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## Birgit Sonesson, Puerto Rico's Commerce, 1765-1865: From Regional to Worldwide Market Relations

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*Puerto Rico's Commerce, 1765-1865: From Regional to Worldwide Market Relations.* By Birgit Sonesson. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 2000. xiii + 338 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, notes, glossary, bibliography, indexes. Price not available.)

This book belongs to a historiographical movement closely associated with the names of Carlos Buitrago Ortiz, Francisco A. Scarano, Fernando Picó, Andrés Ramos Mattei, and Laird Bergad, among others.

These scholars made path-breaking inroads about the ways in which commercial agriculture, servile labor, and immigration shaped social and working conditions in Puerto Rico during the late-Spanish-colonial period. Birgit Sonesson's latest book, *Puerto Rico's Commerce, 1765-1865: From Regional to Worldwide Market Relations*, represents a commendable effort to place their general findings in a global perspective.

The author meticulously analyzes a vast array of previously underutilized data on import/export patterns, mercantile firms, and related economic trends culled from European and American archives to trace Puerto Rico's incorporation into the Atlantic economy. Sonesson identifies several broad phases of this process. The first stage, dating from 1765 to 1815, was

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marked by regional exchanges with trading outlets in the non-Hispanic Caribbean. Initially, the bulk of this commercial activity involved the illegal exportation of livestock, provisions, and timber to the West Indies in return for textiles, wines, flour, agricultural implements, and slaves. Principal among the series of events that coalesced to bring this about was Spain's inability to supply its colonies adequately, prompting its inhabitants to seek out clandestine channels. Puerto Rico also underwent rapid population growth and urbanization during the eighteenth century, which in turn generated a burgeoning need for consumer goods. Although this traffic drew ships from various foreign nationals to the shores of Puerto Rico, those from the nearby Danish colony of St. Thomas far outstripped all others.

The fortunes of Puerto Rico's merchant elite improved significantly in the aftermath of the wars of independence in Spanish America. Together with planters, they seized the opportunity to stake out their claims for a greater role in colonial affairs. In a hasty maneuver aimed at halting insurrection in Puerto Rico, the Spanish Crown yielded to many of their demands by issuing the 1815 *Cédula de Gracias*. The *cédula* eased restrictions on foreigners from friendly Catholic nations who desired to relocate in Puerto Rico with their capital, slaves, and farming equipment. It offered the new colonists substantial incentives, such as free land and tax exemptions. It also authorized limited trade between Puerto Rico and the West Indies. Although Sonesson acknowledges its importance, she does not view it as a break with the past. Given that both foreign immigration and trade with the non-Hispanic Caribbean were already underway prior to 1815, the *cédula* was more of "an acknowledgement of established practice, impossible to suppress, given the fiscal and economic reality of the island" (p. 47).

Wealthy foreigners turned to commercial agriculture or formed partnerships with Spanish and Creole merchants engaged in the booming import/export business, including the slave trade. Spanish loyalists from Santo Domingo and Venezuela (Catalans among them) who fled to Puerto Rico provided crucial links to South America. As a result, San Juan became a bustling re-exportation entrepôt for raw materials and tropical staples from Brazil (mostly cotton) and Venezuela (cocoa, indigo, hides). The south-central and western regions of Puerto Rico, led by the districts of Ponce, Mayagüez, and Guayama, also exported increasingly larger quantities of island-grown sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton. The author tracks down these exports as they made their way to an ever-expanding global marketplace. Most of the sugar and molasses were dispatched to the United States, which in turn furnished the island with plantation wares and foodstuff (flour, cornmeal). Coffee was shipped out profitably to France, Italy, and Germany. England and Germany took most of the tobacco, which was used mainly for its dye. Livestock was sold to the non-Hispanic Caribbean, and hides to Spain.

Sonesson shows persuasively that most of these ventures were launched or carried out by entrepreneurs in Puerto Rico, often in conjunction with overseas business associates. This painstakingly researched work challenges dominant explanations of economic change that stress the centrality of metropolitan mercantile policy in peripheral regions. In its place, the author proposes that we look more closely at the economic activities of these local merchants and financiers. Their success rested on a previous accumulation of capital from retail trade and *refacción* (supplying haciendas on credit); experience with regional trade; strong kinship and homeland bonds (in the case of Catalan and Basque merchants) that enabled them to build and retain sizable family assets; social, business, and political connections to local powerbrokers; systematic efforts to lobby the colonial authorities in order to influence Spanish colonial fiscal and commercial policy; and the ability to modify their operations in response to international market forces.

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