S. Mintz

The bromides of gods, the passions of humans

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 70 (1996), no: 1/2, Leiden, 107-112

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

SIDNEY W. MINTZ

THE BROMIDES OF GODS, THE PASSIONS OF HUMANS

Histoire du chocolat. NIKITA HARWICH. Paris: Desjonquères, 1992. 292 pp. (Paper, n.p.)

The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao. ALLEN M. YOUNG. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994. xv + 200 pp. (Cloth US\$ 24.95)

A recent hurried look at some bookstore shelves on the Boulevard St. Michel was enough to convince this reviewer that French publishing has been infected with wild enthusiasm for the history of substances. This may reflect some older vogue; in France as elsewhere, fashions come and go. But today's trend is entirely separate from the Braudel era, from those pre-occupations with the material world and the social struggles it embodies, which Braudel himself had sedulously popularized. Instead there is a concern with substances, especially edibles, and how *good* they are: a fascination with *sensation* that is not at all surprising at this historical juncture.

The variety of such works is considerable. One series, in which Harwich's volume figures, is dubbed simply "Outre-Mer," and moves blithely across tea, rubber, and much else in the tropical world. There are now also coffee table "studies"; one of them, on henna ("*plante du Paradis*"), is composed largely of photographs. (It is endowed with a text, that should not distract the viewer.) A scholarly collection of papers on Mediterranean sweeteners and a pedestrian book on the history of sugar also figure in a random batch of such works; there are no signs of decline in their production.

The question is not why such books (*Que sais-je?* was producing them, many of them good, decades ago), but why *now*? It may be owing to a rediscovery of the role individual commodities came to play in the rise of

capitalism; but it's probably simpler than that. My mother always said that if you put all of your old clothes in a barrel and turned it upside down when it was full, you'd be back in style again. There was, after all, a time when such substances were rare or precious or new – or even all three. That they have become prosaic in our wondrous world of today is not the same as their becoming trivial. Perhaps they are simply being thought of in a different way. Instead of touting their virtues, or figuring out who the touts were, we scholars can rhapsodize about their effects, revel in their manifestations, wonder at their power.

The two books under review differ in nearly every way. Volumes in the series in which Young's appears "describe the biology and natural history of individual plant or animal species" (the bald eagle, the red fox, among others), "and allow insight into how science is conducted." Young clearly takes this description seriously. But Harwich (who has written, among other things, on Venezuela's 1929 economic crisis, on bank and state in that country, and on something called the New York & Bermudez Company) here turns decisively toward a subject about which he apparently knew little before, and in the direction of a wider readership. One chapter only in his 266 pages runs to more than twenty pages, and there are fourteen chapters, all festooned with subheadings (such as "*l'heureuse monnaie de Pierre Martyr*" and "*Méfiez-vous du chocolat de Chiapas?*" and concluding with "*Quetzalcóatl s'est-il vengé?*"). Young's text totals less than 175 pages; meticulously detailed, it forms a more coherent whole. While Harwich's chapters provide information and stimulate transient reflection, they sometimes come off reading too much like reports in a literate Parisian weekend newspaper.

Whatever the reasons why such subjects have returned, and whatever makes their return different, a backward glance may help. In 1955, when René F. Millon wrote a doctoral thesis on cacao entitled "When money grew on trees," the subject was not eye-catching. Unfortunately, the thesis has never been published. Millon was interested in determining the pre-Columbian extent of cacao cultivation; in evaluating the claim that cacao beans had served as money; and in weighing their role in trade, in traditional land patterns of cacao production, and in pre-Columbian cacao consumption. He made good use of the *Codex Mendoza*, the *Relaciones de Yucatán*, Motolinía, Juan de Torquemada (reputedly given to exaggeration), the *Suma de visitas de pueblos por orden alfabético* and (unless this reviewer has missed something) of every ancient historical source anyone else has quoted on cocoa in the last forty years. But except for one kind of anthropologist, people weren't much interested in cacao, cocoa, or chocolate in 1955; and now they are. Quincentenary puffery,

which so publicized New World cultigens in recent years, is one reason. Some diverting and educational works accompanied the propaganda. Foster and Cordell's collection, *Chilies to Chocolate* (1992), Amal Naj's breezy *Peppers*, and the late Sophie Coe's excellent *America's First Cuisines* (1995), followed quite naturally from Salaman's study of the potato of long ago (1949) and Albert Crosby's pioneering *The Columbian Exchange* (1972).

How differently such subjects have come to be viewed is suggested by a recent publishing event. Not very long ago, The Book of the Month Club chose as one of its alternative selections a coy little volume entitled *Chocolate Sex: A Naughty Little Book*. This truly unspeakable product of Time Warner Books is noteworthy only because of its selection by the Book of the Month Club. It would be nice to believe that it was chosen by them sight unseen. But more likely (and more depressing), it was chosen *because* it is such bad soft porn. Like the book on henna, it has a text; but unlike the henna volume, which is visually splendid, its photographs are merely of scantily-clad women and men eating chocolate, possessing no redeeming value of any sort, certainly not erotic.

That such a book could have been imagined at all owes to chocolate's current reputation. It is now fashionable to impute its appeal to its chemical composition. The excitation of ardor is repeatedly evoked in this connection, even though not everyone is equally convinced. Hetherington and MacDiarmid (1993), for example, begin their article on "chocolate addiction" as follows:

Chocolate is identified as the single most craved food in studies of food cravings. More than most foods, chocolate has come to signify luxury, reward and pleasure. It is not surprising that chocolate is considered pleasurable by most people since it combines positive orosensory qualities, including a highly preferred sweet taste and creamy texture with positive connotations developed from childhood of gift-giving and special occasions. It has been suggested that chocolate cravings have a biological basis, associated with depressed mood states, the menstrual cycle, and psycho-pharmacological effects. However, equally plausible is that the desire for chocolate simply derives from the desire for sensory gratification (1993:233).

Their doubts about the chemistry (not shared by Harwich) lead one toward the power of hype, at least as a partial explanation. Like sugar, the argument is not really about whether the substance is good, but about how much more of it people can be caged or bullied into eating. When worldwide commercialization of chocolate was underway, M. Arthur Mangin did his best, in *Le cacao et le chocolat* (1860), to convey an im-

pression entirely different from the folks at Time Warner. As with Coca Cola and many other novelties, the hook at first was hearth and health. Mangin dwells on chocolate as a family food, homely and warm, something never served in bars, “the food of sober, orderly, and peaceful folk” (Walter Baker 1886:66). After telling us how many folks get employment from the cultivation, transport, and processing of cocoa, Mangin concluded: “Its consumption should be encouraged and respected by all wise governments, not only because it is physically beneficial but, and we do not hesitate to say it, because it is *morally* salutary” (Walter Baker 1886: 65).

There is, one supposes, no reason why the same substance cannot be “the ultimate aphrodisiac and quintessential seducer,” as the dust jacket of Time Warner’s product would have it (Barber, Whittin and Loew 1994) on the one hand, and “morally salutary” on the other – just as long as the profits roll in.

Harwich’s book begins and ends with Quetzalcóatl; the chapters vary not only in length but also in scope. In Chapter 7, for example, he credits Conrad van Houten with having invented the press with which cocoa butter could be squeezed out, thereby first making cocoa powder, and freeing the cocoa butter to be used to enrich ordinary cocoa beans – the real beginnings of solid chocolate. Van Houten did do all of that; but his press is clearly depicted in Nicolas de Blégny’s treatise on chocolate, coffee and tea published in 1687, 141 years earlier. It was hardly an original idea of Van Houten’s. Harwich cites de Blégny often, but appears to have missed this curious connection.

With Van Houten’s success, the era of solid chocolate was initiated – before then there was nothing of the kind, even though the Royal Navy had long been issued chocolate “bars” with which to brew their hot cocoa. For modern consumption, of course, the beverage has become relatively minor, the solid enormously important. In his chapter on the modern market, Harwich points to the sevenfold increase in bean production between 1900 and 1940. This was stimulated mostly by demand for the solid confectionary, and nothing has slowed that upward trend. Consumption continues to rise at the rate of three to four percent per year; the Swiss, Norwegians, British, Belgians, Dutch, Germans, and Austrians lead the world with annual per caput consumption figures running between 14 and 17.5 pounds.

Though Harwich thinks that Hershey, Pennsylvania is named Hersheyville, he has nonetheless identified the United States as one of the odder national consumers of chocolate. What he does not mention is that current per caput consumption in this country runs about half that of Switzerland.

And is it not interesting how many of the big consuming countries are Germanic? (Chocolate consumption figures really need to be accompanied by sugar consumption figures; they are more revealing together.)

Though Young devotes most of his book to natural history, he includes some interesting information on modern developments. Only about a fifth of world cacao production comes from plantations, but several North American companies own their own estates, including the M&M Mars Company, and a Chicago firm demurely named The World's Finest Chocolate Company. Without pressing his point, Young writes:

Part of the mystique of cacao is that its production still largely depends on the small-scale farmer, deploying fairly ancient methods for curing the beans, while the technology for processing chocolate has been large-scale in response to high demand. (pp. 77-78)

Again:

Chemists still do not understand the nature of the chocolate flavor, which depends upon hundreds of substances in the cacao seed or cocoa bean. Attempts to manufacture an acceptable synthetic chocolate, bypassing the cacao tree altogether, have failed. So although chocolate is to some extent an invented product in that the seeds are treated in certain ways to produce the unique flavor, no one has successfully come up with a synthetic counterpart to the chemist wrought in the rain forest. (p. 79)

And finally:

Because the cacao tree is still tied ecologically to the tropical rain forest, the more we can incorporate certain features of the rain forest into the design of commercial plantations, the more likely we are to maintain production at suitable economic levels in the long run. This may necessitate recognizing what the Mayas, Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples realized long ago – that growing “the food of the gods” in small groves can reap considerable harvests.

Without even knowing it, these ancient peoples may have learned to cultivate cacao in a manner consistent with good natural pollination and disease control. In such modesty there can be marvelous accomplishments, namely the delightful discovery of chocolate long ago and the livelihoods of rain forest zone farmers both then and now. To this I add also ... interpreting the cacao tree as a creature of nature, something that compels us to protect what little, extant collective tropical nature is left in the ecologically and culturally rich isthmus of Mesoamerica. In doing so, we might well be insuring, in the long run, the world's coveted supply of chocolate, while protecting many more biological riches integrated into the complex fabric of tropical diversity. (p. 173)

Both of these books are useful, but Young leads us to more serious reflection. The definitive book on chocolate, which will do for the subject what Salaman has done for potatoes or Warman for maize, remains to be written.

REFERENCES

- BARBER, A. RICHARD, NANCY R.M. WHITIN & ANTHONY LOEW, 1994. *Chocolate Sex: A Naughty Little Book*. New York: Time Warner.
- BLÉGNY, NICOLAS DE, 1687. *Le bon usage du thé, du café et du chocolat pour la préservation et pour la guérison des maladies*. Lyon: Thomas Amaudry.
- COE, SOPHIE D., 1994. *America's First Cuisines*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- CROSBY, ALFRED, 1972. *The Columbian Exchange*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press.
- FOSTER, NELSON & LINDA S. CORDELL (eds.), 1992. *Chilies to Chocolate: Food the Americas Gave the World*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- HETHERINGTON, M.M. & J.I. MCDIARMID, 1993. "Chocolate Addiction": A Preliminary Study of its Description and its Relationship to Problem Eating. *Appetite* 21(3): 233-46.
- MANGIN, ARTHUR, 1860. *Le Cacao et le Chocolat considérés aux points de vue botanique ... et économique*. Paris: F. Denis.
- MILLON, RENÉ F., 1955. *When Money Grew on Trees. A Study of Cacao in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, New York.
- NAJ, AMAL, 1992. *Peppers*. New York: Vintage.
- SALAMAN, REDCLIFFE, 1949. *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WALTER BAKER & COMPANY, 1886. *Cocoa and Chocolate*. Boston: Rockwell and Churchill.
- WARMAN, ARTURO, 1988. *La historia de un bastardo: Maíz y capitalismo*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

SIDNEY W. MINTZ
Department of Anthropology
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore MD 21218, U.S.A.