

Cortés Zavala, María Teresa. *Los hombres de la nación. Itinerarios de progreso económico y el desarrollo intelectual, Puerto Rico en el siglo XIX* (México: Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo y Ediciones Doce Calles, 2012), 176p.

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Characterized by a marked tendency towards social reform and technological invention, the re-incorporation of Latin America to the global economy during the second half of the nineteenth century ushered in an unprecedented wave of modernization. Social Darwinist and positivist doctrines gaining currency in the region's academic, scientific and governmental circles stood at the ideological core of this trend. The winds of change influenced not only the newly emerging nations of the mainland, but also some of the insular territories that remained under colonial control. María Teresa Cortés Zavala's novel book, *Los hombres de la nación. Itinerarios del progreso económico y el desarrollo intelectual, Puerto Rico en el siglo XIX*, is a fascinating account of how the innovating drive impacted Spanish colonial Puerto Rico.

The book emphasizes the pedagogical and scientific interventions of two leading spokespersons for the island's lettered Creole elite, Román Baldorioty de Castro and José Julián Acosta. Taken as a whole these activities, as will be briefly outlined below, seemed to be mostly directed at overturning the deleterious consequences of the reigning slave-based plantation system that dominated the island. After a

protracted and strenuous bid to effect the desired changes, both men ultimately entered mainstream political life as leaders of the *Partido Liberal Reformista* and the *Partido Autonomista Puertorriqueño*, respectively. Politics aside, much of their modernizing energies, which occupied a good portion of their professional careers, provide valuable insights about an undercurrent of environmentalism that appears to have been intertwined with their campaign to promote abolitionism, agricultural diversification and the transition to free labor.

Their academic calling began in Puerto Rico under the autodidactic free black teacher Rafael Cordero, who imparted their primary education. Afterwards, they enrolled at San Juan's *Seminario Conciliar*, where the liberal Galician priest-scientist Rufo Manuel Fernández took them under his wing. Intent on creating a *Colegio Central de Segunda Enseñanza* to educate the island's impoverished youth, Father Rufo later supported their advanced training in Spain starting in 1846. After earning their *licenciaturas* (undergraduate studies) in Physical and Mathematical Sciences the pair went on to complete additional work in Chemistry and Mechanical Sciences in France. Acosta also pursued further technical preparation in Germany and England.

Cortés Zavala retraces some of their activities in Europe that reveal their awareness of the socioeconomic and political conditions of their native soil, and how they turned to science, education and history to voice their concerns. In his 1854 biography of the New Granadian naturalist José Francisco de Caldas, Acosta stressed the latter's "heroic" determination to succeed in the colonial atmosphere of the former viceroyalty. In true positivist fashion, he dubbed the Caldas story "an excellent thermometer" with which to gauge the underdeveloped state of public education in Spanish America. To Acosta, Caldas's decision to join the South American independence movement made him "an example of the patriotic scientist, the man of letters who was committed [to the causes] of his day...a man devoted most of his life to science [but] who when called to act upon the world around him, as a great patriot he did not hesitate to assume that responsibility" (p. 132). Caldas's predicament reminded Acosta of his "burning desire to educate myself amidst an atrophied [colonial Puerto Rican] society" (p. 133).

While studying in Spain Baldorioty de Castro and Acosta collaborated with Puerto Rican peers in the metropolis to found the *Sociedad Recolectora de Documentos Históricos de la Isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico*. The exercise must have reinforced their commitment to changing the island's arrested development, when contrasted to the thriving, modern conditions they experienced in Europe, intensifying their frustration with the colonial status quo. This preoccupation became clear in Baldorioty de Castro's *Exposición Universal de París en 1867: Memoria presentada a la Comisión Provincial de Puerto-Rico* (1868), where he compared the latest agro-industrial and scientific advances in Europe and the United States with the archaic state of agricultural, industrial and technological development in Puerto Rico.

The writer all but denounced the island's poor land and maritime transportation systems, its deficient public works, its lack of savings and credit institutions and its antiquated farming and stockbreeding practices. He objected to the ecologically unsound consequences and inflexible labor organization in the reigning slave-based plantation mode of production. To correct these deficiencies he advocated adopting the latest agronomical breakthroughs, diversifying the agro-industrial sector, and replacing slaves with a free, skilled labor force comprised of properly trained *jornaleros* and technicians. Building on the archival work done by the *Sociedad Recolectora*, in 1869 Acosta published a new edition of Fray Agustín Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra's *Historia geográfica, civil y natural de la isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico*. By creatively annotating the late 18th-century account, Acosta updated (modernized) the friar's original text while simultaneously chronicling the island's shift from cattle ranching and subsistence farming around the 1780s to slave-based sugar monoculture in the 1860s.

Many of the other activities in which the two figures were involved demonstrate their strong interest in the human and natural resources of the island. They taught courses on Botany and Commercial and Agricultural Geography, respectively; wrote for local newspapers and drafted commissioned reports about such topics as education, agronomy, monetary policy, guano, free labor, slavery, and the communications infrastructure; and served as jurors and/or officials for the agro-

industrial fairs that began to be held in the 1850s. This branching out activity, as Cortés Zavala shows, came at a significant price to their tenuous vocations. Since the slave-based plantation system of Cuba and Puerto Rico helped sustain Spain's Second Empire, overzealous imperial overseers had little or no tolerance for those who opposed it, and tagged the two educator-scientists as separatists and abolitionists.

Los hombres de la nación is undoubtedly an important addition to the social history of Spanish colonial Puerto Rico, especially during the critical last fifty years of Iberian rule. Unlike conventional studies of this period that focus on broad political or economic patterns, Cortés Zavala uses a biographical and life history approach to explore the strategies deployed by two key representatives of the island's intelligentsia to advance Creole demands for social, economic and political participation. The selection of the two multitalented figures also allows her to show how they leaned successively on education, science and mainstream politics to achieve their aims. In linking their scholarly and political legacy, *Los hombres de la nación* suggests that their modernization project envisioned at least two inter-related objectives. In the short run, it was a practical means for wresting Puerto Rico from the semi-feudal grip of the ruling plantocracy, whose detrimental effect on agro-industrial growth, labor and the environment had become increasingly indefensible. Over the long haul, they also sought to bring Puerto Rico out of its backward, dependent state, paving the path for its decolonization down the road.