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WHAT PRICE SUGAR? LAND, LABOR, AND REVOLUTION

Sugar, Slavery, and Society: Perspectives on the Caribbean, India, the Mascarenes, and the United States. BERNARD MOITT (ed.). Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. vii + 203 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00)

Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680. STUART B. SCHWARTZ (ed.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiii + 347 pp. (Paper US\$ 22.50)

These two books illustrate the fascination that sugar, slavery, and the plantation still exercise over the minds of scholars. One of them also reflects an interest in the influence these have had on the modern world. For students of the history of these things the Schwartz collection is in many ways the more useful. It seeks to fill a lacuna left by the concentration of monographs on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggesting that we know less about the history of sugar than we thought we did. Perhaps in no other single place is such a range of information on so wide an area presented in such detail for so early a period. Ranging from Iberia to the Caribbean and including consumption as well as production of sugar, with a nod to the slave trade and a very useful note on weights and currencies, this volume is a gold mine of information. It considers (briefly) the theoretical meaning as well as the growing of this important crop, contrasting its production in Iberia with that on the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Canaries, colonized by Iberian powers, and continuing the contrast with São Tomé, off the coast of Africa, and on to Brazil and the Spanish American empire before ending with the British in Barbados. In the transit, it of necessity considers and complicates the meaning of “sugar revolution” and shows how scholars using that term do not always mean the same thing. John McCusker and Russell Menard, for example, tackling a cornerstone of the traditional interpretation of the development of sugar, argue that there was no “sugar revolution” in Barbados; economic change had already begun before sugar’s advent, though sugar may have accelerated it, and yet sugar production was transformed on the island. They also undercut, without quite denying,

the significance of the Dutch role in the process. Schwartz, while questioning, clings to the traditional expression if not the traditional outlook, seeing in Barbados “the beginning of the sugar revolution” (p. 10).

In his introduction, Schwartz also contests the notion of sugar as the “quintessential capitalist crop” (p. 2) and suggests the irony that such a crop was sponsored in the New World by the feudal societies of Spain and Portugal and maintained by communist Cuba. He gives a clear and capsule summary of debates around these issues. As important as the theoretical debates, however, are the mechanics of turning crop into commodity. Several authors discuss technological advances, and if one wanted to know what a casual reference to a new sugar press might mean, one can learn here. They also discuss the distinction between a *trapiche* (animal driven) and an *ingenio* (using the Spanish term, or water driven) mill but even in that case differences existed over time and place as to what the terms encompassed. An illustration of both on p. 15 carries a caption which says it was uncommon to operate both types simultaneously; yet Genero Morel, p. 99, declares that it was not uncommon, in sixteenth-century Española at least, to *have* if not simultaneously to *operate* both types. This is not the only instance in which one has to read carefully to understand what precisely is being claimed. In fact, Morel writes that the *trapiche* “could continue to operate in case of accident or damage at the waterwheel,” suggesting they frequently did operate at the same time, though only larger planters could afford them both. While the water-driven mill was more efficient, animal-driven mills were more dependable.

It will be no news to those familiar with sugar’s history that, particularly in the Old World, it was not always or even usually grown by slave labor, and several chapters, based primarily on archival sources, provide minute details about land systems and labor arrangements, revealing that neither bound labor nor extensive units of production had to obtain. That such features have been commonly associated with sugar is significant in itself and indicates why attention to this early period is crucial. The authors reveal succinct regional distinctions, such as that the nature of the soil in Brazil usually obviated the use of plows and fertilizers, which was not always the case in the Caribbean; nor did Brazilians use irrigation, though it was important in Spain, Española, and Mexico; Brazilians produced clayed sugar in contrast to the *muscovado*, or brown sugar, shipped from the West Indies, though it is left for an author in Moitt to explain the West Indian divergence. The importance of Native American labor in early New World production is reaffirmed and a connection is made between their exploitation and that of Africans. Herbert Klein makes the interesting point that in Brazil, Native American sweat made possible the importation of Africans by creating the capital needed to purchase them, and this extended beyond their initial use in cultivation but included their mining of gold and silver; this observation would apply equally to Mexico and other regions that first used native peoples. There was an inter-island slave trade in

native peoples to support production in Española before the transatlantic trade supplanted it. A chapter on Iberia pushes back the baseline for European use of sugar, highlighting the effects of sugar on European cuisine and contrasting European and Middle Eastern dietary practices.

In reviewing the various methods for organizing production in Iberia and Iberian possessions, it becomes easy to understand why the sugar estate took the name *ingenio* or *engenho* in those regions, referring to the mill, instead of “plantation,” referring to the size of unit and structure of labor, as in English colonies. The presence or absence of an efficient milling process made the difference between sugar as a commercial export and a crop of local utility. When sugar went to the West Indies, its role as a commercial item was clearly assumed and the importance of finding and organizing land and labor were foremost considerations. Producers in the two regions emphasized different things, which the two terms *ingenio* and *engenho* signify.

The collection edited by Moitt partly seeks to dispel common misperceptions about the way sugar is or has been raised, but treats as well the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of the sugar regime upon African slaves and upon those who replaced them in the fields. While Schwartz’s collection is historical, Moitt’s is interdisciplinary, including literature and sociology along with history, and while Schwartz moves from an early period to the seventeenth century Moitt goes from the seventeenth to the twentieth-first century. In that sense they are complementary. Moitt’s focus is the Caribbean but includes production in India and postemancipation labor struggles in Louisiana. Literary chapters compare writings in the French and British Caribbean and the Caribbean and the Mascarenes in an attempt, as Sada Niang expresses it (p. 49), “to round out the ... sociohistorical experience.” In this way and others, Moitt places more emphasis on the plight and behavior of the laborer than on the structure of the estate or organization of the industry. Authors in his collection are at least as concerned about the interior lives of slaves or Asian contract laborers as about their external circumstances and they make some interesting points: Although indentured laborers from India were theoretically protected by a legal document, they suffered the same loss of personal freedom, confinement in tight and squalid living quarters, and corporal punishment as slaves. They suffered the additional indignity in the French Caribbean, as Niang reports on the work of Guadeloupian artist Ernest Moutoussamy, of losing their name and language as well: “French, and not the existing *créole*, is the overseer’s language and actualizes the official parameters of their enslavement” (p. 45), as the worker is handed a passbook with his official designation, including to whom he belongs, what he does and is to be called, in a language he cannot read. Their alienation was likely therefore to be greater than those brought to the British West Indies where English was spoken, even if they did not claim that language as their own either. These authors also add a gender dimension, reminding us, for example, that Barbados and the Bahamas stand as exceptions

to the general rule that Caribbean slaves could not reproduce themselves, that women outnumbered men in the fields and generally worked harder, and that women were prominent among those killed or maimed in the mills, involved in an industrial pursuit many might think was confined to men.

It is clear, however, that Schwartz's volume is closer to the cutting edge of research than Moitt's, the downside of which is that many of the essays, based on archival research, sometimes contain more information on arcane features of local sugar production than one not especially concerned about that particular region would care to know. But these details can be passed over quickly to reach the still useful conclusion. Moitt's collection, though containing original work, is more synthetic and reinforces advances already made. Moitt's study of *marronage* in the French Caribbean, for example, sheds light on the way planters enforced the *code noir*, showing few gender distinctions except that they reserved mutilation of the nose for women, and punished new slaves who absconded more leniently than seasoned or creole ones – for the obvious reason that hamstringing as obliged by law would have robbed them of the use of too many slaves. They saved that punishment for those who had already proved themselves useless. Especially important is the finding that enforcement became more flexible in the eighteenth century, as strict accordance with the seventeenth-century enactments had proved to be inconsistent with effective and economical maintenance of the slave regime. But the fact that slaves persisted in running away despite harsh punishment is not news, nor is the call for continued study of the psychology of slave resistance. In like measure, Moitt and Horace Henriques's desire to counteract the model of the plantation as a "total institution" by focusing on the slave and postemancipation populations in Guiana is a version within the West Indian or South American context of the scholarship that followed Stanley Elkins (1959) in the United States and therefore is not a conceptual breakthrough. Yet they give the idea a peculiar twist by looking at class and ethnic divisions (among both Blacks and Whites) as evidence of the absence of totality, and show that lack of unity among Blacks doomed an otherwise successful rebellion in Berbice.

Moitt repeats perfectly acceptable expressions of the scholarly consensus that give one pause after reading the essays in Schwartz. So that, for example, while it may be absolutely true, as Moitt quotes Philip Curtin's *Plantation Complex* (1990) that "the first plantation slaves were neither blacks nor Africans of any color," (pp. 2, 3) the force of discussion about labor in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic outside of São Tomé in Schwartz features the variety of labor arrangements and the relative paucity of slaves. None of this is inconsistent with the basic principles of what we already knew but the new evidence modifies the picture and shifts the emphasis. In particular, the term "sugar revolution" in reference to Barbados causes some unease after reading McCusker and Menard who say there was a "sugar boom" but no revolution; the adoption of sugar was part of a process of experimentation as

planters tried first tobacco, then cotton, then indigo, and finally sugar, and a host of changes usually associated with sugar had already occurred. The distinctive Barbados contribution was to develop an integrated rather than dispersed sugar plantation, using gang labor, driven by the whip. They think the term has outlived its usefulness. If one accepts Schwartz's definition of it (p. 2) as "the process of forming large estates using coerced labor in semi-industrial productive activity geared towards export," it may still apply, and Schwartz as well as Moitt continue to use it. McCusker and Menard may have changed the equation but it is unlikely scholars will soon abandon the terminology. The point is that essays in Schwartz have made this and other concepts problematic, and they may never be used as comfortably again.

It is not clear what precisely Moitt means when he asserts (p. 2) that "only after it arrived in the Caribbean following centuries of migration did the sugarcane become a viable and commercially successful crop." This might have been news to people in Madeira, the Canaries, São Tomé, and Brazil. Perhaps this is the danger of an unreflexive use of words like "revolution." But Schwartz points out that technological advances notwithstanding, on the whole, the sugar plantation was not very innovative. The attachment to an archaic labor system was common, and there was no linear or sustained increase in either labor productivity or plantation efficiency. After a century of technological progress, slaves on eighteenth-century Jamaican plantations were only 20 percent more productive than those of early Cuba.

Although Moitt solicited some chapters, his collection evidently grew mostly out of a conference on sugar, which may partly explain its diversity, and it lacks Schwartz's cohesion. Its greatest usefulness is to remind us that Asian populations share the Caribbean with Africans and Europeans (and what might be left of native populations), and that many if not most of them also came to work sugar. If Schwartz's collection is an example of what good Atlantic history can offer and why such work should be transnational, Moitt suggests that the perspective should be global. Moitt can appeal to a wider range of scholars but Schwartz is probably more useful to historians. Yet historians should not neglect the psychological and social dimension Moitt offers, and his authors are especially effective in adducing current relevance. No serious scholar of sugar and the plantation should be without Schwartz's book, and no one curious about sugar's social dimensions should ignore Moitt's.

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