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Leida Fernández Prieto, *Cuba agrícola: mito y tradición, 1878–1920* (Madrid: CSIC, 2005), pp. 359, pb.

Leida Fernández Prieto, *Espacio de poder, ciencia y agricultura en Cuba: el Círculo de Hacendados, 1878–1917* (Madrid: CSIC, Universidad de Sevilla and Diputación de Sevilla, 2008), pp. 331, pb.

In reporting on the first year of operation of the experimental agronomic station in Santiago de las Vegas, in Havana's rural hinterland, the Cuban agricultural reformer Francisco Cruz remarked that 'the happy period has now passed when with pride we could say that Cuba was a promised land, over which it was sufficient to cast the seed in order to harvest shortly afterwards tasty, exquisite and abundant fruit' (*Cuba agrícola*, p. 45). By the late nineteenth century, it had become evident just how severe the ecological cost of 'traditional' approaches to sugarcane and tobacco cultivation, in particular, had been. Soil exhaustion had resulted in diminishing returns on land that had been the richest throughout the preceding century, and this stimulated the push to research and apply the latest in scientific advances in order to tackle the problem of increasing yields and compensate for the erosion in soil quality.

These two books by Leida Fernández, a Cuban historian based at Spain's *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas* in Madrid, complement one another, and together they make an important contribution to our knowledge of the processes by which Cuba adopted scientific approaches to agricultural production during the period spanning the final years of Spanish colonial domination and the first two decades of an independence that was compromised by the direct involvement of the United States in the island. While *Cuba agrícola* assumes a broad perspective, providing an in-depth study of agricultural practices and change in the western half of Cuba and drawing on a very wide variety of sources, *Espacio de poder, ciencia y agricultura en Cuba* approaches the same questions and themes through the detailed study of one of the key institutions involved in promoting the island's agricultural and scientific development in this period, the *Círculo de Hacendados*.

An important motif running through *Cuba agrícola* is the distinction between traditional and modern approaches to agricultural production. Fernández begins by presenting the problems that necessitated such reforms and goes on to detail the institutionalisation of these reforming tendencies, which took agricultural policies beyond the individual impulses of concerned landowners with the establishment of experimental agronomic stations and a School of Agriculture. She then analyses in depth the modernising impulse as applied to the two principal commodity crops of western Cuba, sugar and tobacco, showing how cultivators were encouraged to employ the latest advances in fertilisation and irrigation, as well as improved varieties and approaches to dealing with problems such as plagues.

There has for long been a tendency when considering the history of Cuba to concentrate on the principal export crops, in particular sugar. Fernández helps to break from this, providing a push towards the study of what was occurring on the frontiers and in the interstices of commodity crop cultivation. She demonstrates that, although this was a period characterised by the rise of large central sugar factories fed by ever-expanding cane fields, such a view disguises a notable tendency towards diversification within Cuban agriculture. Whether to provide for the subsistence requirements of the peasantry, to stock local markets or to become an export crop in their own right, a wide range of vegetables and fruits were also

cultivated, often on land that had once been dominated and then exhausted by sugarcane or tobacco.

Fernández also shows how agricultural innovation and modernisation in Cuba, rather than being the result of foreign influence, was the result largely of an indigenous impulse. Creole landowners were often the most affected by soil exhaustion, and by the processes that were leading to their sugar plantations becoming supplanted by the new central sugar factories. Whereas the large, often foreign-owned plantations that extended in the eastern part of the island in this period were able to enjoy the benefits of virgin land, and considerable untapped forest resources, if producers in the western part of the island were to continue competing, they needed to make up for their over-farmed land and lack of forest resources through the application of the latest in scientific knowledge. Such an impulse on their part was far from new. In fact, it had characterised their approach to farming since the 1790s, with creole landowners taking the lead throughout the nineteenth century in the introduction of the latest in technological advances and scientific thinking, although until the late nineteenth century they had concentrated more on scientific improvements in manufacturing than in cultivation itself. It had been this that had led Cuban sugar production to become the most developed of the period, and had gained the island world dominance in cane sugar, as well as an international reputation for its tobacco. Now, at the turn of the century, while the island was breaking from Spanish colonialism and resisting the imposition of North American neocolonialism, once again Cuban landowners and agriculturalists played their part through their desire to modernise the island.

Ironically, though, it would seem that much of the diversification that occurred in agricultural production came from North American colonists, who had access to the investment that many modern techniques required – many Cuban farmers lacked such financial resources. The move from plantation production of sugarcane to the farming of cane for supply to large central factories in fact enabled many Cuban peasants to take part in the sugar economy from which they had previously been effectively excluded, though their lack of sufficient capital and tendency therefore to continue to employ 'traditional' cultivation methods led to tensions with those who were promoting the new scientific approaches. It is also interesting to note that peasants appear to have made active choices as to what they cultivated, alternating between commodity and subsistence crops as their needs and the market determined.

In *Espacio de poder*, Fernández develops further her analysis of the role that Cuban landowners and farmers played in the development of agriculture in Cuba during this same period, through the discussions and interventions of their principal institution, the Círculo de Hacendados. Although it was not without disagreements among its members, Fernández see the Círculo as coming to provide a collective representation of a combination of interests that were coalescing as a rural middle class drawn from large landowners on the one hand and the wealthier peasant farmers on the other. The book begins by tracing the process by which such agriculturalists came to institutionalise their interests out of their own individual endeavours in the course of the nineteenth century. Fernández then describes the formation and operation of the Círculo de Hacendados and the role it played in late nineteenth-century developments, not just in Cuban agriculture but also in the island's economy more broadly. She then analyses, through the lens of the Círculo and its participants, the application of advances in chemical science to the problems

facing Cuban agriculture, particularly in relation to sugarcane. Finally, Fernández provides a history of the formation and ten years of operation of the School of Agriculture established by the Círculo.

Fernández shows that although the Círculo de Hacendados provided an institutional context within which an attempt was made to articulate the collective interests of landowners and farmers, in the end it proved impossible for them to consolidate as a social class capable of fulfilling its potential as a leading actor in the assertion of independent national interests. Although nominally convinced of the need for agricultural diversification, the Círculo remained dominated by those involved in sugarcane cultivation. While these individuals were committed to the promotion of scientific methods, the increasing dependence upon the North American market and the apparent commercial advantages offered to Cuban sugar interests by the Reciprocity Treaty of 1903 resulted in a furthering of a process already begun in the nineteenth century. Quantity replaced quality as the defining characteristic of Cuban sugar. The Cuban landowners who sought to defend their interests through the Círculo (and after independence, the *Liga Agraria*) became supplanted by North American and British investors, and their plantations were overshadowed by the massive new sugar *centrales* in the east of the island.

Both *Cuba agrícola* and *Espacio de poder* draw on an impressive array of primary sources, including Spanish and Cuban archives and newspapers, as well as the wide range of agricultural and scientific tracts that were published in Cuba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With these two studies Fernández positions herself firmly at the forefront of some important contemporary debates within Cuban historiography: the active role of the Cuban rural elite in the modernisation of the island's agriculture and economy; the social dynamics underlying the political change from decadent Spanish empire to neocolonially compromised independence; and the complexity of an island whose history has always been far more than the export crops that have typically characterised it. Although these two connected studies are very rooted in the empirical history of Cuba itself, the questions raised and the themes considered go far beyond the island. While research into commodity chains is enabling us to understand the networks that tied local production and social dynamics into national, regional and even global interconnecting processes, by focusing too heavily on key commodity crops there is a danger that our historical perspective will become clouded to the complex way in which such export commodities were cultivated in conjunction, and at times in competition, with other forms of land use and industry, with local actors playing an important role in determining the outcome of this relationship. Leida Fernández points the way towards an approach to empirical historical research that succeeds in balancing such complexity.

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Araceli Tinajero, *El lector de tabaquería: historia de una tradición cubana* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2007), pp. 259, pb.

The practice of reading aloud to tobacco workers while they work has long been recognised as a distinctive part of Cuban culture. In this fascinating study of the