Daniel Strum


Daniel Strum’s research on the sugar trade was awarded the 2010 Odebrecht Historical Research Award—Clarival do Prado for contributions that address historiographical gaps in Brazilian history. The award enabled him to take advantage of the services of a team of research assistants in Brazil, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Madeira, including specialists in iconographic research. As a result, the book draws on a wide variety of documentation from diverse sources, including superb reproductions of 376 images of various aspects of the sixteenth-century sugar trade. Many of the images gathered in this impressively elegant oversize volume are little known; they will be of great interest to scholars of sugar and the sugar trade as well as those broadly interested in Atlantic history.

The sugar trade, which is the near-exclusive focus of this book, has received relatively little attention from scholars, especially in comparison with the slave trade, with which it was so intimately associated. Primarily using sources from Pernambuco, Bahia, Porto, and Amsterdam, Strum focuses on the relations between Brazil, Portugal, and the Netherlands, the key actors in organizing the sugar trade during the crucial period between 1595 and 1630. Writing in a straightforward, descriptive style that synthesizes his research with other work published in Portuguese and Dutch, he offers not a narrowly focused economic history of the sugar trade, but rather a broad, multilayered treatment of the diverse strands of activity that made sugar into a commodity of world economic significance even as sugar shaped the emergent Atlantic economy.

Strum begins his account by establishing the geopolitical context of the sugar trade, examining overseas expansion and the colonization of the Americas in the context of European politics and imperial rivalries. He traces the sources of Iberian maritime expansion beginning in the mid-fifteenth century and the challenges to it by the Dutch, English, and French in the sixteenth century. Portuguese colonization of Brazil, the revolt of the Netherlands against Habsburg rule, and the Dutch Republic’s emergence as an independent maritime and commercial power formed the conditions against which the sugar trade developed. The trade itself was the object of imperial rivalry and war, and flows of sugar were frequently disrupted or diverted. Yet, despite international rivalry and conflict (including the Dutch West India Company’s occupation of Pernambuco between 1629 and 1645), a transnational circuit that linked Brazil, Portugal, and the Netherlands remained the backbone of the sugar trade.
Strum next examines sugar production and consumption. By treating the two in relation to one another he is able to elaborate a richer and more nuanced understanding of the forces shaping the sugar trade than do most accounts of the colonial sugar industry. Chapter 2 follows the slow migration of sugar from the Mediterranean across the Atlantic to Brazil and details changes in technology and the social organization of production. The establishment of the sugar-slave complex at once consolidated Portugal’s hold on Brazil and transformed the European sugar market through the unprecedented scale of production. Chapter 3 documents the extension of sugar consumption and the diverse forms in which sugar was distributed and consumed in Europe as Brazilian production made available greater and cheaper supplies. The almost universal attraction of sweetness, its properties as a stimulant, and its capacity to combine with a wide variety of foods and beverages enabled sugar to play a transformative role in the creation of modern diets and rituals of consumption. These chapters are especially effective in revealing the contrast between the barbarous conditions of extensive slave-based industrial monoculture (naturalized and aestheticized by Dutch landscape painters) and the refined forms of its consumption among the wealthy classes of Europe.

The next three chapters document maritime trade and European domination of the sea. Within one hundred years after what had been an achievement of planetary dimension, transatlantic voyages, while risky, had become remarkably routine. Chapter 4 discloses the surprisingly complex strategies for risk aversion. The emergence of maritime insurance was concomitant with the rise of transatlantic shipping. Its operation entailed the development of transnational legal conventions whose acceptance dispersed risk and enabled ships and cargoes to be insured throughout the Atlantic network. Merchants engaged in the Atlantic trade had to balance the costs of protection against those of potential profits. The greatest risk for ships involved in the sugar trade came from predators from other nations. Strum reveals an interesting set of strategic options developed by those engaged in Atlantic commerce. Merchants had to choose between insurance and armaments as the most cost effective way to protect their cargoes. A surprising variety of specialized ships and weaponry was available to them depending on the cargoes they were carrying and whether they decided that fight or flight was the best strategy. (Here, too, the images enhance the discussion of the types of ships.) Chapter 5 examines maritime routes. Voyages were carefully planned in order to synchronize tides and winds, the seasons of two hemispheres, natural obstacles, the nature of the crop, and the need to avoid privateers and colonial restrictions to ensure both successful completion of the voyage and its profitability. Chapter 6 provides a detailed account of the commercial organization of shipping from the raising
of capital for ships and cargo and the ways ships were chartered, to the distribution of responsibilities among different parties involved in the voyage. Here Strum discloses the complex contractual and legal arrangements between merchants, ship owners, and masters that protected property rights and established liability in order to ensure conditions of profitability as commodities moved through the transnational circuit of sugar.

The next chapters trace the intricacies of money and credit that allowed trade finance to operate over long distances and across national boundaries without the benefit of standardized measurements for either goods or money. The development of financial and commercial instruments made possible the organization of consignment, credit, and debt that underwrote physical movement of sugar and allowed the continual renewal of the circuit of sugar. The concentration of banking, financial, and commercial institutions in Amsterdam allowed it to dominate the Atlantic sugar trade.

Strum next reconstructs the merchant networks that both articulated and animated the sugar trade. Based on ties of kinship, religion, place of origin, or personal friendship and mutual interest, merchants were able to establish a reliable and effective network of agents throughout the circuits of the sugar trade who could be counted on to carry out the complex commercial and financial operations that made the trade economically viable. Strum pays special attention to the Portuguese Jewish and New Christian networks that played a prominent role and contributed to Amsterdam’s rise as the center of Atlantic commerce and finance.

Strum concludes with a discussion of the formation of normative behaviors, rules of conduct, and institutions that protected property, secured cooperation, and regulated competition among the agents of the sugar trade. These normative and regulatory practices allowed participants rational expectations and provided the means to discipline transgressors. Without such mechanisms trade could not have been conducted on a regular basis.

Taken together the chapters weave a “thick description” of the sugar trade that draws on social, cultural, economic, and political history. They contribute to our understanding of the formation of the Atlantic economy and the establishment of sugar as a key element of capitalist modernity. The book may be read profitably—and indeed, pleasurably—by specialists and non-specialists alike.

Dale Tomich
Department of Sociology, Binghamton University, Binghamton NY 13902, U.S.A.
dtomich@binghamton.edu