

Title—Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History
Author—Sidney W. Mintz
Year—1985

Categories: Trade, World History, Economics
Place: The World (focus on Britain & British Empire)
Time: 1650-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History attempts to craft a history of the world through the lens of a single commodity: sugar, or specifically sucrose. Sugar was relatively unknown in Europe for much of history, until first gradually and then dramatically entering into the European diet. Overall, Mintz links growing consumption of sugar (and in turn fat) with development. He focuses specifically on the expansion on sugar consumption in Britain during 1650-1900. Mintz is especially interested in the exponential increase during the nineteenth century, where at the beginning sugar was an expensive necessity and by 1900, sugar made up nearly one-fifth of the English diet. Underpinning his argument is the inherently close relationship between production and consumption.

Mintz explores how sugar was transformed from a symbol of the upper class and nobility to a necessary good for all social classes in Britain, especially the working class. Mintz illuminates the use of sugar as a spice, which was the common use of sugar until it became more widely available and affordable. He ties sugar consumption to the rise of other new cash crops during this period: chocolate, coffee, and tea. All three were improved through the addition of sugar, and he focuses specifically on tea in arguing how sugar came to constitute an incredibly important part of the working class diet. He discusses the use of tea sweetened with sugar by the working classes during the work breaks, and even the establishment of a new mealtime for tea. Mintz argues that sugar helped to fill the calorie gap of the working class. The importance of tea in Britain was no accident, according to Mintz, and was the direct result of the East India Company's monopoly on tea, as opposed to products like coffee. This ties into Mintz's argument regarding power, claiming that these commodities were introduced into British society through political, economic, and military undertakings.

Mintz's argument demonstrates how using the lens of a single commodity can produce a compelling history. The importance of the slave trade for the rise of sugar was particularly interesting, with Britain requiring more labor to fill their insatiable desire for sugar. Tracing a single commodity is effective in highlighting connections, such as that between the rise of tea and the rise of sugar, which connected British imperial goals in East India and the West Indies. However, focusing on a single commodity may overshadow the importance of various other historical factors. His discussion of the Industrial Revolution was lacking, especially in regard to the emergence of the working class that would grow to rely on sugar.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Claim that the wine habits of the French explains their lessened consumption of sugar even while having sugar island colonies
- Concurrent rises of tea and sugar seen through the interconnected British imperial goals in the West and East Indies