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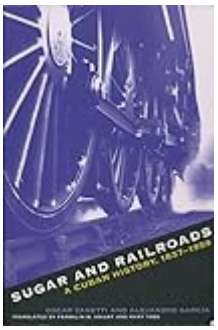

Oscar Zanetti Lecuona, Alejandro Garcia. *Sugar and Railroads: A Cuban History, 1837-1959.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. viii + 496 pp. $42.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4692-6; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2385-9.

Reviewed by Andy Daitsman (Instituto de Estudios Humanisticos, Universidad de Talca)

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SWEET STEEL

Zanetti and Garcia's *Sugar and Railroads* comes highly recommended indeed. The Spanish-language original (1987) won the Association of Caribbean Historians' Elsa Goveia Prize for the best work on Caribbean history published between 1986 and 1989, and this English translation contains a laudatory introduction by the best-known Caribbean historian currently working, Franklin W. Knight.

Sugar and Railroads is an excellent monograph. Careful and sensitive historians, Zanetti and Garcia provide a complex, richly textured analysis of the Cuban railroad industry from its origins in the early nineteenth century up to the eve of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The study is based primarily on corporate records, but the authors also draw on research in Cuban and Spanish government archives, some oral history (especially of participants in the twentieth century labor movement), and wide reading in the secondary literature on the economic history of railroads.

They trace in precise detail the interconnections between railroad construction and sugar production, arguing convincingly that the cost savings of rail transport permitted non-subsidized Cuban cane sugar to compete successfully on the world market with subsidized European beet sugar. Identifying a "triad of plantation, railroad, and the port" (e.g., p. 53), they explain how the anarchic laissez faire promoted by the Spanish colonial state led to "an uneven development of the country, by which some regions had, and others lacked completely, ... modern means of transportation" (p. 77). By the end of the century, Cuba, despite having opened (in 1837) the seventh railroad line to begin service anywhere in the world and the first in Latin America, still lacked an integrated system of rail transportation, and substantial regions of the country–especially in Oriente–had no railroads whatsoever. Cuban railroads, Zanetti and Garcia tell us on several occasions, led to economic "growth ... but not development," echoing the title of John Coatsworth's book on Mexican railroads.[1] Efficient low-cost rail transportation, without backward links or multiplier effects, served only to deepen the country's dependence on mono-crop exporting.

This dependency however, at least initially, was not due to direct domination of the railroad sector (or even

the economy at large) by outside agents. Although Zanetti and Garcia show that British bank loans financed much of the early railroad construction, they contend these should not be understood as "foreign investment" as such, considering that the lenders "received no control over the railroad or any other rights" (p. 26). The North American engineers, furthermore, who planned and directed the actual construction work, were over the course of time replaced in their managerial positions by Cuban nationals. The initial Cuban railroad network, then, was built at the initiative of Cubans, in large part those who had direct ties to the sugar industry either as producers or traders, and was controlled by Cubans for most of the nineteenth century.

Direct foreign domination of the railroads came later, towards the final third of the nineteenth century, when the pressure of domestic political conflict and global economic crisis provoked severe financial strain in the early Cuban-controlled railroad companies. By the 1870s and 1880s, British creditors began to exchange their credit to these firms for equity in them, and eventually took control of several of the competing western Cuban railway lines. In 1889, London's J. Henry Schroder Bank, the principal lender to most of the railroad firms, pushed through a merger of the Cuban rail properties it had accumulated. The company that resulted, Ferrocarriles Unidos de La Habana, came to exercise near monopoly control over the densely populated western core of Cuba until its nationalization by Autentico president Carlos Prio Socarras in 1949.

Cuba's eastern railroads also underwent a process of foreign acquisition and monopolization, though a different one from what had taken place in the west. Eastern Cuba was still relatively undeveloped when the United States occupied Cuba in 1898, and the most important eastern railroads were built following the U.S. takeover. Almost all the new roads were financed by U.S. capital: several of them, including the path-breaking Ferrocarril Central, were directly built by U.S. firms. Monopolization occurred in the 1920s, under the pressure of the severe crisis affecting sugar prices at that time. Despite the heavier direct involvement of U.S. nationals in the east, Cubans still played an important role developing the rail network there. Zanetti and Garcia highlight in particular Jose M. Tarafa, a revolutionary war veteran turned sugar entrepreneur. Tarafa-organized firms built most of the secondary rail circuits in Oriente, generally with strong financial backing in the United States, and Tarafa himself pushed through the 1923 legislation (the "Tarafa law") that enabled the monopolization of the eastern railroads (see Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen).

With monopolization by foreign firms completed (the British in the west, and North Americans in the east), the main focus of the book from the 1920s on shifts to the development of the railroad labor movement, and the impact labor's gains had on the profitability of the railroad firms. Groundwork for this had been laid in previous chapters, with more or less brief discussions of the composition of the railroad construction labor force, the rise of mutualism, and the participation of railroad workers in the struggle for independence. In the final four chapters, however, the railway unions move to center stage.

As might be expected from a book originally published in Cuba and whose authors still live and work in the Academy there, Zanetti and Garcia glorify the role of Communists and denigrate that of their opponents in the construction of the labor movement. In part, this reflects a reality of labor organizing in Cuba in the thirties and forties, as the Communists in general were less likely to cut sweetheart deals with management or to employ gangster-like tactics to solidify their authority in union locals. Still, the requirements of toeing the official line lead to curious omissions – such as the absence of any sustained analytical treatment of the populist 1940s. For example, Batista's name does not even appear in Chapter Seventeen, devoted to the 1940s, even though the text recognizes that his 1940 Constitution "led to the beginning of a new stage of legality, which gave the people's movement possibilities for promoting democracy in the country." (pp. 348-369, quotation on p. 361) Likewise, President Grau's keynote address to the First National Congress of Railroad Workers (held in 1944 and, according to the authors, a critical event in the creation of trade union unity) earns only a brief mention in an endnote. (pp. 365-7, note 60, p. 467)

By the start of the 1950s, Cuban railroads had entered into frank crisis. On one hand, stagnation in the sugar industry combined with stiff competition from trucks and buses to provoke a sharp decline in revenue. On the other, a combative labor movement in alliance with a populist state had won significant wage increases that sharply increased labor costs. The railroads needed state intervention to survive, and they got it. Ferrocarriles Unidos, in the west, was nationalized as a joint venture in 1949, while Ferrocarriles Consolidados, the U.S.-dominated eastern monopoly, received heavy state subsidies throughout the 1950s. Both firms sought to cut costs by reducing wages and service, as they invested in new equipment in a vain effort to improve service qual-

ity. Wage cuts, however, led to an increasing combativeness among railway workers, who in large numbers actively supported the 26th of July Movement's efforts to overthrow Batista. About a year after the revolutionary takeover in late 1958, the railways were fully nationalized, and at that point the book abruptly ends.

Despite some minor flaws, *Sugar and Railroads* is a good book, one that appreciably deepens our understanding of how railroads functioned in the political and economic history of Cuba. Rather than offer sweeping new interpretations about Cuban history, however, the book instead provides critical nuances within the existing historiographical framework. The broad outlines of the railroads' impact on Cuban development had been traced long before, and they are not substantially challenged here. For example, the critical concept of growth without development is directly borrowed from Coatsworth's work on Mexico, and is mentioned in relation to Cuba in standard synthetic textbooks published in the 1970s and 80s.[2] Another key conclusion, that railroads, by expanding the radius of operations of the highly productive sugar *centrales*, permitted the intensification of sugar production in the twentieth century, is also much older than this book. Consider the following lines written by Fernando Ortiz in 1940:

"Mechanization is the factor that has made possible and necessary the increased size of the centrals. Prior to this the central's radius of activity was the distance suitable for animal-drawn haulage. Now, with railroads, the limits of extension of a central are measured by the cost of transportation."[3]

The labor history sections of the book also fail to satisfy, especially to any reader sensitive to the issues raised by the so-called "new" labor history (now nearly forty years old). Zanetti and Garcia give us a straightforward institutional history of working class organizations, developed under the assumption that the PSP automatically and naturally represented the highest and most developed interests of the working class. Workers in general are seen either as factors of production (that is, from the point of view of capital) or as potential revolutionary agents (that is, from the point of view of the vanguard party), but never as historical agents in their right, with hopes and fears, a worldview, and an individual consciousness produced by their unique life experiences.

The book also suffers from silly translating and copy-editing mistakes, too many run-on sentences, poor word choice at times (my favorite: "qualified labor" for skilled labor), parts of two chapters where the endnote numbers do not correspond to the numbers in the text, and sloppy indexing.

Although it does not break significant new methodological or theoretical ground, *Sugar and Railroads* does present a deeper and much more complex picture of the importance of railroads in Cuban economic development and represents an advance in the historiography. The strong initiative taken by Cubans in building the railroads, for example, and the divide-and-conquer competition between U.S. and British firms to dominate the transportation sector in the early twentieth century, are placed in new and illuminating historical contexts that greatly enhance our understanding of Cuban economic history. Likewise, the discussion of the labor movement, while not explicitly analyzing the role of populism in Cuba, nevertheless provides sufficient concrete information so that a reader well-informed in Cuban political history can draw new and interesting conclusions about the relationhip between the state and labor during the nineteen-forties.

In all, it is a good book, which clearly belongs on the reading lists of everyone interested in Cuban history, in dependency theory, and in U.S. relations with Latin America. Those with the linguistic skills might prefer to read it in Spanish.

Notes:

[1]. Quotation appears on p. 104, see also p. iii; cf. John H. Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development: the Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), first published as *El impacto economico de los ferrocarriles en el Porfiriato: crecimiento y desarrollo* (Mexico City: Secretaria de Educacion Publica, 1976).

[2]. See, e.g., Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America*, first edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.258-263; E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp.74-78; Burns,* Latin America: A Concise Interpretive History_ second edition, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1977), pp. 134-8.

[3]. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 51.

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