
Reviewed by Jorge I. Domínguez

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In 1926, President Gerardo Machado proclaimed, “Without economic independence there can be no true political independence. We, who wish above all to preserve our political independence, obtained with the sacrifice of so many precious lives, … must secure our economic independence” (p. 90). In some contrast, President of the Council of State, Fidel Castro, affirmed in 1977, “We ran tests on corn, rice, coffee, and other crops, and found we could get $400 a hectare from them. Sugar brings US $7,000 a hectare. So we will continue to sell sugar and to buy other things we need on the world market” (p. 179). Those two quotations, in tension with each other, formulate the goals of Cuba’s nationalism and the structural market logic that made it so difficult to achieve those goals.

A star historian of Cuba lays out, in magnificent and admirably researched detail, Cuban sugar’s vast generating wealth potential as well as its paralysing burden on Cuba’s attempts at economic diversification and self-supply. Pérez focuses on the trade-offs between sugar exports and domestic rice production. The promotion and defence of the sugar industry and agriculture persistently seemed to require privileging sugar exports at the cost of other domestic production.

The book’s introduction marches through Cuban cookbooks and diet across the centuries to establish the centrality of rice for Cubans. Chapter 1 describes the spurt in sugar wealth in the 19th century and Cuba’s dependence on food imports. Chapter 2 sketches the hardships of Cuban rice consumers in the early 20th century, while sugar production and wealth boomed. Chapter 3 characterises the sugar economy’s collapse in the late 1920s and 1930s and its rebirth during World War II, when US exporters came to monopolise the Cuban rice imports market. Chapter 4 presents the systematic efforts of the Carlos Prío and Fulgencio Batista presidencies to advance a nationalist economic agenda, promoting rice production. Chapter 5 features the US rice producers’ counteroffensive in the 1950s to curb domestic Cuban rice output through threats to curtail Cuban sugar exports to the United States. A brief Epilogue reviews matters from 1959 until the 21st century.
Beginning late in the 19th century, successive governments of Cuba sought secure access for its sugar in the US market, in exchange for granting privileged access to US products in the Cuban market. Pérez focuses on rice because of its historic salience in the Cuban diet and because US rice producers exported a large fraction of their output to Cuba. Time and again, Cuban sugar producers and US rice producers aligned to keep open the US market for sugar imports from Cuba and the Cuban market for rice imports from the United States, at the expense of Cuba’s domestic rice production, which suffered accordingly, requiring Cuba to import a basic staple in the past and still today.

For many years, Cuba’s domestic rice production could not compete with imports because of quality or price and because its costs of production exceeded the cost of producing other crops, especially sugar. Fidel Castro evoked this efficient market logic in the 1977 quotation, affirming the utility of international comparative economic advantage. His words echo Cuban grandee, Francisco de Arango y Parreño, in 1808: “Without question priority is given to the production of commodities [e.g. sugar] other than rice and other foodstuff that we can receive from other parts because it is so cost effective” (p. 37). In 1808 as in 1977, the market-efficient “solution” was to export sugar and import rice and other foodstuffs.

Economic nationalists opposed such arguments. They stressed that Cubans depended on eating rice more than on eating sugar and emphasised that importing food rendered Cuba vulnerable to events and decisions beyond its control. Gerardo Machado, one of the more reviled presidents in Cuban history, gave voice to and implemented policies that promoted import-substituting industry and agriculture, especially through the enactment of the Customs and Tariffs Law of 1927. Cuba’s rice output more than quadrupled between 1928 and 1935 (p. 95). The Great Depression torpedoed such economic strategies, however.

More problematic is Pérez’s account of outcomes in the 1950s. His fifth chapter concludes that Batista, facing overt US pressures, “opted for ... the protection of sugar” (p. 159), stopping state bank preferential financing for rice production, which led to the ruin of thousands of farms and mills. “Rice production plunged into crisis, from which it never recovered” (p. 161). However, Pérez provides the evidence to doubt such a lapidary judgement. My inference from his evidence is that Cuba’s rice production continued to grow, despite US pressures, while Cuba’s rice imports from the United States merely stabilised.

By the 1950s, Cuba’s rice production had become competitive, with output increasing every year between 1950 and 1955, from one million to 4.5 million quintals (p. 127). Rice imports from the United States were 6.3 million quintals in 1950 and 6.4 million in 1951, then falling each year, to 4.0 million in 1954. In 1955, there was a sharp drop to 2.4 million – the year that triggered the US
counterpunch – but then a return to a stable 4.1 million quintals in 1957 and 1958 (p. 138). Cuban rice production might have risen more, absent the US pressures to stop Cuban government support; no doubt many Cuban rice producers were hurt. But the victory of US rice producers amounted simply to the stabilisation of Cuban rice imports by 1957–8 at the low point that had been reached in 1954. Pérez’s time series for Cuban output stops in 1955. The United Nations Statistical Yearbook, 1959\(^1\) indicates Cuban rice production of 164,000 metric tons in 1952, rising to 261,000 in 1957 and 256,000 in 1958. The political economy dynamics, in short, were as Pérez describes them. The resilience of Cuban rice producers was, however, better than his account suggests. Cuba’s private sector rice producers, with some support from Batista’s government, successfully advanced the goals of Cuban economic nationalism on the eve of revolutionary victory.

In late 2001, the Bush administration applied a new statute to permit an agricultural exemption to US economic sanctions on Cuba. In 2006, US rice was nearly 80% of Cuba’s total rice imports (p. 183). By 2015, the US had exported $5 billion worth of agricultural products to Cuba, rice among them; Cuba’s agriculture – heir to its history – could not yet feed Cubans. During the Trump administration’s first three years, US exports of grains (including rice) and oilseeds cost Cuba’s cash-strapped economy over $157 million, exceeding US exports of such products to Australia, the Russian Federation and Switzerland.\(^2\)

Pérez’s impressive research and skilful writing are comprehensive and persuasive. Lyrically in his introduction, Pérez evokes a contrapunteo of rice and sugar; then, relentlessly in the main text he lays out the choices that Cuban elites and government believed they faced across the centuries. Until the end of the 20th century, the logic of markets and comparative advantage led successive Cuban governments to enshrine the primacy of sugar exports at the expense of domestic production of foodstuffs. However, Cuba’s sugar production plummeted in the 21st century. Will Cuba today turn to domestic rice and foodstuff production to feed its people and its tourists, as now that the logic of economic autonomy and markets better align?

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