

BARALT, GUILLERMO A. *Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico. Conspiracies and Uprisings 1795–1873*, Markus Wiener Princeton, N.J. 2007. x, 180 pp. Ill. £24.76; doi:10.1017/S0020859009990101

This is a translation of Guillermo A. Baralt's *Esclavos rebeldes: conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795–1873)*, originally published in 1982. *Esclavos rebeldes*, a classic of Puerto Rico's "new history", followed on the heels of José Luis González' *El país de cuatro pisos*, which grounded Puerto Rican cultural history in a fundamental African identity,¹ and Isabelo Zenón's earlier path-breaking work on racism in Puerto Rico, *Narciso descubre su trasero*.²

Esclavos rebeldes was Baralt's first book, as well as the first book in Puerto Rico on the subject of slave rebellion. For a generation of Puerto Rican historians and for a surprisingly large public – the book is now in its eighth edition in Spanish – *Esclavos rebeldes* was essential reading. Until the 1970s, prevailing interpretations of Puerto Rican slavery held that slavery in Puerto Rico was benign, that the island's slaves were "docile", and that there were never any slave uprisings to speak of.

The book opens with an alleged incident in Aguadilla linked to the Santo Domingo Revolution (1795) and ends with slave emancipation in Puerto Rico (1873). Baralt registers twenty-two episodes of collective slave resistance between 1795 and 1848 and highlights the 1820s and 1840s as the principal periods of slave insubordination. Later episodes include homicides by slaves, and the Grito de Lares uprising in 1868. In a notoriously difficult topic to document, Baralt sifted through myriad government sources and makes sense of often vague and confusing reports on conspiracies and uprisings. In doing so, he raises important questions about the relationship between slave resistance and conditions in the slave trade, the local sugar industry, and the Atlantic sugar market. Besides its contribution to the study of slave resistance, *Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico* is an excellent, accessible introduction to the history of Puerto Rican slavery, combining general overviews with local descriptions of several plantation areas.

Reread a quarter-century later in this excellent translation by Christine Ayorinde, the book's subtitle ("Conspiracies and Uprisings") becomes all the more salient, as the book is mostly about conspiracies, or rumors about conspiracies, and about "uprisings" that were apparently little more than *melées*. The gravity of these "conspiracies" and "uprisings" often appears overblown in the only sources available: the reports, circulars, and correspondence of Spanish colonial officials on the island. The public executions of the slaves by hanging or garroting described in the book are more compelling than many of its conspiracies or uprisings.

Certain patterns emerge in the conspiracies (or at least in the officials' allegations). *Bozales*, or African-born slaves, were often the leaders (they had more rebellion "in their blood", p. 143); the conspiracy spread between haciendas through permitted activities such as *bomba* dances; a fire was set in the cane fields and/or in town; the local garrison and arms depot (the Casa del Rey) would be seized; and "all the white people would be killed" and/or the slaves would flee to Hispaniola.

1. José Luis González, *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos* (Río Piedras, 1980), translated into English as *Puerto Rico: the Four-Storeyed Country and Other Essays* (Maplewood, NJ, 1990).

2. Isabelo Zenón, *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña* (Humacao, 1974).

Time and again in *Slave Revolts*, the reader's expectations are raised only to discover that most of the "revolts" were just conspiracies, that several of the "conspiracies" were only rumors, and that the sources of information are on the whole quite suspect. The twenty-two episodes of resistance between 1795 and 1848 include seven "conspiracies", three "revolts", and six "uprisings". The "attempted" and "failed" conspiracy in Aguadilla in 1795, later designated a "revolt" (p. 134), vanishes on close reading. An 1805 visit by a Haitian mulatto aged between eighteen and twenty was to promote a vast "failed conspiracy of slaves" (p. 7). "Major disturbances" in 1812 were all about a rumor that the Spanish Cortes had abolished slavery (p. 18). In 1821, a more credible conspiracy in San Juan was initially reported by one informant. Sixty-one slaves were arrested and two were executed, the first known executions of the sort. The next "revolt" was in Isabela in 1841: a march into town led by the plantation's foreman, to appeal to the authorities about work on a Sunday. On close reading, other "uprisings", let alone several minor conspiracies, do not fare much better. A serious revolt did occur in Toa Baja in 1843, when five soldiers and the revolt's leader were killed after battling for several hours; eight slaves were executed.

There were also, apparently, significant conspiracies in Ponce in 1826, 1841, and 1848. In 1826, the bloodiest, twenty slaves, including one woman, were publicly executed; in 1841, seven; and in 1848, three. If only because the slaves were valuable chattels to their owners, one may presume that in these instances there was more than rumor. A closer focus on those conspiracies, without the clutter of minor or non-existent "revolts" and "conspiracies", would have highlighted their significance.

Baralt may have relied too much on government officials, who had their own reasons to exaggerate: in order to justify "pre-emptive" repression of the slave and free-colored population, as justification vis-à-vis Madrid of a harsher slave code, as part of a request for more troops, equipment, or fortifications; or even as a means of personal advancement. These are common problems in assessing official records of slave conspiracies and uprising, and Baralt probably did as well as is possible given the material. Moreover, the motives of the informants on which these official accounts generally relied are themselves quite suspect, as they were offered freedom and a bounty, such as was paid in the 1841 Ponce conspiracy. Baralt recognizes these difficulties, but in his account the credibility of the official sources and the informants largely stands.

Baralt's perspectives on slave resistance in Puerto Rico are framed by a reading of the island's social history between 1795 and 1873 that posits a radical expansion of slavery and a corresponding transformation of island society. In fact, even at slavery's peak in Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century, slaves never exceeded 11 per cent of the island's population (p. 59). Direct comparison with the much higher (in excess of 90 per cent) slave-population ratios in the British and French Caribbean would have been useful. Moreover, Puerto Rico's history was not in vain: the island's enduring majority of free colored and free blacks set the tone for slavery, and for slave resistance, in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico.

Pending new information on slave conspiracies and rebellions in Puerto Rico – and research on those has not advanced much beyond Baralt's classic work – what we know is enough to suggest additional questions. Given the relatively small size of Puerto Rico's slave population, and the majority free-mulatto and black population, conspiracies and insurrections may not be the only place to look for slave resistance. Free-colored settlements were often located in or near mangrove swamps or in rugged hill country, and

were rather beyond the reach of the law anyway. Semi-nomadic modes of subsistence (fishing, woodcutting, charcoal-making, crab-catching, hunting wild pigs) were quite viable. Discreet arrivals of runaway slaves in such “maroon” settlements were evidently possible, and far beyond the reach of official records. In Brazil, *mocambos* and *quilombos* were often located in rugged, forested terrain near towns with which they maintained relations, especially with the large population of free colored and slaves.³ Moreover, in Puerto Rico, maritime marronage to Santo Domingo or Haiti was not out of the question; indeed, there was a history of extensive contraband relations with Hispaniola. Particularly after 1822, when Haiti controlled the entire island of Hispaniola and abolished slavery in Santo Domingo, flight across the Mona Passage was an option and was certainly a better plan than “killing all the whites”, as some of the official reports alleged, and hoping for an island-wide uprising. Moreover, the specific slave regime established in Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century was part of what Dale Tomich has called the “second slavery”, which also characterized Cuba, Brazil, and the United States, none of which had large-scale slave revolts in that century. The social and political regimes of that “second slavery”⁴ might have been able to control, pre-empt, and diffuse slave resistance in effective ways. Hence we also need to turn the tables and ask not only what forms slave resistance took in Puerto Rico and other zones in the nineteenth century, but also what sort of slave regimes were able to ensure that little organized, large-scale resistance developed.

The design of *Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico*, with full-page chapter divisions, large titles, and illustrations, matches the book’s over-emphasis on slave revolt and actually amplifies it, detracting from the real merits of the book. The absence of credits for the illustrations gives the book a generic, slave-rebellion-is-always-the-same flavor, beginning with the color illustration on the cover of the book, Richard (1861). That famous painting depicts a man and a woman fighting off three fierce hunting dogs in the US South. On the other hand, a Puerto Rican iconography of slavery and sugar plantations does exist (in the work of Oller, Tufiño, Samuel and Daniel Lind, and others).⁵

Given the importance of slave revolts in Puerto Rican historiography, the book’s publication would have been well served by a new introduction situating the book in time and place, and giving some consideration to later research on slave societies and resistance. A topical index would also have been useful, especially in helping the reader to track persons and localities that reappear at different points in the text.

It is a reflection on the significance of *Slave Revolts in Puerto Rico*, and on later shifts in Puerto Rican and Caribbean historiography, that this book remains essential reading for students of Puerto Rican and Caribbean slavery and social history. Yet trends are shifting once again, and interest in the history of Caribbean slave revolts remains open to fresh perspectives and new questions. Perhaps the publication of *Slave Revolts* will help stimulate renewed discussion on the important issues that this book signaled over two decades ago.

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3. Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *Histórias de quilombolas: Mocambos e comunidades de senzalas no Rio de Janeiro, século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 2006), pp. 89–94.

4. Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD, 2004).

5. Katharine Manthorne, “Plantation Pictures in the Americas, circa 1880: Land, Power, and Resistance”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 2:2 (2001), pp. 317–353.