Sweetness and Power

In *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz illuminates and discusses the social and economic history of sugar production and consumption in Europe and its colonies, particularly focusing on England. He examines the power structures that made it possible for sugar to become the first luxury-turned-necessity, which propelled a revolution in diet and lifestyle, particularly in the working class during the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. Mintz argues that sugar’s contribution to many developed nations has been significant, and that, due to sugar’s history in England and the restructuring of the working class, people in the United Kingdom and the United States have lost their food autonomy.

Sugar’s history is one that closely aligns with themes of conquest and control. Originally domesticated in New Guinea, sugar cane spread throughout south Asia and the Middle East between 6000 B.C. and the first century A.D. Sugar extraction and course refinement into solid crystals was probably invented in Persia and India between 400 B.C. and 100 A.D., and trade and the Arab invasion had brought very small quantities into southern Europe by 700 A.D., though it didn’t reach northern Europe until the eleventh century when the Crusades brought the influence of northern powers into the Mediterranean.

Slavery became an important figure in sugar production while it was still in the Mediterranean, especially in Morocco and the eastern Mediterranean after the Crusades, possibly due to the labor shortages cause by the Black Death. When production shifted to the Atlantic islands controlled by Portugal and Spain and then New World colonies, slave labor was the crux upon which sugar production, and ultimately consumption, was built. Without the system of forced labor, plantation owners would not have been able to sustain such high outputs or retain nearly as much profit, supply would not have been able to keep up with demand, and sugar
prices may not have fallen sufficiently or quickly enough for the working class to adopt it in their everyday diet by the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It is interesting to me that, as Mintz points out, while England was getting rich on slavery in the New World, it was setting itself up to become rich off of proletariat labor in the homeland.

In the New World colonies, production began at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and throughout that century and the beginning of the next, Spanish and Portuguese exports supplied most of Europe’s sugar. From 1650 onward, French and English production outstripped all other colonial production, with French eventually winning out in the mid-1700s, and sugar became the most important export of the New World colonies. Two important “triangles” of trade were established: the Atlantic Triangle Trade (manufactured goods to Africa, slaves to the New World colonies, commodities like sugar to England) and what I’ll call the “Rum Triangle Trade” (rum to Africa, slaves to the West Indies, molasses to New England for rum production). The first embodied the Mercantilist ideal of England (with the colonies providing England both cash crops and an exclusive market for goods produced in the motherland), and the second tended to undermine it (since it circumvented the mother country and manufactures completely).

Mintz makes a strong case that sugar plantations were both an early form of industrial production and a significant factor in the rise of capitalism. First, the plantations themselves were run much like later factories in England, with a high level of organization, interchangeability of labor units, extreme time-consciousness, and, most importantly, separation both of production from consumption and the worker from his tools (stripping from the producer the means of production). Second, the incredible return on investment in the sugar industry (made possible because of slave labor), the market for goods that the colonies created, and, as we will see, the restructuring of the working class into an urban labor pool largely free of constraints which sugar
propelled (or at least made easier), gave strong incentive for England to move toward a free-market (at the cost of the planters who got rich on protectionist laws).

Demand in England for sugar remained high from its first appearance as a rarity in the eleventh century through its widespread availability in the nineteenth. Mintz describes in detail the initial uses of sugar by the English royalty and nobility. But as sugar prices fell between 1650 and 1750, sugar and its meanings percolated downward through English society, finally reaching the lower classes in the mid-eighteenth century. More people used sugar, and new meanings were created, and at the same time, old meanings were absorbed and re-cast, often in the form of ritual throwbacks to previous uses (such as wedding cakes with marzipan fruit embellishments reminiscent of the old royal subtleties).

This percolation was not simply caused by market fluctuation and/or flooding; demand kept pace with production since people always wanted to buy more than they could afford. More than anything else, the proponents of capitalism used their power in the government to enact laws that spread the use of sugar, to expand its market downward in society. This was accomplished through rationing to the navy and poorhouses, and especially through the official movement away from protectionism to free-trade throughout the 1800s.

The concurrent downward percolation of tea during the eighteenth century created a new, important mode of consumption for the poor: tea sweetened with sugar was drunk every day by everyone by the year 1800. Mintz argues that this, more than anything, marked a dietary revolution that was beginning in England and has since occurred almost everywhere that sugar has been introduced. Mintz is careful to note that while the working class’ consumption of tea sweetened with sugar may have originated as a class-attainment goal made possible by government policy, it transformed into a dietary necessity, “the irreducible minimum beyond
which was only starvation” as people supplemented their bread and butter with very cheap sugar calories.

In reading this account of sugar, I really latched onto the concept of sweetness as an artificial desire. I agree with Mintz’ argument that the desire and/or liking of sugar is not dictated by biological preference, but almost wholly by cultural convention. That people are so easily addicted to sugar simply makes his arguments stronger—particularly when he makes reference to sugar as a drug, an “opiate of the masses” which kept the working class complacent (my quotes).

It hit me while reading about the concomitant export of chocolate and sugar from the New World that “chocolate” as we know it in America was created by the same factors Mintz discusses regarding the percolation of tea with sugar (and coffee as well, especially in France). That is, although I know a bit about the history of chocolate in the New World (prior to contact), and I am aware that it was primarily a spicy food or drink, prior to this book, I had not been able to dissociate the ideas of “chocolate” and “sweetness” in my mind, so engrained are they by modern industrial society and culture. I was therefore appalled when I considered chocolate’s place in the development of our modern dietary habits and culture, because it is not really chocolate that performs all of the functions that we tend to attribute it—it is sugar, in all the ways that Mintz describes: its drug effects (along with caffeine), its easily attainable nature, its instant gratification, its cultural meanings (attached to the concept of richness), its social functions, its connection to “poor eating habits” of the lower class… If you look at the ingredients of a chocolate candy bar in America today, it likely doesn’t even contain any chocolate: the cocoa butter and chocolate liquor have been replaced by (usually hydrogenated) vegetable oil, and the cocoa itself is often replaced by synthetic chemicals that mimic a “chocolaty” flavor, designed to trick your brain into liking, even craving them. What we are drawn to, then, are drugs: sugar and
artificial flavoring—both synthetic tastes that today completely dominate our food choices. It is a bit shocking, and dizzying, thinking about the implications of sugar.