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COMMENT

Suggestions and Debates: *The World of Sugar* and the Commodity Frontiers Initiative*

Epilogue

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Over the past 800 years, a far-flung sugar commerce has connected distant points in Eurasia, and, from the fifteenth century, it encompassed the Atlantic Worlds as well. It offers an excellent field of study for global historians keen to focus on connections and anxious to avoid the pitfalls of methodological nationalism. Moreover, it is a showcase of the tremendous flexibility and adaptability of global sugar capitalism that became more powerful with every successive crisis. *The World of Sugar* is about sugar capitalism in a broad sense, including the many resistances and sidesteps, and it takes notice of its cultural and ideological dimensions. The aim was to write a singular history driven by a variety of actors that together shape this world of sugar. But, as in every theatre, some perform bigger roles than others.

In my book, capitalism takes centre stage, and this means that I attribute a central role to owners of the means of production. This is obviously a highly diverse group, ranging from the sugar tycoons controlling tens of thousands of people and acres of land, as well as highly capital-intensive factories, to the small farmers planting some sugar cane on their land to obtain some additional income. In some cases, the modes of production of the latter are linked to the global capitalist economy, but even then they are not necessarily shaped by it. The story of peasants in South Asia and Latin America producing their own raw sugar outside of the global sugar market and beyond the reach of large-scale industrial complexes indeed shows the limits of global capitalism's reach. In addition to the existence of a significant sector of "low-capital" sugar manufacturing up to the present day, there are many stories of "big capital" failing. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of examples of unsuccessful introductions of sugar plantations. In Tamil Nadu, as Parthasarathi points out, high levels of taxation and relatively high wage levels all but eliminated this region as a competitive exporter of cash crops.

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The production of both sugar and cotton remained marginal there for most of the nineteenth century.[1]

Yet, the many failures and the resilience of local agrarian systems and local consumption preferences hardly put brakes on the expansion of an increasingly capital-intensive global sugar production. In our article in the *Journal of Global History*, which introduced the research agenda of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative – mentioned in my Introduction – we argued that the "history of the making of the modern world is a history of the expansion of commodity frontiers, a historical process so spatially, socially and structurally all-encompassing that it still awaits its persuasive analysis".[2] The history of sugar, as the most internationally traded commodity in the nineteenth century, obviously plays an important role in this agenda. In *The World of Sugar,* I have applied the agenda's analytical framework, narrating, for example, how, during and after the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of the sugar frontier was moved by powerful sugar industrialists who invested in the most advanced equipment, aided by bright technicians and botanists who took care of a rapid diffusion of expertise. As Neveling points out, these technology transfers played a key role in the convergence of methods of sugar production. Often, these transfers were introduced by planters who travelled from one colony to another, fleeing wars or revolutions. Their mobility and transnational outlook were pivotal in the emergence of a remarkably globalized world of sugar. For this reason, the sugar bourgeoisies, often born and living in the colonial dependencies – for which reason I refer to them as colonial bourgeoisies – play such a central role in this book.

On the other end of the scale one finds the workers without means of production, many of whom were enslaved or indentured. Even today, in north-east Brazil, in the western states of India, and in the Dominican Republic, people work in the cane fields in slave-like conditions. At the same time, the history of work in the plantations is one of unabating resistance. Slave rebellions were crucial in ending the pre-industrial plantation system. Mass strikes and protests in the sugar colonies during the Great Depression of the 1930s brought about a revolution in Cuba and forced the British government to fundamentally change its policies towards its colonial dependencies of the West Indies and Mauritius. The critical writings by outstanding scholars such as the Saint Lucian (West Indies) Nobel Prize winner W. Arthur Lewis and the Brazilian economist Celso Furtado on the historically deeply rooted impoverishment of the sugar cane belts in this world laid the foundations for development economics. Moreover, Fidel Castro's revolution was the direct result of Cuba's subservient position as a US sugar dependency. This revolution, as well as the acknowledgement of the revolutionary potential owing to the deprivation of north-east Brazil after three centuries of sugar extraction, induced President Kennedy to start the Alliance of Progress for Latin America.

Widespread resistances at the world's sugar frontiers have demonstrably enforced adaptations of institutional arrangements supporting global capitalism. This notion

[1]See also Kumar Dharma, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1992), pp. 114–115.

[2]Sven Beckert *et al*., "Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside: A Research Agenda", *Journal of Global History*, FirstView (2021), p. 435.

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also guided the framework that was spelled out in our joint article in the *Journal of Global History*, which, in turn, was inspired by the notion of "food regimes", the analytical device of Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael.[3] Particularly important in this respect has been the emphasis Friedmann gave to the moments of crisis between the different successive regimes, being defined as global arrangements under the aegis of a hegemonic power, such as Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States since 1945.[4] In the history of sugar, such moments of systemic crisis are pertinent, for example, at the time of the abolition of the slave trade and, indeed, the Great Depression of the 1930s. At these moments, labour resistance changed the course of sugar capitalism at a systemic (i.e. global) level. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the end of the slave trade did not bring the much hoped for beginning of the end of slavery, let alone of coerced labour in the cane fields. Likewise, the alternative models of production such as sugar cooperatives that emerged from the dismal 1930s did not result in meaningful ownership by smallholders of the production process in the Global South. Although most sugar in the world is produced by smallholders today, they are too often in the thrall of big transnational sugar corporations, who determine the choice of cane varieties, often supply the pesticides and fertilizer, and finally set the price farmers can obtain for their cane.

Indubitably, at present, smallholders and landless workers have better means to resist oppression than at the time of slavery and indenture. Yet their voices are glaringly absent in history writing. Likewise, as Queiroz notes, their perspectives seem to be under-represented in my book. I am aware of the fact that the administration of big sugar companies is better documented than the lived experiences of sugar workers, and I underwrite the necessity to look for the silences in these archives and allow those who are not represented in the archives to speak. The question posed by Queiroz and Neveling about the options to write a global history of sugar based upon the voices from below are not only legitimate, but also urgent. They might induce us to think about alternative economic models that liberate instead of enslave. Or, to cite Neveling: "The question, then, is whether an additional global historical narrative of enslaved, indentured, and free wage workers or of those who worked their way up colonial hierarchies into middle management, business ownership, and political positions, could lead to similar insights into transhistorical personae and personhood."[5] There are some jumping-off points offered in the later part of my book, which indeed beg to be further elaborated.

It is difficult to disagree with these observations, and I have no inclination to deny that *The World of Sugar* might have given more room to these voices from below. I nonetheless made different choices, emphasizing the dominant bourgeois model of accumulation of wealth over the generations. As Thomas Piketty has already made abundantly clear, over time wealth tends to accumulate in the hands of the happy few.

[3]Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, "Agriculture and the State System: The Rise and Decline of National Agricultures, 1870 to the Present", *Sociologia Ruralis*, 29:2 (1989), pp. 93–117; Philip McMichael, *Food Regimes and Agrarian Questions* (Black Point, 2013).

[4]Harriet Friedmann, "From Colonialism to Green Capitalism: Social Movements and Emergence of Food Regimes", in Frederick H. Buttel and Philip D. McMichael (eds), *New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development* (Bingley, 2005), pp. 227–264.

[5]Patrick Neveling, "Historical Materialist Anthropology and *The World of Sugar*: Cross-Disciplinary Research Agendas", *International Review of Social History* (2025), doi:10.1017/S0020859025100643

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As Bernardi points out, the powerful position of the big sugar corporations has been built up over the centuries. And, as Neveling observes, the considerable profits from the Atlantic commerce, which was completely dominated by slavery, ended up in the hands of the economic elites of England, the Dutch Republic, and France, laying the basis for the industrial sugar complexes of the nineteenth century. Profits from capital accumulate much more easily than wages grow, and the agro-industrial sugar sector is a case in point.

There is another point I would like to make here. Sugar workers across the globe have had few interests in common. The Jamaican cane workers in Cuba did not share interests with either the Polish beet workers in Germany or the Mexican beet workers in California or Michigan. Since the nineteenth century, the world of sugar was one of fierce global competition. The sugar bourgeoisies were capable of surviving the pressures of the market thanks to their control of the political institutions, excluding workers, particularly workers of colour, either via Jim Crow legislation – as was the case in the US state of Louisiana – undermining universal suffrage and oppressing unionism, or excluding them from suffrage entirely, as was the case in Brazil and Cuba. In this respect they were bourgeoisies in the classical Marxian meaning of the word.

There is no doubt that oppressive labour conditions in the world's cane and beet fields in the early twentieth century were the outcome of relentlessly declining sugar prices. In the same way, the fate of the sugar cane workers in Brazil is connected to horrific conditions in West India today owing to depressed sugar prices. This race to the bottom of sugar prices was sustained by an almost unlimited supply of labour in the poorest countries of the world. As Bernardi points out, migrants, not their employers, pay for their journey; the latter might *advance* their fares, but, as a rule, these are deducted from the wages. The ubiquitous application of pesticides saves crops, but field workers pay for it with an early death. This demonstrates the appalling weakness of labour versus capital. And when workers did resist, sugar industrialists were keen to put workers in a condition of competition, to deny them the right to collective action, and to exploit a dearth or absence of citizenship rights. Cane or beet workers from different ethnic backgrounds or foreign countries have always been unscrupulously played off against each other. As is shown throughout *The World of Sugar*, capitalism is a "race-making" phenomenon.

While it is necessary to give voice to the workers of the world, it is equally important to further analyse the exploits of the bourgeoisies that move capital wherever the best profits can be made. We are witnessing an increasingly concentrated corporate capitalism that can play off not only workers, but also entire regions or countries against each other. Often, these firms are assisted by governments that, in pursuit of foreign exchange, are prepared to put the army or paramilitary forces at the disposal of big sugar corporations operating in their countries. This facilitates, for example, the extensive land grabbing discussed by Kay, who brings to our attention the systematic expulsions of people from their land in Cambodia. Big sugar corporations are directly responsible for gross human rights violations – and they get away with it. There is some movement towards fair trade sugar, but it remains a minute element within the bulk of 170 million tons of sugar produced every year. Meanwhile, international solidarity is in short supply.

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