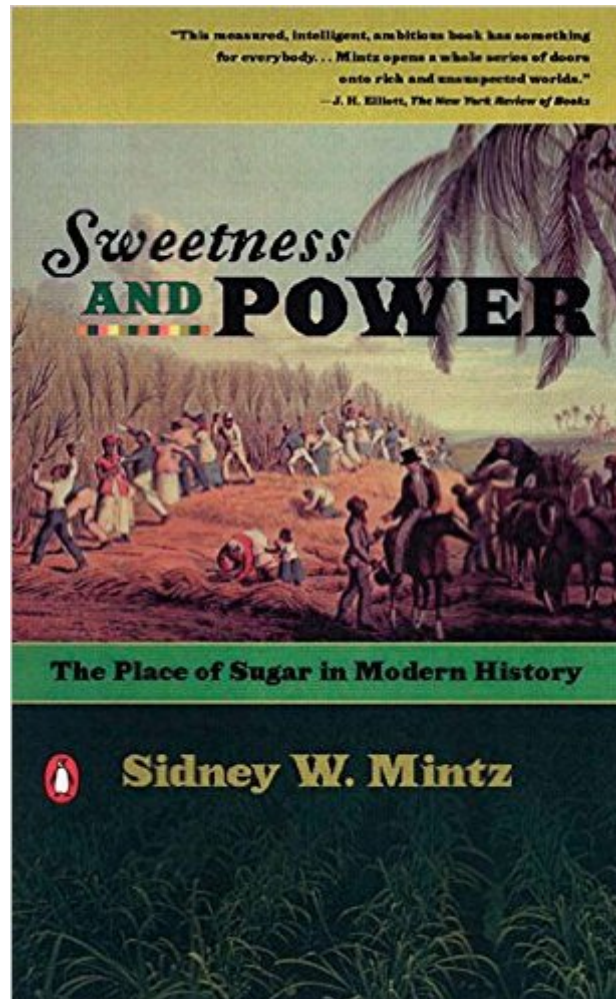


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Sweetness And Power: The Place Of Sugar In Modern History



Synopsis

"Shows how the intelligent analysis of the history of a single commodity can be used to pry open the history of an entire world of social relationships and human behavior."—The New York Review of Books.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mintz carefully places implications that sugar has caused human nature and culture to change and the end of his work, after a brief overview of all that we have been doing with sugar or rather sugar has been doing with us for the past 1000 years. Mintz's work is divided into 5 sections: Food, Sociality and Sugar; Production; Consumption; Power; and finally Eating and Being. Mintz really hopes to build a base of facts to reveal to us how we as a people have identified with and sought to consume sugar over the past 1000 years and how that has affected us. Sugar is always a labor intensive project, from the mill, to the distillery, to the storehouse and all the laborers it takes to run these places. Mintz discusses how this need for labor caused the British to look to Africa and other places to find cheap or free labor. With sugar came slavery, and those slaves who did the plantation work generally worked in the Caribbean while the product they created was delivered to British aristocracy. In the mid-1700's sugar is made cheaper and more accessible to the lower classes and at this point shifts in its purpose to sweeten food. And as outlined by the upper statistics, sugar only continues to grow in demand. It is interesting that because sugar started as something precious and hard to come by, when it later became more cheap and accessible to the working class it still

seemed to uphold that "rarity." The working class felt like they were increasing in freedom and status as they started to consume sugar. Sugar and like products "represented the growing freedom of ordinary folks," yet did Sugar really mean freedom? In analysis of Mintz's thesis I am most convinced that sugar is a powerful force that has moved us historically and today.

Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* situates economic analysis in consumption rather than production. The author believes that a producer's labor and exploitation is not enough to understand the exploitation of production. One must unpack the mythos of demand. Central to this is the idea that rational choice leads liberal individuals to consume products because it is in their best interest. Mintz correctly implies that in the historiography of western consumers and colonial producers, this liberal individual is almost always white, male, and couched in the trappings of "civilization." He criticizes prevailing practices in social anthropology that approach colonized peoples as pristine and discrete, a tendency that also has troubling sway over what he terms "anthropology of modern life." He sees the anthropology rooted in his study of a basic commodity-sugar-as a positive contestation of the bounded primitive as a mode of inquiry and one that connects rather than marginalizes its subjects. Mintz's engagement with cultural anthropology is based on a sophisticated premise: the way in which canonical anthropology marginalizes the primitive in opposition to civil society is related to the way in which liberal economics marginalizes the producer in opposition to the liberal individual consumer. The term "in opposition to" is appropriate because in this marginalization, both ends are mutually decentered. Both the primitive and the civil as well as production and consumption are on the margins because there is a labor, an exploitation, and an invocation to behavior that defies logic on each end. This, Mintz implies, necessitates a rejection of the prevailing colonial narrative of one-way dominion. For him, the mass-consumption of sugar is an anthropological anomaly.

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