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# **Devouring Objects of Study**

## **Food and Fieldwork**

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Back in 1978, when thinking about food seriously was becoming a crotchet among scholars, Joseph Epstein wrote a column for *The American Scholar* about the subject:

Judging from the space given to it in the media, the great number of cookbooks and restaurant guides published annually, the conversations of friends -- it is very nearly topic number one. Restaurants today are talked about with the kind of excitement that ten years ago was expended on movies. Kitchen technology-blenders, grinders, vegetable steamers, microwave ovens, and the rest-arouses something akin to the interest once reserved for cars.... The time may be exactly right to hit the best-seller lists with a killer who disposes of his victims in a Cuisinart (Aristides 1978:157-8).

If Professor Epstein was so in awe more than thirty years ago, he must now ponder with added bewilderment -- as should we all -- what has happened since. One keeps expecting the fascination with food to fade away but it has not -- anyway, not *yet*. The anthropological study of food-related behavior has also changed and expanded radically during the last three decades, though no one is ready to explain its momentum. Some years back, Christine Du Bois and the author (Mintz and Du Bois 2003) sought to document briefly in text, and with bibliographical underpinning, some of the major problem areas this interest has entailed, to enable us to highlight a few changes. One such problem area has to do with studies of single plants or animals, food substances, or ingredients -- buckwheat or quinoa, shrimp or muskrats, collagen or lecithin, vinegars or oils. It is with that problem area in particular, in relation to anthropology, that the following remarks are concerned.

Redcliffe N. Salaman's remarkable *History and Social Influence of the Potato* appeared in 1949, yet the number of kindred studies that followed it during the subsequent three decades or so was small.

<sup>1</sup> Requests for copies of the original lecture may be addressed to the Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, 701 E. Kirkwood Avenue, SB 130, Bloomington IN 47405.

I wrote a book on sugar (sucrose), published now twenty-five years ago (Mintz 1985\*). Since then, similar works have multiplied. We have seen books on maize (Warman 2003\*), saffron (Willard 1999), rhubarb (Foust 1992), potatoes (Zuckerman 2000), pasta (Sirventi and Sabban 2000\*), bananas (Jenkins 2000), eels (Schweid 2002), codfish (Kurlansky 1997), wedding cakes (Charsley 1992), Coca Cola (Pendergrast 1993, Foster 2008), two on guinea pigs (Morales 1995\*, Archetti 1997\*), at least two on salt (Kurlansky 2002, Laszlo 2001 [1993]), at least three on rice (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993\*, Hess 1992, Carney 2001), at least two on milk (Wiley 2010, Valenze 2011 [forthcoming]), at least three more on capsicums (Long-Solis 1986\*, Naj 1992, Schweid 1999 [1987]), and even a quintet, by a prolific popular food writer, on peanuts, popcorn, ketchup, and two on tomatoes in America (Smith 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002). The supplementary list of volumes since 2003 and now forthcoming or in progress is, if anything, even more intimidating. Only some of these works are by anthropologists (I have starred them above). But anthropological books on food now float amid a veritable sea of food studies. The anthropological interest in food came about by a distinctive route. If we go back to two of the founding food-centered studies by American anthropologists – Frank Cushing's essay on Zuñi breadstuffs (1920) and Franz Boas's work on salmon among the Kwakiutl (1921) – we can see why. Though each focused on a single food, one plant and one animal, their aim was to describe that food in cultural context. Otherwise said, each dealt with a subsistence mainstay that was food for all, inside what was conceived of as a small, specific, geographically distinct society; and both works were based on fieldwork. Most important, production, distribution and consumption are treated in each as integral -- as coherent within a single social and economic system. Trade was certainly known to the Zuñi and was important to the Kwakiutl, yet food-linked economic activity appeared to be mostly endogenous.

Of course social and economic boundaries between them and their neighbors were crossed. But such boundary crossing was noteworthy. Food-related activity took place almost entirely within the society itself; and it was, and was considered, absolutely critical to survival. In both societies the issue of adequate food figured, ceremonially and ideologically, in the lives of the people. For anthropologists at that time, at least, the reasons for studying food systems were crystal clear: how could you know how the society worked, if you did not know how it got and used its food? If one looks, for example, at Clark Wissler's *The American Indian* (1917), in its time a bible for beginning students of the indigenous peoples of North America, one discovers that Wissler's culture areas are above all *food* areas, built on Otis T. Mason's earlier work on "ethnic environments" (Mason 1895).

How better to begin to sort out the complexity of indigenous hemispheric life than to look at

which people ate salmon, which acorns, and which maize? While some groups, such as those of the Northwest Pacific, lived rather high on the hog (so to speak), most had it much harder; none, especially to judge by their folklore, had it easy. For all New World peoples food was, both literally and figuratively, part of the central challenge of life. Turning back to works on the aboriginal peoples whose cultures most interested the anthropologists of a century ago, we remember that those societies produced most of what they consumed, and consumed most of what they produced. Yet such societies were not isolates. Alexander Lesser (1961) pointed this out in a brilliant paper, as had others before him. Still, most of the economic activities remained within definable borders. When anthropology moved away from societies that were largely self-sufficient (or that the ethnographers *took to be* largely self-sufficient), our task changed. Our ability to treat production, distribution and consumption as a coherent system ended, once that real (or in some cases spurious) self-sufficiency disappeared. One simply couldn't write a monograph about Muncie, Indiana that made it look like Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, or Firth's *A Primitive Polynesian Economy*, no matter what sorts of blinders the ethnographer wore.

The enlargement of anthropological focus beyond the so-called "primitive" came slowly, even painfully; and a full recognition that the job requirements for anthropologists had become different arrived yet more uncertainly. I ask your forbearance, in commenting briefly on that shift, by referring to my own experience. More than half a century ago, when such fieldwork by anthropologists was still rare, I worked in a rural proletarian community on the south coast of Puerto Rico. Nearly everyone there worked in the sugarcane. Indeed, one could argue defensibly that *the community was defined* by the activities of a foreign sugar corporation, which employed nearly every inhabitant. To have tried to picture that community as some sort of isolate, self-contained, definable in terms of itself, would have been as convincing as imagining it to be on the moon.

But understanding what had happened does not end there. I discovered that much of the social fabric of that community would remind me more of what I had been reading about in Malinowski and Firth than of Muncie, Indiana, in spite of the industrial ambience. I would come to conclude that this seeming contradictoriness was real. Learning about sugarcane and sugar production was essential to making sense of people's lives there. Understanding something about the Boston corporation that managed its production and sale clarified other things about Puerto Rican life. Yet I knew I was making a community study, even while realizing that the local economy was utterly dependent upon forces external to it. Its people were not tribespersons or peasants; they were rural proletarians (Mintz 1951).

They had no means of production beyond their labor; they were nearly as stripped of such means as any dishwasher in a New York City restaurant. They sold their labor power to a North American corporation. They produced hardly anything that they ate, ate nothing they produced. That is an exaggeration, but only a slight one. Economically speaking, their lives would have been empty without sugar.

Yet their lives as a community were real enough. Indeed, in the tenor of daily life, they seemed to me in my short life much more like a living community than anywhere else I had lived up to that time. I saw sugar as an element in the shaping of their lives, not as the subject of my research. It was not until thirty-five years later, when I decided to write a book on the history of sugar, that I first began to think of myself as a serious student of a single substance. It was lecturing on that book that made me a student of food. In the question period following a lecture on sugar history, I might be asked what I had to say about salt -- about which I knew nothing; or about honey, of which I knew too little; or about Equal, or HFCS, or maple syrup -- or why people everywhere seemed to like sweet foods, anyway. It was in response to my listeners' questions that I became serious about the study of food. I recount this only to indicate to the reader how accidentally one can -- or anyway, I did -- wander into something like the anthropology of food.

The truth is, of course, that *Sweetness and Power* is not really *about* food -- it is about the rise of capitalism. Sugar (sucrose) was simply an illustrative instance of that process, a long thread in the social and economic fabric of Western history -- and the histories of peoples then buried by western historiography..

While I think that sugar is interesting in its own right, in *Sweetness and Power* my interest in sugar was only incidental. I was trying to uncover how holders of power in the West were establishing themselves at an early time in the world outside Europe on the one hand, and relating themselves in new ways to their own laboring classes on the other. I realized that one of the ways they were discovering how to do so was by manipulating the material universe. The one concrete substance that I knew about personally was sugar.

As the governing classes learned to take the measure of their own people and of subjected peoples elsewhere, we are able to see how the fates of different lands and their inhabitants as producers and as consumers became linked in various ways to the fates of particular substances. In effect, the ruling classes of the societies of the West, who had long seen themselves as entitled to enjoy both substances and experiences not available to others, must have been beginning to think more

consciously about what ordinary people might want – and then, more importantly, under what conditions it might benefit *them*, the rulers, to see that ordinary people *got* some of what they wanted.

This is a highly original line of thought if it turns up in societies where inequalities were inherited -- to control others and to benefit from their existence, not by beating them with a stick, but by offering them some carrots. In practice this doesn't work so well with donkeys, about whom it is commonly said; but some persons thought maybe it would work with humans. It did; and it does. Gradually a social and economic system was born, within which people could fashion their identities as much from what they consumed as from what they could learn, work at, or create.

Of course such a line of thought is highly speculative, even though it may sound persuasive. But what we knew about how capitalism as a system of consumption had taken shape, from writers such as Marx, Sombart and Veblen; and what I knew already about the history of sugar, made it seem worth my while to look harder. Even without the *inner* story of sugar, some uncovering of its nature in relation to human desires – and of the human capacity to braid together desire and habit – the larger, *outer* story of power might be narrated. But if I did only that, we would not have an example of what I intended to uncover. I hoped to show how, by looking at one revealing niche of activity, an ever-larger economic system could be discerned, operating pretty smoothly, though not entirely visible.

To achieve my aim, there had to be – at least for me – a definable and concrete object of study. Of course there were and are alternative ways to study sugar or any other such product. Perhaps it would have been more useful to do a discursive analysis of books on power and the tropics; or to study the history of capitalism on a larger canvas, such as the general nature of human food, the ubiquitous power of capitalism, the generalized hegemony of its leaders. I even wondered about writing about the works of whoever wrote about sugar. I had been studying those, and a lot of people, some of them interesting, had indeed written about it.

But I would not have been able to do that work well. Being of my generation, with a strong liking for the concrete, I went ahead with my own plan. That involved – though I did not anticipate it as such at the time – putting my ideas and what I learned within a framework of the sort sometimes now referred to, not very respectfully, as a "master narrative." I suppose the truth is that I am a sucker for master narratives. Back when I was living on the edge of a sugar plantation in Puerto Rico in 1948, it surely seemed to me that sugar fitted within a larger chronicle of the rise of capitalism, of the use of forced labor outside the capitalist heartland, of *fin de siècle* U.S. imperialism, and of the long-term success of linking a safe site of production and a guaranteed market for consumption: at home and in

the colonies, and preferably without others quite noticing it.

This looked to me like a lengthy chronicle, going back as it did for nearly five centuries, involving Europe, Africa and the tropical New World, using forced labor in many guises, and perfecting a characteristic form of industrial organization, one that blended field and factory into one efficient, productive and vicious enterprise. I did not see any of those features in sugar's history as inevitable. Indeed, I came to take positions on the relationship of slavery to capitalism, and on the geographical locus of the first centers of industrial production, that put me in positions that no orthodox Marxist or economic determinist would want to find herself. And I surely did not believe that my version was by any means the only such narrative of the past. In fact, in a much earlier book, I had put together unawares much of the same story, taken from the mouth of a single narrator (Mintz 1960).

In chronicling sugar, I wanted to be as objective as I could. At times I wondered whether there might be some way to get enough distance from my subject to attain the objectivity that apparently comes with successfully situating oneself outside of, or above, the capitalistic system. I admit that some anthropological scholars had apparently succeeded at doing that, and at first I wanted to do it, too. But when I thought about where my university salary came from; who pays for the fellowships that my school supplies its graduate students; the light that proper attention to politics still sheds upon plantation owners in the right places, even today; and other such truths (not opinions) in today's world – I could not elude my feeling that I, at least, was living within capitalism, not floating invulnerably above it. I decided to write my study of sugar in an old fashioned way: as if I lived in a capitalist society myself, and so I did.

As Redcliffe Salaman's remarkable study of the potato eloquently demonstrated, the idea of studying a single plant, animal, food, or food ingredient is by no means new; and work such as Boas's and Cushing's in an earlier era makes plain that anthropologists had thought of it long ago. But it is worth noting afresh, because when we look at Malinowski's work with the Trobrianders, or Firth's with the Tikopia, we see much of the same, because they could define social groups that produced what they consumed, and consumed what they produced. In such analytical works production and consumption were not amputated from each other; the near-obsession with consumption that we have seen in food studies in recent years was absent. Put simply, in those societies the relation between supply and demand was much less influenced by market forces than is true for most of the modern world. Missing from those monographs is concern with the economic relationships among producers, and their influence over consumers. In those societies producers did not aim at enlarging, changing, or cornering

a part of the market. They were not competing for buyers, nor were the consumers searching for alternate for sellers. Each economic act in those societies was also a social act. A diminishing supply did not automatically result in price rises. When such indicators, having to do with the nature of capital, of the market, and of the market value of factors of production such as labor, are not present, their absence signals that a fully developed capitalism is still wanting. But I believe that it is near impossible to study food production or consumption almost anywhere in the world today without taking such forces into account.

In the modern world, the extent to which economic factors become deeply interwoven with the role of government in the economy makes the picture additionally complex. For example, where does profit stop and the FDA begin? Should ephedra be taken off the market, rather than being sold with warnings to the consumers? Should we regulate the so-called nutraceuticals at all? To what extent should General Foods lobbyists or sugar lobbyists -- or for that matter, congressmen underwritten by lobbyists -- determine how the food triangle is depicted graphically, and what pictures and words go in it?

Now the interpenetration of government and the private sector poses almost daily challenges to our conceptions of individual freedom and the definition of general welfare. If one contemplates the facts about food-borne diseases and what consumers can do to protect our children from the “modern” system of food production, we have a wordless but eloquent demonstration of our near total helplessness.

But these are questions with which our anthropological ancestors did not have to deal when they studied food. They concentrated on other food-related matters, such as coral gardens and their magic, or salmon recipes on the Northwest coast. In very large measure, the doing of the anthropology of that earlier era is gone, even if -- one hopes -- not forgotten. But we can still study the way human beings behave, and the rules and patterns of their behavior, as did our forbears; we can still learn about different value systems, and their internal logics. We can, in short, still profitably do fieldwork, which is what we are supposed to be good at.

I was reminded of our distinctive methodological gift a few years back, when I asked two colleagues if I might read their unpublished manuscript. Professors Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz had based what became their book (2002) on the New Guinea fieldwork they had carried out over two decades and on their recent Morgan Lectures. I asked to read the manuscript because it is about sugar. In it they describe events leading up to the creation of a plantation and the construction of

a modern sugar mill in Papua New Guinea. Since the history of the industrial production of sugar goes back at least to the 17th century in the Caribbean region, I tend to associate it with slavery and the destruction of cultural origins, both Native American and African. But in Papua New Guinea, making a sugar industry was intimately associated with creating a nation – not so much with destroying local cultures, as with aiming at the conception of a national culture.

The early planning discussions there, Errington and Gewertz report, had to do with whether the Papua New Guinea sugar industry would supply only the national population, or undertake to export sugar besides. Much discussion concerned the quality of sugar to be produced, as well as the quantity. People wanted PNG to have a modern industry, so the country would look modern to the outside world. So both quality – in this case, to produce fully-refined white, or the less “modern” brown – and quantity were argued over. Once decided, the next issue became that of location and employment. On grounds of fair play, and to avoid localism, the labor force for the new industry was to be drawn from peoples across the nation – a deliberate attempt was made to avoid provincialism or “wantokism” (“one-language-ism”); and by aiming to treat individuals as equals, the hope was to contribute to the building of a national identity. With the work force recruited from every part of the country, both to prevent kin, village or language-group cliques from forming, and to impose equality of treatment on all, the sugar industry became a bulwark for fostering national feelings, as against local loyalties. To at least some extent, the plan succeeded (or at least at that time the authors thought it had.). Errington and Gewertz had to learn about the sugar industry, as have many other anthropological field workers before them in other places; but what they learned shows the way that the world is changing, and the power of anthropological fieldwork to document in detail the changes taking shape. When one reads what was done with the labor force for the PNG sugar complex -- organized by the Booker-Tate Corporation, one of the great capitalistic enterprises that lay behind the development of Caribbean sugar -- one is stunned to see to what extent the efforts made to create a genuine landless wage-earning proletariat in Papua New Guinea paralleled those that marked the coming of U.S. power to the Puerto Rican south coast, a century before.

Even more remarkable, those efforts also reveal provocative similarities to what happened sociologically with the enslaved Africans brought in to work on Caribbean plantations centuries earlier. What I mean here is that a nation was being deliberately constructed; in Caribbean history, pre-existing cultural patterns were being deliberately broken down.

What I read about in Errington and Gewertz’s book was the imposition of a time-conscious

industrial process upon people in a newly-emergent nation – people whose vision had been, and in large measure still is, conditioned by kin group, village and linguistic group that provide the circles of meaning by which the people identified themselves, as individuals and as group members. The sugar industry there reveals that they are now being circumscribed by a still larger circle – one we social scientists have variously labeled with terms such as secularization, industrialization, urbanization, acculturation or some other, but which also end up meaning at some point “modernity” within global capitalism.

I do not mean to suggest by this description that there is some single interpretive or explanatory high road to the study of food – any food – or toward our richest understanding of human behavior and its past. If we look at the work of other "sugar scholars," after this brief glance at Errington and Gewertz, we see how rich and varied are the approaches that serious scholars have taken. Monographs by historians and anthropologists about sugar, no two of them alike – Ortiz in *Cuban Counterpoint*, Moreno Fraginals in *El Ingenio*, Attwood in *Raising Cane*, Scheper-Hughes in *Death Without Weeping*, Mazumdar in *Sugar and Society in China*, and many others – have advanced our understanding of the relationship among substance, society and behavior; and though sugar figures importantly in all of their work, it would be mistaken to claim that they wrote "books about sugar." My intention in this paper was to keep the notion of concrete objects of study – in this instance, foods and food substances, and one in particular – front and center. Yet none of these books is only about sugar, even though each of them is very much about sugar. Their authors' eyes were firmly fixed on the substance through which their protagonists, and the social forces of which they were part, interacted. Of this list of monographs, all of them excellent, two – *Death Without Weeping* and *Raising Cane* – were written by anthropologists, and both display handsomely how the study of the material world and the methods of anthropology can meet fruitfully in fieldwork. The purpose of these remarks was to reflect upon fieldwork and the study of foods or food-related substances. But permit me to conclude by making a final point.

My aim was to suggest that there are still many different ways to do anthropology, and within the subfield of food studies that is still true. We food anthropologists need to do careful fieldwork and lots of it. But we want it to help us to understand, *if possible*, something larger than itself. That is not always possible; and the fieldwork can still be well worth doing. But if we aim to reach a larger readership than our colleagues; and if we want what we have found out and think to serve some useful purpose beyond self-education, we should aim at exploring the larger messages our data offer us.



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