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Judith Carney<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Geography Department, University of California, Los Angeles

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## RECONSIDERING *SWEETNESS AND POWER* THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

JUDITH CARNEY

Geography Department, University of California, Los Angeles

In drawing attention to the rise of sugar as a commodity, Sidney Mintz in *Sweetness and Power* pioneered new research directions relating the significance of food to the development of capitalism. During the sixteenth century sugar underwent a transformation from a spice and medicine to an essential dietary component. This involved a radical reorganization of production and consumption across a vast geographic space. Sugar brought enslaved laborers in the New World tropics into a transatlantic commodity chain that ended in the sweetened tea and food increasingly consumed by Europeans. It made planters, merchants, and refiners of the substance rich while sustaining the political-economic power they wielded in metropolitan governments. This product of enslaved labor subsidized the reproduction of the English working class, who turned to cheap sweetened substances for daily caloric needs. The growing role of sugar in the diet of the working poor signaled a decisive rupture of customary foodways, making the English working class a major consumer of a product produced on the other side of the Atlantic by unfree laborers.

It is thus the conceptual category of class through which Professor Mintz provides the critical perspective for seeing the transformation of sugar into a commodity indispensable to the development and expansion of capitalism. This is especially evident in his focus on the laborers who produced and consumed sugar:

The linkage between Caribbean slaves and European free laborers was a linkage of production and hence also of consumption created by the single system of which they were both parts . . . Both produced; both consumed

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Address correspondence to Judith Carney, Professor, Geography Department, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-11524. E-mail: carney@geog.ucla.edu

little of what they produced . . . In the view of some authorities, they really form one group, differing only in how they fit into the worldwide division of labor others created for them.<sup>1</sup>

A defining feature of the rise of sugar and global capitalism is the presence of exploited labor at both ends of the commodity chain. *Sweetness and Power* underscores how the expansion of capitalism depended upon it.

If Sidney Mintz were writing his book today, he would have the opportunity to include additional insights now available from feminist and post-structuralist studies. This research emphasizes the fundamental significance of gender to the development of capitalism. It draws attention to the ways women are unevenly incorporated into commodity production as workers and consumers as well as the implication of workforces dependent on female labor for the reproduction of households.<sup>2</sup> Our hypothetical text—perhaps entitled *Sweetness, Gender, and Power*—would place the consumption of the laboring classes within this dynamic and draw attention to its significance for the adoption of specific foodways.

Professor Mintz already lays the groundwork for this perspective in *Sweetness and Power*. He notes differential consumption patterns in English working class households, showing the greater dependence of the female working poor and their children on sugared substances for calories. The nutritional side effects of the absorption of working class women into the English labor force is also discussed in that it shifted previously healthier diets—which were dependent on women's labor-intensive food preparation in the household—to more convenient ones increasingly linked to sugar use. The growing participation of females in the labor force undoubtedly also affected nursing and child rearing practices. Professor Mintz's observations are still pertinent to contemporary discussions surrounding the adverse dietary consequences of high fructose corn sweetener, which is a crucial ingredient of the convenience foods increasingly consumed by today's working classes.

Even though the new face of the caloric sweetener industry is today mostly based on corn, the manufacture of sweetened substances continues as a lucrative path of capitalist expansion. The importance of such foods in the modern world involves

more than demand for the product and its convenience. It is in fact related to the structural role of female workers in specific capitalist transitions. Women are pivotal for the expansion of the contemporary sweetener-based commodity chain as mothers, wives, laborers, cooks, and consumers of purchased groceries. The growing dependence of the middle class on two working parents to cover the costs of household reproduction catalyzes this expanded gender role. This is because women tend to remain in charge of family food consumption, even when they enter the labor force as full time workers. The mounting concern with obesity in national healthcare debates links the crisis of fat to convenient, cheaply priced processed foods and the meals that working mothers predominantly prepare or purchase for their children. Family nutrition is thus essentialized as the responsibility of women, even when females labor as many hours outside the home as their husbands. Both class and gender matter in the analysis of economic processes.

*Sweetness and Power* illuminates the geographical linkage of workers in the eighteenth-century economic system through production and consumption. The English working class produced manufactured goods demanded elsewhere whereas their diet depended on consuming an imported product produced by slave labor. A rupture between production and consumption characterized the development and expansion of capitalism. The book elucidates how a product produced in one part of the world became the dietary mainstay in another. But in contrast to the English working class, enslaved sugar producers both produced and consumed sugar. To what extent were sugar and its derivative products essential to the reproduction of the slave labor force?

Scholars have drawn attention to the caloric importance of sugar and molasses in the rations of Caribbean slaves. This even included rum, as noted by historian Richard Pares, who is quoted in *Sweetness and Power*:

Many colonies made no laws at all about the feeding of slaves before humanitarians forced them into it at the end of the eighteenth century; and even where there were laws, the standards which they enforced were pitifully low. The French *Code Noir*, which outlined rules of slavery in the colonial empire in 1685, stipulated for a supply of protein which would amount to little more than a kipper a day; and this *code* was not at all

well observed. Some planters normally gave their slaves no food at all, but fobbed them off with payments of rum wherewith to buy food, or with Saturdays and Sundays to till their own provision grounds and feed them. The rum was drunk, the Saturdays encroached upon or wasted, and the slaves starved. Their masters almost wholly disregarded their needs for protein, and could not see why they went on hunger-strike or lost their sleep catching land crabs, or died.<sup>3</sup>

Planters systematically ignored the protein needs of their enslaved laborers by supplying them with cheap calories from sugar and starches instead of protein.<sup>4</sup> But even on sugar plantations, the allocation often fell short of what slaves needed for their daily energy requirements. Under such circumstances, slaves at times resorted to pilfering small amounts from the plantation curing mill, which they typically carried away in calabashes. Theft of sugar was so common on Jamaican sugar plantations that it gave rise to the phrase, “to carry sugar to the Calabash Estate”—a reference to the hidden locales where slaves cached the purloined substance for their own consumption.<sup>5</sup>

Sugar defined production and consumption on sugar plantations in ways even more devastating to human life than for the working poor of Europe. As Professors Mintz and Brown point out in this issue, the slave population on sugar plantations failed to grow by natural increase for most of the period of New World slavery. In part, this was because women carried out a considerable amount of the back-breaking field labor on sugar plantations. There were fewer specialized occupations in which they could work compared to those available to men. Those who worked in labor gangs on sugar plantations performed the most difficult work, carried out the heaviest tasks, and labored long hours.<sup>6</sup> Historian Barry Higman enables us to place the attendant ill health, morbidity, and premature death of sugar workers—a sizeable percentage female—in broader perspective. He has estimated that field slaves in the British Caribbean worked on average some 3500 hours annually on sugar cane. This is equivalent to a modern worker accustomed to a forty-hour work week toiling (without time off) an extra thirty-five and a half weeks during the course of a fifty-two week year. Expressed another way, the average work week for a slave was about sixty-seven hours long. These figures do not include the time slaves spent growing and

preparing their own food. The result was an exhausted labor force whose life expectancy remained low.<sup>7</sup>

But slave reproduction refers to more than the capability or, importantly, willingness of enslaved females to bear children on sugar plantations. It also involves consideration of the strategies that slaves used to achieve subsistence. The enslaved produced crops for export, but they also grew many of their own food crops, which were typically located in marginal land unsuitable for sugarcane and often distant from their dwellings. Though propertyless, they struggled to secure access to provision grounds, where they planted food in addition to the small kitchen plots adjoining their cabins. In contrast to the propertyless English working class, the diet of enslaved sugar workers in part consisted of the products of their own labor. Caribbean slaves moreover sold in local markets food they grew in their provision grounds.

Through the plants they cultivated in their kitchen gardens and their role in the household as cooks, women made critical contributions to the survival of their loved ones. In this way they improved slave nutrition. The foods they cultivated and cooked helped to surmount the social and racial prejudice that divided slaveholders from those they enslaved. Through the meals prepared by enslaved female cooks, the wall of culinary segregation was gradually breached as dishes based on food of African origin and other culinary traditions made their way into white kitchens and onto white tables.<sup>8</sup> Planters eventually came to treat as their own specific foods once associated with slave diets, such as okra, greens, rice and bean dishes, sesame, and one-pot stews. Today, the food traditions of former plantation societies provide an opportunity for black and white alike to discuss a heritage now fully integrated but whose African component is still not yet fully appreciated.

Sugar was probably an important ingredient of the foods black women sold in local markets during the plantation era. Although both enslaved men and women participated in selling foodstuffs, females specialized in the sale of cooked food, snacks, and prepared beverages. These female vendors were known as “higglers” and “hucksters” in plantation societies of the British Caribbean and as “*quitandeiras*” in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> An inventory of the “processed” food they marketed has not yet been made, but the variety of cooked foodstuffs and beverages still prepared as

street food in Bahia, Brazil and other culinary corners of the African diaspora suggests where to initiate an investigation. Many incorporate sugar as a critical ingredient. This is readily seen in several beverages and snacks that are still popular, which are made wholly or in part from plants introduced from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. The pod of the tamarind, for instance, was consumed to combat scurvy. But its pulp, when added to water and sweetened with sugar, resulted in a drink still popular in tropical Africa and America. So is the beverage prepared from the tart red hibiscus flower, which slaves frequently planted in their food gardens. Known in Spanish as the *flor de Jamaica*, hibiscus is actually of African origin. Similarly, the bitter African kola nut, appreciated by captains of slave ships for imparting a fresh taste to the stagnant water stowed onboard in casks, became a refreshing drink when sweetened. It is still served in this manner in Belize. But steeped in water with New World coca leaves and industrialized as a beverage, it became the basis for several drinks known across tropical and sub-tropical America as “colas.”

In the way that Coca-Cola represents the marriage of Amerindian and African heritages so does peanut brittle as a snack food. The Amerindian groundnut was readily adopted by African societies following its introduction to Senegambia in the early sixteenth century. Africans consumed it raw, boiled and roasted, and peanuts frequently provisioned slaves across the Middle Passage. For this reason, it was known by its African names—*goober* and *pindar*—in the South. Combined with molasses and brown sugar, it became the candy eventually known as peanut brittle. In Brazil peanut brittle is not called by an Amerindian cognate but rather by a derivative associated with the presence of enslaved Africans: *pé de moleque* (“foot of the street urchin,” the term *moleque* was used derogatorily in slavery to refer to black children). Sugar was also critical in the preparation of sesame wafers, another “Southern” confection made from an introduced African plant that retained its Senegambian name, *beni* or *benne*, in South Carolina. These candies and beverages are probably linked to, or identical with, the sugared foods that New World African women marketed in plantation societies over the centuries of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

In *Sweetness and Power* Sidney Mintz establishes the growing desire for sugar in the early modern world. While its demand was

shaped by capitalism, sugar infiltrated the diet through the exploitation of female labor in commodity production on both sides of the Atlantic. A book entitled *Sweetness, Gender, and Power* would engage the significance of female workers for the consumption of sugared substances in plantation societies as well as in Europe. It might carry the story of sugarcane forward to the advent of high fructose corn syrup. It would explain the contemporary demand for processed and convenience foods as a symptom of the increasing dependence of middle class households on women's participation in the labor force. The book would question norms that assume female responsibility for ensuring the healthy diets of their families. It might engage the role of women in this specific capitalist transition as wives and mothers pressed into a "double day" of employment and family service. As with the English working class of the Industrial Revolution, market demand for ready-to-eat products is created when existing gender divisions of labor do not adjust to economic circumstances that force women out of the home and into the work place.

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### Notes

1. Sidney Mintz. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin, pp. 57–58.
2. See, for instance, Lourdes Beneria and Gita Sen, "Accumulation, reproduction and women's role in economic development: Boserup revisited," *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981): 279–298; Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
3. Richard Pares. 1960. *Merchants and Planters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–40, quoted in Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p. 169.
4. Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1995), pp. 205–206; K. F. Kiple and V. H. Kiple, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
5. F. G. Cassidy and R. B. Le Page. 2002. *Dictionary of Jamaican English*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, p. 89.

6. Barbara Bush. 1996. "Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," in David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 193–217, esp. pp. 196–197.
7. Higman, *Slave Populations*, p. 188.
8. Mary Tolford Wilson. 1964. "Peaceful Integration: The Owner's Adoption of His Slaves' Food." *Journal of Negro History*, 49(2): 116–127.
9. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, "Introduction," in I. Berlin and P. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 1–45; Michael Mullin, *Africa in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
10. A recipe for peanut brittle can be found in the facsimile edition of a cookbook written by Sarah Rutledge in 1847. Sarah Rutledge, *The Carolina Housewife* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1979), p. 219. Many of the sweetened foods that women prepared and sold in the outdoor markets of plantation societies were later commercialized with their industrialization as drinks, candies, and snacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These points are further elaborated in Judith A. Carney, *Seeds of Memory: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).