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Reseña de "Más allá del azúcar: política, diversificación y prácticas económicas en Cuba, 1878-1930"
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Caribbean specialists are well aware of the impact that plantation-grown sugar has had in the region’s environment, economy and society. Understandably, it is to the enduring legacy of the sugar plantation complex that students of the Antillean chain have aimed a great deal of their interests. The disproportionate outpouring of research and writing on Cuba’s experience with the “sweet malefactor,” which elevated the Spanish Caribbean colony into a leading world sugar producer during the nineteenth century, confirms this general pattern. To be sure the volume of work devoted to such themes as the island’s indigenous people, peasantry, subsistence farming, cattle ranching and free artisanry, for example, pales in significance when compared to those


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focusing on the sugar-slavery duet.

Más allá del azúcar is an effort to take a closer look at the other face of Cuba, one that is not entirely dominated by cane fields, ingenios and gangs of nonwhite men, women and children forced to toil against their will. As historian Allan J. Kuethe observes in the book’s prologue, the sugarocracy did not make up a homogeneous block nor speak or act with one voice on economic, cultural or scientific matters. In her introduction fellow Cuban specialist, Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, echoes his sentiments when she notes that sugar did not blot out reformist and diversification projects that gained currency during the 19th century. To the contrary, she adds, appeals for the aforementioned proposals, many of which were incompatible with the interests of the agrarian elite, grew stronger each time an economic crisis threatened the plantation system.

Naranjo Orovio’s own chapter traces the shifting discourse amongst the island’s competing social groups surrounding the founding of white colonias and calls for the blanqueamiento (whitening) of Cuba’s population. At various junctures Spain favored both, mostly in words rather than deeds, to safeguard the territory, but also to keep separatists in check by raising the specter of an impending race war. By the late nineteenth century, however, metropolitan overseers and Cuban reformers revived the debate in their respective attempts to influence the course of Cuba’s uncertain social, economic and political future. Antonio Santamaría García synthesizes the last thirty years of Cuba’s economic history, and attempts to make sense of the island’s agricultural, mercantile and railroad expansion of this interval. Here sugar joins other factors, including the growing transportation infrastructure and global competitors, in steering Spanish commercial policy in Cuba.

The metropolis’ balancing act becomes more evident in its management of Cuba’s growing trade with the U.S. According to Oscar Zanetti Lecuona, the imposition of protectionist tariffs by Spain (until 1898) and the U.S. (after 1898) alone does not do justice to the complicated trading dynamics of this period. While Spain experienced a sizeable economic loss after 1898 at the hands of hegemonic U.S. capital, some of its goods continued to have a modest competitive edge due, in no small part, to heavy Spanish immigration and prevailing cultural tastes. Other factors such as the variety, quality, price and accessibility of specific Spanish products may have also helped to keep mercantile flows from the former metropolis to Cuba economically viable.

Much of the published scholarship on this period, as suggested by the work of the late María A. Marqués Dolz, overlooks the growth of domestic industrial and manufacturing activity. She notes that many of the enterprises that were set up in the last decade of Spanish rule were fundamentally artisanal in organization, were centered on the urban
enclaves, catered to local needs, and were not always directly connected
to the plantations and the sugar export sector. Some of the private wealth
generated through these and other transactions eventually found their
way overseas, as shown by Martín Rodrigo Alharilla’s article, which
draws attention to the transfer of Cuban-raised capital to the Catalonian
capital of Barcelona between 1835 and 1890. By poring over *protocolos notariales*
in Madrid and Barcelona, the author documents how *indianos*,
or returnees as they came to be known, repatriated and invested their
fortunes in real estate and urban expansion projects, easing their re-
integration into the northeastern Spanish city’s affluent elite.

The last three essays address attempts to modernize and diversify
Cuba’s agricultural economy. The piece by Leida Fernández Prieto
illustrates how many of the undertakings in this direction expanded on
the pioneering scientific agricultural research conducted from the 1820s
forward, especially by the likes of Ramón de la Sagra, who advocated
for a more efficient utilization of Cuba’s human and natural resources.
The new advancements introduced between 1878 and 1920 included
the establishment of model plantations and agricultural journals, farming
schools and locally-run development boards. They also entailed, as
Alejandro García Álvarez and Mercedes Valero González demonstrate
in their respective contributions, commercializing crops whose market
value had been previously underestimated, such as bananas, and intro-
ducing new, economically profitable ones as exemplified by the mulberry
tree, valuable for cattle feed and the production of silk.

All in all, *Más allá del azúcar* breaks new ground in the agro-industrial
and economic history of Cuba by going beyond traditional approaches
that have historically privileged the workings of the plantation system.
While the compilation sheds valuable new light on the movements and
trends that helped structure the distinctive trajectory followed by the
former Spanish colony in the period under study, with the possible excep-
tion of Rodrigo Alharilla’s essay, the voices of the various human agents
involved, poor or rich, *criollos* or peninsulares, regardless of their socially-
imposed ethnic or racial identities, are largely absent in the analyses
presented. Thus, we are left to wonder how Canary Islanders responded
to the European resettlement and whitening schemes, the strategies
employed by Iberian commercial farmers and urban entrepreneurs who
retained ties with Cuba after 1898, and how the large contingents of
Afro-Cubans engaged in the island’s manual trades fared as industrial
and manufacturing pursuits expanded in the post-Zanjón era.