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SLAVE TRADE. No. 3 (1875).

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PAPER

RESPECTING THE

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

AND THE

CONDITION OF THE LIBERTOS

IN

PORTO RICO.

(In continuation of "Slave Trade No. 2 (1875)," respecting "Slavery in Cuba and Porto Rico, and the State of the Slave Population and Chinese Coolies in those Islands.")

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*Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty.*  
1875.

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## Paper respecting the Abolition of Slavery and the Condition of the Libertos in Porto Rico.

*Consul Pauli to the Earl of Derby.—(Received May 31.)*

(Extract.)

*Porto Rico, May 12, 1875.*

YOUR Lordship will doubtless expect me from time to time to report on the result of "abolition," and more especially on the contract of "libertos," which is now being carried into effect throughout this island.

I have before expressed my opinion that the Government intended honestly and fairly to carry out the provisions of the Act, and that the law was not only necessary, but even beneficial, to the freedmen themselves; and I have the honour to report that I see no reason to change that opinion.

As distrust seems to have been expressed in some quarters, notably in an extract from the "Orden," published in the papers relating to the emancipation of the negroes of Puerto Rico, and presented to the House of Commons, I considered it my duty to take every precaution to acquaint myself precisely with the state of affairs here from the most reliable sources, and from personal information gathered on the estates within my reach, before making any report.

I have the honour to inclose a report on the subject from Mr. Vice-Consul Gibbons. This gentleman is not a merchant, and has answered my questions in a full and intelligent manner. I may, however, mention that other reports are equally satisfactory, and only differ in minor details in different districts.

I visited some estates in this neighbourhood, where both "libertos" and free labourers were employed, and I carefully inquired into the subject. I can, therefore, report with confidence that the "liberto" under contract enjoys the same treatment as the free labourer, whether native of this country, or British black from our own islands, except as to the fact of being bound by contract until the 20th of April, 1876.

The "liberto" receives the current wages, and is paid for overtime, which is voluntary. The working hours are from sunrise to sunset, and he is not worked on Sundays, or on the principal Feasts of the Church. He receives from 50 to 62 cents per day, or say from 2s. to 2s. 6d., and can make with overtime as much as 4s. 6d. In many places one meal per day is given, and he is housed free of cost. He is never flogged, and if idle or badly behaved, is punished by the Alcalde of the district with fine, or imprisonment in default, during which time he is made to work on the roads, receiving only his subsistence from the Government. The same punishment is sometimes inflicted on the free labourer for riotous conduct, but the latter can leave his employment at any moment; whereas the "liberto" can only change his contract by permission, for good reasons, of the Protector of the "libertos," who is in most cases the Alcalde or Magistrate of the district.

Punishment is very seldom abused or carried to extremes, for two reasons:—

1st. Because the "libertos" are the best men for work, and their employers do not wish to lose their services for any length of time.

2nd. Because the work on the roads is not remunerative to the Government, who have more labour at their disposal from other prisoners than they care to employ on improvements.

The "liberto" is appreciated not only on account of his superior ability for the work, but also because he is available at all times, and cannot leave his employment during a busy season. Although the "liberto" is not expected to work on Sundays

and feast-days of obligation, he does not stay away on the Mondays or days following feasts, as do the others, or if he does so, he can be brought back by the Police.

A gentleman informed me that in sight or within easy distance of his sugar estate were four towns or villages, each of which has its Patron Saint, and consequent yearly festival, lasting nine days. Free labourers from that estate would leave their work on those days, thus adding thirty-six to the already numerous days of obligation and Sundays, and, in most cases, the following Monday, making up nearly half the year of holidays.

The temptation to idleness is easily indulged, as their wants are but few, and their wages in proportion very high. For this reason, next to the "liberto" the British negro labourer is preferred, as they generally come here to avail themselves of the higher rate of wages, and save money, and only require an occasional holiday besides Sunday.

One result of the contract system from the enforced continued work is that the "liberto," if not given to gambling (a prevailing vice here), must of necessity make and save more money than their more independent fellow countryman; and, to retain their skilled labour after the expiration of the term of contract, some owners of estates give them small plots of land, which they gradually bring under cultivation, and on which they feed a horse, cow, pigs, poultry, &c., bought by their savings. As a proof of how seldom they attempt to evade the contract, a report now before me, published in the "Official Gazette," of the number of people sent to prison throughout the island for the month of March last, states that out of 987 persons committed for various offences enumerated, only 12 are "libertos" for being without contract.

One estate I visited was owned by the Alcalde of the district, and in answer to my question if the "libertos" were ever allowed to change their contracts, he informed me that at first that he had about 80 in his employment, but that now he only had about 25; the others had been allowed to change, and he had never opposed their wish; many preferred contracting on other estates where they had old companions, or going into service in the towns; although he was the Judge, he did not wish to retain a man against his will.

At the time of the emancipation, the whole number of slaves did not greatly exceed 33,000, and, although it is difficult to ascertain, I am of opinion that not more than half that number work on estates; the remainder have found employment in the towns, or from age or physical causes are incapable of earning their living, and remain under the charge of the municipality of their district, or live on the estates of their former owners.

In consequence of the small proportion of slaves to the population in Puerto Rico, they have always been treated here, I am told, in a humane manner, with some disgraceful exceptions; and I was certainly much struck at the perfectly equal footing on which the "libertos" appeared to be viewed, not only by their employers, but also by their fellow-workmen. In fact, in the process of sugar-making, the more skilled "liberto" is generally employed within the boiling-house, while the free labourer does the rougher task of cutting and carrying the cane.

The enclosures, by which in slave times the negroes were confined, have now either disappeared or are not kept in repair, and there is nothing suggestive of the past system of degradation.

Slavery has left its mark on the race, which must take several generations to efface; but this applies equally to those who have long been free, and to their children, and is not more observable in the "liberto" of to-day than in the rest of their coloured brothers, as well as in the British negro here, and in our own islands. The want of purpose and reliability, the childish vanity and ignorance, their natural idleness and proneness to vice of one kind or another, seem to me common to most of the race, differing only in form and degree according to the habits of the nationality among whom they have lived.

In giving your Lordship my opinion on the position of the "liberto" at Puerto Rico, it is but right that I should mention a possible contingency.

I notice by Article 2 of the Law of Abolition of Slavery in Puerto Rico of March 22, 1873, that "freedmen are obliged to make contracts with their present owners, with other persons, or with the State, for a space of time which shall not be less than three years;" and again in Article 24 of the Regulations for giving effect to that law, of August 7, 1874, under which the contract system is enforced, that "all contracts made by freedmen in consequence of Article 2 of the Law, and at present in force, as well as those which may be made hereafter, shall be considered binding until 20th April, 1876, at the least." The words "not less than three years," and "until 20th April, 1876, at the least," may possibly be taken advantage of to extend the term beyond the three years. I have no reason to suppose this to be in contemplation, but, if attempted, it would be a breach of the spirit, if not of the letter, of perfect emancipation.

The "libertos" certainly consider their present probation as finished on April 20, 1876, nor have I heard the question discussed by any one; but the words are there in both

cases, and must have been used with intention. I bring this to your Lordship's notice, and will not fail to report any movement in that direction.

For my own part, I am more inclined to believe that more stringent vagrant laws applying to all the labouring classes will be introduced, tending to oblige every one to work who has no settled means of subsistence, and with the view of reducing the now exorbitant high rate of wages. I know that deputations have waited on the Governor to represent the high price of labour, but I have not heard that any conclusion has been arrived at hitherto.

On the whole I think the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico has been a great success, and, except to the planter, who stands a bad chance of being paid for his slaves, has been honestly and intelligently carried out. The conditions under which it has been attempted were much more favourable here than they are now in Cuba, but, even with some allowance for that fact, the success of the step might be an inducement to Spain to extend abolition to that island, and thus remove the last foul blot existing under a European Government.

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Inclosure.

*Report by Vice-Consul Gibbons respecting the position of "Libertos" in the Vice-Consular District of Guayama, Porto Rico.*

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*Position of "Libertos" on Estates.*

1. WHEN contract is made is a certain sum per diem agreed on?—Yes.
2. If current wages become higher do "libertos" derive the advantage?—Yes.
3. Are they paid for overtime?—Yes.
4. Is any difference made between them and other labourers in hours of work and general treatment?—None; hours of work from sunrise to sunset, no work on Sundays.
5. Are they ever ill-used or beaten or imprisoned by the employers?—No; the employers can do neither.
6. In any difference between employers and labourers, are the employers favoured by the authorities, and have the "libertos" facilities given them to change their contract for just causes?—The employers are not favoured but rather the "libertos" who are protected, and they have every facility to change their contracts for just causes.
7. Is food and clothing provided by employer compulsory on the "liberto," and are the deductions made exorbitant, or is the quality or quantity of the food deficient?—No; one feed per day is generally given, which is both good and sufficient, viz., cod fish and corn meal. No clothes are given, the wages are high, from 50 to 62 cents per day; they invariably get lodging besides on the estates free, and are paid overtime, many also work by piecework and can earn a day and a half pay in one day; they are preferred to the native labourers, as they will work on feast-days, which the latter will not. Many make 5 dollars per week with overtime.

When the emancipation was decreed 1st April, 1873, the "libertos" were allowed to go altogether free, most of them left off work altogether, and only returned on the condition of exorbitant wages paid by the planters to get off their crop.

At first the system of contracting was much abused, unprincipled men without means contracting with a hundred "libertos" and then allowing them to get their living the best way they could, but at the end of the first year all "libertos" had to sign a *bonâ fide* contract with a responsible party who was responsible for their good behaviour; there was no obligation for them to return to their former masters, neither was there any restriction as to what wages they should receive; those who could not obtain a contract, generally on account of known bad conduct, were obliged to work on the roads, for which they were paid by the Municipality sufficient for their food, viz., 12 cents a day, and at night they were locked up; this they were obliged to keep up until they could obtain better work.

A contract once made is as binding on the contractor as the "liberto," in fact, it must be a very good reason on either side for it to be broken; the "liberto" being favoured.

*Position of "Libertos" who have elected to work in Towns.*

1. Are they obliged to contract in all cases?—Yes.
2. Are they well treated, and do they receive justice?—Yes.
3. What proportion of number work on estates?—Impossible to say, but very many who

formerly worked on estates are now employed as cooks, house servants, &c., at wages from 5 dollars to 8 dollars per month. Many of these, if well conducted, are allowed to have their own houses and sleep there.

4. Do employers of labour, as a rule, prefer "libertos" or other labourers, and why?—In the towns employers have no preference; but on estates they prefer the "libertos," as they are strong and active, and accustomed to work every day, including feast days, which in this country are very numerous.

#### *General Remarks.*

1. Is there any idea that the contract system may lead to the reintroduction of slavery in fact, if not in name?—Not the least; it would scarcely be possible; at the end of a year the "libertos" will be as free as any one here, white or black; and now, so long as they behave themselves, they are not in any way molested.

2. When "libertos" are fined by the authorities and, in default, punished by being made to work for Government, is any limit put on their term of imprisonment in proportion to the fine inflicted or the nature of their offences?—Yes, most certainly; they are generally imprisoned for a certain time and are paid 12 cents a day out of the public funds for their maintenance; or if they are put to labour their work would cover this amount; they are treated as any free man.

3. Are proprietors ever fined for transgressing the letter and spirit of the law?—Yes.

4. Do "libertos" quite understand the terms of the contracts they enter into, or is advantage taken of their ignorance?—They quite understand the terms of their contract, which is in writing, and read over to them before the "Alcalde" or Mayor. There is very little chance for any one to take advantage of a "liberto;" they know quite well when to claim the protection of the law.

5. Are "libertos" and other labourers subject to private fines by employers, and is this system ever exercised to excess, so as to deprive the labourer of his wages to any extent?—No, but any "liberto" coming late to work would not get any that day, and consequently no pay.

The arrangement of "libertos" is good, as without it few of the former slaves would work; they all prefer to "squat" and work one or two days a week to gain sufficient for their wants, which may be easily satisfied in this country, and for the remainder of their time sleep and lead a general vagabond life.

Since the emancipation property and life are not by any means so safe as formerly, as robberies from houses and the person are now by no means uncommon, whilst before the emancipation they were very rare.

The gainers by the emancipation are, of course, the "libertos," but also the Government, who, up to the present time, have paid no indemnization to the planters or former slave-owners. Government is to pay 75 per cent. of the nominal value of the slaves in a term of years; but to do this it will take from the planter in taxes 100 per cent. and make 25 per cent. benefit.

The rates of wages are exorbitantly high, and Government will not allow foreign labour to be introduced into the island; in fact, it does all it can to prevent labourers seeking employ from coming to Porto Rico by putting exorbitant charges for passports both on entering and leaving the island.

(Signed) CHAS. C. GIBBONS.

*Arroyo, Porto Rico, April 30, 1875.*

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