POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD IN CUBA

Rice in the Time of Sugar: The Political Economy of Food in Cuba. By Louis A. Pérez, Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Pp. 264. $29.95 paper.
doi:10.1017/tam.2021.91

For millennia, rice and sugar have decisively shaped land use patterns, labor regimes, and culinary traditions around the planet. These "proletarian hunger killers"—to borrow Sidney Mintz's felicitous phrase—have also been fundamental to the making of national identities. While Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" came to life on the moveable type of the printing press, Louis A. Pérez Jr.'s notion of "a discernable national cuisine" (1) simmered in the stewpots of *la cocina cubana*. Cuba's criollos consumed white rice, black beans, and black coffee to distinguish themselves from *peninsulares* who ate "colonizer foods" like chickpeas, chocolate, and paella.

As Pérez cogently demonstrates, the counterpoint of rice and sugar offers new vantage points on Cuban history. The Reciprocity Treaty of 1903 that followed the Spanish-American War (1898), along with the renegotiated treaty of 1934 and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in the 1940s and 1950s, shaped the contours of the young Cuban Republic's dependency on the United States as an export market for the island's sugar and the dominant source of its rice. *Arroz*, the starchy anchor of Cuban cuisine, was a logical crop for the island's rich tropical soils, yet most of the rice consumed by Cubans was imported from the country's northern neighbor throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This dependency generated bitter ironies, given that rice was so central to the cultural rhythms of Cuban life. As "an obligatory presence on the Cuban table" (13), rice played starring roles in weddings, birthdays, and the initiation of newborns to the world of taste.

The book's early sections focus on rice, and its later chapters dwell on the other half of the counterpoint, sugar. Following World War I, colossal corporations, mostly US-owned, "converted vast swaths of the national territory into immense fields of sugarcane" (75). By the 1930s, economic growth from Cuban sugar production had stagnated. Attempts to stimulate domestic rice production suggested promising avenues for diversifying the island's agrarian sector, but a cabal of US rice producers in Texas and Louisiana mobilized their allies in Washington to help them maintain Cuba's dependence on imported rice. Two decades later, Cuba had amassed an insurmountable trade deficit with its northern neighbor. As Pérez demonstrates, this unwieldy imbalance was a key factor in undermining the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, which fell at the end of the Cuban Revolution (1953-59).

Matters changed little in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite Fidel Castro's promises of self-sufficiency through import substitution, "Cuba diversified less its agriculture than the sources of its agricultural imports" (177), obtaining its rice from Asian nations instead of from US suppliers. In a lengthy epilogue that could have easily

been expanded into several stand-alone chapters, Pérez explores how US rice farmers have been strong advocates for ending the US trade embargo with Cuba. As he points out, rice from the United States represented 80 percent of the island nation's imports of the staple in 2006.

The book's arguments build on a decade of meticulous research in a diverse array of primary sources, ranging from nineteenth-century cookbooks to unpublished materials from the archives of the Banco de Fomento Agrícola e Industrial de Cuba, an administrative entity in charge of promoting rice production. When these are placed in conversation with documents Pérez acquired from of the Louisiana Rice Milling Company, the Rice Millers Association, several family archives, the US State Department, and US congressional records, the result is both forceful and convincing.

The author might have given readers more details about Cuba's farm laborers—the women and men whose lives were directly impacted by the precarious trade imbalances that the book chronicles. Nevertheless, such a minor oversight does little to detract from a major achievement of historical scholarship. This book will be of great interest to students of Latin American-US relations, food history, and agrarian studies.

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CARIBBEAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

The Last Turtlemen of the Caribbean: Waterscapes of Labor, Conservation, and Boundary Making. By Sharika D. Crawford. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Pp. 216. $29.95 paper.
doi:10.1017/tam.2021.92

If you love sea turtles, this book might break your heart. As with so much of environmental history, it is a sobering reminder that humans have a long history of exercising predation upon other creatures, and that the turtles of the Caribbean were no exception. However, even knowing in advance that the turtles do not fare well, this book deserves attention because is exceptionally well written and argued.

The author tells a multilayered story centered around the fishing or hunting of the green turtle (and the hawksbill turtle and others), from the Cayman Islands through the entire Caribbean Sea, including tiny islands as well as the coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The narrative expands from the geographic waterscape to the political arrangements that shaped the hunt from colonial times into the late twentieth century, a couple of hundred years. As the men who hunted the turtles extinguished their prey in the British colonies, their forays led them further and further into waters and territories