

Sidney Mintz and an Anthropology of Capitalist Modernity

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With the death of Sidney Mintz (November 16, 1922~December 26, 2015), a notable chapter in American anthropological history has ended. He was an important contributor to a small but a distinguished group of anthropologists, who came from the hardships of the Depression and World War II, to build new approaches to anthropology. These world historical events persuaded Mintz to search for ways to integrate anthropological methods of ethnography and concepts of culture with Marxian social theory.¹⁾ These concep-

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1) See Trouillot (2003) for a sophisticated development of Mintz's ideas about the place of the Caribbean in the emergence of the modern world system and the so-called rise of the West. See David Scott (2004) for a sweeping examination of how Mintz's work on the Caribbean dealt with concepts of modernity in a colonial context helped redefine anthropology in critical ways. See Baca, Khan, and Palmié (2009) for a collection of essays whereby anthropologists and historians critically assess Mintz's work.

tualizations are still, and increasingly relevant, to contemporary reassessments of Japanese colonialism in Korea. Since the 1980s, new perspectives about Japanese colonialism have emerged in the works of such scholars as Bruce Cumings (1981), Mark Driscoll (2010), Carter Eckert (1991), Henry Em (2013), Yu Yōng-ik (2008), and Andre Schmid (2002), among others. Mintz's anthropological project, and its focus on European colonial power in the New World, has many insights that could contribute to the ongoing project of reconceptualizing Japanese colonialism's impact on Korean national history and its peculiar political economy.

For many Korean scholars, Mintz's role in transforming American anthropology during the 1950s is not well-known. He is widely recognized for his book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in World History* (1985) and his research on food, represented by *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (1996a). Certainly these works have many of his insights about the way the colonial world transformed the West in ways that remain unclear and largely mystified. Over the past month, even in the United States, most tributes have focused on the Mintz of "Sugar," "Sweetness," and "Food."²⁾ But there is much more to Mintz's anthropology.

Mintz developed his distinctive approach to anthropology in the late 1940s at Columbia University. Indeed, he had the privilege to work with great anthropological minds including Ruth Benedict and Julian Steward. However, Mintz believed that his most significant

2) For a great discussion of Mintz's contribution to anthropology that focuses on *Sweetness and Power*, see Sarah Hill (2015).

training in anthropology came from a small group of fellow graduate students. In 1946, when he enrolled in Columbia University's graduate program, the department of anthropology was dysfunctional and course offerings were horrible. Mintz gravitated to other veterans who shared experiences of living through the Depression and World War II; they founded an informal study group they jokingly called "the Mundial Upheaval Society (MUS)". Remarkably, the MUS spawned several of the best-known names of American Anthropology during the postwar period: Elman Service, John Murra, Morton Fried, Stanley Diamond, Robert Manners and Eric Wolf. Though most of the Mundialists were students of Julian Steward, they taught each other in ways that allowed each to make significant criticisms of the way Boasian anthropology had devolved into a decontextualized culture concept that was ill-equipped to deal with structures of power. Mintz's approach to anthropology as shaped by the MUS was what most captivated my attention when he became my mentor.

Background and Beginnings

When I joined the Johns Hopkins graduate program in 1994, Mintz continually impressed me with his stories. Apart from being entertaining, they illustrated his remarkable reach across intellectual boundaries and back into time. Sid was as funny a person as I have ever met. He peppered his stories with salty language, risqué jokes, and a large dose of self-deprecation. Only a fool would have been side-tracked by the banter; Sid usually had something serious to say.

For instance, the first time he spoke to me about his parents he began with a joke about the backwardness of his Eastern European background. In comparing himself with Eric Wolf, he lauded Eric's erudition that stemmed from his German Jewish upbringing, which included a classic European education. He said, "Eric learned to play Beethoven on the piano and read Sombart in original German when he was a kid. And here, my people? They were Russian Jews, who couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time."

Sid did not leave the discussion at merely a joke. He had something else to say about his family, and how it fit into the history of American Jews in ways that often gets lost in racial stereotypes and anti-Semitism. As it turns out, his parents were Polish Jews and came from small villages in Russian-occupied Poland. Astonishingly Sid's father served in Tsar Nicholas II's Army; and the only reason he left the service was because the Russian military did not promote Jews. Despite being conscripted by a colonial power and suffering from anti-Semitism, Sid's father was not political. Upon leaving the military, he became a machinist and avoided getting caught up in the communist movements sweeping through Eastern Europe. Instead, he immigrated to the United States to work in a machine shop in New York City. His parents knew each other as children and became reacquainted in the United States shortly after the turn of the century. His mother worked as a seamstress in a sweatshop. Unlike her husband, she joined the leftist movements of the United States, becoming a labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, famously known as the Wobblies. At an early age, she taught Sid the basics about Marxism, socialism, class conflict, and

anarchism — an education his father dismissed as “a bunch of crap.”

After marriage, his mother proved to be more practical than her leftist ideology would make her appear. Thinking of her future children, she reasoned New York City would be a bad place to raise a family and demanded that they move to a small town. Sid’s father had a friend from the Army who had lived in Dover, New Jersey; it was a little industrial town, still quite rural. His father left the machine shop and joined his friend washing dishes at a restaurant. Working hard and saving money, the two men eventually bought the restaurant and became relatively wealthy. Sid remembered his early years, from 1922 until the depression, as comfortable. The Great Depression, however, ended the family’s brief encounter with affluence; the Mintz family lost everything, and his father returned to his restaurant as merely an employee.

Though Sid did well in High School, he had limited opportunities in the depressed economy of the late 1930s. He headed to Brooklyn, pretending to be a resident there so that he could attend the city’s free college. Sid met residency qualifications by moving in with his newlywed sister and was able to begin coursework. Though he felt it was unfair the way his mother had foisted him upon his brother-in-law, he found New York and Brooklyn College to be exciting. Indeed, he experienced “culture shock” as the city was fast-paced and New Yorkers were more aggressive than the people of Dover. Brooklyn College astonished Sid, as he once explained to me: “I never saw so many Jews!” Not only were the students mostly Jewish, but they talked a lot and openly expressed strong opinions in ways that would have been impossible under the anti-Semitism

that reigned in his hometown. He had fun and did not accomplish much academically. He wrestled collegiately and majored in Psychology. His choice of major, however, did not stem from intellectual interest. Rather it sprang from the desire to get to know a young lady. He did, nonetheless, have one scholarly encounter that would shape his future. Sid took an anthropology course with Alexander Lesser, one of Franz Boas's more interesting, if not well-known, students. Years later, Sid would return to Lesser's work.³⁾

Columbia University, Mundial Upheaval, and People of Puerto Rico

Following graduation from Brooklyn College in 1943, the U.S. Army drafted Sid into the Signal Corps; from there he would transfer into the Air Force. He taught celestial navigation and spent the entire war at several military bases in the United States. Although he never saw combat, the enormity of the war effort affected his approach to scholarship. After the war, Mintz joined the mass of veterans who used the GI Bill to flood into American universities as he entered Columbia University's anthropology program. Franz Boas's famed department, by the 1940s, was in shambles. Course offerings were meager, or what Eric Wolf described as "a very incoherent stew"

3) Mintz viewed Alexander Lesser as a pioneer in bringing a political and historical approach to anthropology. In the 1980s, Sid helped Professor Lesser publish many of his articles in a collection entitled *History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser* (See Lesser 1985). Lesser's essays showcase originality in connecting Boasian anthropology, Darwinian Evolution, and British Social Anthropology. Indeed, one can see his influence on Mintz's work.

(Ghani 1987: 355). To make up for such deficiencies, Mintz helped form the Mundial Upheaval Society (MUS) along with Eric Wolf, Stanley Diamond, John Murra, Robert Manners, Elman Service, and Morton Fried. The informal group held fortnight lectures where they would take turns teaching each other about various aspects of anthropology. Eventually, the Mundialists became “bound together” through commonalities as Eric Wolf explained: “I think we saw anthropology and that kind of socialist concern as having some connection with each other. The questions of class structure and state formation were there at the beginning, not just simply as a result of discovery” (Ghani 1987: 355). When Charles Carnegie asked Mintz about the context of the Depression and World War II having shaped the perspective of the Mundialists, Mintz explained:

In fact, by exactly that combination. By the Depression, and how state power reacted to the Depression world wide: what state power produced in Germany and in Japan and in Italy, and what happened with state power in the United States at the same time, an interest in that, in the differential consequences, in the historical roots of those developments. What did the Treaty of Versailles really have to do, what did inflation really have to do, what did the fear of communism in the West really have to do, with the rise of Hitler? To what extent can we go back even beyond those outcomes to see what gave rise to fascism? We thought in those terms. At the same, we thought a lot about where anthropology stood in relation to those kinds of developments. ... I wanted to show ... how there is a cultural dimension to human behavior, a dimension that Marxist theory had not yet properly embraced, and that remains incomplete without it. That there is a very important way of understanding human behavior that Marxism has missed. I think all of us thought in these terms, though we all did so very differently (Carnegie 2006: 136).

In 1947, Columbia University hired Julian Steward; he brought a new perspective to the anthropology department with his concepts of social evolution and cultural ecology (see Steward 1955). Mintz found Steward's materialist approach, and his focus on labor, useful for developing his interests in political and economic structures. Steward procured a generous grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct a research project, consisting of five separate community studies, to examine the "major regional variants" in Puerto Rico's population (Steward et al. 1956). Steward sought to examine the cultural processes related to the institutions that integrate state societies. After arriving at Columbia, Steward ended up raiding the MUS, enlisting Diamond, Manners, Mintz, and Wolf as research assistants, and recent Chicago graduate John Murra as the field director.⁴⁾

Although Steward provided the conceptual framework for the *People of Puerto Rico* project, Mintz and Wolf carried forward the research and analysis in ways that Steward never fully understood.⁵⁾

4) Stanley Diamond, however, left the project and ended up writing an ethnohistory of the Kingdom of Dahomey, located in present-day Benin (Diamond 1951). For the sake of trivia, during graduate school, Sid Mintz saw that I had a copy of Diamond's dissertation, and he told me that he had typed it and received 10 cents a page. Years later, David Scott, a student of Stanley Diamond, said he had heard the same story. However, in Diamond's version of the tale, he had paid Sid 25 cents a page.

5) Years later, William Roseberry read *The People of Puerto Rico* (Steward et al. 1956) and noticed contradictions between the introductory chapter, many of the individual chapters, and the conclusion. As it turned out, Mintz and Wolf had written the concluding chapter and brazenly used Marxian formulations that contradicted the introduction's cultural-ecological framework. Mintz believed that Steward never examined the final version. He reasoned that if Steward had read it, he would not have allowed it to go to press as he would have rejected their Marxian-inflected conclusions (See Roseberry 1978; Lauria-Perricelli 1989). Indeed, Mintz was shocked when Roseberry, as a graduate student, called to ask about

Sid chose to study a corporate sugar factory on the south coast of the island and he looked beyond the ecological factors Steward prioritized as he honed in on the power that Central Aguirre Sugar Company, a U.S.-owned corporation, exerted upon the municipality. Following the colonization of Puerto Rico in 1898, the corporation bought most of the land and reorganized the economy for the industrial production of sugar and proletarianized the entire community:

the vast majority of people is landless, propertyless (in the sense of productive property), wage-earning, store-buying (the stores being a chain owned by the corporation, with few competitors), corporately employed, and standing in like relationship to the main source of employment. These rural proletarian communities might also be considered class isolates, in the sense that economic alternatives to wage labor in the sugarcane industry, other than via migration to the United States mainland, are very scarce. The working people stand in like relationship to the productive apparatus but are also interacting in reciprocal relationships with members of higher classes (such as the managers). The rural proletarian community association with the plantation emerges as isolated in a very different way from that of the folk society. In the latter the isolation is primarily geographic, and the society can be discussed almost completely in terms of itself. In the former the isolation is socioeconomic. The rural proletarians form a part-society, and they are members of a class which can be analyzed adequately only with reference to other classes (Mintz 1951: 139-140).

In going beyond Steward's ecological framework, Mintz made a noteworthy contribution to the anthropology of rural societies. His doctoral dissertation simultaneously ripped to pieces Robert Redfield's

these discrepancies.

concept of “folk society” and reworked Marxian interpretations of proletarianization. At the time, Redfield was one the most prominent anthropologists in the United States and had garnered widespread attention for his framework for the analysis of rural peoples who did not easily fit the category of “primitive.” He came up with the concept of “folk society” and “folk culture” to characterize individuals who lived in “small, isolated, non-literate, and homogeneous communities” in proximity to “urban centers” (Redfield 1947: 300). Despite what Sid termed as his “elegant” formulation, he thought Redfield was “dead wrong” for he merely idealized human life into “folk” and “urban” categories. Instead of seeing “rural folk” as part of the contemporary transformation of the Yucatan peninsula, and more generally, Mexican society, Redfield conceived of change as coming from “urban” centers and acting upon “rural” peripheries, unleashing a process of “disorganization.”

Mintz used his findings on the Puerto Rican sugar plantation to demonstrate that Redfield’s ethnography of Yucatan, with which he conceptualized folk society, was incomplete in that it did not include plantation communities. Moreover, he revealed that Redfield had ignored a large henequen plantation, the mainstay of the regional economy. Mintz asserted that these “rural industrial organizations” had molded the Yucatan’s agrarian economy. Mintz challenged Redfield’s overly tidy typologies which would have reproduced a notion of culture that was inadequate to explain the real history and on-the- ground realities (Mintz 1951; 1953). Indeed, the concept of a rural proletariat was a breakthrough that shifted attention away from idealist accounts of culture and redirected enquiry toward

economic forces and the heterogeneity of rural life.

Pan-Caribbean Studies and the Modernity of Colonialism

In 1951, Mintz took a job at Yale University. Unlike most of the other members of the People of Puerto Rico, he committed his entire career to the Caribbean. Initially, Sid planned on continuing work on Puerto Rico, seeking to explore the transformation of slave plantations and family owned haciendas, to modern plantations that came along with American Imperialism after the Spanish-American War of 1898. He also started research in Jamaica where he became interested in markets and market systems. He found that working on a sugar plantation and the history of Puerto Rican slavery, haciendas, and plantations helped prepare him for Jamaica. He began to envision his scholarly agenda in terms of four different civilizations that emerged from European colonization of the Caribbean.

Mintz's broader work on synthesizing insights from Puerto Rico and incorporating them with studies of other Caribbean societies suddenly took a backseat in 1953 when he came to know about an event in the life of the man from whom he learned the most during his fieldwork in Barrio Jauca, Anastacio Zayas Alvarado, or "Taso." Taso distinguished himself in Sid's eyes with a "remarkable vocabulary" and "a genuinely sophisticated knowledge of the political implications of events." Mintz further elaborates Taso's characteristics:

he had a subtle sense of humor; and he seemed to understand better than anybody else I knew in Puerto Rico (and not just in Barrio Jauca) what I was trying to do there. That understanding, his startlingly high intelligence, and my feeling that he somehow stood outside his community even though he was thoroughly part of it, made him a rich source of facts and corroboration for me. I thought that he was an extraordinary person for his time and place (Mintz 1989: 789-790).

To Sid's shock, during the intervening years, he learned that Taso had converted to Christianity, becoming a member of the Pentecostal Church:

He had been in trance, he had spoken in tongues, and he had given up various kinds of behavior — drinking alcohol, swearing and gambling, among them — as part of his conversion. I was greatly startled by the news of these events, and returned to Jauca to ask whether we might sit down together to record his life history (Mintz 1989: 790).

Feeling that he had severely misconstrued Taso, and frightened by the implications that such a blunder may have for the rest of his community study of Barrio Jauca, Mintz endeavored to record Taso's life history. He looked to trace the patterns that resulted in such an unpredictable fate, which culminated in the classic *Worker in the Cane* (1974[1961]). As Sid pointed out later in his career, his life history with Taso disclosed a certain way that Ruth Benedict had influenced his work. For many years, he was puzzled about Benedict's significance to his work, because she made "absolutely no reference to history" and was "purely a functionalist" (Mintz 2004: 123). Nevertheless, as he described, in his contribution to Sydel Silverman's *Totems and Teachers*, Benedict left a strong

imprint on his understanding of cultural processes:

In her sensitive analytic movement from cultural standard to individual response and back again, Benedict made us aware of the dominant place of culture in the profile of the individual; but she never portrayed culture — nor I believe, conceived of it — as some impersonal monster, some bloodless computer, “encoding” us, or pouring us into rigid molds (Mintz 2004: 115).

This tension between culture and individual comes out clearly in Mintz’s description of Taso’s life and the way in which American occupation had shaped it.

From *Worker in the Cane*, Mintz clarified his position that people living in rural areas were thoroughly contemporary, and producers of the “modernity” scholars often associate with European society. Analytically, he took his sharpened insights from the Puerto Rican case and developed them in the entirely different contexts of Jamaica and Haiti. On one level, his mastery of Hispanophone, Anglophone, and Francophone Caribbean society distinguished his work. He was able to deepen his understanding of the role slavery and how the industrial-like production of commodities connected European industrialization with colonization in the Caribbean. Mintz’s interest in European power and the construction of the Modern World System did not reduce the Caribbean to merely serving the metropolitan “core.” Instead, he made “plain the obscured but intimate ways in which Caribbean labor has made modern Europe and North America possible” by transforming European habits of consumption, and “altering everyday life and the symbols that give meaning to social

life” (Carnegie 2006: 106-107).

Mintz’s insights went beyond the correcting of anthropology’s fascination with the ideal of the “primitive.” He also criticized the way Marxist perspectives often assume modern forms, represented by industrial factories and processes of proletarianization, were uniquely and inherently European. Instead, he showed that many of the things we associate with modernity and progressive transformation of society actually appeared in the Caribbean first, or as he eloquently described in his Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture at Warwick University:

In the view espoused here, Caribbean peoples are the first *modernized* peoples in world history. They were modernised by enslavement and forced transportation; by ‘seasoning’ and coercion on time-conscious export-oriented enterprises; by the reshuffling, redefinition and reduction of gender-based roles; by racial and status-based oppression; and by the need to reconstitute and maintain cultural forms of their own under implacable pressure. These were people wrenched from societies of a different sort, then thrust into remarkably *industrial* settings for their time and for their appearance, and kept under circumstances of extreme repression. Caribbean *cultures* had to develop under these unusual and, indeed, terrible conditions. The argument here is that they have, as a result, a remarkably modern cast for their time (Mintz 1993).

Indeed, Mintz conceived of plantations as institutions of modernity as he gathered inspiration from Edgar Tristram Thompson’s 1932 dissertation entitled “The Plantation” (Thompson 2010[1932]). Thompson had dismantled climactic theories of plantation agriculture by conceiving of the plantations as a “frontier intuition,” operating as a political structure that brought land and labor under new and

more severe forms of control. Mintz developed Thompson's insights by describing the multiple ways these "modern" agricultural institutions forged connections between the developing capitalist states in Europe and slavery in the Caribbean and the American South. Rather than an archaic form of social organization, Mintz viewed plantations as "landmark experiments in modernity" (1996b: 295) that Europeans could hardly have imagined until the nineteenth-century. In this way, Mintz pointed out the existence of a factory system in the New World before factories existed in Europe; an insight which anthropologist Anne Stoler has used to depict colonies as "laboratories of modernity" (Stoler 1995).

Mintz found an unusual and intriguing way to showcase many of his significant insights into the intricate workings of colonialism, capitalism, and the rise of modernity by tracing the trans-Atlantic career of the commodity sugar. Indeed, *Sweetness and Power* brought Mintz's anthropology, and his unique conceptualizations of power, beyond the specialized audiences that consumed his scholarship for three decades. By focusing on the magnetic chemical properties of sugar, inherent in the taste of sweetness, he provides a unique perspective on the workings of industrial power. Sugar's story begins as an expensive luxury for the elite and gradually materialized into a working class necessity. In the process, sugar became intertwined with proletarianization and the rise of factories in England through the production of cheap and high caloric foods that fed working classes. Mintz uses the rise of this peculiar commodity to reveal the "intimate linkages" between coerced labor in Caribbean plantations and "free" labor the industrialists assembled

in the British industrial zones. In these pages, the reader comes to see the Caribbean, and its enslaved peoples, as active producers of the modern world. Through a compelling story of these cross-Atlantic connections, Mintz exposed the unseen ways that through sugar production, the Caribbean played a significant role in the processes that E.P. Thompson described as the “making of the English Working Class” (Thompson 1963).

Regarding the raging debates about the relationship between Japanese colonialism and the two Koreas, the stories Mintz has told us about the intersection of plantation slavery and capitalist modernity is politically and intellectually stimulating. In the Korean context, a Mintzian historical anthropology explodes the mythologies that try to separate the repressive elements of colonial history from the “positive” features of economic “miracles” and the rise of industrial powers. Moreover, Mintz’s view of the historical connections between metropolitan “cores” and colonial “peripheries” redefines the debates about the partition of the Korean peninsula. The moral complexity inherent in the interconnecting processes of European industrialization and New World colonialism reveals the political danger in Manichean accounts of Japanese-Korean relations, opening up more complex and interesting questions about the ways political power and class domination have blown in many directions across the East Sea.

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