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This study has both a local and a global context. It is local in the sense that it closely examines “small scale, politically involved” independent producers of tobacco leaf in Puerto Rico and their engagement with the American metropolis within a framework, which even though it remains colonial, provided for dynamic negotiations. And, it is global in the sense that the subject in question is part of an imperial and colonial, global agricultural narrative which during the first third of the twentieth-century included an expanding American Empire stretching from the Philippines to Hawaii and to the Caribbean. Hence, this book is a welcome addition to the New Imperial Studies.

The new American empire brought and sought to impose its own political and economic structures while attempting to reshape the new colonial subjects by imposing its own gender, racial, and class organization patterns, as well as new forms of labor and land tenure patterns in both the formal and informal empire. The metropolis, however, had to contend with well-established cultural and socio-economic practices in its new territories. In the case of Puerto Rico, Laura Briggs (2002), Eileen Findlay (1999), and Solsiree del Moral (2013), among others, have addressed the contestation and negotiation of power within a colonial setting by examining education, gender and race. Teresita Levy takes the same approach addressing this understudied area of Puerto Rico’s agricultural sector.

As one of the largest employers in rural Puerto Rico during the first decades of the twentieth-century, the tobacco leaf industry is relevant for both labor and agrarian studies. But Levy goes beyond the field, delves into demographics, and also discusses the political power that tobacco-growers came to yield.

Levy’s historiography section in the introduction is a tour de force. She engages with the long historiography of oppression narratives and simplistic Manichean views of Puerto Rico’s past. She questions the several unchallenged “truisms” in Puerto Rican historiography since 1898, and the seminal works that have perpetuated “the colonial mentality,” “the attitude of submission and acquiescence characteristics of Puerto...
Ricans,” the juggernaut of “land concentration, the disappearance of the independent farmer, and the damages to the psyche of the Puerto Ricans” (7) by a capricious and intractable metropolis.

As Levy takes us through a historiography of colonial-imperial relations in Puerto Rico, she reminds us that even as the 1990s’ academic crop focused on the dramatic changes brought by the American occupation, certain themes continued to dominate almost unchanged. Among them, is the development of the sugar industry as a main goal of the “American colonial government at the expense of every other economic sector on the island”, and the insular government “acting as an agent of U.S. corporations to the detriment of the Puerto Rican people” (9). And perhaps more importantly, the damage inflicted by colonial policies to the collective self-esteem of the Puerto Ricans continued to be taken as a fact.

Levy exhorts us to move beyond these simplistic views and to conceive the Puerto Ricans as active agents within the American Empire much in tune with Ayala’s American Sugar Kingdom’s thesis (1999). Within this empire there is agency in the form of resistance, negotiation, and collaboration (10). Levy reminds us that “Is it for this reason that Puerto Rico is an extraordinary case for understanding the political, economic, and social structures of the American empire in the early twentieth century.” The study of tobacco cultivation in Puerto Rico allows for a close examination of “how economic expansion triggered by the new colonial policies resulted in increased political activity and demands for participation” (13).

Most studies dealing with the agricultural narratives of Puerto Rico under American sovereignty deal with sugar and the exploitative nature of the factory in the field. Levy argues that what we have learned from the sugar sector has been applied unquestioned to other agricultural sectors without bothering to use empirical data or a serious methodology. Thus, agriculture in Puerto Rico after 1898, has been, in general, presented as completely dominated by absentee owners who consolidated vast swaths of land, displacing males, and destroying the traditional Puerto Rican family, while peasants were rendered landless. Levy debunks each one of those deeply held beliefs in the first two chapters.

Levy focuses on the agrarian side of tobacco. Since U.S. corporation’s vertical integration focused on the industrial side of it and did not extend into the tobacco fields (it was cheaper this way) Puerto Rican leaf growers were able to own the land. This fact in itself represents a major shift from the narratives of sugar and absentee-corporations. In her acute discussion of demographics and land tenure patterns she shows that ownership in the tobacco regions were marked by small growers-owned operations; that families in these regions had more children than
in the other regions; and that families migrated, seasonally, together.

Tobacco, the cash crop known as the “poor man’s crop”, perfectly complemented the subsistence agriculture, a trademark of the mountain regions. The small space it required and the comparatively short time it took from planting to harvest allowed for the cultivation of subsistence items, and the raising of chickens, and pigs. Income earned directly from tobacco cultivation was comparatively less than that of workers in the coffee or sugar regions, but since tobacco was a complimentary crop to subsistence agriculture and farming, tobacco growers enjoyed a better diet than workers from the other regions.

Levy’s greatest contribution may be her take on both the island and the metropolis complex actors. The tobacco growers represented the interests of a sector of Puerto Rico’s agrarian society that had intricate relations with the tobacco workers on the industrial side and with insular and federal authorities. One is reminded that the American metropolis did not have one head but that federal agencies were frequently at odds with American businessmen and the insular government. This is not a dichotomy but a polygonal relationship in which the contestation of power is very elastic.

The narrative that Levy presents is one of resilience in the face of much adversity. Aware of their place within a global system and of their relative weakness to influence market prices during the 1921 tobacco prices’ crisis, the growers resorted to the rapid creation of cooperatives and ligas agrícolas. “Puerto Ricans were aware of the economic and political power they could yield if they were affiliated, and then took the necessary actions to actively participate and improve their economic returns” (72).

But as Levy argues, it was the extension of American citizenship in 1917, and the right to association, that triggered the Puerto Rican growers’ rush to associate. The tobacco leaf growers effectively lobbied for protection of their products, extension of federal aid and agricultural legislation to be extended to the island, financing, the transfer of technologies to the island, and even bypassed the local colonial administration and elected officials by engaging with the Bureau of Insular Affairs directly (64-65).

In the end, however, tobacco production lost its place in Puerto Rico’s agricultural sector. That, however, was not because of an oppressive colonial relationship but due to a combination of natural disasters; the Great Depression; and changes in consumer preferences which went from expensive cigars to cheap cigarettes. But throughout all of it, tobacco leaf growers found ways to extend the life of what seemed a doomed agricultural sector. When federal funding and research refocused on subsistence agriculture “[t]he science of tobacco, with the
cultivation field as laboratory and the farmers as scientists, succeeded in improving the economic returns or tobacco cultivation” (127).

When consumer preferences switched from high quality tobacco for cigars to cheaper tobacco for cigarettes, the ligas agrícolas responded by both trying to limit production and by focusing on improving their crops quality. This may seem counterintuitive, but it was in fact a good policy. Increasing production would have only driven prices lower, and the small farmers did not have the luxury of unlimited land. Focusing on quality and reducing production was their best bet.

The tobacco growers also engaged in social engineering and the metropolis’ and the insular elites’ nation/state building projects. Tobacco growers lobbied for the building of roads and schools, and appealed to the growing nationalist fervor of the 1930s by promoting the “patriotic Fridays,” in which only local products should be consumed. The Asociación de Agricultores Puertorriqueños (founded in 1924) would even label itself as the “Champion of the Nation” and equate agricultural prosperity with “with the success of the Puerto Rican Nation” (78-80). Levy barely starts to unpack this exciting topic—which should be part of any discussion of the cultural and political power of nationalist narratives in Puerto Rico.

Levy provides an excellent discussion of the Agricultural Experiment Station and its mission of modernizing Puerto Rican agricultural practices and finishes with a discussion of the roles of “housewives” in the tobacco regions and the efforts to make them “house managers” (127). It is well-noted that these “housewives” also worked in the field, and in the sewing industry as both spheres have never been mutually exclusive for working women.

In summary, Levy’s empirical data is convincing, overwhelmingly so, and her analysis impeccable. The succinct prose is both fluid and elegant, at times inspiring. In a nuanced way, Levy weaves discussions of modernity, social-engineering, nation-state building, gender roles, class, race, political organization, and activism within a colonial context. Her take on these issues will spark many conversations which we need to have.

Levy finishes by making a call to action to solve the island’s colonial dilemma. She exhorts us to take the example of the tobacco grower’s resilience and reminds us in her conclusion that “Puerto Ricans—and I include myself, as a Puerto Rican woman and scholar of the island—must remember the history of negotiation with the American empire. Limited as it may be, it is a position of power” (137). There is, perhaps, no better way to end this manuscript as the tobacco growers and their families’ struggles, endurance, and ability to negotiate and even thrive within a colonial setting, is evident from the first page to the very last one.
Notes


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With her title Creolization and Contraband, Rupert puts a magnifying glass over the island of Curaçao during the seventeenth and eighteen centuries to show how the interplay of these two processes not only shaped the island’s economy and society but also exemplified what occurred in most of the Atlantic Caribbean. She presents Curaçao as a cosmopolitan, polyglot, and ethnically diverse, with productive commercial ties, rich merchant archives, all of which allows the island to become the perfect case study for examining the multifaceted relationships between the extra-official economic and social endeavors that wrought colonial societies in the early modern Atlantic. The book is divided into two parts and six chapters. Part I chronicles the seventeenth century which presents the process of the island of Curaçao becoming an important trading post and spans from chapter one to chapter three; and Part II describes the eighteenth century, focusing more on the intermingling of social, economic and cultural exchanges—it extends from chapter four to chapter six.

The introductory chapter sums up the thesis of the book. Rupert presents the West India Company (WIC) governing the island and its