25

Time, Sugar, and Sweetness

SIDNEY W. MINTZ

Food and eating as subjects of serious inquiry have engaged anthropology from its very beginnings. Varieties of foods and modes of preparation have always evoked the attention, sometimes horrified, of observant travelers, particularly when the processing techniques (e.g., chewing and spitting to encourage fermentation) and the substances (e.g., live larvae, insects, the contents of animal intestines, rotten eggs) have been foreign to their experience and eating habits. At the same time, repeated demonstrations of the intimate relationship between ingestion and sociality among living peoples of all sorts, as well as the importance attributed to it in classic literary accounts, including the Bible, have led to active reflection about the nature of the links that connect them. Long before students of Native America had invented "culture areas," or students of the Old World had formulated evolutionary stages for pastoralism or semiagriculture, W. Robertson Smith had set forth elegantly the concept of commensality and had sought to explain the food prohibitions of the ancient Semites.[1] But food and eating were studies for the most part in their more unusual aspects—food prohibitions and taboos, cannibalism, the consumption of unfamiliar and distasteful items—rather than as everyday and essential features of the life of all humankind.

Food and eating are now becoming actively of interest to anthropologists once more, and in certain new ways. An awakened concern with resources, including variant forms of energy and the relative costs of their trade-offs—the perception of real finitudes that may not always respond to higher prices with increased production—seems to have made some anthropological relativism stylish, and has led to the rediscovery of a treasure-trove of old ideas, mostly bad, about natural, healthful, and energy-saving foods. Interest in the everyday life of everyday people and in categories of the oppressed—women, slaves, serfs, Untouchables, "racial" minorities, as well as those who simply work with their hands—has led, among other things, to interest in women's work, slave food, and discriminations and exclusions. (It is surely no accident that the best early anthropological studies of food should have come from the pens of women, Audrey Richards and Rosemary Firth.[3]) What is more, the upsurge of interest in meaning among anthropologists has also reenlivened the study of any subject matter that can be treated by seeing the patterned relationships between substances and human groups as forms of communication.

While these and other anthropological trends are resulting in the appearance of much provocative and imaginative scholarship, the anthropology of food and eating remains poorly demarcated, so that there ought still to be room for speculative inquiry. Here, I shall suggest some topics for a study of which the skills of anthropology and history might be usefully combined; and I shall raise questions about the relationship between production and consumption, with respect to some specific ingestible, for some specific time period, in order to see if light may be thrown on what foods mean to those who consume them.

During and after the so-called Age of Discovery and the beginning of the incorporation of Asia, Africa, and the New World within the sphere of European power, Europe experienced a deluge of new substances, including foods, some of them similar to items they then supplemented or supplanted, others not readily comparable to prior dietary components. Among the new items were many imports from the New World, including maize, potatoes, tomatoes, the so-called "hot" peppers (*Capsicum annuum*, *Capsicum frutescens*, etc.), fruits like the papaya, and the food and beverage base called chocolate or cacao.

Two of what came to rank among the most important post-Columbian introductions, however, did not originate in the New World, but in the non-European Old World: tea and coffee. And one item that originated in the Old World and was already known to Europeans, the sugar cane, was diffused to the New World, where it became, especially after the seventeenth century, an important crop and the source of sugar, molasses, and rum for Europe itself. Sugar, the ingestible of special interest here, cannot easily be discussed without reference to other foods, for it partly supplemented, partly supplanted, alternatives. Moreover, the character of its uses, its association with other items, and, it can be argued, the ways it was perceived, changed greatly over time. Since its uses, interlaced with those of many other substances, expressed or embodied certain continuing changes in the consuming society itself, it would be neither feasible nor convincing to study sugar in isolation. Sweetness is a "taste," sugar a product of seemingly infinite uses and functions; but the foods that satisfy a taste for sweetness vary immensely. Thus, a host of problems arise.

Until the seventeenth century, ordinary folk in Northern Europe secured sweetness in food mostly from honey and from fruit. Lévi-Strauss is quite right to emphasize the "natural" character of honey,[4] for he has in mind the manner of its production. Sugar, molasses, and rum made from the sugar cane require advanced technical processes. Sugar can be extracted from many sources, such as the sugar palm, the sugar beet, and all fruits, but the white granulated product familiar today, which represents the highest technical achievement in sugar processing, is made from sugar cane and sugar beet. The sugar-beet extraction process was developed late, but sugar-cane processing is ancient. When the Europeans came to know the product we call sugar, it was cane sugar. And though we know sugar cane was grown in South Asia at least as early as the fourth century B.C., definite evidence of processing—of boiling, clarification and crystallization—dates from almost a millennium later.

Even so, sugar crudely similar to the modern product was being produced on the southern littoral of the Mediterranean Sea by the eighth century A.D., and thereafter on Mediterranean islands and in Spain as well. During those centuries it remained costly, prized, and less a food than a medicine. It appears to have been regarded much as were

spices, and its special place in contemporary European tastes—counterpoised, so to speak, against bitter, sour, and salt, as the opposite of them all—would not be achieved until much later. Those who dealt in imported spices dealt in sugar as well. By the thirteenth century English monarchs had grown fond of sugar, most of it probably from the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1226 Henry III appealed to the Mayor of Winchester to obtain for him three pounds of Alexandrine sugar, if possible; the famous fair near Winchester made it an entrepôt of exotic imports. By 1243, when ordering the purchase of spices at Sandwich for the royal household, Henry III included 300 pounds of *zucre de Roche* (presumably, white sugar). By the end of that century the court was consuming several tons of sugar a year, and early in the fourteenth century a full cargo of sugar reached Britain from Venice. The inventory of a fifteenth-century chapman in York—by which time sugar was beginning to reach England from the Atlantic plantation islands of Spain and Portugal—included not only cinnamon, saffron, ginger, and galingale, but also sugar and "casson sugar." By that time, it appears, sugar had entered into the tastes and recipe books of the rich; and the two fifteenth-century cookbooks edited by Thomas Austin[5] contain many sugar recipes, employing several different kinds of sugar.

Although there is no generally reliable source upon which we can base confident estimates of sugar consumption in Great Britain before the eighteenth century—or even for long after—there is no doubt that it rose spectacularly, in spite of occasional dips and troughs. One authority estimates that English sugar consumption increased about fourfold in the last four decades of the seventeenth century. Consumption trebled again during the first four decades of the eighteenth century; then more than doubled again from 1741–1745 to 1771–1775. If only one-half of the imports were retained in 1663, then English and Welsh consumption increased about twenty times, in the period 1663–1775. Since population increased only from four and one-half million to seven and one-half million, the per capita increase in sugar consumption appears dramatic.[6] By the end of the eighteenth century average annual per capita consumption stood at thirteen pounds. Interesting, then, that the nineteenth century showed equally impressive increases—the more so, when substantial consumption at the start of the nineteenth century is taken into account—and the twentieth century showed no remission until the last decade or so. Present consumption levels in Britain, and in certain other North European countries, are high enough to be nearly unbelievable, much as they are in the United States.

Sugar consumption in Great Britain rose together with the consumption of other tropical ingestibles, though at differing rates for different regions, groups, and classes. France never became the sugar or tea consumer that Britain became, though coffee was more successful in France than in Britain. Yet, the general spread of these substances through the Western world since the seventeenth century has been one of the truly important economic and cultural phenomena of the modern age. These were, it seems, the first edible luxuries to become proletarian commonplaces; they were surely the first luxuries to become regarded as necessities by vast masses of people who had not produced them; and they were probably the first substances to become the basis of advertising campaigns to increase consumption. In all of these ways, they, particularly sugar, have remained unmistakably modern.

Not long ago, economists and geographers, not to mention occasional anthropologists, were in the habit of referring to sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, and like products as "dessert crops." A more misleading misnomer is hard to imagine, for these were among

the most important commodities of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world, and my own name for them is somewhat nastier:

> Almost insignificant in Europe's diet before the thirteenth century, sugar gradually changed from a medicine for royalty into a preservative and confectionery ingredient and, finally, into a basic commodity. By the seventeenth century, sugar was becoming a staple in European cities; soon, even the poor knew sugar and prized it. As a relatively cheap source of quick energy, sugar was valuable more as a substitute for food than as a food itself; in western Europe it probably supplanted other food in proletarian diets. In urban centres, it became the perfect accompaniment to tea, and West Indian sugar production kept perfect pace with Indian tea production. Together with other plantation products such as coffee, rum and tobacco, sugar formed part of a complex of "proletarian hunger-killers," and played a crucial role in the linked contribution that Caribbean slaves, Indian peasants, and European urban proletarians were able to make to the growth of western civilization.[7]

If allowance is made for hyperbole, it remains true that these substances, not even known for the most part by ordinary people in Europe before about 1650, had become by 1800 common items of ingestion for members of privileged classes in much of Western Europe—though decidedly not in all—and, well before 1900, were viewed as daily necessities by all classes.

Though research by chemists and physiologists on these substances continues apace, some general statements about them are probably safe. Coffee and tea are stimulants without calories or other food value. Rum and tobacco are both probably best described as drugs, one very high in caloric yield, and the other without any food value at all, though apparently having the effect at times of reducing hunger. Sugar, consisting of about 99.9 percent pure sucrose, is, together with salt, the purest chemical substance human beings ingest and is often labeled "empty calories" by physicians and nutritionists. From a nutritional perspective, all are, in short, rather unusual substances. With the exception of tea, these hunger-killers or "drug foods" destined for European markets were mostly produced in the tropical Americas from the sixteenth century onward until the nineteenth century; and most of them continue to be produced there in substantial amounts. What, one may ask, was the three-hundred-year relationship between the systems of production of these commodities, their political and economic geography, and the steady increase in demand for them?

Though remote from his principal concerns, Marx considered the plantations of the New World among "the chief momenta of primitive accumulation":[8]

> Freedom and slavery constitute an antagonism. . . . We are not dealing with the indirect slavery, the slavery of the proletariat, but with direct slavery, the slavery of the black races in Surinam, in Brazil, in the Southern States of North America. Direct slavery is as much the pivot of our industrialism today as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery, no cotton; without cotton, no modern industry. Slavery has given their value to the colonies; the colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry. Before the traffic in Negroes began, the colonies only supplied the Old World with very few products and made no visible change in the face of the earth. Thus slavery is an economic category of the highest importance.[9]

These and similar asse
Williams, who develop
In recent years a lively
West India plantations
potential contribution
direct capital transfers
the demand created by
machinery, cloth, tortu
tinue about both of the
their aggregate effect.
amounts only to a hun
ings by the provision o
Even if not, an attract
more of these produc
seems fair to stop the c
enumerated, it seems l
human consumption–
ness may be in order.

Claude Lévi-Straus
stingless bees of the Tr
which, he says,

> have a richness and s
> indeed can seem alm
> normally afforded by
> its registers, so much
> or burning with the f

I shall resist an inclin
revenge and the way
describe them—and s
The general position
it had some positive e
use suitable plant nut
ity, which presumably
call "a hedonic tone,
ences. Indeed, we kno
sweet, sour, and bitte
argument can be mac

Overlaid preferenc
it. Sugar-cane cultivat
tury to the sixteenth,
their first sustained t
teenth century, appa
"regard as shameful
explains much about

These and similar assertions have been taken up by many scholars, most notably, Eric Williams, who develops the theme in his famous study, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). In recent years a lively controversy has developed over the precise contribution of the West India plantations to capitalist growth in the metropolises, particularly Britain. The potential contribution of the plantations has been viewed in two principal ways: fairly direct capital transfers of plantation profits to European banks for reinvestment; and the demand created by the needs of the plantations for such metropolitan products as machinery, cloth, torture instruments, and other industrial commodities. Disputes continue about both of these potential sources of gain to metropolitan capital, at least about their aggregate effect. But there is a third potential contribution, which at the moment amounts only to a hunch: Possibly, European enterprise accumulated considerable savings by the provision of low-cost foods and food substitutes to European working classes. Even if not, an attractive argument may be made that Europeans consumed more and more of these products simply because they were so good to consume. But it hardly seems fair to stop the questions precisely where they might fruitfully begin. Of the items enumerated, it seems likely that sweet things will prove most persuasively "natural" for human consumption—if the word dare be used at all. Hence, a few comments on sweetness may be in order.

Claude Lévi-Strauss in his remarkable *From Honey to Ashes* (1973), writes of the stingless bees of the Tropical Forest and of the astoundingly sweet honeys they produce, which, he says,

> have a richness and subtlety difficult to describe to those who have never tasted them, and indeed can seem almost unbearably exquisite in flavour. A delight more piercing than any normally afforded by taste or smell breaks down the boundaries of sensibility, and blurs its registers, so much so that the eater of honey wonders whether he is savouring a delicacy or burning with the fire of love.[10]

I shall resist an inclination here to rhapsodize about music, sausage, flowers, love and revenge and the way languages everywhere seem to employ the idiom of sweetness to describe them—and so much else—but only in order to suggest a more important point. The general position on sweetness appears to be that our hominid capacity to identify it had some positive evolutionary significance—that it enabled omnivores to locate and use suitable plant nutrients in the environment. There is no doubt at all that this capacity, which presumably works if the eating experience is coupled with what nutritionists call "a hedonic tone," is everywhere heavily overladen with culturally specific preferences. Indeed, we know well that ingestibles with all four of the principal "tastes"—salt, sweet, sour, and bitter—figure importantly in many if not most cuisines, even if a good argument can be made for the evolutionary value of a capacity to taste sweetness.

Overlaid preferences can run against what appears to be "natural," as well as with it. Sugar-cane cultivation and sugar production flourished in Syria from the seventh century to the sixteenth, and it was there, after the First Crusade, that north Europeans got their first sustained taste of sugar. But the Syrian industry disappeared during the sixteenth century, apparently suppressed by the Turks, who, according to Iban Battuta, "regard as shameful the use of sugar houses." Since no innate predisposition, by itself, explains much about human behavior, and since innate predispositions rarely get stud-

ied before social learning occurs—though there is at least some evidence that fetal behavior is intensified by the presence of sucrose, while human newborns apparently show a clear preference for sweetened liquids—how much to weigh the possible significance of a "natural" preference remains moot. For the moment, let it suffice that, whether there exists a natural craving for sweetness, few are the world's peoples who respond negatively to sugar, whatever their prior experience, and countless those who have reacted to it with intensified craving and enthusiasm.

Before Britons had sugar, they had honey. Honey was a common ingredient in prescriptions; in time, sugar supplanted it in many or most of them. (The term "treacle," which came to mean molasses in English usage, originally meant a medical antidote composed of many ingredients, including honey. That it should have come to mean molasses and naught else suggests, in a minor way, how sugar and its byproducts overcame and supplanted honey in most regards.) Honey had also been used as a preservative of sorts; sugar turned out to be much better and, eventually, cheaper. At the time of the marriage of Henry IV and Joan of Navarre (1403), their wedding banquet included among its many courses. "Perys in syrippe." "Almost the only way of preserving fruit," write Drummond and Wilbraham, "was to boil it in syrup and flavour it heavily with spices."[11] Such syrup can be made by supersaturating water with sugar by boiling; spices can be added during the preparation. Microorganisms that spoil fruit in the absence of sugar can be controlled by 70 percent sugar solutions, which draw off water from their cells and kill them by dehydration. Sugar is a superior preservative medium—by far.

Honey also provided the basis of such alcohol drinks as mead, metheglin, and hypomel. Sugar used with wine and fruit to make hypocras became an important alternative to these drinks; ciders and other fermented fruit drinks made with English fruit and West Indian sugars represented another; and rum manufactured from molasses represented an important third. Here again, sugar soon bested honey.

The uses of spices raises different issues. Until nearly the end of the seventeenth century, a yearly shortage of cattle fodder in Western Europe resulted in heavy fall butchering and the preservation of large quantities of meat by salting, pickling, and other methods. Though some writers consider the emphasis on spices and the spice trade in explanation of European exploration excessive, this much of the received wisdom, at least, seems well founded. Such spices were often used to flavor meat, not simply to conceal its taste; nearly all were of tropical or subtropical origin (e.g., nutmeg, mace, ginger, pepper, coriander, cardamom, turmeric—saffron is an important exception among others). Like these rare flavorings, sugar was a condiment, a preservative, and a medicine; like them, it was sold by Grocers (*Grossarii*) who garbled (mixed) their precious wares, and was dispensed by apothecaries, who used them in medicines. Sugar was employed, as were spices, with cooked meats, sometimes combined with fruits. Such foods still provide a festive element in modern Western cuisine: ham, goose, the use of crab apples and pineapple slices, coating with brown sugar, spiking with cloves. These uses are evidence of the obvious: that holidays preserve better what ordinary days may lose—just as familial crises reveal the nature of the family in ways that ordinary days do not. Much as the spices of holiday cookies—ginger, mace, cinnamon—suggest the past, so too do the brown sugar, molasses, and cloves of the holiday ham. More than just a hearkening to the past, however, such practices may speak to some of the more common ways that fruit was preserved and meat flavored at an earlier time.

Thus, the uses and functions of sugar are many and interesting. Sugar was a medicine, but it also disguised the bitter taste of other medicines by sweetening. It was a sweetener, which, by 1700, was sweetening tea, chocolate, and coffee, all of them bitter and all of them stimulants. It was a food, rich in calories if little else, though less refined sugars and molasses, far commoner in past centuries, possessed some slight additional food value. It was a preservative, which, when eaten with what it preserved, both made it sweeter and increased its caloric content. Its by-product molasses (treacle) yielded rum, beyond serving as a food itself. For long, the poorest people ate more treacle than sugar; treacle even turns up in the budget of the English almshouses. Nor is this list by any means complete, for sugar turns out to be a flavor-enhancer, often in rather unexpected ways. Rather than a series of successive replacements, these new and varied uses intersect, overlap, are added on rather than lost or supplanted. Other substances may be eliminated or supplanted; sugar is not. And while there are medical concerns voiced in the historical record, it appears that no one considered sugar sinful, whatever they may have thought of the systems of labor that produced it or its effects on dentition. It may well be that, among all of the "dessert crops," it alone was never perceived as an instrument of the Devil.[12]

By the end of the seventeenth century sugar had become an English food, even if still costly and a delicacy. When Edmund Verney went up to Trinity College, Oxford in 1685, his father packed in his trunk for him eighteen oranges, six lemons, three pounds of brown sugar, one pound of powdered white sugar in quarter-pound bags, one pound of brown sugar candy, one-quarter pound of white sugar candy, one pound of "pickt Raisons, good for a cough," and four nutmegs.[13] If the seventeenth century was the century in which sugar changed in Britain from luxury and medicine to necessity and food, an additional statistic may help to underline this transformation. Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter has divided her overseas trade statistics for England into nine groups, of which "groceries," including tea, coffee, sugar, rice, pepper, and other tropical products, is most important. Richard Sheridan points out that in 1700 this group comprised 16.9 percent of all imports by official value; in 1800 it comprised 34.9 percent. The most prominent grocery items were brown sugar and molasses, making up by official value two-thirds of the group in 1700 and two-fifths in 1800. During the same century tea ranked next: The amount imported rose, during that hundred years, from 167,000 pounds to 23 *million* pounds.[14]

The economic and political forces that underlay and supported the remarkable concentration of interest in the West India and East India trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries cannot be discussed here. But it may be enough to note Eric Hobsbawm's admirably succinct summary of the shift of the centers of expansion to the north of Europe, from the seventeenth century onward:

> The shift was not merely geographical, but structural. The new kind of relationship between the "advanced" areas and the rest of the world, unlike the old, tended constantly to intensify and widen the flows of commerce. The powerful, growing and accelerating current of overseas trade which swept the infant industries of Europe with it—which, in fact, sometimes actually *created* them—was hardly conceivable without this change. It rested on three things: in Europe, the rise of a market for overseas products for everyday use, whose market could be expanded as they became available in larger quantities and more cheaply; and overseas the creation of economic systems for producing such goods (such as, for instance,

slave-operated plantations) and the conquest of colonies designed to serve the economic advantage of their European owners.[15]

So remarkably does this statement illuminate the history of sugar—and other "dessert crops"—between 1650 and 1900 that it is almost as if it had been written with sugar in mind. But the argument must be developed to lay bare the relationships between demand and supply, between production and consumption, between urban proletarians in the metropolis and African slaves in the colonies. Precisely how demand "arises"; precisely how supply "stimulates" demand even while filling it—and yielding a profit besides; precisely how "demand" is transformed into the ritual of daily necessity and even into images of daily decency: These are questions, not answers. That mothers' milk is sweet can give rise to many imaginative constructions, but it should be clear by now that the so-called English sweet tooth probably needs—and deserves—more than either Freud or evolutionary predispositions in order to be convincingly explained.

One of Bess Lomax's better-known songs in this country is "Drill, ye Tarriers, Drill."[16] Its chorus goes:

> And drill, ye tarriers, drill,
> Drill, ye tarriers, drill,
> It's work all day for the sugar in your tay,
> Down behind the railway . . .

As such, perhaps it has no particular significance. But the last two verses, separated and followed by that chorus, are more pointed:

> Now our new foreman was Gene McCann,
> By God, he was a blamey man.
> Last week a premature blast went off
> And a mile in the air went Big Jim Goff.
> Next time pay day comes around,
> Jim Goff a dollar short was found.
> When asked what for, came this reply,
> You're docked for the time you was up in the sky.

The period during which so many new ingestibles became encysted within European diet was also the period when the factory system took root, flourished, and spread. The precise relationships between the emergence of the industrial workday and the substances under consideration remain unclear. But a few guesses may be permissible. Massive increases in consumption of the drug-food complex occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There also appears to have been some sequence of uses in the case of sugar; and there seems no doubt that there were changes in the use, by class, of sugar and these other products over time, much as the substances in association with which sugar was used also changed. Although these are the fundamentals upon which further research might be based, except for the first (the overall increases in consumption) none may be considered demonstrated or proved. Yet, they are so general and obvious that it would be surprising if any turned out to be wrong. Plainly, the more important questions lie concealed behind such assertions. An example may help.

To some degree it could be argued that sugar, which seems to have begun as a med-

icine in England and then soon became a preservative, much later changed from being a direct-use product into an indirect-use product, reverting in some curious way to an earlier function but on a wholly different scale. In 1403, pears in syrup were served at the feast following the marriage of Henry IV to Joan of Navarre. Nearly two centuries later, we learn from the household book of Lord Middleton, at Woollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire, of the purchase of two pounds and one ounce of "marmalade" at the astronomical price of 5s. 3d., which, say Drummond and Wilbraham, "shows what a luxury such imported preserved fruits were."[17]

Only the privileged few could enjoy these luxuries even in the sixteenth century in England. In subsequent centuries, however, the combination of sugars and fruit became more common, and the cost of jams, jellies, marmalades, and preserved fruits declined. These changes accompanied many other dietary changes, such as the development of ready-made (store-bought) bread, the gradual replacement of milk-drinking by tea-drinking, a sharp decline in the preparation of oatmeal—especially important in Scotland—and a decrease in the use of butter. Just how such changes took place and the nature of their interrelationship require considerable detailed study. But factory production of jams and the increasing use of store-bought (and factory-made) bread plainly go along with the decline in butter use; it seems likely that the replacement of milk with tea and sugar are also connected. All such changes mark the decline of home-prepared food. These observations do not add up to a lament over the passage of some bucolic perfection, and people have certainly been eating what is now fashionably called "junk food" for a very long time. Yet, it is true that the changes mentioned fit well with a reduction in the time which must be spent in the kitchen or in obtaining foodstuffs, and that they have eased the transition to the taking of more and more meals outside the home. "Only in the worst cases," writes Angeliki Torode of the mid-nineteenth-century English working class, "would a mother hesitate to open her jam jar, because her children ate more bread if there was jam on it."[18] The replacement of oatmeal by bread hurt working-class nutrition; so, presumably, did the other changes, including the replacement of butter by jam. Sugar continues to be used in tea—and in coffee, which never became a lower-class staple in England—but its use in tea is direct, its use in jam indirect. Jam, when produced on a factory basis and consumed with bread, provides an efficient, calorie-high and relatively cheap means of feeding people quickly, wherever they are. It fits well with changes in the rhythm of effort, the organisation of the family, and, perhaps, with new ideas about the relationship between ingestion and time.

"What is wanted," wrote Lindsay, a nutritionist of the early twentieth century, about Glasgow, "is a partial return to the national dish of porridge and milk, in place of tea, bread and jam, which have so universally replaced it in the towns, and which are replacing it even in the rural districts."[19] But why, asks R. H. Campbell, the author of the article in which Lindsay is cited, did people fail to retain the more satisfactory yet cheap diet of the rural areas?"[20] Investigators in Glasgow found a ready answer: "When it becomes a question of using the ready cooked bread or the uncooked oatmeal, laziness decides which, and the family suffers." In the city of Dundee, home of famous jams and marmalades, other investigators made an additional observation: The composition of the family diet appears to change sharply when the housewife goes to work. There, it was noted that such time-consuming practices as broth-making and oatmeal-cooking dropped out of domestic cuisine. Bread consumption increases; Campbell cites a sta-

tistic for the nineteenth century indicating that one family of seven ate an average of fifty-six pounds of bread per week.[21] Jam goes with bread. The place of laziness in these changes in diet remains to be established; the place of a higher value on women's labor—labor, say, in jam factories (though women worked mainly in jute factories in Dundee)—may matter more.

The rise of industrial production and the introduction of enormous quantities of new ingestibles occurred during the same centuries in Britain. The relationship between these phenomena is, on one level, fairly straightforward: As people produced less and less of their own food, they ate more and more food produced by others, elsewhere. As they spent more and more time away from farm and home, the kinds of foods they ate changed. Those changes reflected changing availabilities of a kind. But the availabilities themselves were functions of economic and political forces remote from the consumers and not at all understood as "forces." People were certainly not compelled to eat the specific foods they ate. But the range of foods they came to eat, and the way they came to see foods and eating, inevitably conformed well with other, vaster changes in the character of daily life—changes over which they plainly had no direct control.

E. P. Thompson has provided an illuminating overview of how industry changed for working people the meaning—nay, the very perception—of the day, of time itself, and of self within time: "If men are to meet both the demands of a highly-synchronized automated industry, and of greatly enlarged areas of 'free time,' they must somehow combine in a new synthesis elements of the old, and the new, finding an imagery based neither upon the seasons nor upon the market but upon human occasions."[22] It is the special character of the substances described here that, like sugar, they provide calories without nutrition; or, like coffee and tea, neither nutrition nor calories, but stimulus to greater effort, or, like tobacco and alcohol, respite from reality. Their study might enable one to see better how an "imagery based . . . upon human occasions" can take shape partly by employing such substances, but not always with much success. Perhaps high tea can one day become a cozy cuppa; perhaps the afternoon sherry can find its equivalent in the grog shop. But a great amount of manufactured sweetness may eventually lubricate only poorly, or even partly take the place of, human relations on all occasions.

The coffee break, which almost always features coffee or tea, frequently sugar, and commonly tobacco, must have had its equivalent before the industrial system arose, just as it has its equivalent outside that system today. I have been accused of seeing an inextricable connection between capitalism and coffee-drinking or sugar use; but coffee and sugar are too seductive, and capitalism too flexible, for the connection to be more than one out of many. It is not that the drug-food habits of the English working classes are the consequence of long-term conspiracies to wreck their nutrition or to make them addicted. But if the changing consumption patterns are the result of class domination, its particular nature and the forms that it has taken require both documentation and specification. What were the ways in which, over time, the changing occupational and class structure of English society was accompanied by, and reflected in, changes in the uses of particular ingestibles? How did those ingestibles come to occupy the paramount place they do in English consumption? Within these processes were, first, innovations and imitations; later, there were ritualizations as well, expressing that imagery based upon human occasions to which Thompson refers. But an understanding of those processes,

of those meanings, cannot go forward, I believe, without first understanding how the production of the substances was so brilliantly separated by the workings of the world economy from so-called meanings of the substances themselves.

I have suggested that political and economic "forces" underlay the availabilities of such items as sugar; that these substances gradually percolated downward through the class structure; and that this percolation, in turn, probably fit together social occasion and substance in accord with new conceptions of work and time. And probably, the less privileged and the poorer imitated those above them in the class system. Yet, if one accepts this idea uncritically, it might appear to obviate the research itself. But such "imitation" is, surely, immeasurably more complicated than a bald assertion makes it seem. My research to date is uncovering the ways in which a modern notion of advertising and early conceptions of a large clientele—a mass market, or "target audience" for a mass market—arose, perhaps particularly in connection with sweet things and what I have labeled here "drug-foods." How direct appeals, combined with some tendency on the part of working people to mimic the consumption norms of those more privileged than they, can combine to influence "demand" may turn out to be a significant part of what is meant by meaning in the history of such foods as sugar.

As anthropologists turn back to the study of food and eating and pursue their interest in meaning, they display a stronger tendency to look at food in its message-bearing, symbolic form. This has resulted in an enlivening of the discipline, as well as in attracting the admiration and attention of scholars in kindred fields. Such development is surely all to the good. But for one interested in history, there is reason to wonder why so few anthropological studies have dealt with long-term changes in such things as food preferences and consumption patterns, to which historians and economic historians have paid much more attention. In part, the relative lack of anthropological interest may be owing to the romanticism of an anthropology once resolutely reluctant to study anything not "primitive." But it appears also to stem from a readiness to look upon symbolic structures as timeless representations of meaning.

Hence, we confront difficult questions about what we take "meaning" to mean and within what limits of space and time we choose to define what things mean. No answers will be ventured here. But if time is defined as outside the sphere of meaning in which we are interested, then certain categories of meaning will remain and may then be considered adequate and complete. In practice, and for the immediate subject-matter, the structure of meaning would in effect be made coterminous with the political economy. For the substances of concern here—plantation products, tropical products, slave products, imported from afar, detached from their producers—the search for meaning can then be confined within convenient boundaries: the boundaries of consumption.

But if one is interested in the world economy created by capitalism from the sixteenth century onward, and in the relationships between the core of that economy and its subsidiary but interdependent outer sectors, then the structure of meaning will not be coterminous with the metropolitan heartland. If one thinks of modern societies as composed of different groups, vertebrated by institutional arrangements for the distribution and maintenance of power, and divided by class interests as well as by perceptions, values, and attitudes, then there cannot be a single system of meaning for a class-divided society. And if one thinks that meanings arise, then the separation of how goods are produced

from how they are consumed, the separation of colony from metropolis, and the separation of proletarian from slave (the splitting in two of the world economy that spawned them both in their modern form) are unjustified and spurious.

Such substances as sugar are, from the point of view of the metropolis, raw materials, until systems of symbolic extrusion and transformation can operate upon them. But those systems do not bring them forth or make them available; such availabilities are differently determined. To find out what these substances come to mean is to reunite their availabilities with their uses—in space and in time.

For some time now anthropology has been struggling uncomfortably with the recognition that so-called primitive society is not what it used to be—if, indeed, it ever was. Betrayed by its own romanticism, it has sought to discover new subject-matters by imputations of a certain sort—as if pimps constituted the best equivalent of "the primitive" available for study. Without meaning to impugn in the least the scientific value of such research, I suggest that there is a much more mundane modernity equally in need of study, some of it reposing on supermarket shelves. Anthropological interest in things—material objects—is old and highly respectable. When Alfred Kroeber referred to "the fundamental thing about culture . . . the way in which men relate themselves to one another by relating themslves to their cultural material . . . ,"[23] he meant objects as well as ideas. Studies of the everyday in modern life, of the changing character of such humble matters as food, viewed from the perspective of production and consumption, use and function, and concerned with the emergence and variation of meaning, might be one way to try to renovate a discipline now dangerously close to losing its purpose.

NOTES

Versions of this paper were presented during the past few years at the University of Minnesota, Bryn Mawr College, Rice University, Wellesley College, Cornell University, the University of Pennsylvania, and at Johns Hopkins University's Seminar in Atlantic History and Culture. In radically modified form, these materials also formed part of my 1979 Christian Gauss Lectures at Princeton University. I benefited from comments by participants at all of these presentations, and from criticisms from other friends, including Carol Breckinridge, Carol Heim, and Professors Fred Damon, Nancy Dorian, Eugene Genovese, Jane Goodale, Richard Macksey, Kenneth Sharpe, and William Sturtevant.

1. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (New York, 1889).
2. Audrey I. Richards, *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition Among the Southern Bantu* (London, 1932); *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia: An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe* (London, 1939).
3. Rosemary Firth, *Housekeeping Among Malay Peasants* (London, 1943).
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (New York, 1973).
5. Thomas Austin, *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookbooks* (London, 1888).
6. Richard Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery* (Baltimore, 1974).
7. Sidney W. Mintz, "The Caribbean as a Socio-cultural area," *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale,* IX (1966), 916–941.
8. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York, 1939), I, 738.
9. Karl Marx to P. V. Annenkov, Dec. 28, 1846, *Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels: Selected Works* (New York, 1968).
10. Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes,* 52.
11. J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food* (London, 1958), 58.
12. I am indebted to Professor Jane Goodale of Bryn Mawr College, who first suggested to me that I investigate this possibility.
13. Drummond and Wilbraham, *Englishmen's Food,* 111.
14. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery,* 19–20. Statistics on tea are somewhat troublesome. Smuggling was common, and were staggering d abeth Schumpeter
15. Eric Hobsbawm,
16. See A. Lomax, *Th*
17. Drummond and
18. Angeliki Torode, Yudkin, eds., *Ou*
19. R. H. Campbell,
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 58.
22. E. P. Thompson, 38 (1967), 96.
23. Alfred Kroeber,

was common, and figures on exports are not always reliable. That the increases in consumption were staggering during the eighteenth century, however, is not open to argument. See Elizabeth Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics*, 1697–1808 (Oxford, 1960).

15. Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London, 1968), 52.
16. See A. Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975).
17. Drummond and Wilbraham, *Englishmen's Food*, 54.
18. Angeliki Torode, "Trends in Fruit Consumption," in T. C. Barker, J. C . McKenzie, and John Yudkin, eds., *Our Changing Fare* (London, 1966), 122.
19. R. H. Campbell, "Diet in Scotland: An Example of Regional Variation," in ibid., 57.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 58.
22. E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (1967), 96.
23. Alfred Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York, 1948), 68.