

The Unequal Embodiment of Sugar

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As vividly captured in Diego Rivera's mural *Sugar Cane*, the politics of sugar are to be found in the structures of class, gender, nationality and race. It is these social relations, more than the intrinsic sweetness of the commodity or the characteristics of the crop, that shape how it is produced, traded and consumed. Collectively, they result in what I call here the *unequal embodiment* of sugar.



Diego Rivera (1931) *Sugar Cane*. Fresco on reinforced steel. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Image used from <http://www.moma.org> under fair use licence.

This unequal embodiment can be seen today in the corporeal effects of sugar on the body: the [new type of chronic kidney disease](#) striking down sugarcane field workers in Central America, the high rate of [prostitution and HIV](#) in sugar towns in Zambia, and the disproportionate level of [tooth decay](#) among poor and Hispanic children in Colorado, US.

The circulation of capital through sugar is also embodied in the landscape with unequal effects on wildlife. Fertiliser run-off from sugar farming has contributed to the [degradation of the Great Barrier Reef](#) in Queensland and the [destruction of fisheries](#) in the Indus delta (though the sugarcane plantations have provided welcoming habitats for rats and snakes). These environmental changes are also social. In the case of water pollution, those worst affected have tended to be indigenous people and artisanal fisherfolk, traditionally dependent on communal resources for drinking and fishing.

By starting with social relations, I diverge from two standard approaches to analysing the global politics of sugar. The first of these has addressed the poverty-inducing effects of sugar and framed it as an issue of international trade. This stems from the curious situation whereby exactly the same product, refined sugar, can be made from two entirely different crops. These are the grass crop sugarcane which is grown in tropical climates, and the root crop sugar beet which is grown in temperate climates. The near universal ability to grow these crops has allowed governments across the world to build up a domestic sugar industry by protecting markets from imports and supporting producers with favourable prices.

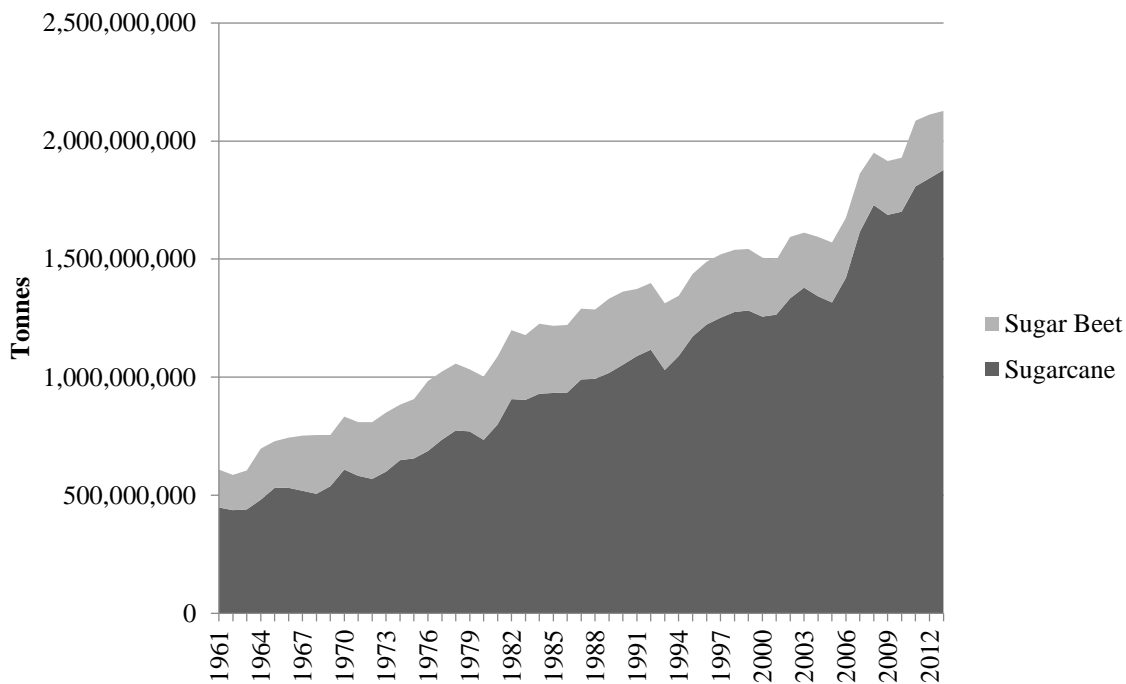
There are now an estimated [1.1 million jobs in sugar manufacturing](#) and tens of millions more in sugar farming scattered over 120 countries in the world. Moreover, sugar is considered by the World Bank to be the second most protected agricultural commodity in the world behind rice. In 2008 the level of import tariffs and domestic subsidies on sugar accounted for almost [one fifth of all agricultural support](#) – that amounts to a lot of redistributive tax!

The injustice that both free traders and development campaigners have pointed out is that protectionist policies seem largely to benefit sugar producers in *higher-income* countries. They argue that by keeping out exports from lower-income countries, trade barriers have denied poor people the chance to trade their way out of poverty and thus confined them to a life of hunger. Or as the *Wall Street Journal* once pithily put it: “[Addiction to sugar subsidies chokes poor nations’ exports](#)”.

While trade protection remains important in shaping who benefits from sugar production, the idea that the industry is controlled by wealthy farmers in the European Union (EU) and the US is increasingly untenable. First, significant steps towards liberalisation have happened over the last two decades, turning the EU into a net sugar importer for the first time since the 1970s and opening up the US to unlimited imports from Mexico (whilst sending increased amounts of processed food and High Fructose Corn Syrup the other way). In fact, the US is consistently one of the world’s biggest importers of sugar.

Second, demand for sugar has grown most rapidly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Correspondingly, over the last six decades there has been a steady shift toward planting in the Global South where sugarcane rather than sugar beet is the favoured crop (visible in the graph below). Brazil, India, China and Thailand are now the production powerhouses of the global sugar economy.

Total tonnes of global sugar crops harvested, 1961-2013



Data sourced from <http://faostat3.fao.org/home/E>

The third problem with the trade protectionism argument is that they treat countries as homogenous units rather than hierarchical societies. Since there is significant inequality *within* countries as well as *between* them focusing on which country sugar is produced only gives us part of the picture.

There are many examples of men (and they are usually men) in developing countries who have become fantastically wealthy through sugar while their fellow citizens languish in poverty. Two of the richest people the world in fact built their business empires on the back of sugar trading enterprises: the Nigerian Aliko Dangote, now worth an estimated \$25 billion, and the Malaysian Robert Kuok worth \$12 billion. Others have found their fortunes as sugar industrialists. The Brazilian Rubens Ometto Silveria Mello, worth \$2 billion, made his money at the helm of a sugarcane milling company and was dubbed “[the world’s first ethanol billionaire](#)”.

Beyond those agri-businesses selling sugar as an ingredient, there are those *re-selling* it in the form of manufactured foods and drinks. These include Western-based multinational corporations like Coca-Cola, Hershey's, Kellogg's, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo and Unilever. Together these companies made over \$50 billion *profit* in 2013; a handsome return for their managers and shareholders. (Did you know that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, despite its stated goal to improve global health, holds [stock in Coca-Cola, Mars, Wal-Mart and Kraft-Heinz](#) worth over a billion dollars?!). These examples of wealth accumulation all belie the idea that we can determine who benefits from sugar simply by looking at national levels of output and export.

The second approach to sugar politics has addressed its adverse health effects. If the injustices of sugar production have been framed as a problem of trade protectionism then those relating to consumption have been framed, quite separately, as a problem of corporate manipulation. These companies are charged with purposefully misleading the public into dangerous eating habits. On the one hand, they manufacture and market foods high in sugar, salt and fat, and on the other hand, lobby governments to water down dietary guidelines and labelling regulations.

Like the literature on trade protectionism though, while it contains some important insights, as a political critique this approach also has its limitations. First, it tends to ignore the countervailing appeal of diets and detoxes popular in the media. Among these are Atkins, Dukan, Glycaemic Index, paleo and No Sugar, all of which have changed the consumption of sugar either by discriminating against sucrose or shifting eating habits away from sweetened foods altogether. Studies which focus only on the dominance of corporations thus miss these forms of (typically feminised) agency and marginalise the response of companies to it. Product reformulation using artificial sweeteners and the takeover of health conscious brands have been particularly common strategies, although by no means a solution to the spread of diet-related disease.

Second, these studies are divorced from issues of production. One of the biggest developments in recent years has been the growth of the ethanol biofuel market. By 2013 fully 15 per cent of global sugarcane production was turned into ethanol; a proportion which is expected to almost double over the next decade. Meanwhile, the masses of corn grown in the US that have been diverted into biofuel production has put inflationary pressure on the price of High Fructose Corn Syrup, making it [less competitive compared to sugar](#) in the North American sweetener market. Ignoring these dynamics blinkers us to which agricultural crops end up in our food, in what form, and why.

Third, this account has little to say about the prospects for conscious political change. For example, in his otherwise excellent book *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*, the journalist Michael Moss concludes by putting his faith in enlightened shopping to save the day. In his closing paragraph, he argues that:

They [the major food corporations] may have salt, sugar and fat on their side, but, we, ultimately, have the power to make choices. After all, we decide what to buy. We decide how much to eat.

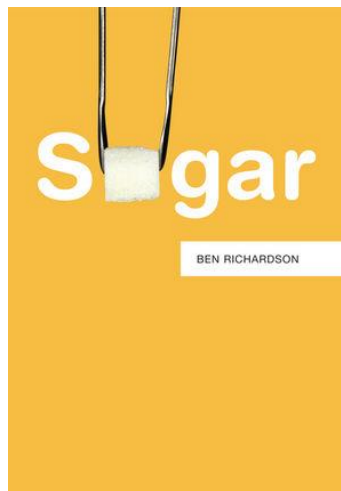
Not only is this is perverse conclusion to reach after spending the previous 346 pages detailing the myriad ways that American consumers have virtually no meaningful choice over what they eat, it also rules out other sources of change and ways of acting. By reducing politics to individual choice at the checkout and starving it of its collective character and varied institutional expression, accounts like the one given by Moss may do more harm than good.

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So how should the global politics of sugar be approached instead? My book proceeds from two foundations. The first is that the circulation of sugar is deeply structured by capitalism. Since the 1990s this has been entrenched on a global scale. The North American Free Trade Agreement and the formation of the World Trade Organisation have undermined national farm policy, while the industrialisation of China and marketization of food provisioning across the Global South has underpinned a seismic 'nutrition transition'. Through these changes and more, the reach and use of sugar has been transformed.

As such, a critical analysis of capitalism is necessary – not for advocating Communist revolution of the food system, though what that would mean is certainly intriguing (“Eaters of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your fast-food chains!”) – but rather to appreciate why this system has led to social inequality and political crisis.

Inequality is reproduced in many ways through sugar; from under-paying easily exploitable farm workers like migrants and women, to disproportionately marketing processed sweetened foods to racial minorities and children. Likewise, the over-production of sugar has led to systematic contradictions including [periodic market crashes](#) and exacerbating [a global diabetes epidemic](#). These in turn have produced crises (a farm crisis, a health crisis) which state authorities have been called upon to manage. And contrary to the common assertion that equates capitalism with free markets, it is often capitalists themselves have called for state intervention, either to make a market function in their interests or else protect them from the vagaries of it.



Available at <http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745680156>

At the same time as taking global capitalism seriously, it is also important not to ascribe it with uniform and omnipresent characteristics. This is the book’s second foundation: that capitalism need not be a single fate. This refers both to the different ways in which capitalist economies can be organised and the limits to which capitalist principles of private property, commodification and endless accumulation extend. Think of the bake-a-cake sales that raise huge amounts of money for charity. These are just as much part of the economy as a factory making chocolate bars or a futures exchange trading sugar contracts. What this second foundation does then is to create some room for human agency, without which every eventuality would be boiled down to the inner workings of capital – no better than other [deterministic accounts of sugar](#) which ascribe everything to its irresistible sweetness or the characteristics of the cane plant.

This brings us to the book’s central argument, which is that progressive political change is not about changing people’s relationship to sugar *per se* but changing our relationships to one another. Reducing sugar consumption may lower some people’s risk of diabetes, but if those same people remain reliant on poor quality food then it is likely that they will suffer from other forms of diet-related ill-health instead. Similarly, increasing crop productivity through high-yielding seeds may help farmers make a decent living, but only insofar as they are not then subject to price cuts by other businesses in the supply-chain.

I argue that this change comes about through site-specific struggles to value life differently. They are site-specific because they take different forms in different places: a campaign against child advertising here, a protest against water pollution there. But what they have in common is a desire to govern by a different metric, one that recognises values beyond ‘the bottom line’, be it the sanctity of childhood or the preservation of the environment.

At its furthest reaches, therefore, the book considers how these contestations might cohere into broader change that would make sugar provisioning more ecologically sound and socially just. This is a transition that, I believe, must ultimately challenge the profit-driven organisation of food and farming itself.