



## The University of the West Indies

# Professor Sidney Mintz

Chancellor, *the Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines the adjective “remiss” as “careless, negligent, or slack in the discharge of a task or duty” - all poignant adjectives in their own right and pointing in the direction of shamefacedness. Fortunately for us, it is followed immediately by the absolving noun “Remission” - “the act of remitting; release from a debt; forgiveness or pardon”. It is hoped, perhaps, that tonight’s events, culminating in this belated recognition, will follow the same exculpatory sequence as just described in the *Shorter Oxford*.

Some fifty-odd years ago, shortly after the ending of the Second World War, a young American student, Sidney W. Mintz, completed his graduate work on the ethnography of sugar workers in Puerto Rico. Published a decade later as *Worker in the Cane*, it was a path breaking study of the social changes wrought by sugar as seen through the eyes of a participant in the industry. Already, in far more than embryonic form, the themes that would become legendary in the *oeuvre* of the mature Mintz were present. Among them: a concern for the poor and their place in written history; the rightful place of food in the making of the modern world and perhaps, above all, a deep and abiding concern for the Caribbean and its peoples.

The rest of his career, we might argue, is but the elaboration of these central themes. However, it would be further remiss, were we not to spend a moment on the details. The young Sidney never confined his horizons to any single language sphere of the Caribbean. His 1955 article on the Jamaican internal marketing system as developed under slavery, remains a seminal source for an understanding not only of the economic complexities of Caribbean slavery, but how, despite its dehumanizing imperative, the enslaved recaptured critical aspects of their personhood. His 1976 book with Richard Price “An Anthropological approach to the Afro American Past: A Caribbean Perspective” illuminated the rich and variegated character of African New World culture, revealing clearly his transnational approach, though, once again, with the Caribbean experience as his point of departure.

Chancellor, many would consider the 1985 work *Sweetness and Power* as his *magnum opus*. In *Sweetness*, Mintz turned the prevailing orthodoxy on its head, approaching the study of sugar in world history not from the perspective of production, but from consumption, placing once again, the Caribbean and its people at the centre of the drama. Indeed, it is fair to say that *Sweetness and Power* was something of a turning point in Mintz’s overall focus, as, after 1985, there is a decisive

shift to the study of consumption. The new emphasis, though never to the exclusion of his other interests, is on the role of food in not only Caribbean, but also World history. His 1996 book *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past*, sought to explore with significant analytical power, the complex relationship between food, politics and social power. The success of *Tasting Food* is evident in its many translations, including Korean, Chinese, Spanish and Japanese.

In all of this, Sidney Mintz has enjoyed a breathtaking career as a teacher of anthropology, with teaching stints at Columbia, Yale, Wesleyan, MIT, Princeton, The University of California Berkeley, Munich, Hong Kong, Paris and Johns Hopkins to name but a few. He has been honoured with numerous awards, again to mention a mere sample: from Yale, the Smithsonian Council, the Royal Anthropological Institute, the American Anthropological Association, the University of Puerto Rico and the Fernando Ortiz Foundation of Cuba and tonight, the University of the West Indies.

Finally, Chancellor, it would be even further remiss of me and apposite to the spirit and style of Mintz the scholar, not to hear from the subject himself. In the article, "The Origins of Reconstituted Peasantries" Mintz is concerned, inter alia, with the purpose, the *raison d'être* of Caribbean peasantries in their early formation. He contended with two views. On the one hand was the perspective that the formation of Caribbean peasantries, through the accumulation of wealth by slaves and the purchase of freedom, was an act of resistance to the sordid experience of the plantation. On the other, was the opposed view that the peasant response of accumulating capital and later purchasing land, led away from class-based resistance along more individualist avenues of family and patrimony. Mintz does not deny the validity of either argument, but rather, welds them together. His synthesis, deftly executed, suggests both the richness of his intellect and his deep empathy for the Caribbean people:

"Torn from societies that had not yet entered into the capitalist world, and thrust into settings that were profoundly capitalistic on the one hand, yet rooted in the need for unfree labour on the other, the slaves saw liquid capital not only as a means to secure freedom, but also as a means to attach their paternity – and hence their identity as persons – to something even the masters would have to respect. In these terms, the creation of peasantries was simultaneously an act of westernization and an act of resistance".

Chancellor, I present to you a scholar whose work on the Caribbean is second to none; an icon of Caribbean anthropology; the quintessential Caribbean 'sweet man', Professor Sidney W. Mintz and ask that by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of The University of the West Indies, you confer on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2006  
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