



Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History

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Traces the history of sugar production and consumption, examines its relationship with slavery, class ambitions, and industrialization, and describes sugar's impact on modern diet and eating habits.

Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History Details

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From Reader Review Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History for online ebook

Hubert says

Mintz's classic text on the history of sugar represents a classic approach to interdisciplinary work in anthropology, history, and economics, through one of the most-used foods in the modern world. Mintz traces the development of sugar from a primarily noble-class condiment to one used by all classes, including that of a caloric additive by members of working classes. The work focuses on England, particularly 17th and 18th centuries, with an emphasis on the role of Carribean colonialism.

A must-read for scholars of food and/or anthropology.

Peter Walton-Jones says

I loved this book. Read during my anthropology years I found this treatment of history, people, and product intelligent, readable, coherent and simply satisfying...

Anders says

A thought-provoking and riveting social history of the discovery and incorporation of sugar into capitalist modernity. Mintz's approach straddles anthropology, history, and sociology to make sense of how sugar went from obscurity to necessity, and traces the restructurings of the global economy and consumptive patterns along the way. All that, and a really fun read!

I guess what I like best about it, and what makes it most accessible, is his supremely descriptive language about the intimate-to-all topic of food. For example, he describes the rise of "ragged and discontinuous but very frequent snacks" which are supplanting the meal. Ragged snacks! I for one had never thought of snacks as ragged but now I will never be able to extricate that picture from my mind.

Annie Koh says

a fun read on how what had been an elite condiment in the middle ages became a staple of the working class diet by the 19th century.

From page 170: It is to their [planters, bankers, slavers, shippers, refiners, grocers, etc] efforts that England owed the institutionalization of a rum ration in the navy (begun 'unofficially' after the capture of Jamaica in 1655): half a pint per day from 1731 on. In the late 18th century it was increased to a pint a day for adult sailors -- much-needed creeping socialism for an infant industry. The official allocations of sugar and treacle to the poorhouses in the late 18th cent were similar support measures.

Abby says

Mintz traces the rise of sugar from all angles: the growing, refining, and shipping processes; colonialism and the slaves that grew (grow?) the cane; the physiological effects of sugar; the tastes for sugar and its uses; and the class implications of sugar for its European users. My anthropologist best friend recommends this book as one of the top food anthropology books, and I agree with Dr. Lewis that it is a good book, but I think it could've been shorter as it begins to feel a bit redundant. (It's certainly better than this scattered book I read about coffee the year before.)

I learned a lot from this book. Never before had I considered sugar an expendable flavoring agent (life without sugar?! That's one of Dr. Lewis's projects for her students). I was also unaware that sugar traveled downward class channels in England, beginning as a treat for the rich and finally subsidizing poor workers and providing their main source of calories.

You could probably read this book in 2 or 3 overly-sugared coffee sittings, and it's an enjoyable cafe book.

Malcolm says

Histories and sociologies of food stuffs have become fashionable in recent years - we've had histories of Cod, of Nutmeg, of Salt, of the Potato and others. But before all of them came this book, Sidney Mintz's excellent (1985) exploration of the place of sugar history. To us today sugar may seem a common-place (and in many case we eat far too much of it) but it has not so for more than a couple of hundred years, and sugar played a major part in shaping the modern world. For instance, it accounts for much of British and French colonisation of the Caribbean and bits of Central and South America and it shapes land use patterns in large areas of Australia and South Africa. Sugar along with the trade in people to work its areas of growth and manufacture reshaped wealth and power in 18th and early 19th century Britain and in the process helped reshape capitalism, wealth, industry and diets.

Mintz is an anthropologist specialising in Caribbean studies, so his work places him at the centre of sugar studies, and with an interest in political economy his work seems (in retrospect) to lead almost logically to this book). He has, in this case, produced an excellent and accessible serious-popular exploration of modern economics, society and history. It is a great piece of scholarship that puts many of the more recent food and commodity histories to shame.

unperspicacious says

As a commodity history this is somewhat dated, and as other GR reviewers have noted, in need of tighter editing, both stylistically and structurally. Remarkably uneven in quality. The last two chapters are problematic, IMO - far too much space has been devoted to theory, defending the earlier historical materialist approach against disciplinary battles with social anthropology, while the prior historical approach is ultimately jettisoned in favour of abstract speculation about contemporary food meanings. Very much a work of its time, in terms of the 'transition' in academic history from materialism to 'cultural studies'. History and anthropology in some ways are admittedly very difficult bedfellows to reconcile, and this book shows both the problems and some possible solutions to doing so, if one is inclined.

The best bits were perhaps the detailed discussions in Chapters 2 & 3 on the details of production and consumption. If only more space had been devoted to these. The thesis about non-European aspects of

industrialization and capital accumulation might have gained more depth and explanatory power that way.

Again this perhaps is indicative of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in commodity histories - too broad in some ways (in terms of disciplines, geographical coverage, topical material), too narrow in others.

Josh Maddox says

In *Sweetness and Power*, a 1985 text by anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz, the author sets out to uncover the meaning and place of sugar in the modern world (specifically England) and how it came to be. For this task, Mintz is more qualified than most; he is an anthropologist and has personal experience working in and around Caribbean sugar plantations. Unluckily, Mintz's communication abilities are not as great as his academic strength. The book is broken into five chapters of greatly varying quality: "Food, Sociality, and Sugar," "Production," "Consumption," "Power" and "Eating and Being." These chapters are so disparate that they must be analyzed as short, individual books.

The first chapter, *Food, Sociality, and Sugar*, focuses on the anthropology of food in general. This reveals the anthropological context in which Mintz writes, as well as background essential to understanding this particular work. The chapter is the shortest, and in addition to explaining the anthropological milieu surrounding food history, he notes the rise in English consumption of sugar from the period of 1650 to modernity. In some ways, it is more like an extension to the already overlong introduction than a chapter, and continues to set the stage rather than begin the drama.

Although some economics is involved in the next chapter, *Production*, the section is mostly historical. The feeling one gets from his explanation of the system under which sugar spread from Asia outward to the rest of the world is rather like a bird's eye view; readers see all that happens from above. He shows very clearly that sugar moved from central Asia to the Islamic lands, to Europe through the Crusades, from Europe to the African Islands, and from there to the Caribbean. For the most part though, he does not show why landowners, farmers, and governments took the actions they did. With the exception of a discussion about the Atlantic islands which tangentially relates to supply and demand, Mintz ignores the economic forces almost entirely. Still, the map-like understanding of where sugar came from and went is valuable, although not as much as it could have been if coupled with an understanding of why it moved from place to place.

The third chapter, *Consumption*, is also historical. Here, Mintz centers single-mindedly on the English uses of sugar and dissects them with relish. To begin, he divides the uses of sugar into five types: medicine, spice-condiment, decorative, sweetener, and preservative. He discusses each of these uses in depth, and discourses on how the uses merged with each other, developed, and grew. These portions of the chapter are well organized by their usages, and the insight he gives into the uses of sugar is fascinating. However, the author does also spend a great deal of time discussing meanings and shifting meanings associated with these different uses without ever explaining what those meanings are. This makes the meaning-related discussions, which could be quite valuable and informative, vacuous claptrap. Mintz goes on for pages without conveying any real information to the reader, aside from the fact that he finds his own thoughts and views of sugar very deep and scholastic, and is completely unable to communicate those views to others.

The fourth chapter is even worse. Since it is titled *Power*, the chapter is ostensibly about control, influence, and authority. In reality, it is mostly Mintz talking about meaning without plainly defining it. It is quite possible to read and re-read this section multiple times without grasping Mintz's meaning, much less sugar's meaning for the book's subjects. Maddeningly, he makes many claims such as "it (sugar) is closely

connected to England's fundamental transformation from a hierarchical, status-based, medieval society to a social-democratic, capitalist, and industrial society" while entirely neglecting to explain how it is connected to the transformation (185).

The fifth and final chapter, *Eating and Being*, leaves the realm of relevance almost entirely. Mintz waxes philosophical and fills most of the chapter's pages with lines such as these:

"Maximum enjoyment in minimum time has come to mean both divided (simultaneous) consumption – one eats while walking or working, drinks while driving or watching entertainment – and higher frequency of occasions for consumption. Watching the Cowboys play the Steelers while eating Fritos and drinking Coca-Cola, while smoking a joint, while one's girl sits on one's lap, can pack a great deal of experience into a short time and thereby maximizing enjoyment. Or it can be experienced quite differently, depending on the values one holds (203)."

The rest of the chapter, like this portion excerpted, seems to come very close to relating to the subject of the book, but in reality signifies nothing. Even his discussion of the disappearance method of measuring sugar, possibly the only part of the chapter more than tangentially related to the rest of the book, is unclear and vague.

Ultimately, the book is disappointing. Mintz's ability as an anthropologist and historian is eclipsed by his inability to communicate his ideas clearly; nearly half the book talks about the shifting meanings of sugar without ever explaining what those meanings are. Had Mintz made visible to the reader the connections in his mind, the book would be excellent, but since those connections are anything but evident, it is mediocre.

Jessica says

A great history book in the wonderful myopic vein Ginnie mentioned. I am also planning to read *Rats* at some point, which seems like one too.

I am baffled by some changes since the last time I was on here. "Private notes??" What the heck is that supposed to be for??? I honestly can't even begin to imagine. I'm just baffled in general by the concept of writing something that's just for your own private information on the Internet. Shouldn't you keep that written in a real life notebook stuffed to the back of your sock drawer, or better yet, not write it down at all?

"This slender volume slipped to me by gardener, after our third tryst behind the gazebo that languid sensuous summer, while my husband was away at War."

"Did not actually manage to read past p 38 but Wikipedia notes main character struck by train towards end, so can prob scrape by with droll ref."

"Likely read at some point, see most reviewers do not like so grant five stars to be contrary."

"Dirty bits marked pp 37, 178, 259, 512."

"Gift given by Bookster X two years ago at xmas, so must act as if read."

"Book written by Bookster Z so must rate highly and pretend to have finished."

"Assigned chapter from soph year of college, likely did not read but possibly did skim and do still own, so counts."

"Will crib sex scene, major plot points, and desc of heroine/Bklyn Bridge/muggy August morning for own novel, currently in 2nd draft."

"Cannot attempt own review as Bookster Z's simultaneously more amusing and erudite than own capacity allows."

"Am running out of vodka, must remember to buy more at store along with pregnancy test and US Weekly, plus Moby Dick comic book/NYT book review if they have so as to keep up appearances."

John says

Sidney Mintz's "Sweetness and Power" is a global history by an anthropologist, so lay readers may find parts of it a little hard to get into, and even historians may have some issues with the way he structures his argument. Adopting a global approach was a necessity - there is no way to tell the story of production and consumption of sugar, even just within the British Empire, without the global perspective.

According to Mintz, in the world of sugar "production and consumption were so closely bound together that each may be said partly to have determined the other." Sugar was not common all around the world from an early date. In Europe, prior to the seventeenth century, it was barely consumed at all. The consumption of sugar exploded in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at basically the same time that sugar production expanded in Britain's tropical colonies. Basically, Mintz uses this production and consumption to tie various parts of the world together and tell a global history of British industrialization. Though most people do not identify the growth of the Caribbean plantation economy with the Industrial Revolution, Mintz argues that it was clearly part of the story. Sugar plantations were a "synthesis of field and factory" - sugar production involved interchangeable workers, operating in a time-conscious atmosphere. Plantations also produced a lot of capital, in addition to sugar, to send back to Britain. The ever increasing quantities of sugar then changed the very meanings of sugar consumption in Britain. Sugar had been an expensive luxury, but it became a cheap source of calories at the exact moment that British workers were being thrown into an industrial economy. Sugar from the West Indies combined with tea from East Asia to become a calorie rich stimulant that workers could afford on the lowest of wages. Exploited labor on sugar plantations thus "sharply reduced the overall cost of creating and reproducing the metropolitan proletariat."

So, labor and class, and tea and sugar, and the changing meanings of consumables. All very interesting. Made me want tea and scones, and I made do with tea and girl scout cookies.

Krishna says

This is an excellent example of what might be called a micro history, in this case that of a single commodity, sugar, and its impact on historical developments over the last five hundred years. In the process of telling the story of sugar, Sidney Mintz masterfully draws in the biology and cultivation of sugarcane, the economics of plantation agriculture, the anthropological analysis of dietary practices, the institution of slavery and the slave trade, the drive to colonialism, mercantilism and trade policy, the rise of industrialism, and even the mass marketing of fast food in 20th century America. The book is told mostly from a European, and even more specifically a British, perspective.

Mintz's book is divided into roughly three sections, dealing with the production, consumption and the power relations surrounding sugar. In terms of production, sugarcane has been grown in tropical Asia for millennia (there are references in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures to sugar). But it is a finicky crop requiring very specific conditions for growth - it needs strong sunshine, plenty of water, but well-drained land. It is labor-intensive to plant, harvest and process. The extraction of the juice and its refining into sugar too requires the execution of a series of precise steps that have to be executed in a tight time frame. Because of this, sugar until the age of exploration was mostly grown in tropical Asia, and imported into Europe as a luxury commodity. The Arabs may have picked up the details of growing sugar cane from Indian or other sources, and they popularized its cultivation in the lands which they conquered - including many islands in the Mediterranean, as well as the coastal areas of Morocco and Egypt. Also, due to the labor-intensive nature of sugar production, it involved from the very beginning some form of slave labor.

Europeans at this time did not produce sugar themselves, but avidly imported and traded it as a luxury commodity. But once the age of exploration began in the 16th century, lands suitable for sugarcane production came into European hands, and cultivation spread farther afield -- first to the Atlantic islands of the Azores and the Canaries. During this time too, production was not high enough for sugar to be anything other than a luxury commodity consumed in small quantities. But this began to change with the discovery of the new world. First the Caribbean islands such as Santo Domingo, and later Cuba, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, and the smaller islands such as Martinique and Barbados. Meanwhile, Brazil too was emerging as a major source.

Mintz argues that it was in the plantations that the first experiments in the capitalist mode of production were attempted -- a controversial position, since the plantations were also based on a captive labor market (slaves) who were considered no more than capital investment. But in every other respect, the nascent elements of capitalism were evident in the plantation economy: the reliance on investments raised from the capital markets, systematization of production, close attention to profit margins, specialization and division of labor, and vertical integration between raw material production, processing and distribution.

Turning to consumption, Mintz begins by cataloging the different uses to which sugar was put: as medicine, spice-condiment, decorative material, sweetener and preservative. As medicine, sugar seems to have benefited from the supposed curative properties attributed to many things that are rare or exotic, and it has also been used in small quantities as a spice, just as we do black pepper or basil today. It was also used for conspicuous consumption by the rich to commission elaborate sculptures and confections, precisely because it was rare and expensive. But somewhere around the time sugar started to reach Europe from the Atlantic colonies in larger quantities, its use began to percolate down the social ladder. Through the imitation of their "social betters," the middle and lower classes too began to use more sugar -- but it was still not a mass commodity.

But in the 19th century, as the industrial revolution gathered steam, sugar finally made the transition from a luxury or leisure good, to a consumption essential. Mintz discusses how the new demands of industrial labor -- shorter break times, the need for cheap and quick calories, more food consumed outside the home, the absence of parents at home as more women began to work in factories -- created demand for a variety of sugared foods: jams, treacle, biscuits. Sugar also benefited because its use was coupled with that of other tropical stimulants such as tea, coffee and cocoa, that were also becoming popular at that time. The plantation class could no longer keep protectionist policies in place, and duties on imported sugar fell, and further reduced prices, and stimulated even more demand. If sugar consumption by the poor was once condemned as an example of profligacy (the poor spending on the expensive luxuries of their betters, instead of saving for a rainy day), it now came to be seen as a necessary stimulant that keeps the industrial proletariat alert and energetic at work.

On power, Mintz shows how closely sugar production relied on state power -- the the colonization of land, the execution of land management and irrigation practices, the acquisition of labor through the slave trade, the policing of plantations to prevent slave rebellions, the protection of home markets against foreign competition -- all of this required the active connivance and support of the state. Plantation owners and investors spent heavily to influence legislators back home, and were a power to reckon with until the 19th century, when the increasing demands of consumption and new spirit of laissez faire economics broke their protectionist coalition. But even then, the plantation lobby did have enough power to make sugar products a part of government procurement -- for example, through a rum allowance for sailors, and a state-subsidized treacle quota for every poorhouse resident. Mintz argues that though power was not directly exerted to get people to consume more sugar, the hegemonic power of elite example was a factor encouraging the poor to consume more sugar, and to substitute industrially produced refined sugar for traditional sweeteners that were now considered contaminated, unhygienic, or uncultured (for example, Indians replacing jaggery or palm sugar in coffee by store-bought white sugar).

A final chapter discusses contemporary concerns (the book was written in 1985). The major trend of the 20th century has been first, the replacement of home-cooked meals by commoditized, pre-packaged food and meals eaten outside the home, and second, the extension of the consumption window from set meal times at home, to encompass "snacking" throughout the day, and anywhere. This is advocated aggressively through marketing and advertising as a convenience and an opportunity to meet consumer preferences; for example, family meals involve a process of communication and negotiation, and a common denominator meal might be chosen that will satisfy all family members. But commoditized meals allow each family member to choose the precise food they prefer, and to eat it wherever they choose: in their bedroom or in front of the TV. But packaged food is often too heavy in sugar and fat -- by design, since our hunter-gatherer brains were primed to choose these.

A few more interesting insights -- Mintz argues that current levels of sugar production and consumption, while clearly the outcome of historical processes, might make sense from an agricultural viewpoint -- his data show that sugarcane produces more calories per acre of land, than other products such as potatoes or wheat. In addition, the byproducts of sugar production such as bagasse (the crushed cane) can be used for paper production and the manufacture of industrial solvents.

In short, this is a very informative and entertaining book, and demonstrates clearly why nothing in the modern world can truly be studied in isolation. Every history is essentially a global history.

J.M. Hushour says

Mintz dives into an endlessly fascinating theme: how and why we came to value a thing (sugar) and how did it change the way people behave and eat? However, the end result, while probably intoxicatingly and almost sexually fulfilling to lovers of "theory", is patchwork and stilted. The main reason why is that a perfectly fine historical (and even science-y) narrative is continually interrupted for large swathes of the book by pushy academic theory and paeans to all kinds of dumb social and historical theory. Whatever. I used to be in academia, so I understand the fan-wank. You have to do it; but an otherwise awesome foray into the importance of a single condiment/commodity largely falls flat because of it.

That said, the actual bits on sugar, its manifestations, its role in labor history, slavery, and shifts in production are really great. The best parts are the sections on desserts and how ideas of taste and eating changed.

Emma says

HOOOOOOO BOYYYYYY

I have a lot of thoughts on this book.

Sweetness and Power is a book I had to read over my Christmas break for university and there could have been worse books for them to tell me to read, but there also could have been much.. better ones.

Sweetness and Power is a history of sugar, covering the chemical process in how they made sugar, which countries had dominance over the industry at what times, the role of slavery, how it went from a rarity to a luxury to a commodity, how it so deeply affected the British working class diet, and more.

For the most part the content was interesting, although there were aspects I didn't give a damn about, I did find myself telling my friends and family about the interesting things I was learning from the book.

But the writing, God, *the writing*

The writing of this book made me want to tear my hair out.

It's just... bad? He repeats himself so much I am convinced Sidney W. Mintz was desperately trying to meet a word count. He will tell you the same point so many times that if you finish the book and you didn't pick up on a particular fact, that's on you. I feel like there were certain sentences that I read about 10 times because he kept saying the same thing, it became so frustrating it really detracted from how interesting the fact actually was.

I'd also say if you're planning on reading this out of choice, and not because you had to for your course, I'd really only recommend reading it if you're very *very* interested in the history of sugar and its place in society. I say this because it's very thorough. It had a level of detail that frankly bored me, if you're mildly interested I'd recommend seeing if you can find a documentary instead. I suppose it's a good thing it's thorough, but for me it made it a lot more boring.

I also found the structure of this book was all over the place. Again with the repetition, I found he'd tell me things he'd already said in a previous chapter, as if you're really only supposed to read one chapter. I found he jumped around between the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries so much I gave up trying to keep track of a timeline or paying attention to a century, it wasn't even he'd tell you the chronological order in one chapter and then go back to the start and go through it again chronologically in the next, he'd jump around centuries within a page, making the mention of a century seem almost irrelevant.

There were also some chapters I liked significantly more than others. The 'Consumption' chapter was my favourite even though it was the longest as I found it the easiest to follow and the most interesting, I liked the chapters 'Food, Sociality, and Sugar' and 'Eating and Being', I very much disliked the 'Production' chapter as it took me forever to read despite not being the longest and this is when I first took issue with the writing although there were a few parts of the chapter I found interesting albeit a lot that I did not, and the 'Power' chapter can go fuck itself to be honest. Maybe it's because I'd just finished the Consumption chapter and I found the Power chapter less interesting so I had a bias against it, but I think my main issue is that he'd

covered power so much in the previous chapters that a whole chapter on it felt very pointless and I ended up finding that chapter waffley, repetitive, and redundant.

Anyway... this book played a big role in my Christmas holiday so I'm certainly not going to forget it and I did find it interesting, but it could have been a lot better and it brought me a lot of frustration.

(side note, the edition I have has a really nice Feel to it, it's very floppy and I could open it all the way without even coming close to breaking the spine, also the cover feels very soft lol)

David says

There was a dish of oysters sprinkled with sugar that was known as “**Oyster in gravy Bastard**”. Isn’t that the best name for a meal?

“Hi Mum! What’s for dinner?”

“Oyster in gravy Bastard.”

“My favourite!”

“And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the oyster in gravy Bastard. With a green salad.”

“Very good sir.”

This was an interesting read ... but I’m not sure that the structure’s quite right. Lots of jumping around and repetition. It’s like you’re only supposed to read one of the chapters.

Bits:

“holidays often preserve what the everyday loses.”

“Mixing sugar, pearls, and gold leaf to produce a powder in order to blow it into one’s ailing eye may seem bizarre in the extreme.”

On Tea and the British:

“Tea, which refreshes and quietens, is the natural beverage of a taciturn people, and being easy to prepare, it came as a godsend to the world’s worst cooks.”

“A rarity in 1650, a luxury in 1750, sugar had been transformed into a virtual necessity by 1850.”

“Maldistribution of food within poor families may constitute a kind of culturally legitimized population control, since it systematically deprives the children of protein.”

“Tobacco, sugar, and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could *become* different by *consuming* differently.”

“The food technologist’s lexicon for the uses of sugar and fat pays special attention to sugar’s way of making foods more palatable. Baked products are judged by their quality of ‘go-away’. Proper proportions of sugar

and fat result in good 'go-away' – which means that the mouthful of food can be swallowed without leaving the inside of the mouth coated in fat particles. The help of sugar in achieving good go-away is vital. It is now permissible to add up to 10 percent sugar to manufactured peanut butters in the US. No other food, they say, has such poor go-away as peanut butter; sugar improves its go-away marvelously.”

Jessica says

Once on a dare I ate a tablespoon of cornstarch at a party. The minute that powder hit my tongue it was a relentless battle to create enough saliva to get it down my gullet. I choked and coughed and when I did a plume of powder was emitted. It was all quite entertaining to the party goers. The reason I am relating this story is that after that incident I didn't think I could experience anything as dry as a tablespoon of cornstarch in my mouth. After reading this book I have been proven incorrect. This book is dry, there is no getting around it. Yes, drier than 1 tablespoon of cornstarch eaten straight out of the box, and I found it just as miserable to consume.
