

Candy: An Imperialist History

Be it in terms of culture, politics, or intelligence, Europeans have always regarded us uncouth Americans with an air of studied condescension. Candy is no exception to this general rule of supercilious disdain. Within the candy kingdom, whether the phylum be chocolate, gummy, sugary, or sour, the Old World has it down: their confectioners have been painstakingly toiling away in their workshops for centuries, passing on jealously guarded secret recipes from master to apprentice as they continuously perfect their art.

An American candy purveyor, on the other hand, is a feed lot for our already obese population to wander cavernous aisles lined with bags of hastily processed lumps of sugar and food coloring. Big box retailers—adopting the American credo of greatest volume at lowest price—know our indiscriminating countrymen don't want artisanal confections, but rather a gloppy concoction of colorfully wrapped carcinogen.

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But, I ask you, where do the Europeans extract the raw materials for their extravagant candy masterpieces? Why, from a network of exploited subaltern peoples. I would go a step further and argue that careful scrutiny of the historical record proves that candy *was the prime motor* for European conquest and oppression of our continent. Recall that for hundreds of years mankind could not satisfy its craving for the enamel-dissolving sugary goodness provided in our time by a single Pixie Stick. Practically until the invention of the deep-fried Mars Bar humans resorted to venturing deep into the forest to steal the closely guarded honey of the selfish common bear. Honey was the

most highly valued product in medieval times, and kings and emperors would pay their weight in gold to douse meat, mead, and concubines in the precious if sticky lubricant. But the absolute monarchs of Europe, concerned about the high rate of attrition among honey gatherers due to fatal bear maulings, put their crowned heads together to devise a more surefire way of rotting their royal teeth. Careful study of the Nestle Foundation archives suggests the meeting went something like this:

Addressing the gathered rulers—everyone from Henry VIII (“between wives”) to a yawning Lorenzo de’ Medici—Catherine the Great started it off with a stentorian bel-low: “I’ll get to the point. What do we love more than oppressing the peons or starting wars of religion? Gourmandise. And what taste do we love most of all, more than the piquant, the savory, and even the little-known, Japanese fifth taste sensation *umami*? Why, the sweet, of course. But our attempts to procure that miraculous white powder tentatively termed “angel dust” by our divines, which never loses its sweetness—have all been failures. Our alchemists have been hard at work trying to distill this magical powder from the crushed carrot, the mashed turnip, and the molten puppy dog, all to no avail. What is to be done?”

The rulers shifted awkwardly in their seats. No one spoke. Finally the unknown Prince Rupert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, to the surprise of all present, got to his feet, and after clearing his throat a number of times, haltingly delivered the following speech:

“My friends,” Rupert began, “what we need is a land not flowing with milk and honey but rather teeming with swaying fields of this fabulous sweet plant—called sugar cane. I have heard tell of such a land, across the great ocean, far to the west.”

And with growing excitement, Rupert unveiled his master plan: how explorers would pretend to happen upon this new land and commence an obvious quest for gold. But the real money would be culti-

vation of this fantastic crop. The native population would have to be extirpated, of course. And then, at great cost, another race of people would be brought in to till the fields. But it would all be worth it—tons upon tons of the substance would flow into European ports and onto European plates. But the day would eventually come when new nations would rise up, wanting control of the crop for themselves.

“And here,” Rupert exclaimed with shining eyes, “the true stroke of genius comes in. Though the people may technically be free, they will still be under sugar’s oppressive tyranny. As we nibble on the most succulent morsels our artisans can devise, these slack-jawed provincials will grow fatter and fatter as they gorge themselves on their swinish feed of sugary snacks. Safe in our turreted chateaux, we monarchists will have the last laugh.”

The others nodded in approval. This plan allowed them to get their sugar and their power. Rupert would have to go, of course—no one could know that such a nonentity had devised the scheme. With visions of candy cane fields shimmering in their eyes, Christopher Columbus was dispatched to the New World—and the imperialist history of candy began.

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