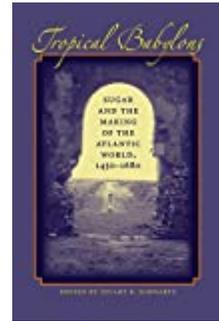




Stuart B. Schwartz. *Tropical Babels: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 347 S. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2875-5; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5538-6.



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Assessing the Role of Sugar in the Atlantic World

As they have investigated the increasingly interconnected Atlantic world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many historians have focused upon the role played by sugar cultivation and the slave trade. From Eric Williams to Robin Blackburn and Joseph Inikori, some have asserted that the European trade in slaves and the commodities slaves produced in Brazil and on Caribbean islands were critical to the development of industrial capitalism. Others like David Eltis have questioned sugar's "role as an engine of economic growth." [1] In a recent review essay on the subject, B. W. Higman concluded, "in the larger history of the Atlantic economy, the sugar revolution marks a genuine historical discontinuity." [2] Yet Higman did not portray this as a closed subject, acknowledging that "the significance" of the sugar revolution "remains to be fully explored and interpreted." That is the intent of this excellent collection of essays, edited by Stuart B. Schwartz, who has a well-deserved reputation for his work on the development of profitable sugar cultivation in Brazil.

In the introduction, Schwartz acknowledges that sugar played an important role in the Atlantic economy,

yet he challenges what he calls "commonplace" notions about the sugar revolution: "that the origins of merchant capital and slaving in the Atlantic were intimately and intrinsically tied to the production of sugar" (p. 1). To illustrate the evolutionary rather than the revolutionary development of sugar production in the Atlantic world, Schwartz calls upon William D. Phillips, Jr., Alberto Vieira, Genaro Rodriguez Morel, Alejandro de la Fuente, John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard to discuss the role of that commodity in the economies of Spain, the Madeira and Canary Islands, Espoala, Cuba, and Barbados through roughly 1650. Schwartz contributes a chapter on Brazil, and there are chapters on the Atlantic slave trade by Herbert Klein and the European sugar market by Eddy Stols.

From the essays we learn several things. In "The Expansion of the Sugar Market in Western Europe," Stols makes an effective case that sugar emerged as nearly as important as tobacco in the expansion of the European economy. From the mid-fifteenth century, increasing supplies transformed sugar from a luxury for the few to a commodity widely consumed by Europeans of

all classes. Beyond the jobs provided by refineries in places like Antwerp, the growing popularity of sugar created opportunities for those who made the wide array of utensils used in serving sugar as well as for confectioners who sought to satisfy the cravings of the European sweet tooth. In the context of this volume, Herbert Klein's most important contribution in "The Atlantic Slave Trade to 1650" is to demonstrate, particularly in the case of Brazil, that the profitable production of sugar preceded the development of a substantial Atlantic slave trade. Moreover, Klein shows that to the West African traders the Atlantic slave trade was secondary to their trade with northern and eastern Africa until the early seventeenth century. In short, the intimate link between the sugar industry and the slave trade evident from the mid-seventeenth century was not necessarily a precondition for the success of either.

In the chapters on the various locales, the reader quickly discovers the great variations in the adoption of sugar cultivation: in sources of capital, the role of slavery in cultivation and processing, the utilization of technology, the willingness to draw upon expertise available in other regions, and the ability of a few planters to dominate the endeavor. Foreign investment was critical for some. German investors in Iberia, Genoese investors in Espoala, and a host of Europeans, particularly Florentine merchant bankers in the Madeira and Canary Islands, played a critical role. Yet in Cuba and Brazil, local investors, notably religious institutions and partnerships of local merchants, were vital. For Barbados, John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard demonstrate that, beyond the reinvestment of island planters, London merchants provided most of the capital in the early years of sugar development. This is a crucial revision of the widely accepted explanation that Dutch investors were critical in financing the sugar industry on the island. McCusker and Menard found virtually no direct evidence for such support. Geography and the availability of livestock determined whether mill owners used animal-powered or water-powered mills. It would have been helpful for the authors to address the dilemma for planters in locales without rivers and sufficient supply of livestock to power sugar mills. Planters on Barbados, for example, began to use windmills by the 1650s.

One exception to the theme of variation was the widespread adoption of the three-roller vertical mill, which most of the authors acknowledge came from Brazil. Planters in most locales, notably Espoala and Brazil, drew upon the expertise of accomplished sugar technicians, especially those from the Madeira and Ca-

nary Islands. Few slaves were used in Iberia, the Madeira and Canary Islands, and Cuba through the early seventeenth century, while on Espoala and in Brazil planters initially drew upon the labor of indigenous people before making a transition to African slaves. Barbados was a special case. Planters there continued to draw upon the labor of indentured servants and tenants while they imported ever larger numbers of West African slaves. Through most of the sixteenth century, much of the sugar in all locales was produced in small operations. In Brazil, in a circumstance similar to that which prevailed in the sixteenth century on Madeira, *lavradores de cana*, or small-scale farmers, produced most of the sugar cane and delivered it to the *senhores de engenho*, or mill owners, for processing. On Barbados, between 1650 and 1680, large-scale planters gained control of sugar cultivation on the island, yet several hundred small farmers who raised sugar remained.

A common challenge for these scholars is the paucity of source material which has forced them to speculate about a number of aspects of the development of the sugar industry. For example, the absence of adequate sources has led to confusing definitions of the different types of sugar mills employed: *ingenios* and *trapiches*. In "The Sugar Economy of Espoala in the Sixteenth Century," Genaro Rodriguez Morel contends that contemporaries described *ingenios* as water-powered sugar mills and *trapiches* as animal-powered mills. Alejandro de la Fuente, in "Sugar and Slavery in Cuba," however, argues that the difference was based not on the source of power for the mill, but rather on its size and complexity, with the *ingenios* being the more sophisticated.

Nonetheless, this is a useful collection of essays. The authors demonstrate that there is little evidence to substantiate the claim that sugar planters and slave traders contributed significantly to the capital formation required for industrialization. These essays also reveal that the areas colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese, at least through the mid-seventeenth century, developed what should best be labeled a "proto-plantation" system (p. 20). The notion of the sugar plantation as a harbinger of the factory system, with a large, regimented work force, does not apply to most of these operations. Indeed, even on seventeenth-century Barbados, where sugar planters came the closest to developing this type of industry, McCusker and Menard found an incomplete process. They conclude that, even with a vibrant European market for sugar, an ever-increasing supply of African slaves, and sufficient capital, "it took a full century for the emergence of the fully developed integrated

plantation on which work was carried out by gang labor” (p. 306).

Although these essays do not and cannot address Professor Higman’s challenge to explore and interpret fully the significance of the sugar revolution, they serve as an excellent summary for the specialist and a valuable introduction for the non-specialist.

Notes

[1]. David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2]. B. W. Higman, “The Sugar Revolution,” *Economic History Review* 53 (2000): pp. 213-236.

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