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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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“Humans eat, they do not feed.”

—Sidney Mintz¹

These papers originated from a session of the conference “Women, Men, and Food: Putting Gender on the Table,” sponsored by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, April 12 and 13, 2007. The conference explored the relationship between food and gender, from production, to preparation, to consumption. Participants, including food writers, historians, economists, scholars in gender studies, and activists, considered the variety of ways in which men and women shape food, and how, in turn, food and foodways shape men and women. The session entitled, “Sweetness, Gender and Power: Rethinking Sidney Mintz’s Classic Work,” had as its goal to examine anthropologist Sidney Mintz’s 1985 book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, through the prism of gender and other axes of analysis. While taking a fresh look at *Sweetness and Power*, we also sought to acknowledge and celebrate the distinguished career of Professor Mintz, whose work has profoundly influenced the academic study of food.

It is fitting that these comments appear in *Food and Foodways*. In 1987, more than two decades ago, the journal published a collection of essays examining the significance of Mintz’s book two years after its 1985 publication. *Food and Foodways*’s “Symposium Review on *Sweetness and Power*” consisted of comments by Immanuel Wallerstein, Daniel Baugh, Gunther Lottes, William Roseberry, Claude Fischler, and Michael Taussig, and a rejoinder

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by Sidney Mintz.² Their widely divergent assessments of the book are emblematic of the book's initial reception in general. While *Sweetness and Power* received ample praise—"Sweetness and Power will surely be regarded as one of [the anthropology of modern life's] founding texts," wrote one reviewer³—a few commentators were puzzled by or downright hostile toward a highly interdisciplinary book that used the single commodity of sugar to explore the connections among slavery, industrialization, and early modern capitalism. "Historians ought to be tolerant of suggestive, discursive, even meandering modes of discourse where the benefits are obvious, as they are in so many parts of this often fascinating book," suggested another commenter.⁴

Upon publication *Sweetness and Power* was reviewed widely in the popular press as well as in academic journals. Some reviewers, faced with the book's ambitious scope and interdisciplinarity, seemed not to know what to make of it. "This is an odd, odd book," began one reviewer.⁵ Another wondered if it were really possible to measure "meaning" historically and over time. An economic historian dryly mused whether "Professor Mintz has laboured over the British Library's collection of cookbooks to a somewhat self-indulgent extent."⁶ Many, invariably those more comfortable with the idea of interdisciplinary scholarship, deemed it highly notable. The *New York Times* called it "an important and stimulating work."⁷ Others deemed it "provocative and well-written," and a "tour de force."⁸ "Mintz has led all of us unwary readers and eaters through the multiple functions and culturally defined goods of sugar and sweetness in order to give us an uneasy hyperglycemic chill," wrote John A. Marino in *The Journal of Modern History*.⁹ Despite certain reviewers' misgivings, *Sweetness and Power* has maintained and even increased its prominence, in large part because the mainstream academy has become more familiar and comfortable with interdisciplinary scholarship and has taken food more seriously as a subject of inquiry. One early (1987) reviewer's assessment presciently predicts *Sweetness and Power's* place today in serious scholarship on food:

Sweetness and Power will become an essential work for those interested in food history. Sugar's rise is a central feature in the development of the modern diet. Mintz successfully captures many sides of this transformation. He avoids the twin pitfalls of either reducing dietary change to a story

of economic and technological imperatives or slipping into the mire of gastronomic antiquarianism. . . . One of the most insightful books on food history, it raises important issues and will provide grist for many scholarly mills.¹⁰

Sweetness and Power has achieved its importance for several reasons. First, it examines both issues of production and consumption. It is hard enough to write a good book on one of those aspects, but to include both is a significant feat. *Sweetness and Power* effectively demonstrates that one half of the food system cannot be fully comprehended without inclusion of the other, and thus provides a model of scholarship. Second, *Sweetness and Power* is a work of both anthropology and history. The book examines the variety of meanings and functions of sugar, which change over time largely according to the material conditions: the amounts produced, the forms in which it appears, and the meanings determined by class, race, gender, and geography. One can hear Professor Mintz explaining to anthropologists why it is impossible to understand the culture of a thing unless one knows its history and how its meaning changes over time. But Mintz converses with historians as well, urging them to take some risks, and make some cultural inferences based on unconventional sources. Third, Mintz's study links the "New" and "Old" Worlds by connecting the brutalities of slavery in the Caribbean to the brutalities of English industrialization. Mintz constantly reminds us of the connections between the colonial plantation system and its violence to slaves, and the English peasants turned proletariats as they enter the Satanic mills of Liverpool or Bristol. Those who produce the sugar endure destruction, slavery, and death; the product of that labor is consumed in weak tea and jam and bread on the other side of the world by the cogs in the industrial factory.

Further, by drawing on history and anthropology, as well as botany, geography, economics, and nutrition, *Sweetness and Power* employs multi-disciplinary theory and methodology to explore sugar's meanings and uses over time, and illustrates how one can—and should—focus on both production and consumption, an example that few have rivaled in quality and scope since its publication. *Sweetness and Power* was one of the first serious academic studies (or, for that matter, books designed for a general

audience) to put an edible commodity squarely at the center and examine it from a variety of angles.¹¹

Finally, *Sweetness and Power* is central to food studies as a core text in an emerging field of academic study. The book takes a commonplace, even mundane substance such as sugar, holds it up to a historical and cultural lens and finds significant import. By taking sugar seriously, it helped to pave the way for food as a topic of academic study to be taken seriously. Scholars across disciplines have studied food for a long time, most notably anthropologists and folklorists, but it is only in the last 10–15 years or so that food as a focus for scholarly study has gained real acceptance. As Sidney Mintz noted in a 1999 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article:

[Food] has been a disdained and patronized subject, and people who study it have been disdained and patronized. . . . I'm still trying to make people who are not anthropologists aware of the tremendous importance of food in our lives and worldwide, politically. The drive for food is more powerful than the sex drive, but we don't pay attention to it, because we're fed three times a day.¹²

Those in interdisciplinary studies define their fields' parameters in part by determining a core of important works that embody the field and its aspiration. We are what we read, we might say, or at least we are what we assign in courses and put in our footnotes. High on the list for food studies—an *Ur* text we could call it—is Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*. When the book was published in 1985, Sidney Mintz was already a well-regarded scholar of the Caribbean basin with several books and dozens of articles under his belt. But *Sweetness and Power* took him from being a well-known anthropologist in academic circles, to a widely read and celebrated anthropologist—and historian—enabling him to reach a much broader audience inside and outside the academy.¹³

What follows are the comments of three distinguished scholars, a geographer and two historians, who were asked to consider how *Sweetness and Power* might be different if the book had been written in 2007 instead of 1985. For the original Radcliffe conference session, panelists were asked to comment specifically on gender—how *Sweetness and Power* might differ if Mintz had had the benefit of drawing from the wealth of scholarship in women's history and gender studies published over the last couple

of decades. In addition to employing gender as a lens, commentators (rightly) did not limit their discussions to gender, but each drew from her or his home discipline and area of specialty (food and global migrations, slavery and the Atlantic world, early modern transnational and specifically Asian history) to offer important insights. Thus, for this issue of *Food and Foodways*, participants revised and expanded their comments to emphasize their areas of expertise. Following the remarks of Professors Vincent Brown, Judith Carney, and Sucheta Mazumdar, the issue concludes with Professor Sidney Mintz's rejoinder and concluding thoughts.

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Notes

1. Mintz, "Cuisines: Regional, National, Global?" Paper given at The History of Food and Drink, University of Adelaide, May 14–15, 1999.
2. "Symposium Review on *Sweetness and Power*," *Food and Foodways*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1987), pp. 107–198.
3. William Roseberry, p. 134 of 1987 issue.
4. Daniel A. Baugh, p. 119 of 1987 issue.
5. Walter L. Goldfrank. 1987. Review of *Sweetness and Power*. *Theory and Society* 16(4): 640–641.
6. Ian Roxborough. 1986. Review of *Sweetness and Power*. *Man*, 21(3): 575.
7. John Gross, Review of *Sweetness and Power* by Sidney Mintz, *New York Times*, June 11, 1985, p. C15.
8. Mark Wilde. 1987. Review of *Sweetness and Power*. *Technology and Culture* 28(1): 141–143.
9. John A. Marino. 1987. Review of *Sweetness and Power*. *Journal of Modern History* 59(3): 551.
10. Wilde, 143.
11. As Mintz notes in his essay in this volume, one of the first such books to focus on a single commodity or food item was Redcliffe Salaman's *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1949). In the last two decades dozens of such books have been published including (in alphabetical order): Ken Albala.

- Beans: A History* (Berg, 2007); Sophie Coe and Michael Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (Thames and Hudson, 1996); Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, Oxford, 2006; John T. Edge, several books including *Donuts: An American Passion* (Putnam Adult, 2006); Betty Fussell, *The Story of Corn* (Knopf, 1992); Virginia Jenkins, *Bananas* (Smithsonian Institution, 2000); Mark Kurlansky, several including *Cod: A Biography of a Fish That Changed the World* (Walker and Company, 1997); Pierre Lazlo, *Citrus: A History* (University of Chicago, 2007) and *Salt: Grain of Life* (Columbia University Press, 2001); Alan McFarlane and Iris McFarlane, *An Empire of Tea* (Overlook Press, 2004); Andrew Smith, several, including, *The Tomato in America: Early History, Culture and Cookery* (University of South Carolina, 1994); Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (Vintage, 2005).
12. Jennifer Ruark, "A Place at the Table," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 9, 1999.
 13. Apart from *Sweetness and Power* Mintz has contributed to and shaped the scholarly study of food in other ways including first, his skepticism over the notion of a "national cuisine," especially when referring to an "American cuisine." In his book *Tasting Food Tasting Freedom* and elsewhere, Mintz has argued that there are only regional cuisines tied to geographical locations and indigenous foods. This is still a rich and important debate in part stimulated by him. Second, important is Mintz's articulation of the "core-fringe-legume" non-Western meal pattern. See "Food Patterns in Agrarian Societies: The Core-Fringe-Legume Hypothesis," by Sidney Mintz and Daniela Schlettwein-Gsell, *Gastronomica*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 40–52. Also significant are Mintz's musings on the parallels between Coca-Cola and tea. In an unpublished paper entitled "Quenching Homologous Thirsts," (paper in author's possession) Mintz traces the history and finds parallels in their development and uses. Among other similarities, both emerged as drinks in societies (in different times, in different places) that were in the process of modernization, becoming industrial (England 1800s, Southern US, 1900s), which aligned people's meal schedules with factory work. Both he has referred to as "proletarian hunger killers."