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MICHIEL BAUD

## SIDNEY MINTZ AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES

*Empirical Futures: Anthropologists and Historians Engage the Work of Sidney W. Mintz.* GEORGE BACA, AISHA KHAN & STEPHAN PALMIÉ (eds.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. v + 232 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

*Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations.* SIDNEY W. MINTZ. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. xiv + 257 pp. (Cloth US\$ 27.95)

There can be no doubt about the importance of U.S. anthropologist Sidney Mintz in the development of Caribbean Studies. His work has influenced both the historiography and anthropology of Caribbean slavery and the emergence of Caribbean peasant societies. Now two books have been published that interrogate the significance of his work. The first is an anthology that tries to build on Mintz's ideas – as I will argue below, in a circumspect and not fully convincing way. In the second Mintz describes and compares the societies of Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico, and looks back on his work that started in the 1940s.

Mintz's career began in Puerto Rico. Under the supervision of anthropologist Julian Steward, a group of young anthropologists (including Eric Wolf, Robert Manners, Elena Padilla, and others) engaged in a research project designed to explore the contemporary culture of Puerto Rico in terms of historical changes on the island. The project reflected the increasingly active U.S. anthropology in Latin America at the time. While the projects of the Carnegie Institution in Mexico and Cornell University in Peru focused on the primitive Indian, the Puerto Rican project studied modern Latin American culture. The ethnographic gaze of the young anthropologists was not directed toward stagnant and isolated cultures but to Puerto Rico's insertion into modernity. The book that resulted, *The People of Puerto Rico* (Steward 1956), described and analyzed how different rural groups became – each in its own way – an

integrated part of the modern, globalized world and how the specific interaction between the local and the global led to differences between groups of producers and, eventually, to the creation of what was called subcultures. This perspective, which took societal change as a point of departure, would undergird the work of both Mintz and Wolf and contribute to present-day social anthropology, which takes historical change and the connection between local and global processes as its point of departure.

The Puerto Rican fieldwork also led Mintz to convert his friendship with a sugarcane worker named Taso into a book project, published in 1960 as *Worker in the Cane*, which analyzed the social history of Puerto Rico via Taso's life history. Mintz demonstrated once again that no present-day human life can be understood without taking into account global market forces but at the same time he stressed the humanist mandate of modern ethnography. *Worker in the Cane* is not the best-known or most sophisticated of his books, but it is lovingly referred to by many of his colleagues and students. The impression of direct ethnographic contact, and the detailed description of a human life that in many ways is so strange to them, explains the continuing appeal of this book for young anthropologists.

Mintz was never a theorist. He was more interested in an embedded, contextualized analysis that aimed at understanding the historical complexities of Caribbean societies. This was also the terrain where he became best known. At the beginning it was his writings on Caribbean slave society that attracted the attention of historians and anthropologists. Mintz was convinced that abolition should be understood as an internal, even local process, growing out of the slave society itself. He elaborated this analytical framework in a number of articles which he republished in *Caribbean Transformations* (1974). By focusing on the internal logic of Caribbean slave plantations, he detected a number of contradictions that undermined plantations from the inside. Slaves were allowed to keep their own provision grounds to take care of their food necessities. This created alternative and in many ways contrasting processes of change on the plantations which, in Mintz's view, created some sort of "informal" peasant societies. The slaves became what he called a reconstituted or proto-peasantry *within* the plantations. The plantations thus created in a paradoxical way their own antidote which developed into what could be called a counterplantation society. This observation helped historians understand the paradoxical logic of the development of plantation societies in the Caribbean, and their downfall, and has been fundamental for present-day understandings of slavery in the region.

It was Mintz's work on the role of sugar in the modern world-system that brought him to the attention of non-Caribbeanist academics. His *Sweetness and Power* (1985) described in detail the evolution of sugar from an expensive, small-scale spice for the European elite to an increasingly popular "drug" for the working classes. An original historical analysis of one of the

most important commodity chains in modern times, the book was erudite, well-written, and accessible to a broad public. It was also one of the first studies that acknowledged the consumer as a social agent, thereby stressing the importance of consumption for social change. It showed how “sucrose epitomized the transition from one society to another.” As Mintz writes, “The first sweetened cup of hot tea to be drunk by an English worker was a significant historical event, because it prefigured the transformation of an entire society, a total remaking of its economic and social basis” (p. 214). The book’s combination of empirical, sometimes anecdotal, evidence and grand vistas made it a best-seller.

Among the historians and anthropologists indebted to Mintz’s work some have used his views on peasant societies, slavery, and the importance of cash crops to inform and refine their own work; others have felt attracted by his combination of history and anthropology, seduced by his clear style, his sincere humanist interest in the poor, and the empirical validation of his arguments.

In this sense, it is not surprising that a number of social scientists have endeavored in *Empirical Futures*, to discuss Mintz’s work, calling him “the most distinguished living representative of a historically informed anthropology that anticipated ‘globalization studies’ by a half century” (p. 6). Nevertheless, there is a somewhat ambiguous ring to the project. It is not a dedicatory book of the sort that is published when an academic retires or passes away. Neither is it a clear response to (or a critique of) Mintz’s work. Even the book’s introduction is ambiguous and fails to make clear what the “engagement” with Mintz’s work really means. After four pages of dropping the names of authors who have been puzzled by the complexities and tensions caused by combinations of history and anthropology, Mintz is invoked to solve the riddle: “Mintz’s oeuvre represents both exemplary creativity in crossing disciplinary boundaries – long before it was fashionable to do so – and more than a half century’s steadfast commitment to empirical research” (p. 5). It remains unclear, however, exactly how Mintz’s work has informed this book. In many articles his name is only mentioned perfunctorily in an introduction or conclusion. And also in its tone and perspective, the book hardly echoes Mintz. Its dense style and complicated, post-modern jargon does not seem inspired by, or even reminiscent of, the plain language that he favored.

This is not to say that the book lacks interesting essays. Frederick Cooper’s chapter on intellectual cross-currents presents provocative ideas and connections. Rebecca Scott’s microhistory of Edouard Tinchant and his son John, who traveled through space and time between Cuba and Belgium, is well documented and entertaining. And Samuel Martínez’s article on Haitian culture in a Dominican sugar *batey* is (like his book, which I reviewed in *NWIG* 84-1&2) innovative and insightful. However, the two articles on Prohibition in the United States and the role of women in sugarcane agriculture in Papua

New Guinea (admittedly outside the scope of my expertise) are difficult to relate to the main thrusts of Mintz's work.

In 2010, Mintz reached the respectable age of 87. *Three Ancient Colonies*, which came out that year, should probably be seen as a final summary of his views on Caribbean history. It is, in his own words, "mostly a meditation, a personal look back – not weighty scholarship" (p. 24). Although showing quite different histories, the societies of Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico share a number of characteristics of which slavery and the role of (slave) plantations are the most important. This is such a crucial element because, as Mintz asserts, "the Caribbean slavery experience was unique in its implications for the nature of human social life" (p. 14). The slaves were brought to the region for economic reasons; they had to provide the labor for tropical crops that were meant for the growing European market. Sugarcane was the most important of these crops and most significant in relation to slavery, because its production is so labor-intensive. "[T]he Caribbean region has been *defined* by both the enslavement of Africans and the production of sugar and its byproducts on large plantation enterprises" (p. 29).

This assessment leads Mintz to identify another shared trait of Caribbean societies. The colonies functioned as frontiers of European expansion, in which the settlement of "empty" regions was the main underlying rationale of societal organization.

It is interesting that colonialism plays a less central role in this comparison than slavery. Mintz views Caribbean slavery as an essential feature not only for the Caribbean but for human social life in general. At the same time, in line with his earlier work, he believes that we cannot understand the significance of plantation slavery only at an institutional level, but that we have to understand its everydayness, which both concealed its horrific reality and demonstrated the agency of the slave population.

After introducing the thesis and background of the book, Mintz dedicates a chapter to each of the three societies, focusing on a specific topic: religious identity among Jamaican peasants, rural market women in Haiti, and working lives on Puerto Rican sugar plantations. Above all, these short essays allow him to look back on his life as an anthropologist and his earlier fieldwork experiences. His arguments continually shift from the very local to the general and global, from the historical to the contemporary. The life of a simple, religiously inspired Jamaican peasant becomes emblematic for a whole way of life, allowing Mintz to develop a theory of the importance of religion for Jamaican peasants. A friendship with a Haitian market woman leads to an analysis of Haitian gender relations, and by consequence, to a view of the difference between Haiti and other Caribbean societies in this realm. Making use of his early experiences in Puerto Rico, he connects the threads of his argument in his chapter on Puerto Rican society. Again he presents his old friend, Taso, and discusses the life and views of Taso's wife. On the basis of these

conversations and his long experience in the region, he confronts readers with a wide array of themes, such as Puerto Rican race relations, everyday forms of nationalism and identity, and the meaning of homicide in peasant society. Of the three essays I found this the most original and convincing.

All of his essays have a similar organization, starting out with a broadly stroked historical introduction on the background of each society. Mintz then zooms in on a number of personal cases connected to his earlier fieldwork experiences, often going back to the 1950s and even 1940s. Finally, he connects these two lines in order to understand the specific problematic coming out of the particular society and formulates some more general conclusions. Caribbeanists will probably not find many new insights in the historical introductions, although sometimes they may be surprised and inspired by the ways Mintz brings historical elements together. The personal vignettes, always illuminating, reflect Mintz's gift for analyzing his fieldwork experiences, though there is a slightly disconcerting aspect to them. Mintz's fieldwork took place more than half a century ago, but it is presented in an ethnographic present that hardly accounts for the numerous crucial changes that have taken place in Caribbean societies: the mass migration to Europe and the United States, the establishment of consumer society, the expansion of tourism, the urban violence. We can acknowledge the academic and biographical value of this book, but it is important to draw attention to these issues that are so pressing for an understanding of present-day Caribbean society.

One theme that structures this book, especially the concluding chapter, is the importance of creolization. Mintz sees the Caribbean as a region where European expansion took on a particular character. It was based on material objectives, but it quickly acquired a cultural undertone. Creolization, in his view, is the "creative cultural synthesis" which was so characteristic for the Caribbean region, especially its slave population (p. 190). "Using 'creolization' to describe supposedly global cultural processes implies that the Caribbean region, so long presumed to have nothing to teach anthropologists, is now thought to have much to teach them" (p. 43). This concept was developed in a famous essay co-authored by Mintz and Richard Price (1976/1992). It consists of two fundamental processes: giving meaning to new circumstances and the building of new or adapted social institutions. In his analysis Mintz leans heavily on work on creole languages. Where the slave population formed a majority and had a more or less stable residential pattern such as in Jamaica and Haiti, creole languages emerged. Where slavery was less dominant and manumission and mixing were more general, such as in Puerto Rico and the Spanish Caribbean in general, creoles never consolidated and the language of the colonial motherland became the mother tongue. Mintz uses this observation to draw more general conclusions concerning the differences between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic Caribbean.

For Caribbeanists none of this may sound very surprising. The differences between the various Caribbean islands have, after all, been analyzed by many Caribbeanists including Mintz before. The value of this book lies elsewhere, in the personal recollections of a prolific and influential anthropologist. Mintz's approach is original and convincing because he takes as his point of departure the lives and ideas of his "informants," the people who made his ethnographies possible. These are what in Jamaica are called the "little people." Mintz stresses time and again that these poor and often illiterate characters are the ones who should be considered crucial in his ethnographic work. "Conceding all of the risks this entails, at least the generalities with which one tries to make sense of things are constructed from what one sees of the lives, and hears from the mouths, of the people who are right there living in their own way" (p. 87). This book can be seen as Mintz's last homage to these Caribbean people who through their constant adaptation and creativity have shaped Caribbean history and society. Some people may prefer to reread Mintz's earlier work, but there is no doubt that Caribbean historians and anthropologists are greatly indebted to him for this crucial insight which entails both a humanistic and an ethnographic agenda.

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