

INTRODUCTION

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A book that breaks new ground in dealing with an old subject merits a simple introduction – one that, minimally, does not obstruct the serious reader's search for enlightenment. I shall try here to be simple, and brief.

A powerful and apparently innate human liking for the sweet taste, tied particularly though not exclusively to honey in the ancient world (as well as globally, among all peoples known to live among bees), was wholly transformed by the spread of crystalline sugar, processed from the juice of domesticated sugar cane, which began its diffusion from Southwest Asia, after about 300 B.C. It was only several centuries later that sugar began to reach Europe in sizable quantities, both overland and via the Mediterranean. Following the Islamic conquest of Spain and Portugal, near the middle of the eighth century, sugar cane was also planted for the first time, and sugar made from it, on European soil, along Spain's southern littoral. Although now only of minor economic importance, its cultivation has continued there for the last 1250 years.

By the fourteenth century, sucrose (crystalline or liquid C₁₂H₂₂O₁₁), won from sugar cane by heat and clarification, had become a coveted good in the West. Its consumption trajectory thereafter was ascendant, especially in Europe. It has begun to falter only in the last half-century or so; but it has continued to rise meanwhile in much of the so-called developing world, including Algeria, Egypt and Indonesia.

The chronology accompanying that trajectory can be broken down into different sorts of stages or epochs. But from nearly every perspective, the history of sugar up to now has been viewed as a triumph of New World production, resting from the outset on an abundance of fertile land and the labour of coerced peoples, especially African slaves. That American history

began with Columbus's second voyage in 1493, which brought the plant to the island of Santo Domingo, and it has continued until present times. The epoch of slavery and the implantation of sugar factories in the New World colonies before 1500, and its sequels with free labour since, has dominated most historical inquiries about sugar, tending to set both the boundaries and the goals of research. But in truth, and in spite of the primacy of New World production, the growing of cane and the making of sugar in the world outside the Americas has long been enormously important and complexly differentiated. In spite of some important work (e.g., Sucheta Mazumdar's for China, Donald Attwood's for India, Chih-Ming Ka's for Taiwan, and that of many students of the Australian, Indian Ocean and Philippine industries),¹ the number of historians of sugar that have shown as much interest in the Old World centres as in the New has been modest. Hence our vision of the global compass of sugar and of its later stages as a world industry has inclined towards being incomplete and simplistic. This book is an important initial step towards addressing that deficiency.

The New-World-centred history of sugar seems to have suffered from an additional shortcoming, linked to sugar's New World beginnings as a large-estate, slave-based, field-and-factory industry in what were the West's first overseas possessions. Inevitably, sugar, rum and molasses first became commodities for the Western world. The history of their production lent itself to convenient polarities of description – large-scale production versus small; unified field-and-factory versus separated cultivation and processing; coerced labour versus free labour, and the like – in the construction of historical portraits of the American centres of production. Each such contrast proved useful for building in broad terms a description of what happened with sugar in particular New World settings, such as Brazil, or in one or another of the various Caribbean 'sugar islands.'

There have been added polarities of this sort, too. Since about 1830, a new one was imposed on sugar production history, which called for a transatlantic perspective: that between sucrose won from cane and sucrose extracted from the sugar beet. Since sugar is made from a temperate-zone crop and cane from a tropical one, quite different implications for political economy lay in this new development. Economically successful beet sugar signalled for the first time in history that a tropical product could be perfectly copied by a temperate one. And since 1960, there has been room for other such descriptive polarities, including that between sucrose and high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), in which the industrial uses made of the product inflect the comparison; and between sugars and non-caloric sweeteners – a rivalry now intensified by the global epidemic of obesity.

Such polarities of description and analysis can sometimes serve to highlight contrasts in the nature of markets in the sphere of consumption, or differing features of local systems in the production sphere – as in Cuba, say, or Brazil. But what happens in each such system of production on the

ground, in terms of land use, labour arrangements, milling, distribution, the identity of the planters, and much else, is specific; so are the consequences of these distinctive features. Case A – Cuba, say – resembles case B, Jamaica; but it is not the same; Case C – Trinidad, say – resembles them both, but it is also different in detail from them both. The student seeks abstractable regularities among the cases; but while using the polarities and finding the regularities, he discovers to his surprise that he can easily ‘lose’ the cases themselves. Indeed, some interpretations were wrong, simply because the contrasts were not so marked as the analyst had argued, or the implications of one or another local difference had not been grasped. So the polarities are helpful, yes; but they can also mislead, because they leave out so much, especially in the form of relevant historical detail. There seems to be little virtue (as Karl Marx famously wrote) in being super-historical.

Many of the previous students of sugar, including this writer, who have tried to make sense of its New World history, have played interesting games by polarising concepts, and have had to face up to the peculiar way in which historical detail can lay low the most imaginative typologies, whether of isolated features of the sugar industry (such as the relationship of milling the product to the form of landownership), the nature of peasantries and plantations (such as the definition of labour that oscillates between them), or the character of whole social systems. At the same time, as the editors also realise, if the contrasts posed by polarities and tentative periodizations are fruitful, they can sometimes help to unlock relationships that might otherwise remain concealed behind the specific details of the individual cases. If typologies compel us to think harder about the variables that they handle as clusters of traits – if on reading a comparison of plantations defined by their size and the basis of their labour force, we are made to look more closely and critically at exactly those two factors – then they serve a useful purpose, even if as a result they have to be replaced by a more exact and informed typology. Successive approximations of sugar’s historical development and spread ought to result in some cumulative improvement of our understanding of the relevant variables, such as the status of labour, its relationship to non-sugar cultivation, the role of an indigenous planter class, the expansion of the market, and so on. Otherwise, why bother?

The contributors to this collection have tried to walk the golden mean between excessive particularism on the one hand, and too much abstraction on the other. What has made their task complicated – as the editors make clear in their lengthy introductory essay – is the size of the main conceptual undertaking: to bring Asia into the world sugar system, and to unite its fate with that of the Americas. They have tackled this difficulty head on, and have acquitted themselves handsomely. They begin by taking the term ‘Sugarlandia,’ long associated with ‘a mono-crop, sugar-based regional economy’ in the Philippines, and freeing it from its local, original meaning. ‘Sugarlandia’ for them becomes the world of sugar, or the sugar world, ‘the

social classes, cultures and political economies' implicated in the production of sugar, and shaping that production. Within this new Sugarlandia, they invited their colleagues to look at both Old World and New World sugar economies, and to ponder previously neglected linkages between these economies, mediated through the world sugar market and the evolving politics of a not-too-remote colonialism. The results are impressive and important.

The editors undertake to disequilibrate – to knock off balance and then to re-balance anew – a picture of the world of sugar, centred on the Americas. At the same time, they see a need to re-periodise world sugar history. They aim to tie what I would dub the first world of sugar to the mercantilist era, and the second to the industrial era; and they move the dividing line between these eras a century backward in history. The various interpretations of colonialism and imperialism that follow are readjusted accordingly. Very importantly, it seems to me, the editors call for a serious re-examination of what might be called the mechanics of colonial-imperial rule. Today's governing view of colonial rule may underestimate the role of indigenous power holders, ignoring the weight of kinship and family for the way power is held and transmitted. In effect, the editors call for a serious re-examination of the genealogies of power in the colony. That makes good sense. In the Caribbean region, for example, differences in planter rule in the late eighteenth century among British Jamaica, French Saint-Domingue and Spanish Cuba make alarmingly clear how inadequate have been the pan-Caribbean generalities floated about the origins of the sugar plantocracies. A re-examination of the sort the editors call for, perhaps particularly when applied to major erstwhile Old World colonies such as India and Java, could throw considerable additional light on the varying character of European colonialism, and on the question of who might be most entitled to speak for the oppressed.

The individual contributions are concentrated upon three cases: Java, the Philippines, and parts of the hispanic Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico). The Antillean cases provide a useful link between New World and Old, through the character of the Hispanic overseas colonial system and its sequelae. Although they bring into plain view some parts of the Old World industry that are not dealt with – Fiji, for example, or China, or South Africa and now New Guinea² – they carry us forward to a new vision of world sugar.

But by now this prefatory note has become neither simple nor brief. I only hope that readers' appetites will have been whetted.

Notes

1. Mazumdar, *Sugar and Society in China*; Attwood, *Raising Cane*; Chih-Ming Ka, *Japanese Colonialism in Taiwan*.
2. Errington and Gewertz, *Yali's Question*.