

## Le Prix du Sucre

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Today's society, as many before it, views sugar as the embodiment of pleasure, luxury, and jubilation. Society's infatuation with sugar is seen in the figurative usage of the word sweet, the association of children with sweetness, the belief that sugar makes one giddy, and the necessary presence of sugar at joyous celebrations. What festivity would be complete without the consumption of sugary delights? Yet, the role sugar played in the project of empire and the long-standing effects of the sugar trade tell a bleaker tale of a commodity stained with the blood of humans and marked with the treachery of consumerism. Though numerous commodities, or more specifically cash crops, helped to shape society, sugar is unmatched in its effects on economies, cultures, politics, health, and the environment. The study of the sugar revolution reveals "the transformative power of a single commodity" that is best termed as "crop determinism" (Higman 213). The immense influence of sugar and the similar current cash crop domination expose the power of agriculture in our society and, ultimately, the power of consumers and their desires. The conditions that gave birth to the sugar revolution in the Caribbean and the consequences of commodity globalization display the unparalleled power of sugar in society then and now, as well as the lengths humans are willing to go in order to maintain a consumer-based economy.

Sugarcane was first grown in Asia and the South Pacific and was first domesticated in Indonesia and New Guinea. From there, sugar spread across the globe to other tropical climates through trade routes and subjugations. During the Crusades, Crusaders survived on sugarcane grown in the Muslim territories, which led the invaders to develop a taste for the sweet stalks. Elizabeth Abbott, in her book *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, states that Crusaders "transformed Europeans into sugar producers" and "also laid the foundation for global conquest" (18). Not long after, the Black Death struck Europe, causing there to be a severe shortage of

laborers and increasing the demand for slaves. In 1441, a Portuguese ship captain sailed along the west coast of Africa and decided to capture a group of natives in order to please the prince of Portugal. This act led to the start of the oversea African slave trade. Several decades later, Cristoforo Colombo voyaged to the Caribbean to inform the Taino people that Pope Alexander VI deemed their land the property of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Colombo brought with him the sugarcane grown in the Canary Islands. After planting the sugarcane, Colombo noted "how readily it rooted and grew" (Abbott 24). Thus, the seeds for the sugar revolution in the New World were planted (Abbott 11-24).

By the early 1600s, consumption of sugar surpassed the consumption of honey. The uses of sugar ranged from sculptures, used to display power and extravagance, to material for roofs to cures for colds (Abbott 15-16). By this time, sugar wasn't just a commodity for the wealthy. Anyone and everyone had access to the sweetener and its products. According to Russell R. Menard, in his article "Plantation Empire: How Sugar and Tobacco Planters Built their Industries and Raised an Empire," the "annual consumption of sugar in England and Wales stood at just over two pounds per head in the 1660s; by the late 1680s it had reached just over four pounds per capita" (322).

Sugar is known today to be an addictive substance. The addictiveness of sugar no doubt played a large role in its popularity, but the popularity of three other addictive substances paved the way for sugar as a food item in all homes. Coffee, tea, and chocolate emerged as food sources at the same time that planters and merchants cultivated and sold sugar. Coffee, tea, and chocolate are all naturally bitter, but are also physiologically stimulating, just like sugar. The use of sugar turned these already popular products into even more "heavenly brews" (Abbott 50). Sugar also gave a way for low-class workers in Europe to consume more calories for less money (Abbott 50-51). Sugar was able to satisfy the needs of all social and economic classes in Europe. The world stage was set for consumerism, and the addictive, sweet substance was the perfect universal commodity.

The continued mass production of sugar was made possible by the simultaneous, and correlated, boom in the African slave trade. Soon after the Portuguese began kidnapping west African natives and bringing them to Portugal as slaves, the rest of Europe adopted the practice. Slaves in the British territories were mostly used as unpaid labor on sugar and tobacco plantations. Therefore, since the "British Empire owed its life to plantation crops," it also owed its life to the work of slaves (Menard, "Plantation Empire" 312). The work of slaves was so crucial to the success of the British Empire that Menard calls sugar slavery "a rational and efficient use of the available worker" ("Plantation Empire" 318). Menard also explains that the slave trade "earned substantial returns to scale and large profits" (29). B. W. Higman, in his article "The Sugar Revolution," designates sugar slavery as "a rational market choice" (224). Abbott writes that over the course of four hundred years, the African slave traders took "at least thirteen million Africans from their homes and killed upward of two million" (Abbott 77). Of the eleven million that survived being kidnapped from their homes, six million were sold to owners and investors in the sugar industry (Abbott 77). From the beginning of the journey till the end, slaves were degraded, abused, and murdered, all for the consumption of sugar. Before slaves could board the transport ship, they were subject to an examination by a surgeon who "twisted, poked and prodded," which "was designed to degrade as much as to select" (Abbott 77). Abbott records that the slaves who passed the examination were packed onto crowded ships where they were made to sleep in an area filled with their own human excrement (78). Those who survived the voyage were brought to the slave markets where "potential buyers jabbed, squeezed limbs, handled genitals, [and] inspected orifices" (Abbott 80). Slaves were inspected like cattle, and just as cattle were whipped, so were slaves. After buyers purchased the slaves, they were brought back to the plantation and began their training. Slave drivers would whip a disobedient slave or, in some cases, sever a limb to subjugate them. They "simply had to be productive" in order to satisfy the consumer demand for sugar (81). Consumers were ready to pay money for the sweet product

and producers were willing to go to any lengths to provide it, even if it meant the commoditization of people.

The institution of a plantation was complex in its rules, traditions, and social constructs. Higman cites Sidney Mintz when he describes the plantation as “an absolutely unprecedented social, economic, and political institution” (Higman 222). The slaves were divided into specialized work groups called gangs. After being separated into these groups, slaves had “a life expectancy estimated at seven years” (Abbott 87). Some slaves, mostly women, were assigned to work on assembly lines, where they refined sugar from cane juice for eighteen to twenty hours. Because of the dreadful working conditions and unbearably long shifts, many women would fall asleep at the assembly line causing them to fall into the mills meant to crush sugarcane. In order to prevent the slave women from dying by being crushed in mills, overseers would carry a hatchet with them, so that if a slave woman’s body were to get caught in the mill, the overseer could chop off the limb that was stuck (Abbott 88-89). Abbott harkens back to Voltaire’s *Candide* where a Surinamese slave says, “it is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe” (89). Slaves were not only expected to plant, tend to, harvest, and process sugarcane. They were also made to do “before-day jobs” which included shoveling animal excrement and collecting feed for the livestock. Then, they began their work on the fields. The slaves worked until ten in the morning, when they would take a break for lunch, but often slaves had no food and were forced to sneak a slice of sugarcane. If the slaves were caught stealing the crop, they were severely punished. In one particular case, a large plantation owner, Thomas Thistlewood, forced a slave to defecate into another slave’s mouth (Abbott 92-93).

Food on sugar plantations was scarce, except for the massive fields of sugarcane of course. The colonial slave laws required that a minimum amount of meat and fish, rice and flour, and plantains to be rationed to slaves, but these laws were not enforced, so plantation owners often did not abide by the law and were never punished. Abbott writes that most plantations provided their slaves a food allowance of “two or three miserly meals, a breakfast of tassajo-dried, salted beef-and a dinner of plantains and

Indian corn, or a potage of sweet potatoes" (106). The rest of a slave's provisions were expected to be grown and harvested by the slaves themselves from a small patch of dirt near their quarters. Slaves were sometimes also allowed to keep a small amount of livestock. With this food, slaves were able to create their own traditions, some new and some from their homelands. Several plantation owners also allowed their slaves to sell their goods to the owner himself, a neighboring plantation owner, or at a nearby town market (Abbott 106-108). Abbott notes that "ironically, one of the most profitable goods [at the town markets] was sugar" (108). In this way, slaves became consumers and thus; even more essential parts of the world of sugar. Slaves showed persistence by forming their own economic systems, social traditions, and rules, yet these were all structured by sugar. Higman writes that "sugar transformed society in every area it touched," and slaves were the most fitting example of this undeniable truth (228).

Sugar most notably dominated every aspect of a slave's life, but it also dominated the world economically, politically, demographically and technologically, as well as affecting the world population in a more quotidian way. The sugar boom is often called the sugar revolution, because according to Mintz, as quoted by Higman, "'sugar epitomizes the transition from one kind of society to another'" (226). Sugar transformed the world economy by setting up the model for mass production and trade on an ever-growing scale. The desire to produce sugar as efficiently as possible led to major advancements in agricultural technology. As the consumption of sugar doubled and tripled, much of the world's diet changed. The sugar industry also brought the slave trade to an all-time high. This fact reveals aspects of a consumer society that aims to satisfy the needs of paying customers while simultaneously desecrating the lives of millions of others. The political influence of merchants in the early British Empire helped to further shape the world into a consumer-driven society, rather than a human rights-driven society. The purpose of legislation is often thought to be for the betterment of the people, but as seen in the sugar revolution, it is often deliberately intended to benefit those who are willing to pay to protect their interests. In a consumer culture, commodities are the

most vital part of the economic system, no matter the means used to obtain them. The growth of sugarcane also drastically altered the areas where it grew. The slave trade used to support the sugar industry changed the Caribbean demographic from native people to a mix of Africans, natives, Creoles, and white Europeans. The change of demographic, consequently, transformed the local cultures. New traditions, languages, and religions formed from the intermixing of numerous peoples in the Caribbean.

The copious facets of society transfigured by sugar centuries ago are still prominently represented in the present-day world. Perhaps most directly influenced by sugar are our diets, which have increasingly incorporated sugar, causing diet-related diseases to amplify. Far more noticeable are the social effects that the use of slavery has had on race relations, especially due to the spread of African slavery to the United States. The treatment of blacks has yet to fully recover from the dehumanizing institution of slavery. One artist, Kara Walker, made this clear in 2014 with her work titled "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" (Smith 2014). The art piece was entirely constructed from sugar in an old Domino sugar factory. The sculpture was shaped like the Egyptian sphinx, but with stereotypically black female features. The sculpture wore a bandana atop its head to remind viewers of a time when slavery was a widely accepted practice.

The consumerist culture that flourished in the sugar revolution still thrives. The importance of this commodity over all else, especially at a low price, can be observed in almost all food industries of today. The technologies spawned to meet sugar demand have also remained and are now used in production of today's cash crops. The "crop determinism" of sugar is also present today, but other cash crops like corn and soy have joined sugar as powerful commodities that influence local, state, and national politics (Higman 213). Though more people today may be aware of the impact that agricultural industries have on politics and society as a whole, just as people present during the sugar revolution, most people today do not know, or simply may not care, how the goods they purchase affect the lives of others. This suggests that a lack of

transparency is at the heart of any consumer-centric system, such as the economic system of most countries today.

From the lands of New Guinea and Indonesia to the Canary Islands and then to the Caribbean, sugar travelled far and took insidious root in societies across the globe. As consumer demand for sugar rose, slave labor emerged, prices fell, and the sugar revolution was born. The boom of the sweet delight became a blood-stained industry that would resonate throughout the world for centuries. Today, the consumer-focused economy and the food industry are modeled after the systems constructed to create the sugar revolution. Societal practices are still influenced by the institution of slavery a century and a half after its abolition. A majority of people continue to be blind to the truth of agricultural practices and power. This is the price that society has paid for the consumption of sugar.

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