
The Historical Background of Sugar Trade and The Ways it Influenced Slavery

Abstract

The little bowl of sugar on our table is often something we take for granted. The history of sugar is one of violence, greed, and oppression. Through the triangular trade between Africa, Europe, and the Americas starting in the 1600's, it can be argued that slavery and capitalism became widespread in the Western Hemisphere due to the European desire for sugar. Since the beginning of humanity, we have craved this sweet substance known as sugar. The sweet taste, the burst of energy one gets after eating a small amount, caused our ancestors to crave it. The difficulty to obtain this commodity led to the Europeans searching for a way to satisfy their sweet tooth. The discovery of the Caribbean—an area of ideal climate—led to the rise of mercantilism from Europe. In a search for cheap labor to maximize profits, slaves—previously a relatively small industry—were in high demand. Thus, the high demand led to an increase in the slave trade. As the plantation system grew more diverse in its products, this practice spread to the Americas in the moderate Southern climate in an attempt to maximize profit and meet the populace's demands. It can be argued that the increased demand for sugar initiated the global slave trade, which caused European colonies in America to prosper, but Africans' lives to deteriorate.

In the modern world, one does not normally list sugar as one of the most valuable commodities the world has to offer. Because sugar is so plentiful and cheap today, we often don't think about the history of sugar or appreciate its historical significance. In order to reach its current state of being in excess supply, various changes in the world had to transpire. Originally a small crop native to New Guinea, it first diffused across the globe slowly, as an aristocratic delicacy used as a spice before eventually becoming a commonplace item. This development was largely due in part to global trade and social changes that occurred between the years 1450 and 1750. During this time period, trade routes expanded and intensified, allowing diffusion of different commodities of various cultures to reach Europe, including sugar. This transformation, along with European expansion in the Caribbean, was the catalyst for sugar to become more available to commoners. In addition, the merchant class of Europe flourished as consumers bought this sweet luxury-turned-staple. However, although the rise of sugar had positive effects on Europe, it had negative effects on the civilizations they took advantage of. It can be argued that the increased demand for sugar initiated the global slave trade, which caused European colonies in America to prosper, but Africans' lives to deteriorate.

In order to analyze the prosperity of European merchants that dealt in sugar, the story of sugar's rise as a commodity across world history must be understood. For most of human history, the flavor known as sweetness has been sought after, with early man using honey and local, seasonal fruits. This phenomena was so unusual and divine, that many religions of the world describe the afterlife or paradise as a land of milk and honey, with milk being a part due to its use as subsistence since birth (Mintz 1985). Since sweetness was considered a divine sensation, it would be understandable that the control of sweetness by the elites in societies would be commonplace. The origins of sugar cane, the plant where the white crystals we know today come from, can be traced to New Guinea. National Geographic's Rich Cohen (2013)

describes:

...some 10,000 years ago, people picked cane and ate it raw, chewing a stem until the taste hit their tongue like a starburst. A kind of elixir, a cure for every ailment, an answer for every mood, sugar featured prominently in ancient New Guinean myths. In one the first man makes love to a stalk of cane, yielding the human race. At religious ceremonies priests sipped sugar water from coconut shells, a beverage since replaced in sacred ceremonies with cans of Coke (Mosques of Marzipan section, para. 1).

A systematic interpretation of this passage can reveal much about the history and importance of sugar from the beginning of its cultivation. Typically, myths of a society revolve around an aspect of a society considered essential for life, like the Egyptians worshipping the Nile, or the Maya and Aztec myths revolving around corn. However, the fact that these myths are about sugar is a bit puzzling. Why would a society worship a foodstuff that is neither essential to life nor easy to obtain? Perhaps the “starburst” of taste made the people feel as though they had experienced a divine occurrence, unbeknownst to anyone but themselves. This belief that sugar had a divine connection continued as it spread to the Indus River Valley civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. According to Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos, Hinduism held sugar in the highest regard, as shown in a special sacrificing ceremony to appease the gods, where “...Five ingredients were selected for this special burning: milk, cheese, butter, honey, and sugar,” (p. 12). The continuity of sweetness as a sacred aspect is shown both in the selection of sugar, and also in the continuity of honey as a divine object due to its sweetness.

Both of these exhibit how before the global trade, sugar indeed was a symbol of godliness and power. But the real power of sugar was exhibited in its use in the Muslim empires of the Middle East, and their influence spread throughout all the lands they conquered in addition to land in the vicinity. Acclaimed historian Sidney Mintz (1985) claims that, “...wherever they went, the Arabs brought with them sugar, the product and technology of its production,” (p. 25). Due to the far conquests of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, the Muslim empires were able to absorb technology and commodities from other regions and inadvertently bring them closer to Europe. The proximity of the Muslim empires to the Mediterranean Sea enabled cultural diffusion into Europe, in addition to the Crusades to Jerusalem. The development of sugar that caused it to become a commodity and therefore profitable for European merchants in the Americas most likely came from the usage of sugar in the Muslim empires, such as full-sized mosques made of the sugary delicacy marzipan (Cohen 2013). Through this continuity of sugar being used for grandiose products, sugar developed a demand among the wealthy, and merchants learned that they could sell it and get rich. But, how were they to produce sugar? That’s where the fertile Americas come in.

The sugar trade planted the seeds for economic prosperity for European colonies in the Americas which in return created large profits for European mother countries. The profit gained from the colonies was amplified through the use of mercantilism by European countries. The purpose of mercantilism was to unify and increase the wealth and power of a country through strict government regulated trade. Francis (n.d.) states, “16th century organization of the trade was entrusted to a company that was given the sole right by a particular nation to trade slaves and erect and maintain forts.” In this system, the colonies provided the raw materials to send to the mother country who would send manufactured goods back to the colonies. According to Stockdale (2014), “Mercantilism drove the economics of 17th- and 18th-century colonialism and forced the colonies into a dependent relationship in which they were economically weaker than

the 'mother country,' which controlled the triangular trade" (para.5). The mercantilist system enabled the European countries to make the largest profit from the resources produced in the colonies. In the sugar trade, the sugar produced in the colonies in the Americas would be shipped to Europe where it would be sold to Europeans. The Europeans would use the capital that they gained from this to buy slaves from Africa and send manufactured goods to European colonies to be sold. The colonies guaranteed a new market for manufactured goods.

As the slave trade developed and intensified, capitalism replaced mercantilism as the new economic system in Europe. Mercantilism was not efficient because it limited imports to keep profits from enemy and rival states, which was a regressive system and kept the world from advancing. Adam Smith saw the issues with Mercantilism and developed the theory of Capitalism that stressed free trade and competition and it called trade with no government involvement. Smith (1776) argues, "To prohibit a great people, however, from making all that they can of every part of their own produce, or from employing their stock and industry in the way that they judge most advantageous to themselves, is a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind" (p.470). Smith believes that free trade constitutes the fundamental rights of men. This is the ideology that eventually replaced mercantilism. Mercantilism failed to support the slave trade because the monopolies "had two major opponents: the planter in the colonies, who complained of insufficient quantity and poor quality of high priced slaves, and the merchants at home. The failure of monopolies to deliver enough trade led to free trade" (Francis, n.d.). The sugar produced by African labor would be exported from the colonies to the Capitalist system in Europe. It allowed for even cheaper slave labor, which in return created a larger population of slaves in the Americas, and therefore, larger profit.

Because sugar was in such a high demand in Europe, the colonies were extremely valuable and important to the Europeans. According to Stuart (2013), "The Caribbean sugar islands were more than valuable to their colonial masters: they were priceless...there capacity to generate obscene profits led many to describe them as 'the best of the west'" (p.130). Not only were the colonies profitable to their mother countries, but especially to the colonial masters of the plantations. This was because the masters would receive a large profit in the production of sugar. Although the colonies existed to enrich the mother country, the colonies did have their own internal economy based on trade. Stuart states (2013), "According to Biet, the elite sugar planters 'all lived like little princes,' driving around in grand coaches and wearing the finest clothes. Since they were able to delegate most of the estate's labour to their servants and slaves. these men led pleasant lives" (p.96). Because these colonial masters had such wealth, they dominated local politics. Plantation-owning families became an aristocracy as they married merchants, bureaucrats, and officials which enabled them to run local institutions (Stearns, Adas, Schwartz & Gilbert, 2001). Having control over the economy as well as politics in the Americas gave plantation owners immense power. This led to detrimental effects for the people who enabled the planters to obtain their wealth.

The plantation farmers were able to establish this wealth on the backs of slaves. Originally, Indians were used as slaves on the sugar plantation, but as a result of disease the majority of the Indian population died out and was replaced with African slaves. Stuart states (2013), "the island's economic structure was totally based on the labour of enslaved Africans. It's political structure as well as its system of governance was organized around the control and management of an enslaved majority" (p.83). The entire society in these colonies was based on slavery: politically, economically, and socially. The major result of the sugar trade was that racism developed. Cohen argues (2013), "Africans, in other words, were not enslaved because

they were seen as inferior; they were seen as inferior to justify the enslavement required for the prosperity of the early sugar trade.” From the European point of view, Africans had to be seen as less than human to justify their horrible treatment, therefore, racism developed as a result. Stuart states (2013), “In this society, his colour, which he would have given little thought to in his old life, was becoming the most important determinant of his identity” (p.86). “Black” and “White” did not exist until Africans were used as slaves in the Americas. Although slavery did create economic prosperity for Europe and its colonies, it was at the cost of African lives.

The effect of the rise of sugar was the slave trade, which deteriorated African lives through by taking them from their homes in Africa and bringing them to America through the Middle Passage. The rise of sugar caused Europeans to develop plantations in the Americas to grow cane for money, but they needed a cheap form of labor to work the fields—slaves. European capitalists took Africans from their homes to use them to make their money. Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave who wrote an autobiography detailing his life, describes:

One day, as I was watching at the top of a tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbour but one, to kidnap, there being many stout young people in it. Immediately on thus I gave the alarm of the rogue, and he was surrounded by the stoutest of them, who entangled him in cords.... and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both. (Equiano, 2005)

Like Equiano describes, the white Europeans came without warning and abducted Africans to use as slaves. A home is supposed to be a safe haven, a place where one is protected from outside harm; however, Africa was anything but that. People were driven almost insane by the hunger for money that they completely ignored morality. Africans were taken from their homes, taken from their lives, in order to fuel European greed. Strangers invading their villages, violently capturing them, and tying them up is what these poor Africans had to go through by no fault of their own. This was solely driven by the sugar trade. Equiano later describes, “The next day proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other’s arms”(2005). Captured Africans often experienced the worst pain ever—emotional pain from losing their families. Because Europeans were solely interested in profit, they made absolutely no effort to keep families together; they only put them where they saw fit. Before this, Equiano was separated from his parents at his village, and all he had left was his sister. The heartless Africans took away from him the only tie he had to his previous life, the only thing that meant to him. In addition to the terrible emotional suffering slaves went through, in order to get to the Americas, they had to endure the torturous Middle Passage. Equiano describes the conditions on a slave ship:

When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate...so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. (2005)

After captured Africans were cruelly separated from their families, they had to endure even more physical suffering in the bowels of the slave ships. On the slave ships, Equiano saw the

complete look of misery and defeat on the other Africans, and he knew that he was going to be enslaved, never to see his home again. The conditions on the ships he described were unimaginable, with the unbearable stench and all the slaves chained up together. Even worse, the slaves were forced to eat, for if they didn't, they were whipped. This is because the ship owners wanted to get as much money as possible for the slaves they captured. The slaves were so miserable that they preferred suicide by jumping overboard over slavery, but even this was forbidden. Any attempts to do so resulted in beating. This was done for the same reason: the ship owners didn't want their slaves to die because they would make less money. This goes to show just how ruthless the Europeans were, ruining the lives of Africans for their own economic benefit, all because of the rise of sugar. And the torture did not stop there; pain and suffering continued as the slaves arrived in the Americas.

In addition to taking Africans' from their homes, the slave trade caused Africans' lives to deteriorate in their new, terrible lives enslaved on plantations in the Americas. After crossing the horrifying Middle Passage, African slaves were subjected to equally terrible conditions on the plantations where they worked. For example, Aronson and Budhos explain the grueling jobs of the slaves which they often had to work ten hours a day with rats and vermin (2010, p. 38). Plowers had to dig holes for the cane, seeders had to plant the cane, and weeders had to clean the undergrowth that could inhibit sugar growth, and all of this had to be done extremely quickly to meet the high quotas (Aronson & Budhos, 2010, p. 36-38). Working in the hot, tropical weather endlessly for countless hours was the reality for millions of African slaves. The demand for sugar caused a surge in the amount of Europeans developing plantations in the Americas. These plantations were solely used to make money, so the European capitalists did not care at all about the treatment of the slaves; they just wanted as much sugar to be grown as possible. Perhaps even more horrific was the conditions during the hot harvest season. Pairs of slaves would have to cut and bind stalks for up to eighteen hours a day, with daily quotas reaching 4,200 stalks (Aronson & Budhos, 2010, p. 39). In the fields, the slaves were always on edge because they had to keep up with the mills, so they were pressured to always produce enough cane. The worst places to work were the mill and the boiling house. In the mills, women constantly fed sugar cane into the mill to crush it, and if they lost concentration for a moment, they could have lost an arm (Aronson & Budhos, 2010, p. 39). In the boiling houses, slaves had to constantly watch and purify the syrup as it boiled in hot, putrid vats, and, like in the mills, if a worker dozed off from lack of rest, he could fall in. These conditions are nearly impossible to comprehend because of the horrors they embody. During harvest time, slaves' lives were unimaginable, for they had to work almost endlessly in extremely miserable conditions, where one mistake could cause you to die or live the rest of your life suffering. The terrible part is that their white overseers showed little care or remorse for what they did. This entire system was driven by the European demand for sugar, and the capitalists didn't even see anything morally wrong with their coercive labor system; they viewed them solely as tools used to make them money.

The high demand of sugar in Europe led to the development of plantation systems in European colonies in America, which sparked the slave trade and led to the deterioration of African lives. It is amazing how an item as simple as sugar has caused such destruction to African lives. Sugar is an item we take for granted today, given the blood and misery that had to occur for sugar to become what it is in modern society. The irony is that sugar is so common today that its overconsumption has led to an increase in health complications such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. An item that once caused the death of African slaves now causes the same fate to those that consume it. The case of sugar proves that often in history "what comes

around, goes around.”

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