Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Rice in the Time of Sugar: The Political Economy of Food in Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. xiv + 249 pp. (Paper US\$29.95)

Rice is an essential part of the Cuban diet; that much is clear to anyone familiar with Cuba or Cubans. But how and when did the Cuban palate become so hooked on a food whose consumption relies on imports? *Rice in a Time of Sugar* interweaves historical testimony with factual evidence to explain this paradox. This account makes clear that, like most things in Cuba, the history of rice is inseparable from the history of the sugar industry, which is itself inextricable from the history of Spanish colonization and U.S. economic and political domination, both of which generated the structural dependence on food imports that persists in Cuba today.

Louis Pérez shows how food had taken on a political identity in Cuba by the nineteenth century when “the proposition of a distinctive Cuban cuisine entered the creole imagination” (p. 1). The meal espoused as the national dish, “ajiaco,” represented the ethnic complexity and racial diversity of the Cuban people with its mixture of local ingredients (tubers, cereals, fruits, vegetables, and meats) variously associated with the populations of indigenous people, Europeans, Africans, and Asians; as such, “the stew offered an ideal metaphor for *cubanidad*” (p. 4). Through *la cocina cubana* Creoles distinguished themselves from Spanish *peninsulares* (colonials); Cuban Creoles conspicuously drank black coffee and ate white rice and black beans rather than the chocolate drink, chickpeas, and paella favored by the Spaniards.

The typical Cuban dish was invariably defined by rice, such that the staple became, “a way of life, an obligatory presence on the Cuban table” (p. 13). A cookbook published in 1914 declared: “There is perhaps no country in the world, other than in China or India, where rice has come to signify the meal par excellence” (p. 18). Indeed, by the early twentieth century, Cuba’s per capita consumption of rice ranked among the world’s highest for non-Asian countries. And yet, as Pérez points out, “For all the vaunted and indeed celebrated centrality of rice in *la cocina cubana*, it is remarkable indeed to learn that the obligatory dish of the national cuisine ... has depended almost entirely on foreign imports” (p. 21).

Having introduced the enigma of the centrality of rice in the Cuban diet, Pérez goes on to describe the “utterly incomprehensible state of affairs,” in which Cubans lost the capacity to feed themselves at some point in the nineteenth century (p. 25). The book’s chapters divide the narrative into broad historical periods. Each one shows how calls to increase agricultural production for domestic consumption of rice and other foodstuffs went unheeded

as the national economy became increasingly dependent on the bitter-sweet prosperity of an expanding sugar industry that dragged the country through severe boom and bust cycles. Most acute was the so-called “dance of the millions,” which saw the total value of the sugar harvest peak at USD \$1 billion in 1920, before crashing down to \$292 million the following year.

Pérez underscores the external drivers behind this process. Among them were the “reciprocal” trade arrangements with the United States that forced Cuban markets wide open to U.S. producers, and the lobbying activities of U.S. agribusiness interests opposed Cuban attempts to bolster domestic food production. Additionally, both world wars contributed to the fate of Cuban agriculture by interrupting European food production and international trade. Forests were decimated and small farmers were run off the land by the likes of the United Fruit Company to facilitate the expansion of sugar plantations. Inequality and poverty grew alongside sugar prosperity. Less land was dedicated to the production of food for domestic consumption and the island’s trade dependency increased.

U.S. economist Edward Boorstein opened *The Economic Transformation of Cuba* by stating: “The central fact about the Cuban economy before the Revolution was neither its one-crop concentration on sugar, nor the monopoly of most of the agricultural land by huge *latifundia* [plantations], nor the weakness of national industry ... the central fact about the Cuban economy was its domination by American monopolies—by American imperialism. It was from imperialist domination that the specific characteristics flowed” (1969:1). Unlike Boorstein, Pérez does not theorize Cuba’s sugar dependency in terms of imperialist exploitation, unequal terms of trade, or structuralism. However, by providing a detailed and compelling account of agricultural production and food trade over 150 years, *Rice in the Time of Sugar* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Cuban political economy. It is highly recommended to students of any period of Cuban history and anyone interested in the history of agriculture and food.

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