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From sweetness to servitude

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Abstract

This study examines Sidney Mintz's book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1986), which takes an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of sovereignty, looking at it through the lenses of anthropology, culture, psychology, and economics. His work in the nineteenth century seeks to explain how a commodity and its use have resulted in a shift in global culture and history, as he engages with the changing world through anthropology. This global history of a commodity highlights important characteristics such as production structure and consumer relevance. Mintz highlights the significance of a colonial product like sugar in the formation of global capitalism, as well as its connections to slavery and subsequently, unfree labour.

Keywords: Sugar, slavery, capitalism, commodity, consumption, production, industrialization, global history

Introduction

Sidney Mintz's work adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the question of sovereignty, addressing it through anthropology, culture, psychology, and economics. He engages with the changing world through anthropology, therefore his work in the nineteenth century aims to explain how a commodity and its use have resulted in a shift in global culture and history. This global history of a commodity states significant aspects such as the organization of production and the importance of its consumption. Mintz demonstrates the importance of a colonial product such as sugar in the development of global capitalism and its linkages to slavery, and later, unfree labour.

The commodity is the foundation for this capitalist mode of production. Sugar is a foundation for the analysis of capitalist modes of production from the standpoint of production because of its commonality and fundamental necessity for everyday use. Sugar was originally a luxury good in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, and it was utilized in five different ways: as a spice, medicinal, decorative sweetener, and preservative. It was a status symbol, but as its symbolic significance faded, its economic and dietary significance grew. It was turned into a mass-consumption item. These developments allude to a huge continuous historical upheaval in which a food that was previously only available to the privileged becomes a necessity for the working class throughout the industrial capitalism era of the nineteenth century. As Karl Marx strives to come up with a conceptual framework to explain this historical development. When a commodity becomes the major focus of a study of the capitalist mode of production, this dialecticism becomes not only distinct from, but also the polar opposite of, Hegelian dialecticism.

In Europe during the 19th century, industrial capitalism created a class of people whose livelihood was based on physical labour. By this time, sugar was widely available, and it was no longer necessary for the working class to wear the status symbol, because sugar was a good source of energy in comparison to other foods, and calories were devoured quickly. Here we can see the diverse character of exchange value, which is the manifestation or expression of a commodity's use value and utility as it varies through time and space. Commodity exchange value can be represented in terms of something common to all of them, and for which they represent a higher or lesser quantity.¹ Sugar output in the UK's tropical colonies expanded as sugar consumption surged in the UK. Tobacco was the first crop in the new world to go from a rare upper-class luxury to a necessity for the working class.

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¹ Karl Marx, "Commodities" in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol- I, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), 28.

Sugar had surpassed tobacco in both the British and French West Indies by the end of the seventeenth century. The expanded sugar market was met with a steady increase in production.² Sugar served as a fuel for capitalism's finance to make the working class more productive. Other goods, like tobacco and alcohol, have a negative impact on the working class's health, unlike sugar. Sugar has been one of the first foods of the industrial work break after proving to be useful in covering the calorie gap for the Labouring poor. Mintz depicts the production and consumption of sugar in various parts of the world during the global history of British industrialization. Although most people do not recognize the Caribbean plantation economy's rise as part of the industrial revolution's development, Mintz does.

Although tropical commodities were not traded in the United Kingdom, rather sold for profit by plantation proprietors, it is also true that practically everything consumed in the West Indian colonies originated in England. There were no direct trades that benefited imperial enterprise in the long run. These businesses subsequently grew into two triangular trades. The first and most famous triangle connected Britain to Africa and the New World: manufactured goods were sold to Africa, African slaves were sold to the Americas, and American tropical commodities, primarily sugar, were sold to the mother country and her importing neighbours. New England sent rum to Africa, slaves from Africa to the West Indies, and molasses from the West Indies back to New England in the second triangle. Human commodification was depicted on a massive scale in these triangles.

It wasn't simply sugar, rum, or molasses that weren't being traded directly for finished goods, according to Mintz. The human was a "false commodity," as Mintz puts it, but it was vital to the system. He refers to humans as "false commodities" because they are not objects, even when treated as such. The wealth earned by these slaves was returned to Britain; the things they produced were consumed in Britain, and the products produced by Britons were consumed by slaves who were themselves consumed in the process of wealth creation.³

Mintz discusses the interaction between cane growers and the mechanical/chemical transformation of sugar cane into sugar, as well as the coordination between land and mill. How did this total control of land and mill play a key role in worker discipline and organization? He is underlining the nature of sugar cane and sugar production, which is characterised by discipline and time consciousness as inherent to the capitalist mode of production.

Commodity does not exist in and of itself; it exists in human labour. In the capitalist system, however, it is erroneously decided by the market and its fundamental values. Humans have no influence over the end output of their own labour. As a result, it alienates him from his own labour, where the value was created by him. The inherent value of a commodity assumes autonomy from human labour. It is the fetishism that attaches itself to the results of labour when commodities are produced and hence is inseparable from the production of commodities, as Marx describes it.⁴ As a

result, slaves are alienated from both their working environment and the product, with their working circumstances deteriorating in order to manage labour. This particular social nature of labour demonstrates that humans are less valuable than the capital obtained through their own labour; eventually, these qualities of commodities and "false commodities" demonstrate labour alienation, which is a component of commodity fetishism.

The Atlantic slave trade and Britain's industrialization are inextricably linked. Thus, Eric Williams' argument (in the preface of his book "Capitalism and Slavery") that Caribbean slavery fueled British capitalism appears to be correct, and these plantations were, in Fernando Ortiz's words, capitalism's "favorite child."⁵ Sugar production benefited not only the capitalist classes in England who ran agro-industrial firms in the colonies, but it also catered to the demands of the developing proletariat. Mintz refers to it as agricultural industrialism because of the new plantation system and its products produced by the same power that has entrenched itself in Caribbean society, whilst Jairus Banaji refers to it as a capitalist economy. The entire process is one of primitive accumulation, and Mintz agrees with Marx that it was during the early stages of capitalism that people were dispossessed of their means of subsistence. With the rise in sugar consumption, the professional culture altered, as did the domestic culture, which was already very different from the earlier concept of time and space.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the new economic philosophy known as "free trade" ensured Britain's access to sugar and other tropical commodities, as well as income from processing and re-exporting them; it also ensured a big overseas market for finished British goods.⁶ The transition from other commodities to sugar production necessitated a considerable amount of capital, which resulted in the formation of large states. Patterns that allowed indentured workers to purchase land at the conclusion of their contract vanished. Plantations supplanted small farms, and by the late seventeenth century, the number of enslaved Africans had risen dramatically. Slavery became the preferred method of labour exploitation, despite the fact that it required a significant investment in human "stock."⁷ Slave-based sugar plantations in the United Kingdom and France were at their peak in the eighteenth century. The first, Spanish phase of Caribbean plantation history saw a "mixed" form of labour; the second, 1650-1850, with the Danes, Dutch, English, and French, embraced three distinct forms of labour that really altered until the solely "slave" type ended with emancipation. By the 1870s, the third "contract" form of plantation life in the Caribbean, which began with a new arrangement using imported labour to mitigate the consequences of freedom and keep labour expenses low, had come to an end; slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1876 and in Cuba in 1884. Following that, all Caribbean labour was "free."⁸

Three basic types of productive unfree labour and, in particular, slavery, must be recognized within the Old World and Atlantic systems. Small-scale unfree labour in homes, farms, and artisan establishments, prevalent in Europe until around 1000 AD and in the Mediterranean until around 1700, in Eastern Europe until the nineteenth century,

² Sidney W. Mintz, "Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History," (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 36.

³ Mintz, Sweetness and Power, 43.

⁴ Robert J. Antonio, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof (1867)" in Marx and Modernity: Key readings and Commentary Edited by Robert J. Antonio, (Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003), 121.

⁵ Mintz, Sweetness and Power, 32.

⁶ Mintz, Sweetness and Power, 46.

⁷ Mintz, Sweetness and Power, 53.

⁸ Mintz, Sweetness and Power, 54.

in the Americas from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and in the Muslim world and Africa until the early twentieth century. Unfree labour on a large scale in large enterprises such as plantations or mines. There is substantial debate about whether chattel slavery developed continuously in the Western Hemisphere past classical Greece and Rome. The Belgian historian Charles Verlinden contends that sugar cane production and slavery have been inextricably linked since antiquity, via crusader-invaded Syria and Palestine in the eleventh century, via Cyprus, Sicily, and Spain to the Americas. However, according to Philips and Solow, slave labour was not a "significant component" of sugar cane agriculture in the mediaeval Mediterranean, and new sugar cane plantations developed based on chattel slavery on the Atlantic Island.⁹

In a nutshell, Mintz investigates political economics and culture in order to comprehend capitalist social formation by examining sugar production, consumption, and power structure. Sugar consumption changed after the process of proletarianization. The dialectic between necessity and status is at the heart of this entire shift in social and political systems. This book discusses not only eating habits, industrialization, and slavery, but also transformation and power dynamics. Power structures are pervasive in people's lives, and answers can be found in consumption and production behaviors and lifestyles. Slavery and sugar are inextricably linked. Mintz depicts two types of slaves: those who worked on plantations and those who worked in the English working class and were habitual of sweetness.

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