

## RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

STUART B. SCHWARTZ (ed.): *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London 2004.

From “Hell” to “The Land of Cockaigne”: this is the road one travels when reading the volume of articles edited by Stuart Schwartz, a well-known historian of colonial Brazil and Latin America. “Hell” or “Inferno” is an image often evoked in descriptions of the “Middle Passage” of Africans across the Atlantic and of the life of slaves on the sugar plantations or *engenhos* in Brazil and the Caribbean. “The Land of Cockaigne” (the collective name given to late-medieval fantasies on earthly paradises of plenty) is what comes to mind when reading the descriptions of the sumptuous feasts of confectioneries presented at the tables of the rich and noble in the Netherlands or Italy. In the introduction Schwartz quotes Father Antonio Vieira, who visited a plantation in Bahia in the 1630s: “People the color of the very night, working briskly and moaning at the same time without a moment of peace or rest; whoever sees all the confused and noisy machinery and apparatus of this Babylon [...] will say that this indeed is the image of Hell” (p.3) - and these are impressions of plantation owned by Jesuits. Eddy Stols, in the eighth article in this collection, begins by describing the festivities in the Palace in Brussels in 1565, where over 6,000 lbs. of sugar were used to create a most splendid artistic display including ships, dolphins, church towers and cats, molded to perfection to please the eye and the palate of hundreds of eminent guests (pp.237-8).

The road from the horrors of the industry to the splendors of the palace (which is also a passage from black to white) is just one voyage the reader is required to make while reading this volume from cover to cover. *Tropical Babylons* is a book on economic history that uses one commodity – sugar – as a point of departure. Thus the reader is asked to follow the westward expansion of sugar from the Mediterranean islands, through the Iberian Peninsula, to Madeira and the Canaries, then to Española and Cuba and finally to Brazil – and all this before the great success of Barbados and the “Sugar Revolution”. This route is outlined by the contributors with the aid of tables, figures and maps, which all provide

a great deal of information about the many aspects involved in the growing of sugar cane, as well as sugar production and trading in the commodity. The old theses concerning the connections of slavery-sugar-capitalism-modernity, discussed extensively ever since Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) are carefully examined and partially refuted or at least refined.

In recent decades, a "sugar revolution" has been added to the many "revolutions" (technological, commercial, military and scientific, as well as religious and political) identified by modern-day historians as shaping the history of the west in the early modern period. According to several economic historians, dramatic changes in the world's economy as a result of the "explosion" of sugar began in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of Barbados to the position of the main sugar producing colony. This affected practically every aspect of production, finance, shipping and consumption in Europe and its colonies. *Tropical Babylons*, however, is concerned with the earlier, but just as crucial, stage in the history of this sweet commodity. Almost twenty years have passed since the publication of the ground-breaking book by the anthropologist Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History*. The present volume reveals the immense amount of research that has been done on the subject in recent decades, particularly regarding the first 200 years of its Atlantic history.

Unlike most other collections of essays, the articles in this volume, organized around certain themes, were written in response to questions posed in advance by the editor. This allows the reader to make comparisons concerning capital, organization, labor, resources, technology, regulation of production and trade by governments, and more. All the authors based their theses on new archival sources. Thus, they not only increase our knowledge and transform some accepted notions about the results and consequences of the expansion of the sugar industry, but also put to rest some often-repeated "facts" such as the central role of the migration of Dutch technological and commercial experts.

Yet even for readers with little taste (however sweetened) for economic history, this volume offers food for thought on many other aspects of the history of sugar. For instance, there is a discussion of how the growth, production and transportation of sugar affected patterns of colonialism and international relations, not to mention the endless suffering and human misery of the millions of Africans transported to the New World to satisfy the plantations' insatiable demand for labor. A study of the enormous success of sugar as a commodity in Europe opens wide vistas of cultural and social developments associated with the "sweet tooth" that Europeans seemed to have developed since the 16th century. For example, Eddy Stols emphasizes that the growing consumption of tea and coffee was by no means the sole reason for the huge growth in the demand for sugar. The expanding home industry of preserves, jams, jellies and marmalades

(manufactured by both men and women) was also a major factor in the increased demand. He also points to some yet to be explored aspects of this saga, such as the specialization of many convents in the production of sweets and confectionery or the way sugar and sweets affected the imagery of love and happiness in literature. Stols' panoramic view of the culture of sugar could have been enriched even further by quotations from the letters written by Sister Maria Celeste, Galileo's daughter, to her father in the 1620s and 1630s. From an impoverished convent near Florence, the young woman (already almost toothless in her early thirties) repeatedly asks her father to send her sugar for the production of candied fruit, marzipan and other sweets – the only presents she can afford to give her family members and the only luxuries that sweeten her own harsh existence. One wonders if the kind and loving Sister Maria Celeste would have craved these sweets as much had she known anything about the conditions in the “tropical Babylons” where all that sugar was being produced.

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**SERGE GRUZINSKI: *Images at War. Mexico From Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*. Duke UP, Durham and London, 2001.**

Serge Gruzinski is one of the most interesting and innovative historians of Mexico, who pioneered the socio-cultural study of the colony's religion, heresy, magic and related popular protest. Over time, his research has expanded both spatially (he has recently been working on a study of the entire Hapsburg Empire, including Europe, the Americas and Asia) and also chronologically. (This volume, as the title shows, ranges from Columbus's landfall in the Caribbean to AD 2019 – the notional date of the Philip K. Dick sci-fi novel, filmed by Ridley Scott in 1982). If the title alone were not enough to intrigue and perplex potential readers, the cover carries a controversial image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's revered Catholic and national icon, with the head of Marilyn Monroe superimposed, complete with peroxide perm.

These provocative dates and images are presented as part of a sweeping analysis of images – paintings, sculptures, icons and other material artefacts – in the context of Spanish colonialism. Despite the terminal date of 2019, the book is chiefly concerned with colonial Mexico. It is not until the (20 pp.) conclusion that we break through the barrier of Independence (1821) and encounter some brief references to 19<sup>th</sup> century iconography and –even more cursorily– to 20<sup>th</sup> century “electronic images.” These, Gruzinski suggests, form part of a “neo-baroque” visual culture, making Mexico and Latin America an ideal “research