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Review Articles



Tobacco and Politics in the Caribbean

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Charlotte Cosner, *The Golden Leaf: How Tobacco Shaped Cuba and the Atlantic World*. Nashville TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015. xiv + 182 pp. (Cloth US\$ 35.00)

Teresita A. Levy, *Puerto Ricans in the Empire: Tobacco Growers and U.S. Colonialism*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. x + 214 pp. (Paper US\$ 28.95)

Tobacco is a fascinating crop. It is a plant that originated in the Americas and boasts a rich tradition of spiritual power. It has often been heralded (most famously in Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's 1940 book, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*) for its role in supporting small-scale family agriculture and sustaining democratic societal relations. In both the colonial era and the period of modern export-oriented agriculture around the turn of the twentieth century, it played an important economic role in Latin America, providing a major source of income to entrepreneurs and the state while allowing small-scale producers to maintain their subsistence-oriented family economy. And as a product for global consumption it has caused an unprecedented medical catastrophe throughout the world.

In the animated debate that these contrasting qualities have inspired, the crop sometimes seems to acquire an agency of its own. In the introduction to *The Golden Leaf*, Charlotte Cosner draws attention to the ways “tobacco

affected the world in terms of culture, society, governmental control, and economics,” and she underscores “tobacco’s enduring impact” in the modern world (p. 4). Focusing on the role of tobacco in colonial Cuban society, she carefully describes and analyzes the political context in which colonial Cuban tobacco cultivation was embedded. After two introductory chapters on tobacco cultivation on the island, she analyzes the relationship between Cuban growers and the Spanish bureaucracy. The growers, by no means only powerless peasants, were often Spanish-born entrepreneurs who were well prepared to defend their economic interests. This became clear when the colonial government instituted a tobacco monopoly in 1717. The *vegueros* (tobacco farmers) first combatted the decision by peaceful, legal means, but when this proved fruitless, they turned to violence, setting fire to houses and tobacco fields. The conflict lasted for six years, ending in 1723 with the bloody repression of the revolt.

The tobacco monopoly fundamentally changed the political and social structure of rural society in both Cuba and other parts of the Spanish Empire. It was never uncontested, especially because the State failed to pay the producers adequately. In this way, it created what colonial officials considered a major problem and what Cosner calls “a form of subtle resistance”: *contrabanda*. She devotes a chapter of the book to the illegal commercial activities that Spanish mercantilism provoked, showing the desperate and eventually unsuccessful efforts of the Spanish Crown to maintain control over its most important export activity and to curb the diverse ways in which the monopoly was resisted. Cosner rightly observes that illegal activity “ultimately depended on government officials turning a blind eye to it or participating in it themselves” (p. 109). In this sense, the illegal trade “tested the very essence of state control” (p. 114). In a tantalizing short section she argues that this kind of resistance happened everywhere in the Spanish colonial empire.

The Cuban tobacco monopoly was frequently reorganized and renamed. Ultimately the state control was a failure and it was abolished in 1817. In this sense, it can be considered to have been a symbol of the weakness of the Spanish colonial empire. However, tobacco exports from the island always maintained themselves as an important activity, contrary to, for instance, the situation in Louisiana where both the French and the Spanish failed to foment a viable tobacco sector. In the late eighteenth century the Cuban monopoly produced high returns on its investment. In her epilogue Cosner concludes therefore that this episode also exemplified “the incredible capacity of the Bourbon Crown to generate revenue and create a new colonial bureaucracy” (p. 135), drawing attention to the productive and entrepreneurial side of the monopoly. This is an interesting point which challenges the traditional view

of a powerless and inert Spanish bureaucracy. On the other hand, her book offers little to explain the paradox that the creole struggle against the tobacco monopoly in Cuba did not lead to independence as happened in other parts of the Empire.

The most original contribution of *The Golden Leaf* is its focus on the diversity of the producers within the Cuban tobacco sector. In addition to the Spanish growers, the slave population and “people of color” also produced large quantities of tobacco. In this sense, Cosner explicitly distances herself from the legacy of Ortiz, who based his analysis on the white small-scale producers. In a more implicit way, her book also gives concrete examples of the contradictory consequences of Spanish colonialism in Cuba. For tobacco *aficionados* this book has a lot to offer, though it suffers a little bit, like much tobacco literature, from an exclusive focus on the tobacco sector. As a result, the more general context of Cuban colonial society largely remains out of sight. This hinders a satisfactory assessment of the importance of tobacco agriculture in Cuban colonial history.

In many ways, Teresita Levy continues where Cosner leaves off. She is also interested in the colonial context of tobacco growing, but focuses on Puerto Rico in the first half of the twentieth century when the colonial power was the United States. Like Cosner, Levy uses tobacco agriculture to provide a changing perspective on the island’s history and, above all, to emphasize the agency of the colonial subject. The tobacco sector provides an alternative to what she calls the predominant “sugar narrative,” which traditionally focused on “victimization and imperial abuse” destroying and displacing the Puerto Rican peasants (p. 3). Instead, she draws attention to the “history of activism and participation” that was engendered by tobacco.

Levy’s book covers the period between 1898, when the United States took formal control over the island (and better serial data became available to the historian!), and 1940. Although ignored by traditional historiography, the tobacco sector was booming until 1929. During many years it was the most valuable crop after sugar but before coffee. Many people migrated to the central highlands, especially to the east of the island, which was the center of tobacco cultivation. Levy concludes that the lack of cash circulating in the tobacco region—often seen as proof of its poverty—was compensated by the fact that most tobacco cultivators owned their own piece of land. She concludes that farmers in the tobacco region had more opportunity to subsist as independent producers than those in the sugar and coffee regions, and backs up that argument in the second half of the book by focusing on three elements of the tobacco economy. First, she analyzes the associational behavior of the peasantry, already made famous in Juan José Baldrich’s 1988 analysis of the producers’ strikes, *Sembraron la no siembra*. The call for a “*no siembra*” was caused by low market prices and inept

state intervention. It is generally considered a symbol of the autonomous and activist political position of the tobacco growers.

Levy's final two chapters then analyze the changing credit structure and the increasing technification of tobacco production. The specific situation of Puerto Rico as a U.S. dominated territory led to an extensive credit system. Levy makes clear that this existed mainly on paper, and that small-scale producers continued to rely on informal (and normally usurious) credit systems. This was different in the case of the technological assistance, which became an important way for the state to become engaged with the tobacco producers. In the early decades of the twentieth century a plethora of initiatives were implemented. Levy emphasizes the tobacco growers' support for these efforts. My reading is that through this assistance the government tried to push forward its colonial project and "ideologies of progress," focusing, as Levy observes, on "the nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, and comfort of the rural population" (p. 116). These efforts targeted the tobacco growing regions because the poor peasantry was considered the most backward element of the Puerto Rican population. It is no surprise, in this context, that part of these efforts was directed to the "housewives," the female half of the population which was seen as urgently in need of education and civilized modernity.

The underlying argument of Levy's book is that peasant agriculture of tobacco was an important foundation of Puerto Rico's economic, but certainly also social, tissue. In this sense, it is in line with Ortiz's analysis and follows the traces of Julian Steward's famous 1956 collection, *The People of Puerto Rico*. I sympathize with this view, but Chapter 2, on which Levy's analysis is mainly based, is not fully convincing. It sketches a picture of a small-scale peasant sector which, as anywhere, combined the safety of the family economy and a certain independence with an increasingly fragile existence. Decreasing prices, land fragmentation, hurricanes, and commercial extortion were just a few of the perils confronting the producers. The neocolonial situation of Puerto Rico provided a very specific context for this situation. Tobacco agriculture became a symbol of the "traditional," independent Puerto Rico, and the political activism that evolved from the sector should be understood in that light. In this way, anticolonial ideas provided an ideological foundation for the struggle of the peasantry.

This connection with the (neo)colonial situation of Puerto Rico may be seen as the main thesis of Levy's book. She draws attention to the negotiation and participation of the peasantry instead of its victimization. In her conclusion she writes: "Tobacco cultivation provides a prism through which we can analyze the myriad ways that Puerto Ricans negotiated the American empire" (p. 134). However, in many ways her story points in different directions. On the one hand, it

shows that rural society was deeply divided. The various people that she treats as a single category, “tobacco growers,” were in fact highly heterogeneous. The differentiation between various types of producers (with different economic and political interests) is something that Levy does not bring out very clearly, possibly because her documentary sources do not allow her to do so.

On the other hand, her book also shows that U.S. colonialism was less one-sided than is often depicted. U.S. officials really wanted to modernize the Puerto Rican countryside. Sometimes they succeeded, but most of the time they did not know how to do it. One of the problems encountered by U.S. officials was that they did not understand Puerto Rican rural society. While they were confronted by the political activism of the more well-to-do tobacco growers, they were unable to reach the poorest sectors which they most urgently wanted to modernize.

Here a comparative perspective may be useful. In the northern part of the Dominican Republic there was an equally vibrant tobacco sector, but it did not lead to autonomous political activism in the early twentieth century. Peasant society continued to be embedded in clientelist relations in this region and the peasants were dependent to the land-owning and commercial classes. During the U.S. Occupation, which began in 1916, resistance came from other regions and the tobacco growers largely acquiesced. Interestingly, the only “revolutionary moment” of the tobacco growers came in February 1930 when tobacco-growing peasants joined the march to the capital to support Trujillo’s cause as president. This support for Trujillo, which is still remembered in the region, continued to be relatively strong during his long reign (1930–61) as dictator of the country.

While Dominican tobacco growers were at least recognized as political subjects, this was not the case in northeastern Brazil. In the Bahia region tobacco agriculture was in the hands of the ex-slave population. Small-scale tobacco cultivation allowed the recently freed slaves to secure a subsistence, but “under the radar,” almost outside the regional body politic. The crop played an increasingly important role in the development of the region, but the ethnic and social distance of tobacco growers in the Bahian countryside precluded any form of political activism on their part.

So, if we return to the issue of the so-called “agency” of tobacco, the plant’s innate characteristics that made it a poor man’s crop, we have to conclude that some nuance is in order. These two books show how in widely different periods and circumstances, in both Cuba and Puerto Rico, tobacco allowed some producers to accumulate financial wealth and political power, while others were left behind. It is the factors underlying this continuing differentiation that need to be explained, ideally via a combination of global and local considera-

tions. The international commerce, and especially the role of the mercantile class and the organization of export, played a crucial role. This explains why, already in the colonial context, the tobacco monopoly provoked such strong reactions among some tobacco growers. However, these reactions were the result of the local constellation of the agricultural process. Tobacco could be profitably grown as a poor man's crop, but it could also render ample (though sometimes speculative) profits to richer and more market-oriented producers. The resulting heterogeneity of the sector may well be its most distinguishing characteristic. Tobacco indeed had a vital impact on Caribbean societies, but the explanation for this impact needs to be sought more in the social and ethnic relations in which it was embedded, and less in the botanical characteristics of the tobacco plant itself.