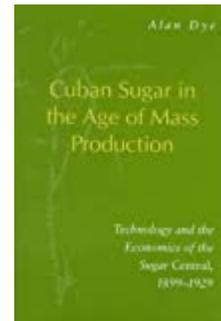


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Alan Dye.** *Cuban Sugar in the Age of Mass Production: Technology and the Economics of the Sugar Central, 1899-1929.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 343 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2819-5.



**Reviewed by** David Cartwright (Florida State University)

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*Cuban Sugar in the Age of Mass Production* is a well-written, well-researched history of the business of sugar in Cuba from 1899-1929. The book is synthesized from Alan Dye's Ph.D. dissertation research, two previously published articles, and new research at the University of Florida's Braga Brothers Collections. It is written from a neo-liberal perspective that presupposes the "invisible hand" of technology-driven economics as the force behind Cuba's economic transformation following its independence from Spain. The author not only denies, but attempts to refute the role of North American economic imperialism in this process. He does so by concentrating almost entirely on macroeconomic data. In some respects, Dye has produced two separate works woven into one: a history of the truly remarkable technological change in the Cuban sugar industry from 1899-1929 and an ideologically driven attempt to refute the dependency theory model of Cuban development. The former is truly impressive, the latter falls quite flat.

The first four chapters serve to set the stage for the specific information to be expounded upon and analyzed. Dye provides a history of the rise of the sugar cane industry and the institutions that accompanied it. He provides in depth coverage of such phenomena as the rise of the *latifundia*, the transition from slave labor to wage labor, and the reorientation of the Cuban economy to the mass

production of one crop for agricultural exporting. The information that Dye presents in this section of the book is concise, very readable, and suggests an excellent grasp of the historiography of Cuba and of Caribbean economics.

Dye makes several claims in this section, however, that seem quite dubious on their face. He claims that "Cubans of all classes either invested in sugar or sought the privilege of becoming a *colono* for these new *centrales*" (p. 62). He also claims that "[d]espite the inequities that seemed to be exacerbated by sugar-induced prosperity, the average person was probably much better off" (p. 14) than s/he would have been without the domination of the Cuban sugar industry by foreign capital. The first claim is not supported by Dye's own description of the class composition of Cuban *colonos* and seems ludicrous given the hand to mouth subsistence of the majority of sugar workers and other manual laborers. The second claim is not only not supported by any evidence in Dye's narrative, but runs counter to the conclusions of most scholars of this subject, a fact that Dye acknowledges in his own framing of the statement. Dye fails to reconcile the decreasing opportunities and downward pressure on wages that technological innovation brought to the bulk of the workers in this industry and the fact that profits were remitted to owners in the U.S. rather than being invested in Cuba with his contention

that these conditions were beneficial to most Cubans.

The fourth chapter also introduces us to the “vintage capital” model which serves as the basis for much of Dye’s analysis of the Cuban sugar industry. In simplified terms, this model describes the phenomena whereby new technology is adopted in a piecemeal fashion as mill owners could afford to upgrade or became willing to purchase newly proven technologies. It accounts for the utilization of a combination of old and new technology. Chapters Five through Eight are the heart of Dye’s work while Chapter Nine is reserved for his conclusions. Chapters Five through Eight provide a wealth of information about the business of sugar in Cuba from 1899-1929. The detailed information about the sugar industry in Cuba and elsewhere, the transformation of the Cuban economy, and Dye’s heavily statistical analysis of the various phenomena at work provide the reader with a perspective that one might otherwise receive only by holding a managerial position in the sugar industry. Dye uses his “invisible hand” assumptions in an attempt to trace the factors that motivated the actions of the persons that owned and operated the Cuban sugar industry.

Dye’s work provides a truly intriguing glance at the Cuban sugar industry at a pivotal point in its development. The book suffers, however, from the grinding of a very apparent ideological ax. Dye rejects out of hand any analysis of the Cuban Republic during this time period that is based on dependency theory or on the role of U.S. imperialism without actually providing refutation of

the assertions that he rejects. He presents the transformation and expansion of the Cuban sugar industry as a blind function of market capitalism’s tendency to maximize efficiency in production. As many scholars that hold this view, he presents his case entirely through the use of macroeconomic data. The glaring one-sidedness of this approach instantly causes the reader to wonder why other economic approaches or historical approaches are not utilized if the evidence is as compelling as Dye would have us believe. If one were to look only at Cuba and to look only at economics, then Dye’s “invisible hand” assumptions are quite plausible. However, Dye does not give sufficient credence to the fact that many aspects of the legal and economic structure which allowed U.S. corporate expansion into Cuba was dictated to the Cuban by the force of U.S. arms at the end of the 1898 war. His claims are even less credible when one looks at similar actions taken by the combination of the U.S. military and U.S. business in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and other areas which promoted a type of development that was similar to that of Cuba. In spite of these flaws, the work that directly covers the sugar industry is interesting and thorough. It might be interesting reading indeed if Dye were to present his case against dependency theory in the development of the Cuban sugar industry thoroughly in a separate undertaking.

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