history of changing relationships among peoples, societies, and substances.

The study of sugar goes back very far in history, even in European history. Yet much about it remains obscure, even enigmatic. How and why sugar has risen to such prevailing importance among European peoples to whom it had at one time been hardly known is still not altogether clear. A single source of satisfaction—sucrose extracted from the sugar cane—for what appears to be a widespread, perhaps even universal, human liking for sweetness became established in European taste preferences at a time when European power, military might, and economic initiative were transforming the world. That source linked Europe and many colonial areas from the fifteenth century onward, the passage of centuries only underlining its importance even while politics changed. And, conversely, what the metropolises produced the colonies consumed. The desire for sweet substances spread and increased steadily; many different products were employed to satisfy it, and cane sugar’s importance therefore varied from time to time.

Since sugar seems to satisfy a particular desire (it also seems, in so doing, to awaken that desire yet anew), one needs to understand just what makes demand work: how and why it increases under what conditions. One cannot simply assume that everyone has an infinite desire for sweetness, any more than one can assume the same about a desire for comfort or wealth or power. In order to examine these questions in a specific historical context, I will look at the history of sugar consumption in Great Britain especially between 1650, when sugar began to be fairly common, and 1900, by which time it had entered firmly into the diet of every working family. But this will require some prior examination of the production of the sugar that ended up on English tables in the tea, the jam, the biscuits and cakes and sweets. Because we do not know precisely how sugar was introduced to large segments of Britain’s national population—at what rates, by what means, or under exactly what conditions—some speculation is unavoidable. But it is nevertheless possible to show how some people and groups unfamiliar with sugar (and other newly imported ingestibles) gradually became users of it—even, quite rapidly, daily users. Indeed, there is much evidence that many consumers, over time, would have gladly
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eaten more sugar had they been able to get it, while those who were already consuming it regularly were prepared only reluctantly to reduce or forgo its use. Because anthropology is concerned with how people stubbornly maintain past practices, even when under strong negative pressures, but repudiate other behaviors quite readily in order to act differently, these materials throw light upon the historical circumstances from a perspective rather different from the historian's. Though I cannot answer many questions that historians might bring to these data, I shall suggest that anthropologists ask (and try to answer) certain other questions.

Cultural or social anthropology has built its reputation as a discipline upon the study of non-Western peoples; of peoples who form numerically small societies; of peoples who do not practice any of the so-called great religions; of peoples whose technical repertoires are modest—in short, upon the study of what are labeled "primitive" societies. Now, the fact that most of us anthropologists have not made such studies has not weakened the general belief that anthropology's strength as a discipline comes from knowing about societies the behaviors of whose members are sufficiently different from our own, yet are based on sufficiently similar principles, to allow us to document the marvelous variability of human custom while vouchsafing the unshakable, essential oneness of the species. This belief has a great deal to recommend it. It is, anyway, my own view. Yet it has unfortunately led anthropologists in the past to bypass willfully any society that appeared in one regard or another not to qualify as "primitive"—or even, occasionally, to ignore information that made it clear that the society being studied was not quite so primitive (or isolated) as the anthropologist would like. The latter is not an outright suppression of data so much as an incapacity or unwillingness to take such data into account theoretically. It is easy to be critical of one's predecessors. But how can one refrain from counterposing Malinowski's studied instructions about learning the natives' point of view by avoiding other Europeans in the field, with his rather casual observation that the same natives had learned to play cricket in the mission schools years before he began his fieldwork? True, Malinowski never denied the presence of other Europeans, or of European influence—indeed, he eventually reproached himself for too studiedly ignoring the European presence, and called this his most serious deficiency. But in much of his work, the West in all its guises was played down or even ignored, leaving behind an allegedly pristine primitivity, coolly observed by the anthropologist-as-hero. This curious contrast—unspoiled aborigines on the one hand, hymn-singing mission children on the other—is not an isolated one. By some strange sleight of hand, one anthropological monograph after another whisks out of view any signs of the present and how it came to be. This vanishing act imposes burdens on those who feel the need to perform it; those of us who do not ought to have been thinking much more soberly about what anthropologists should study.

Many of anthropology's most distinguished contemporary practitioners have turned their attention to so-called modern or western societies, but they and the rest of us seem to want to maintain the illusion of what one of my colleagues has aptly dubbed "the uncontaminated McCoy." Even those of us who have studied non-primitive societies seem eager to perpetuate the idea that the profession's strength flows from our mastery of the primitive, more than from the study of change, or of becoming "modern." Accordingly, the movement toward an anthropology of modern life has been somewhat halting, and it has tried to justify itself by concentrating on marginal or unusual enclaves in modern societies: ethnic clusters, exotic occupations, criminal elements, the "underlife," etc. This surely has its positive side. Yet the uncomfortable inference is that such groups most closely approximate the anthropological notion of the primitive.

In the present instance, the prosaic quality of the subject matter is inescapable; what could be less "anthropological" than the historical examination of a food that graces every modern table? And yet the anthropology of just such homely, everyday substances may help us to clarify both how the world changes from what it was to what it may become, and how it manages at the same time to stay in certain regards very much the same.

Let us suppose that there is some value in trying to shape an anthropology of the present, and that to do so we must study societies that lack the features conventionally associated with the so-called primitive. We must still take into account the institutions anthropologists cherish—kinship, family, marriage, rites de pas-
sage—and puzzle out the basic divisions by which people are assorted and grouped. We would still try to find out more about fewer people than less about more people. We would still, I believe, put credence in fieldwork, and would value what informants say, as well as what they aspire to and what they do. This would, of course, have to be a different anthropology. As the archaeologist Robert Adams has suggested, anthropologists will no longer be able to invoke scientific “objectivity” to protect themselves from the political implications of their findings, if their subjects turn out simply to be fellow citizens who are poorer or less influential than they. And this new anthropology does not yet wholly exist. The present book, mainly historical in nature, aspires to take a step in its direction. My contention is that the social history of the use of new foods in a western nation can contribute to an anthropology of modern life. It would, of course, be immensely satisfying to be able to declare that my brooding about sugar for thirty years has resulted in some clear-cut alignment, the solution to a puzzle, the resolution of some contradiction, perhaps even a discovery. But I remain uncertain. This book has tended to write itself; I have watched the process, hoping it would reveal something I did not already know.

The organization of the volume is simple. In chapter 1, I attempt to open the subject of the anthropology of food and eating, as part of an anthropology of modern life. This leads me to a discussion of sweetness, as opposed to sweet substances. Sweetness is a taste—what Hobbes called a “Quality”—and the sugars, sucrose (which is won principally from the cane and the sugar beet) among them, are substances that excite the sensation of sweetness. Since any normal human being can apparently experience sweetness, and since all the societies we know of recognize it, something about sweetness must be linked to our character as a species. Yet the liking for sweet things is of highly variable intensity. Hence, an explanation of why some peoples eat lots of sweet things and others hardly any cannot rely on the idea of the species-wide characteristic. How, then, does a particular people become firmly habituated to a large, regular, and dependable supply of sweetness?

Whereas fruit and honey were major sources of sweetness for the English people before about 1650, they do not seem to have figured significantly in the English diet. Sugar made from the juice of the cane had reached England in small quantities by about 1100 A.D.; during the next five centuries, the amounts of cane sugar available doubtless increased, slowly and irregularly. In chapter 2, I look at the production of sugar as the West began to consume more and more of it. From 1650 onward, sugar began to change from a luxury and a rarity into a commonplace and a necessity in many nations, England among them; with a few significant exceptions, this increased consumption after 1650 accompanied the “development” of the West. It was, I believe, the second (or possibly the first, if one discounts tobacco) so-called luxury transformed in this fashion, epitomizing the productive thrust and emerging intent of world capitalism, which centered at first upon the Netherlands and England. I therefore also focus on the possessions that supplied the United Kingdom with sugar, molasses, and rum: on their system of plantation production, and the forms of labor exaction by which such products were made available. I hope to show the special significance of a colonial product like sugar in the growth of world capitalism.

Thereafter, in chapter 3, I discuss the consumption of sugar. My aim is, first, to show how production and consumption were so closely bound together that each may be said partly to have determined the other, and, second, to show that consumption must be explained in terms of what people did and thought: sugar penetrated social behavior and, in being put to new uses and taking on new meanings, was transformed from curiosity and luxury into commonplace and necessity. The relationship between production and consumption may even be paralleled by the relationship between use and meaning. I don’t think meanings inhere in substances naturally or inevitably. Rather, I believe that meaning arises out of use, as people use substances in social relationships.

Outside forces often determine what is available to be endowed with meaning. If the users themselves do not so much determine what is available to be used as add meanings to what is available, what does that say about meaning? At what point does the prerogative to bestowed meaning move from the consumers to the sellers? Or could it be that the power to bestowed meaning always accompanies the power to determine availabilities? What do such ques-
tions—and their answers—mean for our understanding of the operation of modern society, and for our understanding of freedom and individualism?

In chapter 4, I try to say something about why things happened as they did, and I attempt some treatment of circumstance, conjuncture, and cause. Finally, in chapter 5, I offer a few suggestions about where sugar, and the study of sugar in modern society, may be going. I have suggested that anthropology is showing some uncertainty about its own future. An anthropology of modern life and of food and eating, for example, cannot ignore fieldwork or do without it. My hope is that I have identified problems of significance concerning which fieldwork might eventually yield results useful for both theory and policy.

My bias in a historical direction will be apparent. Though I do not accept uncritically the dictum that anthropology must become history or be nothing at all, I believe that without history its explanatory power is seriously compromised. Social phenomena are by their nature historical, which is to say that the relationships among events in one "moment" can never be abstracted from their past and future setting. Arguments about immanent human nature, about the human being's inbuilt capacity to endow the world with its characteristic structures, are not necessarily wrong; but when these arguments replace or obviate history, they are inadequate and misleading. Human beings do create social structures, and do endow events with meaning; but these structures and meanings have historical origins that shape, limit, and help to explain such creativity.