

The Land is The Chief

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PUERTO RICO

Of the many problems demanding solution in the island of Puerto Rico, that of land use would seem to be the most pressing. The history of this island differs from that of Mexico. Spain catered to Puerto Rico because it was an outpost, strategically located for protecting and controlling other possessions. From 1810 to 1820, when Spain's South American empire was shrinking, desperate attempts were made to retain the loyalty of the Puerto Ricans. In 1815, they were granted a Cedula de Gracias, a special Bill of Rights which was a most amazing document of liberality, inconsistent with the general attitude of Spain toward her other colonies. And on February 9, 1898, Spain granted to Puerto Rico la Carta Autonómica, which gave the people practically complete autonomy. The principles of this carta were joyously received by the Puerto Ricans, but on October 18, 1898, the island was officially transferred to the United States as the result of a war in the cause of which they had had no part and in which they had had no interest.

With this transfer, the island was placed within high tariff regulations. Sugar entered the United States free, at an advantage over other competitors. In addition to freedom from tariff regulations was the factor of proximity to the greatest sugar-consuming market. American investors were not slow to realize that in Puerto Rico sugar would be king and fortunes were to be made. All sorts of intermediaries were used in buying up all land suitable for cane growing.

At first land was bought at normal or sub-normal prices because many landowners had little faith in the future of the island under American control. Soon those who held out were offered twice or many times what the landowner thought the land was actually worth. The landowner sold, feeling sure that the land boom would collapse and then he could buy back the land at his own price

In the February issue Dr. Crist dealt with conditions of land tenure, and the consequences, in Ireland and in Spanish America. This installment concludes the article.

—but that time never came. The sugar growers have increased their holdings from 61,500 acres in 1898 to 238,000 acres in 1930, and the yield from one half ton per acre to 2.7 tons. Large sugar corporations have taken control of the limited areas of fertile flat coastal lands and are reaching out over the valley lands and low hills into the interior. They have taken over the areas where formerly subsistence crops were grown. Where corn once grew now sugar-cane grows. Dark-green canefields produce "white gold" for investors in a foreign land. Five American sugar companies have most of the best land in Puerto Rico in tracts of 5,000 acres or more. The sugar growers have prospered enormously.

A statistical study of the island since American occupation may be made to read like a typical American "success" story. But, in spite of phenomenal economic progress along certain lines, the welfare of the vast majority of the people has not been improved since the American occupation; if anything, it is worse. At one time during the depression nearly 90 per cent. of the people were on the government payroll, mostly in the form of relief. This great poverty is largely the result of the scarcity of food crop land. Sugar is so profitable that food crops have been crowded back to the hills, grown on unusually steep slopes.

These tropical hill-slope soils are thin and highly leached, and the yield abnormally low. The grower is too poor to buy fertilizer. The food crop acreage to feed one and three-quarters million people is ridiculously small: 70,000 acres in corn; 48,000 in yams and sweet potatoes; 41,000 in beans. Not over one acre in ten of the island's 2,176,000 acres is given over to food production, and

the poorer land at that. This means that each acre is expected to supply eight or ten people with food. However, the land needed to supply a decent standard of living, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, is some two and one half acres per person. On this basis the Puerto Ricans have only one twentieth of the amount needed.

In cases of this kind food must be imported, but imported food is expensive—much too expensive for the poor Puerto Ricans to buy. Thus, the people are confronted with a problem of getting enough to eat. They are not inherent revolutionaries; they do not stage Nationalistic demonstrations, kill policemen and shoot at American governors because lawlessness is "in their blood"—no, they are simply hungry. In the words of ex-Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the island "seethes with miseries"; the achievement of even a slight degree of economic security for a bare majority of the people would go a long way toward inducing political and social stability.

CUBA

Brief mention might be made of Cuba. Her cane fields, like those of Puerto Rico, are easily accessible to the neighboring American market, and since her site is so well suited for large-scale, one-crop farming, she has taken full advantage of her position. Here, too, most of the good land is largely controlled by sugar companies. When Cuba's sugar is in great demand the labor resources of the island are often overtaxed, particularly during the rush season. But the reduced crop which has been raised since the war boom has reduced the demand for seasonal labor.

In order to avoid great seasonal fluctuations in employment as well as too great dependence upon foreign markets, the country is aiming at greater self-sufficiency. This has meant an emphasis on the growing of food crops on land controlled by sugar companies. Since the owners of these companies are not always sympathetic with present-day trends, the

transition period between one-crop farming and a certain degree of self-sufficiency is marked by social unrest, which is reflected by an occasional revolution.

JAVA

Conditions in Java contrast markedly with those in Puerto Rico and Cuba. On the island of Java sugar cultivation is performed by white planters using native labor and native fields. To be sure, the monsoon climate is ideal for sugar-cane and the rich volcanic soil is kept in the best of condition by constant fertilization and by growing sugar in rotation with rice. But the really important factor in Java's prosperity is that sugar companies are not allowed to alienate permanently large tracts of land for growing cane.

According to Dutch law, the planters may rent rice lands for the cultivation of sugar-cane not more than eighteen months in any three-year period. This not only insures crop rotation, but it also prevents the island from becoming over-dependent on imports of rice. As a result, Java is able to support over 41,000,000 people on 50,554 square miles, one of the densest agricultural populations in the world. Wisely administered through Dutch or Dutch-Javanese officials, these people are relatively prosperous and contented, and on the verge neither of starvation nor of revolution.

AFRICA

In many parts of Africa Europeans have favored the plantation system over the native one of local self-sufficiency. Sisal, hemp, cotton, coffee, tea, tobacco, cane sugar, coconuts and bananas are produced on a large scale, almost exclusively for international trade. The natives never had a notion of private property in land in our sense of the term, till they found themselves serfs on huge European-owned plantations, forced to work many months a year for their new white masters just in order to pay taxes—hut tax, poll tax or some other tax or taxes. But a world-wide depression in prices would throw out of work thousands of natives, who had lost the knack of self-sufficiency. The post-war depression has possibly had one good effect in that emphasis is being placed on the

maintenance of gardens by those employed on the plantations. Writers on this subject who have studied conditions at first hand, agree that the majority of the natives on farms or plantations owned by whites have to work harder and live on a poorer diet than did their ancestors.

The impact of European industrialization and the plantation system upon the natives detribalizes them, and it brings about a general social disintegration; but the natives receive no new social mores to take the place of the old. Elasticity is demanded of Europeans in securing institutions which will work. If Bantus want chiefs instead of officials they should be administered through chiefs, properly educated for their work. Racial discrimination embitters the natives. At present, for the same crimes widely different sentences are passed on Europeans and natives. Hence the native proverb, "the ox is skinned on one side only," is applied to European courts, which it is complained do not mete out even justice.

Land Tenure in the Union of South Africa. There is an old fable about an Arab and his camel. The latter wanted to shelter his head in the Arab's tent, and this desire was granted. But, when the Arab awoke in the morning he found that the camel was entirely inside the tent and that he was outside on the bare sand. The fate of the natives of the Union of South Africa resembles in many ways that of the hapless Arab. There the proverb that "the land is the chief" is proved only too true. At present 91 per cent of the land is owned by fewer than two million Europeans, whereas only 9 per cent of the land is owned by five million Bantus. The present state of affairs is very succinctly expressed by one Bantu leader: "At first we had the land and the white man had the Bible. Now we have the Bible and the white man has the land."

KENYA

In Kenya the average size of estates controlled by white settlers is 600 acres, all of which are good land, whereas the natives own on the average only eight acres, of which at least one quarter is too sterile for cultivation or pasture. And in the

Nairobi region "squatters" on the great estates which the white people have carved out for themselves are obliged to undertake 180 days of labor each year for the privilege of domicile on land which is theirs by native law. The indigenous peoples, forced to work for masters not of their choosing, might sometimes wonder if the "white man's burden" is not somewhat lighter than that which they are called on to bear.

SOVIET RUSSIA

Under the Czar, ten million tons of grain each year were exported from the Ukraine, which would seem to show that agriculture was prosperous at that time. Gradually it is being realized, however, that the Russian grain export was a "fictitious" export. A vast peasant population was being exploited by a landlord class that was practically synonymous with the government. The exports constituted a sort of prosperous facade behind which large numbers of people were hovering on the verge of starvation.

With the liquidation of the landlord class following the revolution of 1917, peasant holdings increased from fifteen million to twenty-five million in number and the size of the average holding doubled. Yet there appeared no such surplus of food as had apparently existed before. The reason for this is that the peasants themselves began to eat more wheat and rye, meat and eggs and dairy produce. The meat consumption of the average household doubled. Ninety per cent of the grain produce was eaten by the peasants. Some of the more tangible results of an adequate food supply were a decline in infant mortality, a decline in the death rate, and an increase of population of from 130,000,000 to 160,000,000. Hence, to-day, since the people have a more adequate diet than formerly, there is not enough food to go around unless the harvest is a good one.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss developments in Soviet agriculture since the liquidation of the Kulaks in 1929. Attention is merely drawn to the fact that the Russian peasants in 1917 seized the land in the great landed estates of the absentee landlords and began to grow food for themselves, just as the

French peasants did during the French Revolution. In both cases the people who in the last analysis made the revolution general were peasants, not fire-eating revolutionists. They were oppressed and hungry and simply wanted land on which to grow food.

CONCLUSION

Many more natural regions or political units might be considered—even more exhaustively—but from

these few case studies it is clear how universal the problem of land tenure is. To be sure, this is not the only problem, as has been pointed out, but it is a very important one. A study of the hacienda in Chile, with its millions of *rotos* (literally "ragged" or "broken" ones), and of the great estates in Argentina and Brazil, etc., to mention only a few other examples—might reveal much the same conditions and trends. And no matter

how advanced a civilization or a culture may be, the people who have achieved them must eat, and food in large quantities must be obtained from the land. Hence, throughout history land has been an important factor in determining the trend of events. How many people own how much and what kind of land is a matter of vital concern to all. Perhaps it is not only in Africa that "the land is the chief."
