
Reviewed by Robert Ackrill (Nottingham Trent University)

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2023)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The World of Sugar—A Story Sweet and Sour

“What would Sidney Mintz think?” When reading and thinking about the story of sugar, I am sure I am not alone in thinking first of Mintz’s classic work, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (1985). With this new contribution to the field, by Ulbe Bosma, The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years, however, we at least know what Mintz would think of the motivating idea: at a workshop in 2001 that brought together historians researching sugar production in Asia and the Americas, he spoke about the need “to ‘rebalance’ the Atlantic-centric bias in how we had been writing the history of sugar” (p. 429).

This explains the significance of the title and signposts how The World of Sugar differs from other books on the story of sugar in the extent to which it explores global events.[1] It also hints at the scale and scope of the resulting work, which took over twenty years to write, with two thousand years of global history marshaled into 338 pages of discussion and nearly 90 further pages of endnotes, detailing the extraordinary number and range of sources used. Having read how important Java has been in the global history of sugar, I tested the “world” scope of the book by seeing how many page references to that island are present in each of the six books on sugar that I have. In the other five, there are between zero and eight separate page references to Java: in this book, half a column. This might be a pretty rough measure, but it reflects the global story presented by Bosma—and just how much of the story of sugar took place away from the Atlantic. Moreover, Bosma shows how dependent the Atlantic story is, in so many ways, on what was happening elsewhere.

The book is split into fourteen chapters, each of which is sufficiently bite-sized to be read in a single sitting, although it is telling that the longest chapters deal with different aspects of the story of
slavery and sugar. The chapters are also arranged roughly chronologically, but the content of each chapter is thematic. With this structure, we get to see clearly how the many dimensions of the study (including slavery and colonization, history, geography, economics, politics, technological innovation, and industry expansion) come together in different combinations at different points in time to tell a particular story. To help guide the reader, Bosma produces a handy timeline setting out key moments in the story of sugar. He also provides a valuable dramatis personae, allowing readers to keep track of the many key individuals who affected sugar in profound ways.

We begin a few centuries BCE, in India. This represents the time when granulated sugar was first being recorded, although the edible parts of sugarcane were being enjoyed millennia earlier. Over the next few centuries, the sugar that India produced spread both east and west. Inevitably, the details from this time are a bit hazy, but it appears that as sugar spread, so sugarcane cultivation followed, into China, Egypt, and Persia, and then globally. As with any agricultural commodity, however, sugarcane can only grow in certain conditions. Thus, those initial exchanges with a few elites led eventually to sugar becoming a major globally traded commodity as demand grew.

Once sugar reached the elites of Europe, they—literally—could not get enough of the stuff. This is where the Atlantic comes into play. Although this is the most familiar part of the horror story of sugar, shaped by colonization, slavery, and greed, Bosma’s attention to detail provides many moments of novelty and nuance to the, perhaps superficially familiar, story of the unimaginable conditions under which the millions of items of human property were transported, worked, and kept. As an example, while the Dutch might, in principle, have been opposed initially to slavery and its use in the production of sugar, soon enough this changed as commercial interests overtook moral inclinations. As one Dutch trader, Johannes van den Bosch, told the king: “Since people had to work, labor was forced by definition.” Thus by 1830, Van den Bosch “held his king’s approval to implement his forced cultivation system” in Java (p. 143).

Stories are also told of workers traveling much farther than across the Atlantic for sugar. Chinese contract laborers were reported as believing they were being taken to the gold fields of California, only to find themselves working on sugar plantations, mostly in Cuba, Peru, or Hawaii. Given a seemingly perpetual excess demand for sugar, and global competition and pressures on the sugar interests to keep costs, principally labor costs, down, technology eventually starts to feature in the story of sugar. Efforts at keeping costs down were aimed at multiple stages along the supply chain, from cane to sugar, although some elements were much harder to mechanize than others. One important feature of The World of Sugar is the detail provided in exploring how technologies flowed globally and in all directions. Some colonial powers invested in “their” sugar industries, such as the Dutch, who wanted to counter British interests. Meanwhile, the British chose not to make such investments. Political pressure at home from sugar refiners meant that any measure to improve the quality of the product leaving the colonies was opposed. In modern language, sugar refiners in Britain wanted to make sure they could capture the main value added arising from refined sugar production.

This anecdote brings us to a period when two developments caused particular disruption to the world of sugar. The first was the emergence of beet sugar, starting at the end of the eighteenth century. The second, on which the first was dependent, was governments’ increasing policy interventions in sugar. Long and convoluted is the story of these actions. As someone who has researched contemporary sugar policies, I found it both interesting and alarming to see the extent to which issues dominating debates in the last
twenty to thirty years have actually been present with sugar for at least two hundred years. To give just a snapshot, we see some European governments increasingly putting import tariffs on sugar coming from the East, such as Java, to protect their sugar interests in the Caribbean, which, as we have seen, could not compete with Java on (labor) costs. As beet sugar emerged, it needed protection against all cane sugar, as it could not compete on price. More recently, the sugar industry lobbied for protection against alternative sweeteners, such as high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and artificial sweeteners. For at least two centuries, governments have been trying to set policies that satisfy multiple, and often conflicting, lobbying interests. Coincidentally, as I was reading this part of the book, an email landed in my inbox with an article about how the current negotiations over prices for contracts between British beet growers and their buyer, British Sugar, had reached deadlock.[2]

A further complication in sugar’s political story dates from the nineteenth century and the beginnings of sugar as an input into processed food and drink products—with Bosma picking out familiar names, such as Cadbury (from the 1820s), Kellogg (from the 1900s), and Hershey (from the 1920s), incorporating sugar into their now-familiar products. From the 1970s, many switched to even cheaper sweeteners, such as HFCS. Thus, a picture is painted of different vested and politically powerful interests fighting over the sweetener market, with the sugar industry’s efforts to get the government to regulate against these alternatives growing as their market came under greater threat. That said, as much as they can be blamed for pushing ever more sugar into society’s food and drink, others can share some of the blame. The temperance movement campaigned against alcoholic drinks, but this merely boosted the drinking of tea and coffee, and with them, sugar, both in the drinks and the nibbles eaten alongside.

In this book, therefore, we are taken on a journey that, overall, most definitely adds to the corpus of books telling the story of sugar as a commodity with a truly global history. The considerable detail in the book is so far beyond what can be captured in a review that I have only been able to pick out the key bones of the skeleton, onto which a lot of flesh has been provided by Bosma. And it certainly justifies the “world” in the title.

There are, however, a couple of issues with the book that I am compelled to mention, even if they do not alter my general positivity. First, toward the end, Bosma takes a detour into the world of ethanol. This is only brief, less than a page, but it lacks a critical perspective questioning some of the most common tropes against using crops to produce biofuel. Ethanol is produced from multiple feedstocks, although the market is dominated by Brazil (using sugarcane) and the United States (corn). The US produced over half of the global total in 2019 (59.7 billion liters), close to twice as much as Brazil (33.4 billion liters).[3] Moreover, Brazil’s agricultural and biofuels expansion has come, in particular, since the program of economic liberalization starting in the 1990s.[4] It is therefore a mystery as to why Bosma argues that “expansion is being further driven by subsidies on biofuel, which have turned Brazil and the United States into the world’s largest ethanol producers” (p. 304). Brazil does not use subsidies, and US ethanol is derived almost exclusively from crops other than sugarcane or beet.

Bosma also argues that “cane gobbles up ever more land,” with the land area devoted to cane doubling between 1960 and 1985 (although we are not told where) (p. 304). The use of the present tense is misleading: Brazil’s cane area expanded only after economic liberalization and has been stable for the last decade.[5] Further, since 2009, Brazil has had an agro-ecological zoning scheme in place that limits where new sugarcane can be grown. In practice, this has restricted expansion to the regions in and around São Paulo state. One condition is that any new land must be capable of permitting mechanical harvesting, which has re-
moved manual cane cutting, something that Bosma tells us, repeatedly and rightly, is a truly awful job. The ethanol production in the US grew in response to policy incentives starting in 2005, but this is unrelated to sugarcane.

Bosma also offers dramatic imagery, such as when he argues that, “tragically, the conversion of forest to cane fields for ethanol will only result in more carbon emissions” and that “the race for agro-fuels may bring large swaths of Africa, the Philippines, Brazil, and Indonesia into the hands of foreign companies” (p. 304). These claims are purely speculative, with no evidence provided to show where sugarcane production is even having these effects, let alone whether the sugarcane is then used to produce ethanol.

The second issue with this book is that there is not much drawing of narrative arcs over time, in particular concerning the policy concerns and policy responses over the last two hundred to three hundred years. Many of the issues shaping modern sugar policies are not new. The amount of policy attention devoted to sugar, for the reasons outlined above, could have been explored to show how the historical-political shaping of sugar production, consumption, and policies is still evident in the current story of sugar. Indeed, recent research has shown how historical-colonial linkages still influence sugar trade patterns today.[6]

These shortcomings notwithstanding, this book offers an important new contribution to the literature on the history of sugar. Many of the shadows of sugar are dark, they spread over the entire world, and they are very, very, long.

Notes


Robert Ackrill is professor of European economics and policy at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. He describes himself as a historical institutionalist, something that has influenced his research over many years. He has published widely on agricultural policies in general, including several journal articles and a book on sugar and biofuels, and the ways policies have evolved over time.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59540

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.