

Peasant Identities and Social Power in Spanish Colonial Puerto Rico

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For all that historians have achieved in the study of Caribbean social identities, we still know relatively little about the processes—social, cultural, linguistic, and legal—by which specific social and ethnic identities originated and developed. Theoretical and heuristic choices, driven in part by sweeping philosophical trends, may account for at least a part of this puzzle, a paradox of recent scholarship. Among such choices, none has been more important than the attention paid to the intersection between race and gender in the literature of the past quarter-century. No one would question the ample insights about identity processes we have garnered while examining the fault lines of racial and/or patriarchal power. Caribbean historiography continues to experience salutary effects from these analytical and heuristic choices, as more (and more talented) scholars sign up to become members of the guild with every passing generation.¹

But these new perspectives may have come at the price of abandoning others that, when articulated with the former, might have deepened our knowledge of identity-formation in the colonial Caribbean. Having lived an earlier age when economic and social history of a mechanically, almost formulaic sort was all the rage, some of us can attest to ways in which scholarly consensus can narrow the angle of vision, preventing us from seeing important details, and sometimes edging us toward a false consensus. More plainly, I wonder if by putting so many of our eggs in the race-and-gender basket we may have missed processes by which social ascriptions were created, not in the *absence* of race and gender considerations (a claim that would be ludicrous), but in conjunction with other forces, such as state policies, institutional processes, or legal and ecclesiastical principles. In these cases, the drive to label people a certain way may well have stemmed from concerns about governance and citizenship. In time, the resulting ascriptions may have taken a life of their own and begun to designate people in particular ways. Eventually, those who were so ascribed assumed the labels as ways

by which they chose to define *themselves*—thus bringing the identity-forming dialectic full circle. That people ultimately adopted and wrapped *themselves* in ascriptions given to them by others, often turning the values associated with such ascriptions on their heads is, of course, a story many times told by students of identity-formation in the Americas and beyond.²

In this paper I wish to discuss one such instance of identity-formation in the early colonial Spanish Caribbean, that of the island of Puerto Rico. I wish to suggest that the disparate but overlapping terms by which the rural population of Puerto Rico became known, and ultimately called *itself*—names like *monteros*, *agregados*, *desacomodados*, and most importantly, *jibaros*—arose from specific economic, institutional, legal, and religious policies and practices spearheaded, in most cases, by the Spanish colonial state and by local elites. I am concerned, in the first instance, with how an evolving Spanish colonial policy on landholding and the attainment of a settled, orderly life progressively defined certain people in colonial Puerto Rico as problem-prone outsiders. I am also interested in discovering pathways by which the processes of legal ascription helped usher other processes of identity-formation, especially of the sort that would later lend themselves to the ambiguity and malleability that is required of the most enduring social identities. I address two simple questions: How did legal precepts and social practices based on them brand or qualify a peasant adaptation specific to this Caribbean island (though sharing many traits with others around it), and in what ways did this “legal construction of identity” (to borrow Efrén Rivera Ramos’ suggestive phrase) help define a typical and even quintessential peasant form, variously known by several monikers but ultimately by one dominant one, which was eventually adopted by the majority as the very essence of its *ethnie*?³ In order to answer these questions, I will draw examples from struggles over the possession, use, and ownership of land in colonial Puerto Rico that helped define who was and who was not entitled to certain rights, under what circumstances and to whom those rights would be applied.

The paper takes as its starting point two assumptions about identity-formation in the Spanish Caribbean, some of which are likely applicable to other parts of the Empire. The first of these is that along the Caribbean's multiple frontiers and under a broad range of threats to the safety and well-being of people considered "worth defending," Spanish officialdom commonly labeled people as "barbaric", "savage", and "uncivilized". As David J. Weber has shown, the designation of *bárbaros* applied to multiple Indian groups whom the Spaniards failed to conquer or who lived in distant and inaccessible borderlands.⁴ These groups formed the human raw material for a civilizing project that in the eighteenth century conceived of them as noble savages capable of being made into "new men." In fact, however, Indians were not the only ones so designated by the Spanish colonizers, for whom even the hybridized products of other colonial frontier areas, like those in the Caribbean, deserved a similar designation. Although many of these people in the Caribbean borderlands were Amerindian or Afro-creole, or, more typically, of mixed racial origins, the accusation of barbarity was not wholly dependent on race, as we shall see. The mere fact of residing in non-nucleated fashion along poorly defended zones prone to attack or predatory raids would suffice to elicit the appellation of "bárbaros" and trigger the adoption of policies of population reconcentration or forced nucleation.⁵

The Caribbean entered Europe's imagination precisely as this zone of civilizational tension, first between "cannibalistic" and "warlike" Carib Indians on the Lesser Antilles and the more settled Taíno communities to the west, and later as a constellation of thinly settled Spanish communities constantly under threat of attack from within (escaped and rebellious Indians, Black maroons, etc.) and without (French and English privateers and corsairs, Carib Indians, etc.). To its Spanish settlers, the region spawned a social imaginary founded on the notion of barbarity for many generations after conquest—perhaps as long as the nineteenth century. It took the Spanish loss of Santo Domingo and the conversion of Cuba and Puerto Rico into densely settled agri-

cultural colonies in the early nineteenth century for the “barbaric” appellation to lose its appeal. It is not surprising, then, that the key peasant icons of the three Spanish nations—*guajiros* in Cuba, *monteros* in the Dominican Republic, and *jibaros* in Puerto Rico—all referred, at some point in early colonial history, to unruly (*cum* indomitable) folks occupying a liminal zone between civilization and savagery.⁶

Our second assumption relates to landholding as a means to structure a society of “haves” and “have-nots” in which the notions of savagery and unsettledness might set deep roots. Just as the frontier quality of the Caribbean colonies, their typically thin and disaggregated population, and the mixed-race character of the population promoted ideas of *barbarie*, royal ownership of most land, the absence of individual property rights over it, and the early distribution of choice sites to a small number of individuals exercising usufruct rights created a barrier to entry which exacerbated the perception of uprootedness. Throughout the Spanish Caribbean, there emerged in the sixteenth century a cattle economy centered on very big, open-grazing ranches called *hatos*. Initially they were created by royal grants of usufruct rights given to people who claimed special privileges as part of the conquering cohort. Later, other big land grants (“*a el uso y sin propiedad*,” as the *mercedes* usually stated) were added. The concentration of landed rights on such a small number of settlers sparked protests and open conflicts as early as the 1550s in Puerto Rico. In the long term, the land-tenure regime that resulted from these policies (and was adamantly defended by the islands’ oligarchies well into the eighteenth century) discouraged the immigration of Spaniards and thus exacerbated the problem of underpopulation. Logically, too, it added to the social exclusions which would result in roving, itinerant peasantries in all three colonies, and feed the growing discontent of the peasantry.⁷

In view of these two assumptions, it is not surprising that vast social, symbolic, and political distances would emerge in the Spanish Caribbean zone between landed and landless folk. Especially in the more mountainous zones (eastern Cuba, Santo

Domingo, and Puerto Rico), the gulf between these groups opened further during the course of the eighteenth century. Convergent processes, all related to the Caribbean's deeper insertion into the world system, were at work. Gradual population growth in the early decades, followed by a demographic explosion in the second half of the century, added to the number of landless people.⁸ Progressive integration into circuits of Atlantic trade via export commodities like tobacco, sugar, and coffee placed a premium on property rights, which Spain finally bestowed along a variable timeline. Absent for more than two centuries, these new property rights over land made the gulf between the landed minorities and the landless majorities an even more obvious and pressing concern. Finally, Spanish attention to the security of its Caribbean colonies grew in response to the frequency and intensity of warfare as well as to the growth of enormous populations of enslaved workers in nearby colonies of the British, the French, the Dutch, and the Danes. When, even before the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, Spanish officialdom scanned the slave societies in the region and realized with terror their explosive potential, they could not help but fear the potential powder keg that lay in their midst—a mass of uprooted peasants clamoring for land of their own in the midst of a cycle of economic growth and elite political empowerment.

The following discussion focuses on Puerto Rico. This island provides a suitable case of the construction of social identities based on the two processes just outlined: the demonization of rural denizens and the social exclusion of a large portion of the population based on laws that regulated, and restricted, landholding and property rights on land. The easternmost of Spain's Caribbean possessions and the island closest to the double frontier of Carib "savagery" and foreign (and, more often than not, enemy) colonies, Puerto Rico also was the colony where identities based on a rustic icon—the *jibaro* peasantry—arguably developed more fully into an ideology of creole nationhood. An exploration of these parallel processes of identity-formation will allow us to assess the ways in which rusticity, subalternity, and race interacted with legal

processes to create new social identities in a Caribbean frontier setting. Emphasis on the eighteenth century is warranted because it was then that the forces of commerce heightened underlying social conflicts and made possible the crystallization of the multiple dimensions of peasant identity which would prevail for two centuries or more.

A Spanish friar's disenchantment with the human raw material of his bishopric, located on one of Spain's many imperial fringes, seems like an appropriate point of departure. In 1573, soon after his arrival at the modest cathedral in which he was to serve as the new bishop, the Hieronymite Friar Manuel de Mercado traversed the thick Puerto Rican forests and high mountains until he arrived at the southern foothills of the central *cordillera*. His main business was conducting the required *visita* of a relatively accessible part of the bishopric, which at the time extended from the island of San Juan (Puerto Rico), through the Lesser Antilles, all the way to Cumaná in northern South America. By the time he made it across Puerto Rico's central mountain range and arrived at the southern foothills, in a place called Coamo, the bishop could not help but express shock at what was in store for him in this thinly inhabited corner of the Indies. In Coamo he found about 30 *vecinos*, ca. 200 souls, scattered across the dry scrub forest, without a church or a priest. His vivid impressions of the people are a good starting point for a discussion about the way dominant groups had begun to imagine the creole adaptation then in full swing:

Visitando la Isla he hallado que había gran necesidad de hacer otro pueblo más de los que había, casi en el riñón de la Isla, como por recoger a más de 30 vecinos que hallé derramados y muy lejos de poblado, sin iglesia, ni clérigos, ni oír misa en todo el año, ni recibir los sacramentos de la Iglesia *y finalmente como salvajes, aunque españoles de nación casi todos*. Véase esto, que entiendo será negocio de que Vuestra Majestad será servido y la tierra aprovechada.⁹

Fusing the concerns of the State with those of the Church, and just as anxious about military security as with the spiritual condition of his brethren, Mercado had discovered that some in his flock, despite looking Spanish in origin, were in a state of “savagery”.

A favorite Spanish trope to depict the variegated inhabitants of the Indies, the notion of savagery took in the words of Mercado a specific set of meanings. The first is suggested by the contrast he drew between savagery and race, Otherness and Spanish birth. Mercado had run into a group of people, white or nearly so, whom he expected to be socially advanced, given their ancestry, but clearly were not. Something about life in the colony had turned these people’s norms of proper society upside down. Second, the bishop’s rationale for designating them as his cultural Others reveals a constant feature of Spanish understandings of savage or uncivilized behavior. These “savages” were so because they were scattered about the territory without forming a compact town and sustaining, with their efforts, a church and its clergy—without, that is, a properly organized social body.¹⁰ And third, the testimony is interesting because Bishop Mercado frames his perceptions in the usual style of such *relaciones de visitas* as a conversation with the Monarch intimately conveying the discovery of a wrong to be righted within his colonial realm. In order to appeal to the Monarch for help in founding a new town and church, two elements of civilization the *coameños* lacked, the bishop knew he must make an eye-catching case. Nothing seemed more persuasive than to describe the Puerto Rican scene as a wild rusticism bordering on chaos.

I bring up this early appellation of “savagery” to a group of Puerto Rican colonists because it holds wider implications. Although brief, this account helps us envision the unsettled, frontier character of late sixteenth-century society, just as it reveals the fears which prompted metropolitan actors to turn away from a civic model and toward a military model of colonialism. The shift was in the works precisely at the time Mercado wrote his report. Consequently, for well over the next two centuries Spain would focus

its colonizing mission on military defense, investing in it resources drawn from other parts of the Empire.

But more important to the argument I wish to advance here is the consistency of the bishop's testimony about Coamo's colonists, and the fact that, if contemporary accounts are to be credited, it could have applied to the majority of Puerto Rico's rural residents as early as the 1570s and 1580s and as late as the early nineteenth century. Viewed from the vantage point of four centuries of Spanish rule, Mercado's judgment is significant because it resonates powerfully with numerous later accounts. Whether written by Spaniards or creoles, laymen or priests, these descriptions painted the rural inhabitants of Puerto Rico with disdain, and for many of the same reasons that Mercado had used. Exposed, on the edge of empire, surrounded by the temptations and perils of Spain's rivals, and no longer the rich trove of gold or sugar it once had been, the rural Puerto Ricans, like their neighbors in Hispaniola but unlike those who occupied much of Cuba, had drifted unavoidably from the norms Spaniards considered proper and civilized.

As early as 1573, then, an array of newly minted social norms and cultural patterns—a creole peasant adaptation—appears to be all there: residents scattered about the rugged territory in individual households, distant from each other, or in small hamlets, unattended by the clergy, engaged primarily in subsistence production of cattle and crops, and “savage” in the very sense one reads between the lines in Mercado's account. Thus, when the bishop added the phrase “y finalmente como salvajes,” it suggests a reference to this cultural amalgam, with strong Taíno, Spanish, and African overtones—the same one that comes up repeatedly in later descriptions of the local peasantry.

Beneath the accusations of unsettledness and barbarity lay the pernicious effects of key structures of landholding and land tenure which, over time, exacerbated the

problem of shifting cultivation, itinerancy, and non-nucleated settlement. Francisco Moscoso has described how a veritable “class war” took place in the early 1540s over the practice of conceding huge tracts of land (with usufruct rights only) to the well-heeled members of the San Juan aristocracy, many of them the direct descendants of conquistadores. Others, including former miners and budding sugar planters, clamored for the cancellation of the original concessions and the redistribution of prime land along the north coast, near the City of Puerto Rico (San Juan).¹¹ While on this occasion the protesters won—perhaps because of the economic power some of them wielded—and the *cabildo* obtained the rights to break up the large *hatos* and redistribute their lands, this was only a pyrrhic victory. When the *cabildo*, perhaps by fiat, obtained the right to make land grants, the distribution of *mercedes* (land grants) took on a decidedly aristocratic bias. For more than two centuries thereafter, the practice of *cabildo* allocation of usufruct land rights insured that only those with access to the council and its entrenched social networks would benefit. With few exceptions, poor people need not apply.¹²

With every passing generation, this practice gave well-connected people privileged access to land. At the same time, it created a growing, self-reproducing group of landless folk. In Puerto Rico these peasants came to be defined by two loosely associated terms: *desacomodados* (literally, land-less people) and *agregados* or *arrimados* (hangers-on, or those who lived on someone else’s land in exchange for labor services). The third term, *jíbaro*, which likely grew of the elites’ derision of rural culture, was also added to the list, perhaps at a slightly earlier stage; it was definitely in existence by the early eighteenth century, and may have been in use over the last few decades of the seventeenth. The term *jíbaro*, which I believe was popularized in the Caribbean by military men who knew about the nearly futile Spanish campaigns against the Amazonian Shuar (known as *jívaros*), referred indirectly to behaviors and cultural norms associated with savagery. For their part, *desacomodado* and *agregado* defined people by

how they were formally or legally situated vis-à-vis the land from which they drew sustenance. The inaugural appearance of the latter in the documentary record dates, as far as I can tell, to the early 1730s—precisely the time when the cascade of new town foundings greatly increased in volume.¹³ The labels emerged pretty suddenly in colonial documentation, at precisely the juncture when population growth took a sharp upward swing, cultivators grew impatient with cattle owners over damage inflicted on crops by herds, and both civil and ecclesiastical actors began to pressure for new towns. All of this reflects the early stages of protracted political and legal debates that would occur in Puerto Rico for more than a century.¹⁴ The crux of these debates was the need to overturn an archaic system dominated by inefficient open-grazing ranches and the attendant claim to property rights in land, rights which, according to the reform-minded on both sides of the Atlantic, should reasonably belong to a broader spectrum of subjects than the greedy few who had enjoyed hitherto them. That these debates helped shape rural social identities in the eighteenth century—the *desacomodados* and *agregados* labels, for sure, but to some extent also the moniker *jíbaro*—is a subject not yet explored in the historiography.¹⁵

It is not my intention here to give a detailed account of the struggles over land use and ownership in eighteenth-century Puerto Rico. The political and cultural consequences of those struggles fall beyond the scope of this study. I wish to draw attention, however, to the fact that the three most widespread and important labels or ascriptions given to the peasantry gained currency at the very juncture that land began to be commodified on a large scale for the first time. Whereas to many observers the Puerto Rican colonists outside of the walled compound of San Juan continued to fit the “savage” moniker, new designations emerged to describe the landless. Such ascriptions became truly meaningful when two things occurred: land became a true commodity and the State began contemplating remedies for the scourge of landlessness, like the founding of new townships and the concomitant break-up of *hatos*; whereupon the

excess land was redistributed to the poor. Thus, being recognized by reform-minded officials in Madrid and San Juan as a *desacomodado* or *agregado* (but not a *jíbaro*, as I will argue) became in the early 1700s a useful emblem with which to claim or even demand land grants. During less reformist times, as in much of the nineteenth century, the labels could work the opposite way, too, and a person so designated might lose generally recognized rights to her/his body or her/his labor.

Put another way, *desacomodo* and *agrego* were socio-legal conditions, and *desacomodado* and *agregado* social identities legally constructed, but with multiple social and political ramifications. That the Spanish colonial state and its subjects would engage in a heated contest over who should live where and who would control people's bodies for their labor power should not be surprising. The history of rural Puerto Rico during the latter decades of the eighteenth century and the early decades the nineteenth may be narrated as the unfolding of this struggle. Elites and the government presented numerous, and at times rival, projects to curtail the *agregados'* and the *desacomodados'* presumed inclination to vagrancy, i.e., their unwillingness to work for the wages offered under the discipline exacted. They enacted or subscribed to a multitude of vagrancy laws. The apex of this effort was the infamous *Reglamento de Jornaleros* (1849-1873), a system of State coercion which required all males older than 16 years of age who did not possess a minimum acreage of their own to submit to wage labor under strict disciplinary surveillance and potential punishment.¹⁶

Thus, while at times empowering, as when they justified access to land and citizenship, the categories of *desacomodado* and *agregado* could be disempowering, too, as for example, when they helped rationalize vagrancy laws.¹⁷ The point is that, beginning in the first half of the eighteenth century, the political and legal battles waged over the uses and value of land not only spawned new social identities—"partial social categories," as Juan Giusti has called them—but helped shape a whole new set of social

struggles that would not play themselves out until the very close of Spanish sovereignty in the late 1800s, and some would say even longer.¹⁸

At this point in the analysis it is important to introduce a distinction between the categories of *desacomodado* and *agregado*. Although both began to be used initially as part of an official idiom to denote the paradox of a sea of landless folk in an underpopulated colony, the two were far from identical in nature and scope. Appropriately, their half-life in the Puerto Rican context was quite disparate. *Desacomodado* was primarily a term that described a legal condition vis-à-vis property or use rights, i.e., the simple fact of not having a piece of land accessible for tilling or grazing. *Desacomodados* presumably could be urban folk desirous of a piece of land from which to make a living, even though they might reside in, and be a *vecino* or citizen of, a city or town. And because a *desacomodado* by definition had nowhere to cultivate or tend animals, he and his family presumably were living off of someone's good will or charity. If they were being allowed to squat on somebody else's property, they would also be *agregados*, a term that implied dependence on someone else by terms of a (usually) unwritten contract. In the latter case, the person under "contract" presumably had agreed to work for a stipulated number of days on the property owner's domain in exchange for the gift of using a parcel of land and enjoying the fruits of his labor. Alternatively, the landowner (known as the *señor de agrego*) might exact a portion of the *agregado's* harvest in exchange for permission to reside on and use the land. In this case, the *agrego* contract came very close to the classic sharecropping arrangement.

Thus, *desacomodo* and *agrego* were overlapping but analytically distinct legal and economic categories. The state gave meaning to the former, and it was state policies regarding the breakup of large landed estates (*hatos* primarily) and the redistribution of their lands to impoverished folks that prompted the common use of the term in public debates. In the case of the institution of the *agrego* and the category of *agregado*, both the state *and* the people themselves infused legal and customary meaning into them.

The concept of *desacomodado* disappears from the documentary record, even though the condition to which it referred (not having land to live and work on) arguably expanded exponentially. At some point during the nineteenth century, the colonial state ceased referring to landless people as *desacomodados*, in large measure because, in a more liberal economic environment, it stopped thinking about redistributive measures that would give access to land to those without it. In effect, *desacomodado* was a partial social category that made sense in the eighteenth century but not in the nineteenth or the twentieth.

In the meantime, the category of *agregado* was more complex and had a much longer life. In fact, its meaning may have evolved over time to conform to larger circumstances of demography, economy, and social relations. Historian Fernando Picó has posited that, over time, the category referred to two distinct forms of co-dependence based on access to the land. The first was a familial variant of *agrego*, by which it is understood that people shared landed resources they had with a family member or neighbor lacking this resource: a father or an aunt, for instance, allowed a daughter or nephew to keep a cow or plant a small field, or perhaps a family member inherited a piece of land belonging to a much larger *hato*, but without proper and legal title. The second was the variant that emerged when a more monetized agrarian economy developed over the course of the nineteenth century, especially around the cultivation of coffee. Under these conditions, the *agrego* morphed into a more impersonal relationship between landowner and worker, and the contract between them, while still primarily oral in nature, became more formal. Municipal authorities began intervening with *agregados* who did not fulfill their end of the bargain, and evictions became more common.¹⁹ By the early decades of the twentieth century, as the population grew from fewer than one million in 1899 to 1.5 million in 1930, and capitalist sugar plantations took over much of the arable land in the lowlands, a huge number of Puerto Rican families found themselves as *agregados*, dependent on a landowning elite for a piece of

land on which to build a shack and grow some root vegetables or plantains. No wonder that the centerpiece of the populist movement launched by Luis Muñoz Marín in 1938 was to engage in an agrarian reform that would give title over a homestead to hundreds of thousands of *agregado* families. This program became the first major initiative of the Popular Democratic Party when it rose to legislative power in 1941, and insofar as it provided tens of thousands of families with a secure homestead, proved to be one of its most successful.²⁰

The third category of self-identification among the creole peasantry presents a slightly different set of interpretive challenges. I have argued elsewhere that the term *jíbaro*, which was definitely in use by the 1740s but may also had common currency much earlier, maybe even in the seventeenth century, was very likely a term of derision used by the dominant sectors, most of them associated with large landed interests, merchants, high clergymen, and high military officers residing, for the most part, in the walled city.²¹ Both *jíbaro* and its Cuban counterpart, *guajiro*, were words associated, first in South America and eventually throughout the empire, with a feral existence—a “general model of bravery and savagery,” as Ann Christine Taylor puts it when discussing the Shuar, to whom the first of these was applied.²² As the myth of these “ferocious” Indian groups spread throughout the Empire after repeated unsuccessful campaigns to bring them under Spanish control, certain moral and social behaviors in other populations became associated with them—and none more so than the highland peasantries of eastern Cuba and Puerto Rico.

But, like the legally constructed categories of *desacomodados* and *agregados*, that of the *jibaros* proved unstable over time. During the eighteenth century, with the coming of age of an enlightened creole intelligentsia, and with the assumption of *jibaridad* (the quality of being *jíbaro*) as an emblem of pride by many of the peasants once derided by it, the term’s negative associations faded without disappearing. These

negative values began to fade as the peasant population gradually abandoned the itinerance, which once correlated with the predominance of open-grazing cattle husbandry and hunting expeditions into the forested mountains (*monterías*) in pursuit of hides and tallow. Colonial authorities encouraged this change toward a more intensive agriculture and away from extensive cattle rearing and hunting. Indeed, many of the dozens of new towns founded in Puerto Rico during the course of the eighteenth century pursued precisely this goal of “reducing” the scattered rural denizens into more compact and controllable population nuclei.²³ Economic trends also contributed to normalizing the *jibaro* as the backbone of the island’s agricultural wealth, adding a positive spin to the mostly negative implications thrust upon the peasant figure throughout the early colonial centuries. A spate of coffee, tobacco, and even sugar exports connected Puerto Rico more effectively to Atlantic circuits of trade in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Especially after the violence of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) convinced a faction of the island intelligentsia that the free peasantry, and not an enslaved population, should constitute the island’s future workforce, many Puerto Ricans began to consider the *jibaros* likely candidates for re-education and even qualified citizenship. That their population exploded after 1750 and the internal growth rate of this population remained high for decades afterward was another element in their favor. By the turn of the nineteenth century, all these changes had begun to cast an ambiguous light upon the *jibaros*, now viewed by the elite as uncivilized but potentially educable members of the body politic; and even, by some, as the very essence of creole identity, antipode to a set of increasingly resented—and privileged—peninsular identities.²⁴

During the liberal interludes which the triumph of Spanish constitutionalism brought (1812-14 and 1820-23), some creoles adopted this ambiguous *jibaro* trope to advance their liberal, reformist, but decidedly accommodationist position under the Spanish flag. Ultimately, the trope would become for Puerto Rican creoles like a Janus-like figure of proto-national identity: an atavistic peasant who, despite his

backwardness could be educated and civilized, if only the empire (either Spain or the United States) would grant the political autonomy necessary for the *jíbaro*'s natural superiors to carry out their mission.

How, then, did identities associated with a peasant existence emerge in these imperial fringes, and what do the categories through which they were constructed tell us about the formation of social identities in the Spanish Caribbean? I have argued here that two deep, structural conditions helped support the rise of a small set of overlapping peasant categories. The transfrontier nature (to use Philip Curtin's term) of rural Caribbean life in the wake of the islands' brief apogee as imperial core was one of these conditions.²⁵ Spanish social and cultural norms had a difficult time setting roots outside of the main cities, and yet it was there that the majority of the population lived, scattered ever more by the centrifugal tendencies of cattle grazing in open ranches. Another was the limited access to land fostered by this hato economy after the middle of the sixteenth century, a restriction that lasted well into the eighteenth and only dissipated when the Crown's interest in settlement and colonization converged with the *hateros*' interest in land commodification. Destitution, interdependence between the legal users of land and those without access to it, itinerance, lack of social intercourse, indifference to the Church as an institution (although not to religious beliefs)—in short, all those practices and habits which made the Spanish see "savagery" even, as Bishop Mercado put it, when the "savages" were implausibly *españoles de nación*. In a process that anticipated other colonial constructions of identity through law, in the case of Puerto Rico a reinvigorated Spanish State gave life to three forms of peasant identity, of which two—*agregados* and *jíbaros*—only began withering away, along with the rural society which harbored them for more than two centuries, in the second half of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. For examples of the literature on colonial identities in the Caribbean, see Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Thomas C. Patterson, “Early Colonial Encounters and Identities in the Caribbean: A Review of Some Recent Works and Their Implications,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (1991): 1–13; and Karen Fog Olwig, *Global Culture, Island Identity: Continuity and Change in the Afro-Caribbean Community of Nevis*, Studies in Anthropology and History, vol. 8 (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993). For insights garnered on colonial identities from the literature on race and gender, see Roberto Cassá and Genaro Rodríguez, “Algunos Procesos Formativos de la Identidad Nacional Dominicana,” *Estudios Sociales* XXV, no. 88 (1992): 67–98; Vera M. Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, New World Studies (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); and in a more anthropological vein, Brackette Williams, *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

2. Students of ethnic-group formation often remark that external processes of ascription and internal processes of self-definition usually go together. The classic formulation of this dialectic is Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Differences* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969). For a thoughtful overview, see Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *Social Problems* 41, no. 1, Special Issue on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America (February 1994): 152–76.

3. Efrén Rivera Ramos, *The Legal Construction of Identity: The Judicial and Social Legacy of American Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001).

4. David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Bourbons and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

5. For an interesting comparison on the relationship between nucleation and notions of civilization, see Nancy Farriss, “Nucleation Vs. Dispersal: The Dynamics of Population Movement in Colonial Yucatan,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (May 1978): 187–216. Magnus Mörner writes that the the Crown often saw the dispersal of the Spanish American population across vast rural areas in racial terms; Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 75.

6. For a suggestive analysis of this Caribbean trope of savagery, see Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 107.

7. For a sweeping account of legal precepts and practices concerning landholding in Puerto Rico, see Michel J. Godreau and Juan A. Giusti, “Las concesiones de la Corona y propiedad de la tierra en Puerto Rico, siglos XVI-XX: un estudio jurídico,” *Revista Jurídica de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 62, no. 3 (1993): 351–579. See also Juana Gil-Bermejo García, *Panorama histórico de la agricultura en Puerto Rico* (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1970); Francisco Moscoso, *Agricultura y sociedad en Puerto Rico, siglos 16 al 18: un acercamiento desde la historia* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña; Colegio de Agrónomos de Puerto Rico, 1999).

8. See Pablo García Colón, “El mercado de tierras en la jurisdicción administrativa del cabildo de San Juan durante las décadas centrales del setecientos,” *Exégesis* 8, no. 22 (1995): 23–38 and Francisco Moscoso, “La economía del hato y los campesinos agregados en Puerto Rico, 1710–1815,” *Historia y Sociedad* XI (1999): 9–28.

9. Cited in Antonio Cuesta Mendoza, *Historia eclesiástica del Puerto Rico colonial* (Ciudad Trujillo: Imprenta “Arte y Cine”, 1948), 106.

10. Anne Christine Taylor reveals precisely how the Spaniards depicted the Amazonian Shuar, or Jívaros, as “savage” precisely because they exhibited a series of moral attitudes regarded as antithetical to civilization, especially the highly urbanized version practiced by the Spaniards. Bishop Mercado’s surprise at the lifeways of the Coamo *vecinos* reflects a similar assessment. See Anne Christine Taylor, “La invención del jívaro: notas sobre un fantasma occidental,” in *Memorias del primer simposio europeo sobre antropología del Ecuador*, comp. Segundo E. Moreno Yáñez, in collaboration with Sophia Thyssen (República Federal de Alemania; Quito, Ecuador: Instituto de Antropología Cultural de la Universidad de Bonn; Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1985), 255–67.

11. Francisco Moscoso, *Lucha agraria en Puerto Rico, 1541–1545: un ensayo de historia* (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto; Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1997).

12. García Colón, “El mercado de tierras en la jurisdicción administrativa del cabildo de San Juan durante las décadas centrales del setecientos”.

13. The process would peak in the late 1700s and continue, although at a much reduced level, well into the following century.

14. Rafael W. Ramírez de Arellano, *La reconstrucción agrícola de 1826* (San Juan: Tip. Puerto Rico Progress, 1936); Luis M. Díaz Soler, *Puerto Rico: desde sus orígenes hasta el cese de la dominación española* (Río Piedras: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1994), 370–71; Fernando Picó, “Camuy, bosque y terrón: del hatu ganadero a las estancias de subsistencia,” *CEREP, Investigación y Análisis*, no. 10 (noviembre 1984): 12. Also see Governor Gonzalo Arostegui’s detailed project (1820) for the

reconcentration of “idle” and “vagrant” peasants and the dissolution of open-grazing ranches (*hatos*) in order to establish new settlements, in Research note, “Acta de la Excm. Diputación Provincial de 2 de septiembre de 1820,” *Gaceta del Gobierno Constitucional de Puerto-Rico*, no. 57 (18 November 1820): 223–24. Later efforts along these same lines are discussed in Isabel Gutiérrez del Arroyo, *El reformismo ilustrado en Puerto Rico* (México: Asomante; El Colegio de México, 1953), 103–14.

15. Francisco Moscoso has paid some attention to the issue, in “La economía del hato”; Juan Giusti, “*Puerto Rico and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean: un reto al ‘exclusivismo’ de la historiografía puertorriqueña*,” conference presentation (Tercera Conferencia Arturo Morales Carrión, CISCLA [Centro de Investigaciones Sociales del Caribe y América Latina], Universidad Interamericana de San Germán, 18 de noviembre de 1992, 1993).

16. Fernando Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1976); “Real Orden aprobando el establecimiento de una correccional para los vagos en la Puntilla. Madrid, 28 de febrero de 1818,” *Boletín Histórico de Puerto Rico* IV (1917): 254; Gervasio L. García Rodríguez, “Economía y trabajo en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX,” *Historia Mexicana* 38, no. 4 (abril/junio 1989): 855–79; Sidney W. Mintz, “Labour and Sugar in Puerto Rico and Jamaica, 1800–1850,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* I (1958–59): 273–83; and for a more dated view, Labor Gómez Acevedo, *Organización y reglamentación del trabajo en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX: propietarios y jornaleros* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1970).

17. In 1733, self-described *desacomodados* used the label to demand the creation of the township of Utuado. See Picó, *Libertad y servidumbre en el Puerto Rico del siglo XIX*, 18–19. Eighty years later, the protection of *desacomodados* is cited as a reason to

found several new townships; Gutiérrez del Arroyo, *El reformismo ilustrado en Puerto Rico*, 103.

18. Juan A. Giusti-Cordero, "Labour, Ecology, and History in a Puerto Rican Plantation Region: 'Classic' Rural Proletarians Revisited," in *"Peripheral" Labour? Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization*, ed. Shahid Amin and Marcel Van der Linden, *International Review of Social History Supplements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53–82.

19. Picó, "Camuy, bosque y terrón: del hatu ganadero a las estancias de subsistencia," 12.

20. Mario Villar Rocés, *Puerto Rico y su Reforma Agraria* (Rio Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1968).

21. Francisco A. Scarano, "The Jíbaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745–1823," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (December 1996): 1398–1431.

22. Taylor, "La invención del jíbaro: notas sobre un fantasma occidental". I would like to thank Frank Salomon for this reference.

23. Andrés R. Méndez Muñoz, "Pobladores en los procesos de fundación de pueblos en el Partido de San Francisco de la Aguada durante el siglo XVIII," *Hereditas: Revista de Genealogía Puertorriqueña* 5, no. 1 (2004): 3–29; Francisco A. Scarano, "Congregate and Control: The Peasantry and Labour Coercion in Puerto Rico Before the Age of Sugar, 1750–1820," *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids/New West Indian Guide* 63, no. 1–2 (1989): 23–40.

24. Scarano, "The Jibaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745–1823".

25. Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 92–95.