

# Sickness and Sweetness and Power

John Tresch, *Warburg Institute*

*L*ate May 2020. The shelves are well stocked for the moment—with flour, pasta, toilet paper, sugar—though some items, like the cheap Turkish grape juice at the little local around the corner, still disappear for days. The COVID-19 lockdown has offered glimpses of a parched, restricted reality that could set in at any point. Suddenly we see how quickly the basic arrangements on which we depend—electricity, telephone wires, a competent civil service, food supply lines—can cease to deliver. We also see that we can get by without what we’ve been told are necessities: airplanes are grounded, spending limits are ignored, deadlines don’t matter. We’re peering into the backstage, at the long-distance systems that keep us fed, keep the gears turning, keep the lights on.

When all this kicked in I was reading about the breakneck emergence of a national infrastructure of canals, roads, railroads, telegraphs, and science institutions in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s; those were also years of a cholera epidemic, an economic crisis, and wild utopias. The pandemic makes visible, then and now, the patchworked, faulty, unsynchronized character of what was then called “the American system.” It gives apocalyptic shape to the haunting graffiti on a rusty railroad bridge I saw in Philadelphia after the 2016 election: “MAKE AMERICA NOTHING AGAIN.”

I was also reading about scientific cosmologies and anthropologies of global exchange: in particular, an essay by Marshall Sahlins subtitled “The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology,” originally delivered as the 1995 Sidney W. Mintz lecture.<sup>1</sup> It gave a dense intellectual genealogy of capitalism’s drive to create new tastes and new needs. Its title, “The Sadness of Sweetness,” riffed on Mintz’s landmark 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.<sup>2</sup>

Mintz’s study of sugar’s production, consumption, and meaning made food supply chains visible, revealing their dependence on specific forms of state power, labor exploitation, and consumer tastes. Mintz died in 2015. As his obituaries pointed out, in the thirty years since its publication *Sweetness and Power* had become paradigmatic of studies that follow a single commodity (salt, cod, tea, beef, corn, chocolate, oranges, cotton) across the world and over centuries.<sup>3</sup> Mintz

---

John Tresch is Professor and Mellon Chair in History of Art, Science, and Folk Practice at the Warburg Institute, University of London. He is the author of *The Reason for the Darkness of the Night: Edgar Allan Poe and the Forging of American Science* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, forthcoming) and Editor of the *History of Anthropology Review*. His next book is *Cosmograms: How to Do Things with Worlds*. Warburg Institute, Woburn Square, WC1H 0AB London, United Kingdom; John.Tresch@sas.ac.uk.

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Sahlins, “The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology,” *Current Anthropology*, 1996, 37:395–428.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985). Subsequent references to this work are indicated in the text by page number.

<sup>3</sup> See Virginia Dominguez, “Anthropological Work and Legacy of Sidney W. Mintz,” in *BEROSE—International Encyclopaedia of the Histories of Anthropology* (Paris, 2019), <http://www.berose.fr/article1627.html?lang=fr>.

*Isis*, volume 111, number 4. © 2020 by The History of Science Society.  
All rights reserved. 0021-1753/2020/0111-00XX\$10.00.

deployed an emulable interdisciplinarity, linking environments, technologies, and social and political histories. If we replace edible substances with facts, instruments, specimens, images, and practices, the book offers a model for historians interested in science and capitalism, science in transit, and circulating knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Mintz offered the book as a contribution to “the anthropology of modern life” (p. xviii). If we set aside obvious differences between a deliberately produced and consumed commodity and a self-replicating virus, his analysis of sugar speaks with surprising directness to today’s COVID-19 crisis. For Mintz, sugar served as a social “litmus test,” a “traceable feature” that highlights, “by its intensity, scale, and perhaps spread, its association with other features with which it has a regular but not invariant relation” (p. 7). Likewise, the coronavirus lights up hidden dependencies, fragilities, and inequalities. Experiences of lockdown vary by postcode, income, and race, with deaths in the United States and the United Kingdom disproportionately occurring among poor and nonwhite populations.<sup>5</sup> Linking a speculated “wet market” in Wuhan to nearly every corner of the world, the virus’s sweep shows how dense and rapid are the circuits through which people, products, and information now travel. Instead of reading about the circulation of *goods*, however, we’ve been glued to our screens following the circulation of *bads*—a virus, a disease, and its consequences.<sup>6</sup>

Mintz’s observations of sugar’s “protean” character apply to the virus. Sugar took the form of molasses, golden syrup, loaves of “raw” brown sugar, and “refined” white sugar. Before serving primarily as a sweetener, it was prescribed as a medicine—to sooth digestion and coat pills—and used as a spice; in aristocratic courts it was molded into miniature palaces and coats of arms before being devoured. There’s an equally shape-shifting quality to the virus and its effects. Though its molecular signature has been identified, attempts to track its spread in the United States and the United Kingdom have floundered. The disease itself evades fixed contours: key symptoms of cough and fever are absent in many of those infected; whether reinfection is possible remains unclear; despite a preference for the elderly, obese, and immune compromised, it has killed the young and healthy; its effect on smell and taste remains a puzzle. Anticipating contemporary approaches to the “biosocial,” Mintz acknowledged the chemical and physiological effects of sugar and their salience across cultures, yet any possible “built-in predisposition to sweetness” cannot explain “differing food systems, degrees of preference, and taxonomies of taste” (p. 17)—just as the experience and meaning of the disease vary across individuals, communities, and nations.<sup>7</sup>

Sugar provided Mintz with a lens on the formation of the English working class: “sugar and other drug foods, by provisioning, sating—and, indeed, drugging—farm and factory workers, sharply reduced the overall cost of creating and sustaining the metropolitan proletariat” (p. 180). The coronavirus has highlighted the gap between well-paid jobs with health benefits that can be done at home and precarious jobs for which physical presence is necessary—in hospitals and

<sup>4</sup> James A. Secord, “Knowledge in Transit,” *Isis*, 2004, 95:654–672; and Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, *The Brokered World: Go-betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach, Mass.: Science History, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Ed Pilkington, “As 100,000 Die, the Virus Lays Bare America’s Brutal Fault Lines: Race, Gender, Poverty, and Broken Politics,” *Guardian*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/28/us-coronavirus-death-toll-racial-disparity-inequality>.

<sup>6</sup> David Graeber speaks of “the taking of goods and the giving of bads” in “Manners, Deference, and Private Property in Early Modern Europe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1997, 39:694–728, on p. 708.

<sup>7</sup> Projit Mukharji, “The ‘Cholera Cloud’ in the Nineteenth-Century ‘British World’: History of an Object-without-an-Essence,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 2012, 86:303–332.

care homes, in grocery stores, on farms, in “fulfillment” centers, driving buses and trains, making deliveries. One boon of the crisis might be the consolidation of a class of “key workers” who maintain indispensable functions yet have frequently been invisible, underpaid, and far more exposed than those who stare at computers. This category implies different demographic alliances than the traditional (and now dispersed) industrial working class, quickly taking on global dimensions. Migrant Romanians brought in for the German asparagus harvest—without health protections—appear in the news alongside Mexican workers in Iowa’s meat-processing plants, highlighting the vulnerability of both our food supply and the workers on whom it depends.<sup>8</sup>

Mintz’s analysis roved across scales, from the “asymmetrical relationships between the metropolitan centers and their colonies and satellites” (p. 158) to sugar’s effects at an intimate level of experience and identity; a poetics of sweetness already running through literature, philosophy, and proverbs prepared the English to embrace readily available sucrose. Likewise, a steady diet of disaster cinema has prepped our sensorium for COVID: we superimpose scenes from *Children of Men*, *Contagion*, and *Twenty-Eight Days Later* on everyday life. Mintz examined how sugar spread itself “extensively,” prompting new settings for its consumption (such as the tea break and breakfast jam), and “intensively,” by its incorporation into “traditional” practices. Ritualized with birthday and wedding cakes, sugar was baked into “the calendar of work, recreation, rest, and prayer—into the whole of daily life”; such processes of “assimilation,” Mintz argued, are a “culture’s way of making new and unusual things part of itself” (p. 120). As the virus is assimilated (literally ingested or not), we find a curious juxtaposition between attempts at ritualization and the deprivation of ritual. Its possible presence makes us wash our hands, wear masks, treat breath and touch as sites of danger, and pass quickly through enclosed spaces, while collective rituals—birthdays, funerals, festivals, religious meetings—have been shelved or flattened onto screens.

Both stories are eminently political. We can’t avoid talking about power, Mintz said, “when the objective is to clarify under what conditions the population of an entire country changes its behavior radically without the compulsion of open force and violence” (p. 166). The early acceptance of lockdown—at least in the United States and Europe—seemed to have more to do with fear and collective feeling than with threat or coercion: don’t catch it, don’t spread it, don’t allow the hospitals to be overwhelmed. More extreme top-down measures of the sort seen in China may follow. Voluntary compliance with health directives could also be helped by the “emulation” that Mintz considered a cause for sugar’s spread from royalty to the poor; leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom (and the sugar powerhouse, Brazil) who disregard health advice and shrug at massive death tolls are not so much governing as enabling an indirect genocide—with their rush to “reopen the economy” making further spikes likely.

The coronavirus shows contemporary societies as intensely interconnected and jaggedly differentiated. While Mintz’s readings of sugar’s varied meanings along class and gender lines confirmed that “the culture” in “complex hierarchical societies” is not a “unified, homogeneous system” (p. 121), he fit his local analyses into a broad explanatory framework of “modern capitalism” (p. 158). Taking issue with this approach, Michael Taussig argued in a review that Mintz’s “modest” style masked the book’s complicity with an oppressive reality through its “constant resort to the awesome power of capitalism.” As with the book he reviewed in the same essay, *Europe and the People without History*, by Mintz’s collaborator Eric Wolf, Taussig argued that *Sweetness and Power*’s insistence on empirical facts, causal explanations, and an

<sup>8</sup> Michael Pollan, “The Sickness in Our Food Supply,” *New York Review of Books*, 11 June 2020 (published online 12 May 2020).

all-embracing system of capitalism blocked recognition of the poetic and fetishistic power that arises as the dialectical shadow of utilitarian commodities.<sup>9</sup>

Mintz's book was thus a flashpoint in an ongoing debate within history and anthropology. Put very simply: Does the deterministic material base of the capitalist world-system explain the movements and meanings of commodified goods? Or should we concentrate instead on the shifting interactions (or "frictions") among relatively autonomous forms of life and their distinct realizations of value, causality, and reality? Marshall Sahlins's 1994 essay "Cosmologies of Capitalism" split the difference, countering the totalizing bent of world-system theories (including Eric Wolf's) with ethnographic examples from China, Polynesia, and the Pacific Northwest. These showed how the objects of European trade were incorporated into distinct systems of meaning, that the "specific effects of the global-material forces depend on the various ways they are mediated in local cultural schemes." Sahlins ended with a nod to *Sweetness and Power's* parsing of the mobile meanings of the "soft drugs" circulating through the system—such as coffee, tea, and sugar.<sup>10</sup>

Sahlins's later lecture, "The Sadness of Sweetness," presented capitalism as a cultural scheme in its own right, tracing the idea that humanity is driven by insatiable desires and infinite need back to the biblical Fall and the notion of physical nature as corrupt and lifeless. Enlightenment thinkers including Hobbes, Locke, and Smith transformed this view into a realist dogma of the human sciences: driven by endless need, people formed societies in order to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. From this transvaluation of values, Sahlins argued, fundamental dogmas of modern economics arose: economic growth is the measure of a society's health; markets are the rational mechanism for distributing goods; the creation of new needs is a benevolent duty. Biologists' assumptions of in-built aggression, selfishness, and competition further naturalized these views.<sup>11</sup>

Though Sahlins's essay was interspersed with ethnographic vignettes presenting radically different views of human nature and social order, his depiction of "Western cosmology" was fairly monolithic. But the rise of capitalism accompanied major cultural shifts: not just the emergence of the commodity form and the extension of global networks, as Mintz detailed, but the enclosure of common lands, the rise of the "fact" as a building block of knowledge, and the spread of ideals of self-restraint and control that Norbert Elias described as "the civilizing process."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the intimate habits encouraged in response to the current pandemic—turning us into socially distanced germophobes—are a skewed continuation of these processes. The current crisis may well reinforce the "cosmology of capitalism"; it has already triggered technocratic overreach, profiteering, and blindered exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Michael Taussig, "History as Commodity: In Some Recent American (Anthropological) Literature," *Critique of Anthropology*, 1989, 9:7–23, on p. 18; Wolf and Mintz [replied](#) with a stern "Reply to Michael Taussig," *ibid.*, pp. 25–31.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011); and Marshall Sahlins, "Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of 'The World System,'" in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 412–455, on p. 414.

<sup>11</sup> Sahlins, "Sadness of Sweetness" (cit. n. 1), pp. 400–404; and Catherina Gere, *Pain, Pleasure, and the Greater Good: From the Panopticon to the Skinner Box and Beyond* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Graeber, "Manners, Deference, and Private Property in Early Modern Europe" (cit. n. 6), pp. 709–715; and Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Klein, "Screen New Deal: Under Cover of Mass Death, Andrew Cuomo Calls in Billionaires to Build a High-Tech Dystopia," *Intercept*, 8 May 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>.

But the global slowdown it has provoked may also be the opportunity to reset our fundamental models of self, society, and cosmos and open our thinking to neglected possibilities. For one, the dead nature we inherit from the doctrine of the Fall has never been the only nature. The idea of the Earth as a living being has a pedigree stretching from Plato and Plotinus to Della Porta, Kepler, and Newton; it was reactivated in *Naturphilosophie* and in Humboldt's Earth science and appears again in discussions around "critical zone" environmental observatories. There the vital, interdependent Earth appears as a realistic challenge to what Lynn Margulis, the theorist of symbiosis and Gaia, called the "capitalistic, competitive, cost-benefit" assumptions of neo-Darwinian biology.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, as the skies de-smog, alternatives arise to the idol of endless growth and the frenetic industry it demands. One economic model under discussion bears an appetizing name: the "doughnut." Summarized in a circular graph, its outer ring or "ceiling" represents nine planetary boundaries (including chemical pollution, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification) set to levels we must not surpass; its inner ring or "social foundation" sets food, water, social equity, education, health, and six other collective goods at levels we must not go below. A livable world lies between the two rings. The city of Amsterdam recently adopted the "doughnut" as a guide for planning beyond the pandemic. As we live through the proof that our habits and tastes can quickly change, such focused but encompassing targets seem both powerful and sweet—and more necessary than ever.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Simon Schaffer, "The Difficulty of Animating the Earth," in *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020), pp. 292–295 (see the lockdown launch at <https://zkm.de/de/ausstellung/2020/05/critical-zones>); and Charles Mann, "Lynn Margulis: Science's Unruly Earth Mother," *Science*, 1991, 252(5004):378–381, on p. 381 (quoting Margulis).

<sup>15</sup> Kate Raworth, "A Doughnut for the Anthropocene: Humanity's Compass in the Twenty-first Century," *Lancet Planetary Health*, May 2017, 1(2):E48–E49; and Dan Boffey, "Amsterdam to Embrace 'Doughnut' Model to Mend Post-Virus Economy," *Guardian*, 8 Apr. 2020.