

REVIEW

***Sugar Cane & Rum: The Bittersweet History of Labor & Life on the Yucatán Peninsula* by John R. Gust and Jennifer P. Mathews**

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In *Sugar Cane & Rum: The Bittersweet History of Labor & Life on the Yucatán Peninsula* (2020), John R. Gust and Jennifer P. Mathews draw on historical, archaeological, and ethnographic data to compile a complex picture of the social and political life of sugar cane and rum in the Yucatán. Building on the legacy of such anthropological classics as *Sweetness and Power* by Sidney Mintz (1986) and *Europe and the People Without History* by Eric Wolf (1982), this book demonstrates how extractive colonialism and the desire for cheap and ready commodities irreversibly transformed local culture, economy, and environment in the Americas. As is the case with many regions of the Americas, the colonial economy of the Yucatán Peninsula of southeastern Mexico was largely dominated by a single export commodity sought after by Europe and North America – henequen fibre (largely converted into bailing twine). Similarly, the production and export of sugar cane dominated local economies in the Caribbean and Brazil. By combining the history of the Yucatán and sugar cane in the Americas, this book sheds light on the lesser-known economy of sugar cane and rum production in the Yucatán and how it impacted the everyday life of people in the region. The greatest strength of this book is the manner in which it describes the emergence of debt peonage and other forms of coerced labor, especially among the local Maya population. This includes, for example, the insidious use of alcohol as a means to entrap laborers in a cycle of debt and addiction.

The first core chapter, “Sugar and Rum Production in the Americas,” is a condensed and accessible overview of sugar cane with a particular focus on Brazil and the Caribbean, whose colonial economies were entirely dependent on sugar cane production. The wholesale dependence on the production and exportation of sugar cane and its derivatives, including molasses, rum, and processed sugar, required a large and cheap labor force. In combination with the decimation of Indigenous people in the area, this led to the importation of millions of enslaved Africans, and after abolition, the continued exploitation of African labor, the use of indentured laborers from India, and the arrival of working-class immigrants from overseas. This chapter pays attention to the differences between French, British, and Spanish colonial structures and demands and how this impacted local populations. Building on this, the second chapter, “Coerced Labor and

Sugar Across the Americas," examines the exploitation of different types of unfree and cheap labor including enslaved, indentured, and debt peonage. This chapter is particularly useful to those who teach the history of colonial Latin America or anthropology of labor, as the authors do an excellent job explaining how European types of coerced labor were successfully transplanted onto Indigenous forms of labor as tribute. The authors explain coerced labor unique to Latin America including the *encomienda* system. The third chapter, "Laboring in the Yucatán Peninsula," draws on archival data to reconstruct the relatively unknown history of the sugar industry in Quintana Roo. Unlike the well-documented production of henequen, sugar was unique in the sense that it was largely produced for local consumption. Here the authors further our understanding of the day-to-day living conditions of Maya laborers and their families and how they became entrapped in debt peonage. However, the authors also pay important attention to different forms of tactics and resistance that laborers would use to improve their living and work conditions. The fourth chapter largely draws on archaeological data of a sugar and rum hacienda in the state of Quintana Roo. For archaeologists of the Yucatán, this chapter has specific details of colonial hacienda life, including how laborers lived and worked. In the fifth and final chapter, the authors shift to include contemporary ethnographic data to trace the social and political history of rum and its consumption in the Yucatán. Here the authors begin with the pre-colonial history of alcohol consumption among Indigenous people of Mesoamerica, continue to important social spaces such as cantinas, to the gendered participation in alcohol consumption, including the role of cantina women, and to a contemporary analysis of tourist locations of Mérida and Cancún.

This book is incredibly accessible and definitely written for first- and second-year anthropology students. In particular, this book would be an excellent addition to courses such as economic anthropology, anthropology of labor, anthropology of Latin America, anthropology of colonialism, or anthropology of food. For example, an instructor teaching about Latin American colonialism, cash-crop or extractive economies, globalization, World-Systems theory, the social life of things, resistance, and labor history will find this book a useful addition. In particular, instructors might find the first three chapters to be an excellent companion to *Sweetness and Power* or *Europe and the People without History*. The fourth chapter on archaeology is better suited to archeological experts and students of the area or hacienda life. The final chapter would work well in an anthropology of food course or even anthropology of tourism.