

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

Semester I, 2015-16

Instructor: Dr. Birgit Schneider

Student: Leung Hui Yin

Book Review

Sidney Wilfred Mintz. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking, 1985. Pp. xxx + 274.

Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History written by Sidney Wilfred Mintz is an ambitious publication that encompasses many issues related to sugar production, distribution and consumption. Mintz tries to unfold the role of sugar in global economic systems and to study what this substance meant for individuals. The book does have some limitations; for example, the temporal scope is problematic and Mintz fails to fully utilize his expertise as an anthropologist. However, the book undeniably makes a significant contribution to academia by expanding the scholarship in food studies and history. After a quick search on the internet, I found that many world history companion guides and some university courses recommend *Sweetness and Power* as a world history book.¹ While *Sweetness and Power* possesses some features of a world history book such as the interdisciplinarity and the examination of different human agents, I do not regard it as a world history book because of Mintz's western-centric tone.

Trained as an anthropologist, Mintz by no means adheres to the practice and ideas of his early colleagues in two senses. Anthropology as an academic discipline is inclined to explain the behaviours and ideas of primitive societies.² However, Mintz challenges this conventional approach. Individuals from modern societies are of paramount importance for influencing the aboriginals, and sometimes vice versa. In order to "shape an anthropology of the present," he believes that anthropologists should not limit their studies to primitive groups.³ Further, what dis-

¹ For example, see Jerry H. Bentley, "A Basic, Briefly Annotated Bibliography for Teachers of World History," in *Teaching World History in the Twenty-first Century: A Resource Book*, ed. Heidi Roupp (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2010), 174; and Kenneth R. Curtis, "Architects of World History," in *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past*, ed. Kenneth R. Curtis and Jerry H. Bentley (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 21.

² Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985), xxvi.

³ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

tinguishes Mintz from traditional anthropologists is his personal appreciation of history. This attitude can be gauged from his describing the relationship between history and anthropology as “a marriage made in heaven.”⁴ As he believes that history is extraordinarily helpful for explaining contemporary social practice and cultures, there are a staggering number of historical accounts and primary sources in this book. However, he still values fieldwork experience which he regards as the power of anthropologists. Mintz first carried out anthropological fieldwork in a municipality for growing sugar cane in Puerto Rico,⁵ and later in Jamaica and Haiti.⁶ He seeks to use the experience and knowledge gained from fieldwork, together with historical materials, to study the Caribbean region.⁷ Therefore, Sidney Mintz is widely considered as a pioneer for bringing anthropology and history together and for introducing an interdisciplinary approach which was a novelty to scholars in the 1980s.

A brief review of each chapter in *Sweetness and Power* will be helpful for the following evaluation, especially for judging whether the author achieves what he intends to do. The first chapter in fact functions as an extension of the introduction. These two sections outline Mintz’s own motivation for, and the academic significance of studying food. He suggests that food consumption patterns—how and when to consume, who to eat with and what to eat—reflect human interpersonal relationships. He later elaborates on the reasons for choosing Britain and sugar as his case studies in this book.

Chapters two and three account for more than a half of the book, detailing sugar production and consumption, respectively. Mintz seeks to show “how production and consumption were so closely bound together.”⁸ In chapter two, he traces sugar production from the early Christian era to the nineteenth century, addressing many issues: Arab expansion into Europe, Crusades, imperialist competition for colonies, and the triangular trade to name but a few. He also briefly touches upon the course of producing sucrose: from growing and cutting sugar cane, to crystallizing the juice into solid form. Chapter three explores sugar consumption in Britain between the twelfth and nineteenth century, with a focus on its development since the mid-seventeenth century. Roughly from 1650 to 1850, sugar transformed from a rarity for the upper class showing their

⁴ Sidney W. Mintz, “History and Anthropology: A Marriage Made in Heaven,” (working paper, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2004), 1, 9-10, accessed November 8, 2015, www.cuhk.edu.hk/ant/publish/Mintzworkingpaper.pdf.

⁵ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, xvii.

⁶ “Caribbean,” Sidney W. Mintz, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://sidneymintz.net/caribbean.php>.

⁷ *Ibid.* The titles of his work comprising his fieldwork experience and historical sources can be found on this website.

⁸ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, xxix.

status to a basic commodity for supplying calories. He argues that the sweet tooth could not adequately explain the fanaticism for sugar because sugar was used as food in the late eighteenth century.⁹ Before that, it was used as “medicine, spice-condiment, decorative material, sweetener, and preservative.”¹⁰ It is worth noting that sugar was often consumed with beverages such as tea. The change of usage was related, though not explicitly in some cases, to sugar production. The idea that human activities define the use of a commodity, and the latter further defines its meanings recurs in these two chapters.

Following the interaction between production and consumption, Mintz tries to identify who owned the power to stir up the fanaticism for sugar in chapter four. Obviously, people with vested interests such as “planters, bankers, slavers, shippers, refiners, grocers and people in government” were major players in stimulating the demands for sugar.¹¹ By manipulating their political and economic power to enlarge sugar supply and demand, they could enjoy enormous economic benefits. Mintz also reminds us that the lower classes were agents for increasing demand, too, because they created new meanings for sugar, although they were the last group to enjoy sugar. This repercussion from the working classes caused the upper classes to discard certain meanings of sugar; for instance, consuming sugar was no longer a way for the upper class to demarcate their superior status. This chapter provides a glimpse into the dynamics between different classes in British society regarding the meanings of sugar.

In the final chapter, Mintz discusses sugar consumption in relation to eating habits beyond British society. He makes two arguments. First, the gradual integration of sugar into the British diet between 1650 and 1850 repeated itself in other countries after 1900. Second, the increasing use of sugar, such as in fast food and canned food, signified that individuals were shifting from the “controller and cook” to “consumers of mass produced food.”¹² Therefore, he laments that most of us have already forsaken the power to choose our food. He ends his book by re-emphasizing that the strengths of anthropology lie in fieldwork experience, and by reflecting on the significance of researching commonplace things such as foodstuffs.

Given the diverse topics in this book, it is necessary to identify the central theme so that readers can better understand it. Reviewers tend to have different interpretations: some focus on the economic concepts and principles while some are more interested in how society made use of

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹² *Ibid.*, 211.

sugar. Mintz, two decades after the book was published, revealed that *Sweetness and Power* is a book about capitalism and that sugar was only subsidiary.¹³ However, this attitude seems quite different from the one twenty years ago when he stated his intention of “entailing as [sugar] does a lengthy history of changing relationships among peoples, societies, and substances” in the introduction.¹⁴ Therefore, I agree with another reviewer that the attitude to this book depends on readers’ interest and capability.¹⁵ Extending his viewpoint, I think it depends on readers themselves to find the most captivating theme, and to define what kind of book *Sweetness and Power* is. I am understanding it as a book about the social history of sugar. On the one hand, Mintz’s analysis on the relation between capitalism and tropical food has been done before by economic historians who gave a better performance.¹⁶ On the other hand, Mintz’s discussion on sugar consumption in British society is original and enchanting for me, in particular about how women and sugar cane impacted each other. Therefore, I will primarily comment on his discussion on sugar consumption which I understand to be the most important theme of the book.

Mintz is strong at incorporating both a top-down and a bottom-up approach to demonstrate the dynamics of classes in British society. He explains that the meanings created by the ruling classes were influential to the mindsets of the lower classes who would continue to apply those meanings. Yet, he also mentions how the public, particularly the lower classes, consumed sugar and developed new meanings themselves by studying primary sources from centuries ago, such as recipes, family monthly accounts, medicine prescriptions and even literature.¹⁷ As an anthropologist, Mintz is sensitive to the individuality of human subjects and skillful at analyzing both the active and passive roles of different people. For example, he studies the importance of different stakeholders in sugar production and consumption, based on their class, gender, age and occupation. This approach enables readers to understand the roles of ordinary people, who are often omitted in large-scale world history projects. It also reminds world historians that these commoners might be important for creating a global trend.

Despite these strengths, the limited geographic scope, which mainly centres on Western countries, discredits the book. The book’s subtitle *The Place of Sugar in Modern History* suggests

¹³ Sidney W. Mintz, “Response,” *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 2 (2008): 154, accessed November 22, 2015, doi:10.1080/07409710802086096.

¹⁴ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, xxiv-xxv.

¹⁵ Ian Roxborough, Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney W. Mintz, *Man* 21, no. 3 (1986): 575, accessed September 15, 2015, doi:10.2307/2803144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Mintz compiles numerous primary sources to account for the British consumption of sugar. For instance, see Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 84, 92-93, 99, 105, 111, 116. This is not an exhaustive list of examples.

that there will be a historical narrative related to the general history of sugar, rather than confining the analysis to a region or a country (Britain in this case). When justifying the claim of British sugar consumption patterns recurring in other countries, he only examines two other countries, namely France and the United States. Such a small number of examples do not succeed in making his argument representative. Moreover, it is surprising that the book largely excludes themes related to Asia, provided that the European powers frequently traded with Asia. I do not mean to suggest that world history has to include all countries and regions. Instead, world historians should take into consideration the places relevant to their research. In fact, Mintz's observations—the close relationship between sugar and slavery, the great symbolic meanings of sugar, and the integration of sugar into lower-class eating habits due to massive production—do not apply to the other side of the world. Sucheta Mazumdar gives a very different picture of sugar development in China; for instance, there was a large-scale domestic production of sugar but the Chinese consumption was much less than Britain's.¹⁸ Undoubtedly we cannot disprove Mintz's argument by just taking China as an example; we would merely arrive at another unrepresentative conclusion. Yet, no matter whether China was an exceptional case or she reflected the general trends in Asia, a book about the modern history of sugar should deal with this.

When accounting for sugar's place in the rise of capitalism, Mintz adopts the Braudelian approach,¹⁹ most notably in chapter two. This historiography, named after scholar Fernand Braudel, refers to the approach of the *longue durée*. Instead of studying a particular event within a limited time frame, it aims to unfold structural changes over a long period of time by scrutinizing culture.²⁰ In *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz attempts to trace and explain the long-term development of capitalism from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, through people's everyday lives with sugar, rather than focusing on a few specific historical events. In my opinion, the result is less appealing than expected. First, this approach makes the writer's argument too simplistic. For instance, he asserts that the potential for great revenue from sugar cane market prompted the end of mercantilism.²¹ However, the writer somehow overestimates the role of sugar cane. The trade of commodities such as rum and molasses, which could also provide for sweet tastes, is sidelined. It cannot tell the relative importance of sugar cane in fostering the rise of capitalism. Second, the large temporal scope forces the author to touch upon so many themes; meanwhile, he wants to

¹⁸ For more examples of differences, see Sucheta Mazumdar, *Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology, and the World Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998), 13-59.

¹⁹ Roxborough, Review of *Sweetness and Power*, 575.

²⁰ Curtis, "Architects of World History," 16.

²¹ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 46.

keep the book short.²² As a consequence, the book is too general and descriptive. More importantly, the “information bombardment,” together with the loose connections between historical events, adds difficulties for readers to identify the bottom line of the book. This marks a stark contrast to the section about sugar consumption, which focuses on the 1650 to 1850 time period. The overall change in sugar consumption and the writer’s ideas are much more clearly presented in that part.

In addition, the temporal scope is problematic when the author attempts to prove that the British sugar consumption pattern repeated in other countries after 1900. As stated before, one of the goals is to demonstrate the production-consumption nexus. To his credit, Mintz gives ample examples and elaborations on how these are interconnected in the British context from the mid-seventeenth to the nineteenth century. However, he seems to forget this goal when he discusses sugar development in the twentieth century. One reviewer wonders why there are no contemporary accounts of sugar production, including the use of new technology, growing concerns about sugar’s harmful effects on health, and challenges from other sweeteners.²³ Mintz in fact does mention some of these issues but only with a few lines, without highlighting how these issues about sugar production affect its consumption.

Furthermore, Mintz is unable to demonstrate the full strength of an anthropologist in historical research. He is criticized for omitting the productive lives and practice of sugar plantation laborers because these issues are related to Mintz’s fieldwork.²⁴ Practically, it makes sense for him to exclude this part because the book focuses more on the consumption patterns of modern societies. The productive lives of workers who were often exploited were less important for altering the production scale and British consumption patterns. Moreover, adding one more part would have further complicated the book, which already contains too many themes. However, the reviewer’s criticism reminds us of an important point: what is the role of anthropology in (world) history? Mintz believes that historians mainly study archival sources and written materials, whereas anthropologists have first-hand contacts with descendants of the human subjects that historians research.²⁵ In this sense, anthropologists’ fieldwork experience can provide valuable

²² Mintz, “Response,” 150.

²³ Walter L. Goldfrank, Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney W. Mintz, *Theory and Society* 16, no. 4 (1987): 641, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657599>.

²⁴ Steven Marcus, Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney W. Mintz, *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 2 (1986): 378, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644146>.

²⁵ Mintz, “History and Anthropology,” 9.

oral material for historians. Mintz apparently notices that he does not include his fieldwork experience;²⁶ still, he cannot concretely show why anthropologists should not give up carrying out fieldwork. It would be fascinating to see how Mintz applies this anthropological methodology to writing history. In addition, I think that these two disciplines can be distinguished by their temporal emphasis. History primarily deals with the past while anthropology is more concerned with the present. By integrating knowledge from these two disciplines, we can better understand the larger course of development up until the present. Yet, as aforementioned, Mintz overlooks present-day sugar production. Therefore, *Sweetness and Power* cannot demonstrate the strengths of anthropology; rather, it leaves readers with an impression of the “uncertain place of anthropology in the human sciences today.”²⁷

Although the book contains little about the author’s anthropological fieldwork experience, it can still demonstrate the significance of an interdisciplinary approach which is vital for writing world history. The book is highly interdisciplinary because it combines anthropology, history, economics, biology and psychology. As a renowned anthropologist, Mintz in fact earned his undergraduate degree in psychology. Not only does he explain the demand for sugar by unfolding the psychology and biology of consumers, he also shows how those behind the scenes used their political power for their own economic benefit. All of this is supported with numerous historical sources and anthropological analysis. Of course these few sentences above cannot fully demonstrate Mintz’s use of knowledge from diverse fields. Though *Sweetness and Power* is not a world history book due to its restricted geographic scope, it shows how an interdisciplinary approach is useful for explaining large issues.

In any case, Mintz is widely regarded as the vanguard of food studies with the publication of *Sweetness and Power*. It is worth discussing the target readers here. This book is surely not written for the general public for a few reasons. First, some jargon and theories may be difficult for readers to digest, given that Mintz sometimes ill-defines those concepts and does not elaborate with adequate examples. Despite some scholars recommending *Sweetness and Power* to those who would like to read only one book about sugar history,²⁸ I think there are some easier books which can provide a clear overview of sugar development around the globe. Second, the book is a call to scholars for deriving from a mundane commodity the whole course of history, such as

²⁶ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 213.

²⁷ Goldfrank, Review of *Sweetness and Power*, 641.

²⁸ Erik Gilbert and Jonathan T. Reynolds, *Trading Tastes: Commodity and Culture Exchange to 1750* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), 154.

complex economic systems and social hierarchies. In particular, I think the book's target readers are anthropologists and historians. He shows anthropologists the importance of history to account for human contemporary habits and cultures. On the other hand, Mintz suggests to historians that they "make cultural inferences based on unconventional sources."²⁹ The "unconventional sources," in my view, refer to oral records, anthropological fieldwork and non-standard written materials like recipes. Time proves that he successfully encouraged many scholars to start researching foodstuffs, surely not limited to sugar. Most of them adopt the methodology and approach of Mintz. In fact, studying a commodity by looking at the relationship between production and consumption was a fresh approach when the book was published in the 1980s.³⁰ All in all, *Sweetness and Power* is an academic book which inspires scholars to make a contribution to the scholarship of food studies.

Last but not least, *Sweetness and Power*, sheds light on how food history can merge with world history. Food history certainly is not only concerned with how people consumed their meals in the past. Instead, by considering the production, distribution and consumption, food history can relate to world history and many other themes discussed in the seminars of this course. For example, how a staple food is grown and distributed can be linked to larger political and economic issues such as imperialism and wars. Different powers scrambled for plantations in order to guarantee a continuous supply of sugar and huge profits. Besides, food possesses social meanings and fortifies one's identity, thus relating to themes such as race, class and gender. Sugar, as a commodity originated from the Middle East and later massively planted in the New World, was finally transported to Europe for consumption. The confrontation and supplementation between exotic and local food best reflect the effects of cultural exchanges. In this sense, food can influence humans across continents. Though *Sweetness and Power* shows us the social meanings in British society only, it will be an important piece to the puzzle of world history which can be researched in comparative studies. Although I do not regard *Sweetness and Power* as a world history book, it undoubtedly gives some insights into writing food history on a global scale.

As a whole, *Sweetness and Power* is an inspirational book for scholars but it is not free from problems. Mintz fails to accomplish his purpose of writing. For example, he cannot demonstrate the usefulness of anthropological fieldwork. Besides, while he hopes to convince readers of the tight relationship between production and consumption, he neglects the issues of production

²⁹ Amy Bentley, "Introduction," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 2 (2008): 113, accessed November 16, 2015, doi:10.1080/07409710802085940.

³⁰ Curtis, "Architects of World History," 21; Bentley, "Introduction," 113.

in the twentieth century. Despite these shortcomings, the book motivates scholars to adopt historical anthropology, and provides a fascinating approach for food studies scholars to embark on their research. For students of world history, the book serves as a good model for showing the diverse knowledge required for conducting research in this field, and for reminding us of the importance of a broad sampling of human subjects. The greatest fault of this book is the entirely Eurocentric perspective which world historians need to avoid. People from other continents might view the same commodity very differently than Europeans. To use the words of Mintz, studying the role of the commonplace in the world is “another chorus of the bone song.”³¹ Tiny yet ubiquitous as sugar is, it can link individuals, societies and countries to the development of the world, although we have to be critical of its relative importance. In any case, *Sweetness and Power* is a well-written work and readers can learn a lot about sugar, beyond the simple taste of sweetness.

Bibliography

Bentley, Amy. “Introduction.” *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 2 (2008): 111-116. Accessed November 16, 2015. doi:10.1080/07409710802085940.

Bentley, Jerry H. “A Basic, Briefly Annotated Bibliography for Teachers of World History.” In *Teaching World History in the Twenty-first Century: A Resource Book*, edited by Heidi Roupp, 168-182. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2010.

Curtis, Kenneth R. “Architects of World History.” In *Architects of World History: Researching the Global Past*, edited by Kenneth R. Curtis and Jerry H. Bentley, 1-29. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014.

Gilbert, Erik and Jonathan T. Reynolds. *Trading Tastes: Commodity and Culture Exchange to 1750*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006.

Goldfrank, Walter L. Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney W. Mintz. *Theory and Society* 16, no. 4 (1987): 640-641. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657599>.

Marcus, Steven. Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by

³¹ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 213-214.

Sidney W. Mintz. *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 2 (1986): 377-379. Accessed September 15, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644146>.

Mazumdar, Sucheta. *Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology, and the World Market*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998.

Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking, 1985.

_____. "Caribbean." Accessed November 25, 2015. <http://sidneymintz.net/caribbean.php>.

_____. "History and Anthropology: A Marriage Made in Heaven." Working paper, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2004. Accessed November 8, 2015. www.cuhk.edu.hk/ant/publish/Mintzworkingpaper.pdf.

_____. "Response." *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 2 (2008): 148-158. Accessed November 22, 2015. doi:10.1080/07409710802086096.

Roxborough, Ian. Review of *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, by Sidney W. Mintz. *Man* 21, no. 3 (1986): 575. Accessed September 15, 2015. doi:10.2307/2803144.