Tobacco Institute was funded by the insular legislature as a budget-line item. Additional funding was acquired through the levying of a 15-cent tax on each *quintal* of tobacco sold in Puerto Rico. The Institute would have a full-time director, to be appointed by the governor from a list of candidates submitted by the AAP. In 1937, when Governor Winship submitted nominations for the director's position, the AAP protested and stated that they were not bona fide farmers and that they would not recommend that the farmers cooperate until the "nominations are corrected".⁷⁸ The Tobacco Institute set up a facility that included agronomy and chemistry departments, regularly published scientific findings in both the local and American press, and lobbied the insular legislature for additional funding and for laws that would protect the Puerto Rican tobacco industry.⁷⁹

El Agricultor Puertorriqueño was the main propaganda instrument for the AAP. Billed as "useful and necessary for the farmer as is his tractor, his plough, or his yoke", it cost 5 cents per issue or \$3 per year.⁸⁰ The editors often commented on the hot topic of the time, whether it was absentee landowners, the latest insular political scandal, or the nutritionally poor diet of the typical Puerto Rican farmer.⁸¹ The magazine published letters from farmers, legislators, and insular and federal government bureaucrats, as well as interesting news from the United States and the world. There were also articles on nutrition, agricultural techniques, botany and literature, and advertisements for farm equipment, fertiliser, college courses and insurance. Perhaps the most important section of the magazine was titled 'Market and Prices', which listed the latest prices paid to farmers for products such as sugar, tobacco and citrus fruits.

Many tobacco farmers contributed articles to the *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*. These dealt with a variety of topics, from tobacco cultivation techniques to larger agricultural issues, such as banking and credit.⁸² The ever-changing tax code received plenty of coverage and the

⁷⁶ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, June 1934.

⁷⁷ Carlos Esteva Jr., *Third Annual Report of the Tobacco Institute of Puerto Rico (1938-1939)*, San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing and Transportation, 1940, p.5.

⁷⁸ CIH, Asociación de Agricultores de PR, Minutes, 7 September 1937.

⁷⁹ For an example of a publication in the local press, see M. A. Manzano, 'Apuntes sobre la química de los tabacos claros para cigarrillos', *Revista de Agricultura, Industria y Comercio de Puerto Rico* 31 (1939), pp.209-11. In the American press, see F. H. Bunker, 'Many Economic and Field Problems Facing Puerto Rican Leaf Planters', *Tobacco* 107:26 (1938), pp.8-11.

⁸⁰ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 30 October 1926.

⁸¹ For examples, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 23 October 1926, 31 August 1930, 15 November 1932. For a running commentary on the status of the Puerto Rican infrastructure, see the magazine section titled 'Cómo andan los servicios públicos en Puerto Rico', which first appeared on 15 March 1931.

⁸² For examples of tobacco-specific articles, see J. D. Stubbs, 'La selección de la semilla del tabaco en Puerto Rico', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 1:6 (16 January 1926), p.13; M. Meléndez Muñoz, 'El presente y el porvenir del tabaco en Puerto Rico', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 1:8 (30 January 1926), pp.15-7; 1:9 (6 February 1926), pp.7-9; or Agustín Fernández, 'El cultivo de tabaco en Puerto Rico', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 11:15 (15 August 1931), pp.12, 21-22. Rafael Arce Rollet, a tobacco grower from Caguas, wrote a two-part article on the *contratos de refacción*, or agricultural contracts, arguing the disadvantages of borrowing money from speculators or merchants and instead promoted the use of banks for agricultural loans (*El*

magazine usually included copies of official forms, surveys, or names and contact information of those who should be called for questions.⁸³ Farmers also commented on the living conditions and general wellbeing of the population of the countryside.⁸⁴

The AAP's support of tobacco growers included reports in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* of meetings, incessant comments on the status of the crop, and the publication of every minute transaction during the buying season.⁸⁵ Through the magazine, the AAP disseminated information to tobacco growers regarding global market conditions, including the quantity and quality of tobacco grown in places as far as India and the Philippines and commenting on potential buyers of Puerto Rican tobacco. *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* regularly reported on the quantity of tobacco in the hands of American buyers and the names and corporate affiliation of tobacco buyers visiting the island.⁸⁶

Farmers established the AAP to address cultivation problems in the island and to act as the public voice of the farmer in the insular and federal legislature. The AAP was consistently successful, particularly in their efforts to support tobacco growers. Through their affiliation with the AAP, tobacco growers became a political force in the halls of Congress as well as in the Puerto Rican *Capitolio*, and this culminated in the establishment of the Commission for the Protection of Puerto Rican Tobacco in 1929 and the Tobacco Institute in 1936. Together with their contributions to *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, their involvement ensured that the health of the tobacco sector remained central to insular and federal governments.

Conclusion

The study of tobacco cultivation in the highland regions of Puerto Rico from 1898 to 1940 provides an opportunity to examine how a local population responded to a rapidly expanding commodities market under a new colonial political system. Tobacco growers quickly expanded production to meet the demands of the large American market, now wide open to the Puerto Rican leaf, and in the process, challenged unilateral political decision making.

Agricultor Puertorriqueño, 26 December 1925 and 16 January 1926. For other articles on banking and credit, see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 6 & 20 March 1926. Ramón Gandía Córdova wrote a fascinating five-part article on the Federal Farm Loan Act (*El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 15, 31 May, 15 June, 31 August & 30 November 1928).

⁸³ *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 19 December 1925 or 23 January 1926.

⁸⁴ For comments on nutrition, see M. Meléndez Muñoz, 'La habitación campesina en sus relaciones con la higiene y la moral. Alimentación del campesino', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 1:11 (20 February 1926), p.7. For general economic and living conditions, see Ignacio Lizardi Flores, 'Problemas rurales', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 11:19 (15 October 1931), pp.16-7; 11:21 (15 November 1931), pp.8, 22; 11:22 (30 November 1931), pp.3, 19; and 11:24 (31 December 1931), p.14. For issues of general interest, see Sandalio Torres Monge, 'Las corporaciones y las tierras', *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño* 8:9 (15 November 1929), pp.29-30.

⁸⁵ Read the eyewitness report by a member of the editorial board of the 1926 tobacco crop in *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 11 December 1926. Also see *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 30 April 1927, for an example of AAP's market reports; and *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*, 31 October 1930, for a report of refunds being given for tainted fertiliser and instructions on how to apply.

⁸⁶ Foreign and American tobacco buyers visited the island on a regular basis to determine the quality and availability of the product and to buy tobacco after the harvest. Among these were representatives from the American Cigar Company, Rosenstadt and Waller, American Tobacco Company, Congress Cigar Company, Stern Mendelsohn Co. Inc., Durlach Bros., Webster Cigar Co., and Union Cigar Co. There were also local buyers, such as Ortiz Hermanos and Casa Valiente y Co.

The dynamics of economic, social and political development in the tobacco regions add complexity to the simple dichotomy presented by scholars who have either demonised or idealised the period of U.S. control prior to the Second World War. The colonial system imposed upon Puerto Rico without consulting Puerto Ricans in any systematic way, was one with many components and may not be unilaterally analysed through the perspectives of a single economic sector, political party or social group within the population.

In addition, the paradigm of 'victimisation' in which Puerto Ricans were simply objects of policies effected without their input and largely beyond their control is challenged by examining the economic, social and political behaviour of Puerto Rican tobacco growers. Instead of a victimised population, the actions of the tobacco growers demonstrate that Puerto Ricans exerted influence and pressures at all levels of the colonial government both in Puerto Rico and in Washington. Ironically, and paradoxically, the freedoms of political action and organisation bestowed upon Puerto Ricans as part of the new post-1898 colonial system permitted them to advocate for themselves and to take measures in defence of their own self-defined interests and agendas without the intervention of outsiders, and even when faced from serious opposition from either the insular or federal government.

Farmers in the region, through their affiliations in local and insular-level organisations, took advantage of opportunities created by the expansion of markets for tobacco. At the local level, tobacco growers invested in cooperative societies and demanded legislature to safeguard their economy. Tobacco growers attended meetings, drafted proposals and letters, voted in support or against resolutions, and passionately debated the status of their industry. Together with many farmers in Puerto Rico, tobacco growers created political capital by establishing the AAP and contributing to *El Agricultor Puertorriqueño*. The AAP accepted their self-appointed role as the public voice of the farmers in the insular and federal legislatures, successfully lobbying for legislation that was not only beneficial to the agricultural economy, but that would foment the development of the rural areas and demonstrate the government's commitment to raising the standard of living of all rural residents.

Affiliation guaranteed tobacco growers a voice in the legislative hallways of Washington and San Juan. Governors, presidents, senators and other administrators were visited by the representatives of Puerto Rican tobacco growers, publicly challenged and criticised. Insular and federal officials responded to such challenges, as evident in the case of Governor Towner's approval of Law #53 creating the Commission for the Protection of Puerto Rican Tobacco, or in the case of Senator Bingham's visit to the island after Hurricane San Felipe II. Puerto Ricans were hardly powerless within the colonial structure; they rapidly learned how to manoeuvre the new governmental structure and efficiently used the freedom of the press and the ability to affiliate to effect change. Rather than observing from a distance and being victims of a tyrannical colonial government, Puerto Ricans were involved in every level of government. Their activities had a direct impact on both insular and federal policies and legislation and affected their everyday lives.

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropolises and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropolises;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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