

# The sugar trap

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by David Ransom

From the moment infants first taste lactose in milk, humans seem to find sweetness alluring. 'I want a little sugar in my bowl,' pleaded Nina Simone, 'I want a little sweetness down in my soul.'

The refined sucrose we usually call 'sugar' does have its uses. It gives us comfort, energy, jam and alcohol. It keeps many thousands of people in work and a few of the well-placed in clover.

'Let's face it, people like sugar,' says one of the few, Sir Saxon Tate, boss of the British sugar giant, Tate and Lyle. 'The consumption of sugar still goes up despite all the fanatical attacks from health cranks.' (1)

Strange to reflect, then, that humans evolved into roughly our current shape long before sucrose was even invented. If we were now to stop eating it altogether, no-one would starve and everyone would be a good deal healthier. All the sugar we need occurs quite naturally in anything nutritious we care to eat. The difference with sucrose is that every last nutrient has been refined out of it. So, without any nutritional inhibitions, it is 'free' to adulterate our food—and has become something of a renegade as a result.

At first, probably in Arabia and India, sucrose was savoured with caution. In late-medieval Britain, tiny quantities were sometimes added, together with ale, bread, ginger, saffron, pepper and salt to produce a repulsive dish called 'Oyster in Gravy Bastard'. But the use of sucrose was on the rise. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, celebrity chef Robert May used it to mould astonishing sculptural displays: a stag that bled with claret wine when an arrow was removed from its side; gilded sugar pies filled with live frogs and birds. In Europe, the lavish waste of sugar became a culinary expression of power and prestige. (2)

Then came industrial capitalism. 'Progress' was equated with the acquisition by as many people as possible of sometimes deranged, unquenchable appetites originally intended to boost the power and prestige of a few very silly people. Pioneer pushers took advantage of our predilection for sweetness to turn sugar into the very first 'mass consumer' product. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the seemingly innocuous spoonful or two in the Great British cup of tea had more than trebled consumption of sugar per head of the population. A similar rate of increase has continued ever since, not just in Britain and in cups of tea, but worldwide and in almost everything we eat.

Today it is one of the most active ingredients in what is known as 'the nutrition transition'. This involves the increased consumption of processed foods that are 'energy-dense'—laced with fat and sucrose. These foods invariably displace fresh fruit and vegetables from our diet. Associated with this is 'portion distortion'. The size of the average muffin, for example, has grown by more than 400 per cent in the past 20 years. (3) At the same time, our lives have become increasingly sedentary, so we expend much less energy. The nutrition transition is towards consuming more energy than we expend.

So the human shape has started to evolve again, and fast. Unused energy is stored in the body as fat. In some areas of the world, rates of obesity have risen threefold or more since 1980. Two-thirds of the US population is already overweight, a third obese; on current trends, three-quarters of the British population will be obese within 15 years. And other chronic diseases are increasing just as fast, particularly the horrible type 2 diabetes. (4)

These are not, as you might imagine, 'diseases of affluence'. The same trend is occurring both in poorer countries and in poorer population groups in richer countries, according to an alarming recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN. (5)

'Furthermore,' the report warns, 'it is occurring at a faster rate in developing countries than it did in the industrialized regions of the world half a century ago. This rapid rate of change, together with the burden of disease, is creating a major public health threat ... Modern dietary and physical activity patterns are risk behaviours that travel across countries and are transferable from one population to another like an infectious disease, affecting disease patterns globally.'

Disease of globalization

This is, quite specifically, the result of corporate globalization—though its likeness to an infectious disease is rarely drawn. One symptom of the disease is the worldwide sprawl of supermarkets. In Brazil, supermarkets' share of the food-retail sector increased from 30 to 75 per cent in the decade to 2000. In China the number of supermarkets has risen from nil to 6,000 in the last six years. A third of all household expenditure by Mexicans is now in just one US-based supermarket chain—Wal-Mart. (6)

Most profitable for them is the sale of pre-cooked meals and processed foods, to which sugar is invariably added as a combined preservative and lure. Between them these 'convenience foods' now account for a greater proportion of our sugar intake than the traditional bags.

Much of what's wrong with the stuff has been known for some time—and vested interests have tried to keep it quiet. In 1979 the British Government

appointed Professor Philip James to chair a committee drawing up the first national dietary guidelines. Sugar, diabetes, tooth decay and obesity were linked. The 'British Nutrition Foundation', funded by the sugar industry, was represented on his committee—and objected very noisily to its initial findings. 'The sugar industry has learned from the tricks of the tobacco industry,' said James. 'Confuse the public. Produce experts who disagree. Try to dilute the message. Indicate that there are extremists like me in the field of public health.' (1)

If it had been up to the Sugar Association in the US, the recent WHO/FAO report would never have seen the light of day. 'Taxpayer dollars should not be used to support misguided, non-science-based reports which do not add to the health and well-being of Americans, much less the rest of the world,' yelled the public-spirited Association, threatening to wield its considerable influence to stop \$406 million of US Government funding to the WHO. (7)

The food manufacturing business is no less wedded to sucrose. In 1978 Coca-Cola set up the quaintly named International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). It has been joined by almost all the major food corporations and somehow managed to acquire accreditation with the WHO and FAO. So ILSI was able to send delegates to the preparatory stages for the first international conference on nutrition in 1992. Among them were senior executives of Mars and Coca-Cola, two of the world's largest industrial users of sugar. The first 'Plan of Action' on nutrition that came from the WHO in 1990 failed even to mention sugar. (1)

Meanwhile, the sugar pushers are hard at work on the next generation. Get up early and see what's being sold to children on TV. As the WHO/FAO report points out: 'Fast-food restaurants, and foods and beverages that are usually classified under the "eat less" category in dietary guidelines are among the most heavily marketed products.' (5)

Or take a closer look at what has been presented as 'educational' material in US schools. Kellogg's 'Build on Good Nutrition' was condemned by the Consumers Union in its 'Captive Kids' campaign as 'highly commercial, biased and incomplete'. McDonald's 'warns kids away from sweets and high-fat foods, but doesn't list hamburgers and fries as high-fat foods'. Mars, in its '100% Smart Energy To Go' materials, 'lists candy as one of the foods that can be relied on for energy ... suggesting that eating Snickers will keep you "kicking all day long".' Obesity, once established in the child, is very much harder to overcome in the adult. (8)

So the lure is powerful, the sugar trap very expensively concealed. Consumers should not blame themselves unduly for falling into it. What's more, they have company. Sugar producers have been there for very much longer—though driven by the stick, rather than lured by sweetness.

Last September the World Trade Organization conference in Cancun, Mexico, duly foundered on the refusal of the US, the EU or Japan to concede an inch on the subsidies and trade protections they offer to a wide range of their own industries—including steel and textiles as well as agricultural products—let alone the notorious EU sugar regime.

Concrete questions

So it is best not to think too abstractly about trade. Concrete questions need to be asked. What kind of trade—in narcotics, human body parts, armaments? For the benefit of whom? And the answers need to come first from the people whose lives and aspirations are most directly involved.

If asked, hungry, landless people who work on sugar plantations or live around them might conclude that the best land should provide for their own community's food security. Too obvious for the sophisticated economic analyst, perhaps—and far too practical, at least when compared with the vast public treasure currently squandered on baronial sugar. Why not transfer this treasure to the reclamation of sugarcane plantations? Well, why not? Why not help to make land reform, sustainable agriculture and food security a present reality, not an endlessly broken, cynical promise?

Besides, coming down the tracks fast are 'artificial' sweeteners made from genetically modified US corn—with all its associated problems. Demand for sugar from cane in the South seems bound to take another beating.

One way or another, sooner or later, consumers and producers will escape the sugar trap that ensnares them both. It would be better if it were done sooner, in the name of justice, for producers in the South. Infinitely more people still die young and in agony for want of enough food than are crippled by an excess energy in their diet. It is more likely to be done, however, in the name of self-interest by consumers in the North, because the chronic-disease epidemic is so spectacular.

Escape from the sugar-eater's trap is, in fact, a relatively straightforward matter. EAT MORE FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLES! There really is not much more to it than that. By doing so you are gradually displacing sucrose from your diet and regaining control over your appetite. The more you use local, seasonal and organic food the more you are supporting local farms and fending off corporate globalization as well. If you must have sugar, try to make it fairly traded. And savour your freedom to ignore those modish, money-spinning diets. All of them are useless. None has 'any trial evidence of long-term effectiveness and nutritional adequacy and therefore cannot be recommended for populations', according to the WHO. (5)

Sugar pushers like Coca-Cola claim that none of this is their fault. It's our fault. We should take more exercise. That is, presumably, just so long as we keep

sitting ourselves down to watch their sponsored idols do it for us—and Coke push its Olympian brand—on TV.

This is a truly manic world in prospect. A paradise where our days are allocated between exercise machines and portion distortions. Where the antidote to obesity is anorexia. Where the longer life becomes, the sicker it gets. Where every lucrative disease has its lucrative cure. And there's never, ever, enough. Enough already!

#### Footnotes

1 Laura Barton, 'A spoonful of propaganda' in The Guardian, 12 April 2002.

2 Sidney W Mintz, Sweetness and Power: the place of sugar in modern history. Viking, New York, 1985.

3 BBC TV News, 17 September 2003.

4 International Association for the Study of Obesity, [www.iotf.org](http://www.iotf.org)

5 Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases, joint report, World Health Organization & Food and Agriculture Organization, Geneva, 2003.

6 Stefania Bianchi, 'Supermarkets Boom in Developing Countries', Inter Press Service [www.ipsnews.net](http://www.ipsnews.net)

7 Sarah Boseley, 'Sugar Industry Threatens to Scupper WHO' in The Guardian, 21 April 2003.

8 [www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids](http://www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids)

9 The Great Sugar Scam – how Europe's sugar regime is devastating livelihoods in the developing world, Oxfam Briefing Paper 27.

10 Rigged Rules and Double Standards – trade, globalization and the fight against poverty, Oxfam International, April 2002.

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