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Halloween Candy: A "Rich, Dark" History

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Planning to indulge in a little chocolate this Halloween? You're not alone; a new **survey** reveals nearly 75 percent of Americans choose chocolate as their favorite Halloween treat.

When Illinois Wesleyan University's William Munro looks at a chocolate, however, he sees more than a tempting morsel wrapped in brightly colored paper. As an expert on international food economy, Munro uses candy to teach first-year students to think critically about what they eat.

"A candy is loaded not only with many calories, but with many different stories," said Munro, who is the Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer, Ph.D. Endowed Professor and a member of Illinois Wesleyan's political science faculty. "Stories of taste and travel, of culture and economy, of empire and industry all converge in our mouths, making America quite literally a 'melting pot.'

"Chocolate has a rich, dark history," he added, pun fully intended.

Munro's course "The Social History of a Candy Bar" is a Gateway Colloquia course designed to develop students' proficiency in writing. It's also one of the University's cluster of liberal arts courses centered on the theme "Unraveling Inequality."

Munro doesn't want his students to feel guilty about eating chocolate for societal reasons, but instead wants to increase their understanding.

"It takes enormous resources, human and otherwise, to make chocolate," he said. "We should look at everything we eat in the same way, with the understanding that what we eat and how we eat is shaped by a wide network of social, cultural and historical relationships."

The course traces the complexities of chocolate's journey in becoming a worldwide commodity. In its early recorded history (early 19th century), one-third of the world's cocoa supply came from Venezuela, and half of it was consumed in Spain. Today, however, 70 percent of the world's cocoa is grown in West Africa, and 40 percent of it comes from that region's Côte d'Ivoire alone, Munro said.

"If you eat a chocolate kiss for Halloween, the cocoa almost certainly came from West Africa and it almost certainly involved child labor," Munro explained. "Some of it is coerced labor, and some it is children working on family farms."



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Large chocolate producers are now paying some attention to these conditions, Munro said, partly because civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire involved human trafficking, including child trafficking. Profits from cocoa production helped fund the conflict, Munro said.

The sugar that gives chocolate its sweetness likewise has a global history. Localized sources of sweetness such as honey gave way to the production of sugar as a commodity crop with the colonization of the Caribbean Islands in the mid-17th century, he said.

William Munro

“Cocoa was brought *from* the New World, but sugar was taken *to* the New World and became established as a major slave crop in the Caribbean,” Munro said. Today sugar cane or beet is grown in over 100 countries, and the U.S. imports it from at least 26 countries ranging from Swaziland in southern Africa to Switzerland, Munro said.

Chocolate could only become a mass consumer commodity through the emergence of a capitalist world economy made possible by the advent of the Industrial Revolution, Munro said. In his course, he also introduces students to the history of Cadbury's, the British confectionery company founded in 1824, as an example of the rise of multinational food corporations.

Munro grew up eating Cadbury's chocolates in his native South Africa. As a political scientist during the dismantling of apartheid, his interest in state formation grew out of the questions his countrymen and women were asking in regard to what kind of social system should take its place.

“South Africans knew very little about state formation and politics in the rest of the continent,” Munro said. He then studied in Zimbabwe, where most citizens worked the land on small-scale farms.

“If you want to understand political change, you had to look at the agrarian system as most people were involved with that,” he added. His growing interest and expertise in the international food economy developed with his understanding of the influence of international markets and global commodity systems on African farms.

Munro is the co-author of *Fighting for the Future of Food: Activists versus Agribusiness in the Struggle over Biotechnology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), which explores the debate over genetically modified seeds. He has also contributed book chapters to texts such as *Reconstructing Biotechnologies: Critical Social Analysis* (Wageningen Academic Press, 2008) and *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research* (Stanford University Press, 2008). Munro is the 2012 winner of the Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan.



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