Sugar & the Slave Trade

The ingenious wording of a certain English china house’s advertisement for sugar basins in the early 1800s exploited the contemporary wave of liberal thinking: “East India Sugar not made by Slaves,” the pots were printed, thus enabling the purchaser to display his conscience publicly. “A Family that uses 5lb of Sugar a Week,” the advertisement continued, “will, by using East India instead of West India, for 21 Months, prevent the Slavery, or Murder, of one Fellow Creature! Eight such Families in 19½ years will prevent the Slavery, or Murder of 100!” The equation of 5 pounds for 21 months, or 450 pounds being equal to the life of one slave, was a very extreme calculation. Most of the evidence from the 17th century, when conditions were primitive, life was cheap, and slaves could be obtained relatively easily in West Africa, would equate 1 life with half a ton of sugar. By 1700 it was parity: 1 ton = 1 life. By the end of the 18th century, it was nearer 2 tons equaling 1 slave’s life. So these figures are polemical rather than accurate. Yet this is the central conundrum of the whole sad story, it is also one of the major puzzles of modern history. Sugar remains one of the great moral mysteries.

It was, and is, in absolute terms, a not especially cheap source of human energy. In the 18th century it was much more expensive in real terms than cereals. Before the 16th century the whole of the European world had managed with minuscule quantities of sugar, a mere pinch per head for the whole of history. The glories of the Renaissance were created on the basis of a teaspoonful per head of sugar per year. Sugar is unnecessary to any endeavor, but it is addictive. In the century 1690–1790 Europe imported 12 million tons, which cost, in all, about the same number of black lives. Today, Europe’s consumption is well over 12 million tons each year, more than 100 times as much, and there are no slaves except sugar consumers.

Sugar cane is native to Polynesia, where it was invested with near-magical properties, a mythology arising, perhaps, from the fact that small pieces were often found washed up on foreign shores where they were said to flourish. This was the “explanation” of its movement to China, India, and elsewhere. Sugar cane was widely used in ancient India, and in China was chewed as an aphrodisiac sweetmeat in about 1000 B.C. But it was first refined into sugar as such in India some 300 years later, at Bihar on the Ganges, and thence introduced as sugar to China.

Indian sugar was made from a variety of cane called puri, and it was this variety that spread slowly westward for the next 2000 years, to be joined in the 18th century in the New World by strains from Polynesia and Indonesia. Europe did not see sugar until the Middle Ages, when it first arrived in the Mediterranean. Columbus is known to have introduced puri to Haiti from the Canaries in 1494, and the name was natural-
ized in the British west Indies as *creole*. It was, however, once believed that Alexander the Great had come across sugar cane in the Indus valley in 325 B.C.

Long before sugar cane was distilled and crystallized, honey was the great sweetener—the bee is a very efficient sugar concentrator. The first dated reference to honey bees is in Egypt in 5551 B.C., and there are many in Babylonian sources and throughout the Old Testament. In Egypt magical properties were attributed to honey. It was made into a syrup which was supposed to prolong active life in the aged; it was an ambrosia which was meant to tranquilize; and it was used as an aphrodisiac. It played a part in all sorts of ceremonies, both sacred and profane, in Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Ur, Persia, and India. Not surprisingly, Moses forbade the ceremonial use of honey, since it had acquired from the Egyptians the carnal overtones associated with the abuse of alcohol.

In no ancient civilization before about 650 B.C. is there any evidence of bee husbandry, defined by Virgil, among others, as control of swarming. Usually all honey was “hunted,” and stolen from wild bees. In Homeric Greece the process of honey making was not completely understood, and the character of the end product was attributed more to the quality of the bees than to what the bees fed on. In Roman times Cato, Pliny the Elder, Varro, and above all Virgil described beekeeping in a domesticated sense for the first time in history. Virgil’s Fourth Georgic contained the first verses on beekeeping, and it became known throughout the civilized world. In consequence apiculture, as opposed to honey hunting, spread throughout the Mediterranean. Despite Moses, the early Christian Church associated honey with magical properties—sacred this time, as opposed to those which the Ancient Egyptians had claimed for it. Honey was used in the rite of baptism until about A.D. 600, and the bee was credited with the virtue of virginity—hence the obligatory use of beeswax candles in Catholic churches.

In ancient and medieval Egypt, hive boats full of bees (1 boat might contain up to 100 hives) floated down from the area south of modern Luxor to the environs of the Delta. The bees fed on the nectar of the fields until the boats reached Cairo or Alexandria, and they were offered a diet equivalent to a continuous spring. Arrived at Cairo or Alexandria, they had their honey extracted, and they were released, and the boats returned upstream.

Palestine was noted for honey for several thousand years. As late as 1902, in Nazareth, one Greek bee farmer was owner of 2500 hives, employer of 4 families of beekeepers, compounder of beeswax and honey cosmetics, exporter to London and Paris, supplier to the harems of Constantinople and probably the market in Nazareth.

Long before they became Christians, the Celts, Germans, and Slavs used honey to make mead. Throughout northern Europe, from the Urals to Ireland, honey and mead formed part of the diet of the more privileged, and mead production in Bavaria and Bohemia and on the Baltic coast reached industrial proportions in the

3. “Creole” is the anglicized form of the French word of the same spelling, derived in turn from the Spanish *criollo*, which is a Caribbean black diminutive of *criadillo*, meaning “born, bred, domesticated.” Creole means “naturalized to and born” in the Caribbean (New Orleans and Venezuela as well as the islands), and is a term applied to people, animals, and plants. Alexander von Humboldt, the great German naturalist, noted in 1800 3 different forms of sugar cane in the Caribbean: the Creole, the Otaheite, which had been brought from the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), and the Batavian, which came from what is now Indonesia. “Creole” as a word had no racist meanings when first used: A creole white was one born in the Caribbean, while a creole Negro was one born there and not in Africa. It is a mistake to imagine that the word implies a degree of cross-breeding, whether of humans, animals, or plants.

4. Unextracted honey—honey still mixed with beeswax—has had connections with purification in India, China, and Egypt. After the Exodus and in the desert, the Jews were forbidden to use meat, honey, or leavened bread in any form of sacrifice (Leviticus 2:11). This may have been because honey was used by the Egyptians as a purity symbol, or more probably because the “land of milk and honey” toward which they were moving supported so many bees that honey was a mundane product, never to be considered holy. Honey and wax were regarded as holy in Ancient Greece and Etruria, and to many tribes in Africa. Beeswax for Christian churches originally came from the best “virgin” honey, that is from a young colony of bees which have never swarmed. After Vatican II, beeswax is no longer exclusively required.
Middle Ages. But in the early 15th century honey began to be supplanted by the new cane sugar, and so mead gave way to beer. In Russia this change did not take place until the arrival of beet sugar in the 19th century. Even as late as the 1860s, an industry of bees-honey-mead existed in parts of Russia, and Tolstoy mentions it in a letter to his wife.

There seems to be a clear connection between weather and the sweet tooth. Countries with a vine-growing climate were always much more modest consumers of sugar or honey than were those countries which could not produce wine. What weight must be given to the sunshine and to the sugar in the fruit and wine, no one can say, but sugar/honey and alcohol were quite clearly alternatives in all cultures in the post-Roman world, long before Ogden Nash said the last word on the physiology of alcohol dependence: “Candy is dandy/But liquor is quicker.”

Mohammed banned alcohol to his followers. At first, alternative stimulating drinks in Moslem countries had to depend upon honey for sweetness, but within a hundred years of the Prophet’s death in 632 sugar cane and sugar production had been introduced from Persia and were established in Syria, Palestine, the Dodecanese, Egypt, Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, North Africa, and southern Spain. The sugar industry survived the gradual expulsion of the Moors from the Mediterranean littoral, and was carried on by both Moslems and Christians as a profitable, expanding concern for 200 years from about 1300.5 The trade (as opposed to production) was under the dominance of the merchant bankers of Italy, with Venice ultimately controlling distribution throughout the then known world. The first sugar reached England in 1319, Denmark in 1374, and Sweden in 1390. It was an expensive novelty,6 and useful in medicine, being unsurpassed for making palatable the odious mixtures of therapeutic herbs, entrails, and other substances of the medieval pharmacopoeia. Its price was far too high for it to become a normally consumed food:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Sugar %</th>
<th>Honey %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1350–1400</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>1400–1450</td>
<td>24.5</td>
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<td>1450–1500</td>
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In 200 years the price of both sugar and honey declined dramatically. There is evidence that both reductions were due to increased production in the cane industry, since honey has always borne a premium price relationship to sugar in more modern times.

These were the years when the first sugar from canes grown outside the Mediterranean became available on the European market. The Portuguese had planted canes in Madeira, the Azores, and São Tomé, and the Spanish in the Canaries, half a century or more before there was any production by the Spanish in the Caribbean, and it was they who first used slaves outside Europe. Until 1550 the only sugar imported from the Western Hemisphere consisted of a few loaves brought as proof of the possibility of production, or as mere curiosities. The plantings in West Atlantic islands and the New World had no effect on production,

5. The date at which the Spanish started growing sugar cane in large quantity; also the time when the Venetians took over Cyprus, a major sugar-producing country.

6. It may seem surprising that an expensive luxury such as sugar should become popular so quickly when honey was freely and widely available. There were 3 main reasons for the rejection of honey in favor of sugar. Even when very pure indeed, honey always imparts a taste which may be inappropriate to the accompanying food or drink. Before the 19th century, in any case, pure honey was almost impossible to achieve; the extraction of honey from the comb was a laborious and difficult task, and the honey always included a certain amount of wax, which imparted a taste that was pleasant enough, but stronger than that of the honey itself. Honey also frequently contains substances to which many individuals are allergic. Queen Elizabeth I of England (d. 1603) was an early sugar addict, with notably bad health. She may have been allergic to honey.
distribution, or prices until the latter half of the 16th century, and only became dominant from about 1650. Before 1600 Venice gave way to Amsterdam as the great entrepot for the sugar trade, as for the spice trade, and for the same complicated reasons. All this, as we shall see, was part of the movement of the epicenter of world trade out of the Mediterranean and toward the Atlantic.

So this chapter is about the other end of the sugar story: how an unnecessary “food” became responsible for the Africanization of the Caribbean. It concerns only a very small part of the world, but one which, until 1800, was responsible for more than 80% of both sugar and the trade in slaves. As a direct result, this small region was simultaneously responsible for nearly half of all the seagoing effort, naval and civil, of the western European nations. The story must be allowed to tell itself, but it would be worth asking first why people came to eat refined sugar at all, except as some sort of curiosity, and why they became addicted to it.

What exactly is sugar, biochemically? All edible plants contain, in varying proportions, fiber, protein, fat, starch, and sugar. All vegetarian and omnivorous animals, including man, convert fiber and starch into sugar by biochemical means. Sugar is then made available in the bloodstream as a source of energy. Starch and sugar (in the form of fructose) occur in all fruits and vegetables, and, before the arrival of industrial cane and beet sugar, mankind managed well enough without refined sugar, which is pure, or nearly pure, sucrose.

When pure sucrose is consumed in large quantities, the metabolism of the whole system is altered. If a person eats a fruit containing, say, 10% fructose and 10% glucose, the remaining 80% of dry matter has to go through a number of digestive processes to make the sugars available. In consuming pure white industrial sugar, whether from cane or beet, the stomach has less work to do, and energy is produced and used up in a sudden flood rather than as a steady drip.

When a large quantity of sugar is consumed (and some people eat and/or drink over 4 pounds a week) it can meet nearly the whole of the body’s energy requirements, and the rest of the food or drink consumed becomes a mere vehicle. The production of starch and fiber converting enzymes is inhibited once the body habitually gets its sugar requirements directly from sucrose, so the stomach finds it difficult to digest any accompanying starch or fiber. Naturally people will avoid foods which they find indigestible, so food manufacturers then reduce the fiber content in processed or packaged foods. A vicious circle is created in which the victim becomes hooked on a constant flow of industrial sugar to the bloodstream and cuts down on fiber.

The white sugar addict becomes liable to obesity, tooth problems, and malnutrition; the last leads in extreme cases to the kind of “crowding out” which can cause vitamin and mineral deficiency problems and probably even cancer of the intestine. Because of the speed with which white sugar becomes available to the metabolism, the addict’s blood sugar level rises and falls very rapidly as the pancreas works excessively hard to deal with high inputs of sucrose to the stomach. The body becomes used to a feast/famine syndrome in the blood sugar, and this produces an addiction which is chemical, not psychological. The bloodstream signals a deficiency which is self-induced, and the whole cycle may be repeated within an hour. A true sugar addict cannot do without some kind of reinforcement at very frequent intervals.

In England, where heavy consumption of white sugar arose earlier than in any other country, the preference for white bread also began as a result of sugar addiction. Social historians have had a field day with the Englishman’s illogical preference for white bread, which began at the end of the 18th century, and there has been much play with that well-known obsession of journalists, politicians, and other commentators, the British class system. But there is a very good biochemical reason for this unique English preference which would still hold true even if the English public school had never been invented. In the face of high consumption of white sugar, the enzymes required to digest wholemeal bread are absent, since they are literally killed by industrial sugar. Conversely, if one eats enough dietary fiber, one does not crave sugar. If one eats both fiber and sugar, as in sonic breakfast foods, one gains an excessive amount of weight, and the sugar negates fiber consumption became a problem for the digestive tract.

7. “White” flour, bleached with various (some damaging) chemicals, had been almost a fetish among the fashionable since the time of Periclean Athens. It was only with the advent of massive ingestion of sugar, however, that low-fiber consumption became a problem for the digestive tract.
any good that the fiber might do.

In 1800 the United Kingdom consumed more than 18 pounds of sugar per head per year. As sugar then cost more than 5 times the price of energy in the form of flour, and at least 10 times the price of energy in the form of potatoes, only the rich could afford sugar. So some people must have eaten double the average—say 36 pounds per year—which is more than 11 ounces per week. At that rate of sugar intake, few could digest high-fiber bread. So the White Bread Myth became established for the rich by biochemistry, class warriors notwithstanding.

Sugar addiction is often considered an adolescent problem to be put aside later. Yet it is usually replaced by addiction to alcohol, which enters the bloodstream even more quickly than sugar, almost within minutes if unaccompanied by food. There is an absolute correlation between high sugar consumption and high alcohol intake outside meals. Both sugared drinks and alcohol outside meals give a “lift” to the blood sugar which humans on a balanced diet (including wine with meals) do not require.

What the presence of sugar, and the parallel absence of roughage, in the diet is doing to affluent Westerners has been discovered in the past generation; the effects include at least 1 form of cancer due to a low-fiber diet. The story is now so well known that there is little need to repeat that sugar, after the illegal drugs, and tobacco and alcohol, is the most damaging addictive substance consumed by rich, white mankind.

In the ancient world slavery accounted for perhaps two-thirds of the population of Athens under Pericles, and perhaps half the population of what is now Italy under Julius Caesar. Ancient Egypt probably had a higher percentage. In Ancient Greece and Rome the slave population was increased by servile births, by prisoners of war, and by debtors. Slaves included house servants, athletes, doctors, accountants, artists, philosophers, show business personalities, and men and women used for the pleasures of the flesh. Almost all the professions—with the exception of the army, the priesthood, and the law—were manned by slaves, and many by slaves alone. Priests, farmers, soldiers, legislators, and some of the traders and artisans were citizens. To a poor man in Athens or Rome, to become a slave might be a way to eat, to live in a better house, to avoid debt, and to be secure under the protection of a good master. Until the insane cruelties of the emperors who succeeded Julius Caesar, there is no substantial evidence that slaves were treated more harshly in Rome than in Athens. But after about 50 B.C. servitude became increasingly onerous. In Rome, slaves never had civic rights; slaves could only give evidence under torture (because without torture, the witness could not be believed); when a man died suddenly, all his slaves were murdered, regardless of guilt frequently spoke only

![Arab Developments in Sugar Cane Production after A.D. 700](image)
a foreign language, and were strangers from capture to death. The revolt of Spartacus (73–70 B.C.), which shook the Roman Republic to its foundations, made the relationship between masters and slaves much more severe; so did the sale of huge numbers of slaves by triumphant generals such as Crassus and Julius Caesar. At one time during the reign of Augustus, the slave population may have outnumbered that of free persons. It is fashionable to argue that Roman cruelty existed, in all its obscenity, long before slavery became essential to the Imperial economy. If true, Rome’s mass slavery gave sadism wider opportunity.

The Arabs, by and large, understood the inefficiencies of servitude. Moslem thought was much more commonsensical than the contradictory Romano-Christian views on slavery. Though Christianity had been adopted first by the poor and the slaves of the Mediterranean world, the Church was ambivalent about slavery once Christianity became the established religion. For slavery was essential to civilized life unless the rich and powerful were prepared to work themselves. The well-born could fight and write verses and philosophize, appear in law courts and engage in disputation, haggle and trade, gamble and socialize, but not for them the hard graft of the same daily grind of “business.” This situation could be sustained only in a sedentary, settled society, and slavery diminished with the breakup of the Empire, to be replaced by warfare, murder, the slaughter of prisoners, and all the other horrors associated with the time between the end of the Roman Empire and the onset of feudalism.

Feudalism grew in Europe quite logically after the troubled times associated with the end of Roman rule. After the barbarian invasions, settlements were always threatened by strong and ruthless peoples wandering through the former Empire. A tribe in the Loire valley, for example, would seek the protection of a neighboring lord and his gang of desperadoes. At best this protection, which was exchanged for so many days’ work on the lord’s land, or so many bushels of grain for the lord’s grain store, or so many men-at-arms for the lord’s company, was no more irksome than the protection which we all pay today in another form for defense from our foreign enemies and for crime-free streets. At worst it was no better than the protection paid to a mobster by a small store in any large modern city which has an inefficient or corrupt police force. In time, feudalism became institutionalized so that the king had a small number of great lords who supplied him with men-at-arms; the great lords had many minor lords, the minor lords had free men, and the free men either had to fight for the lords themselves or to produce goods and services provided by serfs. Serfdom was better for the servile than slavery, since they could enjoy a home, marriage, a little land, and some communal life; nor could the serf be separated from the land, though when the land was sold the serf usually went with it.

By the time that the African was enslaved by the European, serfdom had succeeded slavery in most of Europe for nearly a thousand years, and except in Germany, Poland, and Russia it had been much modified; in England, the Netherlands, and parts of France and Portugal, it had actually given way to a cash relationship between landlord and tenant. Even where the full rigors of medieval serfdom still obtained, such as in darkest Mother Russia, the serf was better off than most slaves.

The Arabs, too, found serfdom more efficient than slavery, and for the same reason. While the feudal lords might take from the peasant 2 or 3 days a week, the man had his own land to cultivate for the rest. The serf was not the passive victim of the master’s incompetence, as were many slaves who suffered malnutrition or even starvation. The serf had protection and security and an incentive to work hard. The slave was insecure, with no remedy against an unjust master, and with no incentive except the lash to help him labor. The serf had the right, too, to protection from abuse and was allowed to worship at the church or mosque, whereas slaves could not enter the latter and were not encouraged in the former.

Though the Arabs had and still have a very low opinion of actual physical work, they were excellent planners, managers, and agriculturists. In addition, all Arabs enjoyed haggling and bargaining, and would trade in anything, including slaves. Arabs made warfare pay for itself, and Moslem pirates made the whole maritime life of the Mediterranean insecure; Arabs sold prisoners of war; Arabs traded far down the coast of West Africa and raided the interior for the black servants and personal bodyguards much esteemed in

9. Feudalism is the relationship between vassal (tenant) and lord (landlord) which is nonmercenary. “Rent” originally took the form of service rather than money.
Moslem cities, just as they established themselves in Zanzibar for the same purpose. But under the Arabs the Negro slaves were few in number, generally house servants and rarely acquired for industrial or agricultural purposes.

Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal (1394–1460) was a leader who, despite his sobriquet, rarely left his castle. As far as we know he went overseas only once, and then only to Ceuta, near Tangiers, opposite Gibraltar, a mere 30 miles from the nearest point of Europe. Nevertheless, in many ways he inspired, drove, and directed the whole Portuguese maritime effort in the Atlantic, contributing as much as any single other man to make the Age of Exploration what it became. Joined after his death by the Spaniards, in the century of development which started about 1420, the Portuguese “discovered” most of the world about which they knew nothing at Prince Henry’s birth, nearly all the globe except the Southern Pacific, more than as much again as the Mediterranean peoples knew when the 15th century began.

In 1425 Henry established by proxy a Portuguese settlement in Madeira. By 1432, the first sugar cane had been pulped and refined in a plant near the modern Funchal, the Europeans having destroyed most of the island’s woodland by accident and most of the natives by design. This sugar industry ultimately gave way to the more profitable vineyards. The sugar estates were worked initially by more than a thousand men, brought in in conditions of some servitude from Portugal itself; the group included convicts, debtors, and stubborn Jews who refused to be converted to Christianity. None was either slave or African, but more akin to what became known in the Americas as indentured labor. Sugar was also introduced into the other East Atlantic islands, a generation and more before any permanent settlement in the Caribbean.

By 1530, there may have been more than a dozen sugar plantations in the West Indies, using imported animals, imported machinery, imported workers in an agricultural development in a new continent an ocean away from the market. There were 3 reasons for this strange colonial growth. The first was the necessity to justify the then extremely high cost of Caribbean settlement. In this effort, every kind of tropical crop was attempted. Some were mere subsistence alimentations, but people did not risk their lives merely to subsist in the tropics. Secondly, sugar was always salable, while other crops were riskier. Sugar was also a growing market, since the addiction to it over a period multiplied demand, like all addictions. Finally, there was the gross feeding nature of the sugar plant itself, which made the husbandry of sugar cane a difficult exercise in the state of the art in medieval agriculture. Before European knowledge of plant nutrients had progressed beyond the rules codified in verse by Virgil and Ovid, the fertility problem could only be met by fallowing part of the land every 2nd or 3rd year, as was done for other crops in the Middle Ages. The islands, however, were originally well wooded and relatively underpopulated and so presented the opportunity to practice the age-old custom of jubla, or “slash and burn,” still followed in the Amazon basin, Africa, and India today. This system involves burning an area of scrub or savanna, or even forest, growing one or more monocultural crops on the cleared ground, and then moving on and repeating the process. For up to 3 years the residues of the burned plant material produce very much better crops than the same land under continuous cultivation, even if fallowed every other year. In its ideal state jubla would involve burning a patch, cultivating it for a few years, and allowing perhaps 20 years for the scrub or forest to recover before starting the cycle once again.

Apart from the single bonus of the inherent fertility of forest land, there was no apparent reason in the early 16th century for growing sugar 4000 miles and 3 months away from the market in Europe. Prices in 1500 had been falling for 150 years, as we have seen, and for the next 2 generations they were to fall again.

10. The behavioral problem of slavery, serfdom, and free workers is one of relationship between master and man. For the noble an air of hereditary superiority was an essential from early childhood. For superiority to have validity, it is necessary that the dependents should be made to feel inferior at all times. It is to this factor, as necessary in feudalism as in slave societies, that we may ascribe white male attitudes to gender and race. The inferiors also deferentially accepted the situation, and Sought to make the best of a bad job. At all times, it is necessary to remember that for all the Mediterranean peoples, and most Europeans, until at least A.D. 1500 the next world was more important than this.

11. A monocultural system involves growing the same crop on the same land, continuously.
so that by 1560, and measured against gold, sugar was barely half the price in Europe that it had commanded in 1500. Though prices would rise steeply after 1570, the quantities involved were still tiny in comparison to the trade today. It is certain that the whole of Europe’s sugar consumption for the year 1600 could be contained in one modern bulk carrier, far less sugar than is eaten in 1 year in present-day New York City, London, or Hong Kong.

Prince Henry the Navigator, perhaps obsessed with the myth of Atlantis, sent many ships along the coast of West Africa, as well as to the East Atlantic islands—the Canaries and the Azores. One of his ships, returning fruitlessly from Equatorial Africa in 1443, fell upon a galley and captured and enslaved the crew. These men, who were of mixed Arab-Negro parentage and Moslems, claimed that they were of a proud race and unfit to be bondsmen. They argued forcefully that there were in the hinterland of Africa many heathen blacks, the children of Ham, who made excellent slaves, and whom they could enslave in exchange for their freedom. Thus began the modern slave trade—not the transatlantic trade, which was yet to come, but its precursor, the trade between Africa and southern Europe.

The novel feature of this particular slave trade was not only that the slaves were Negroes and the traders were white, but that a whole new mythology grew up to justify the industry. The Negroes were children of Ham, and therefore unworthy of consideration as human beings; free white men could not be expected to work in the sugar plantations; the Negro was discouraged from becoming a Christian, and forbidden to read and write, so that he could continue to be regarded as hardly human. These theories became accepted within 2 generations of the 1st shipload of slaves arriving in Lisbon in 1443, and they were perhaps necessary to blunt men’s minds to this monstrous aberration in the history of the Western world. The Portuguese also sold slaves in Spain. Long before Spanish Christians knew about the African homeland, the port of Seville was a thriving slave market into which a hundred shiploads of blacks were brought every year from the Portuguese trading stations in West Africa.

These Negroes were only necessary to the agricultural economy of Spain because of sugar. The Spaniards, who were less able agriculturists than the Arabs, found that they grew less sugar with more labor. They also neglected the husbandry and the irrigation which the Arabs had carried out with the use of serf and free workers.

How much of the incompetence of the Renaissance Spaniards in Spain as well as in the colonies was due to poor husbandry, ineffective irrigation, or slavery, no one can now tell. Did the institution of slavery lead to the neglect of husbandry, a virtue and an art which requires the personal attention of the proprietor? Did slavery lead to the decline in irrigation works, which require daily attention if they are to prove successful? Did slavery in the modern world bring into disrepute the whole idea of manual labor, as it had in Athens or Imperial Rome, states which in an earlier phase had been proud of their artisan and agricultural forebears?

Or was it a question of capital? If most of the capital were invested in slaves, there would be little left for irrigation. It should be remembered that before the 11th century the Arabs had installed irrigation works in Algeria, Morocco, and southern Spain which were unsurpassed until the 20th. Those built in 980 in Marrakesh, for example, were still operational when the French arrived 900 years later. Slightly renewed, they are still working, but have required a constant investment of capital in repair and refurbishment, an investment impossible if the capital had been pre-empted by the high capital cost of slavery.

If the Spaniards were responsible for inventing the moral respectability imposed on African slavery, it was the Turks who made it an economic necessity. Between 1520 and 1570 the Ottoman Turks conquered Cyprus, Crete, the Aegean, Egypt, and much of the North African littoral. In doing so they extinguished most of the Mediterranean sugar industry since, unlike their fellow Moslems, the Arabs, whom they replaced, the Turks were not great traders and held the infidel in fierce, isolationist religious contempt. Sugar prices rose steeply after 1570, more than quadrupling, measured in real terms, in the last 30 years of the 16th century.

12. A reference to the prophecy in Genesis 9:25–26 that the children of Ham should be servants to their brethren, one of the “good Christian’s” justifications for the slave trade. Ham is held to be the Egyptian word khem, meaning black. In Psalms 78:51, 105:23 and 27, and 106:22 Ham denoted Egypt. No one knows whether the “blackness” of Egypt referred to the soil of the Nile valley or the people of those times.
Meanwhile, wealthy western Europeans had turned to sugar rather than honey, and even before the advent of tea, coffee, and cocoa, sugar dependence was great enough to bring the New World into the reckoning to redress the balance of the Old. In the Europe of 1600, only Spain produced sugar in quantity.

The rise in the price of sugar over the last 30 years of the 16th century was partially caused by inflation, in turn caused by increased money supply throughout Europe. There is much argument about gold and silver treasure from Latin America and its effects on Europe. At this time the very unimaginative system of management did not allow the treasure to be employed usefully in Spain or the colonies, and this vast capital benefice, a windfall equivalent to five or ten years’ national income, was largely lost through ignorance and the rigid habits of a monarchy in theory absolute, in fact limited by ability. This affected the whole of Europe, not least Portugal which was a dependency of Spain from 1580 onward. By 1640, when Spain relinquished her dominion over the country, Portugal had lost forever her premier position as an Atlantic trader, settler, and merchant. Portugal was overtaken by the Dutch, and the Dutch by the English and French, in the sugar trade, in the colonies, and in the slave trade itself.

In an astonishing burst of buccaneering enterprise, the Spanish conquered in a few years, with only a few thousand men, most of what is now Latin America, except for Brazil which was Portuguese.

Since Columbus’ first expedition, in 1492, much had been done. That first expedition had discovered Watling Island, Rum Cay, Ferdinande, Crooked Island, Cuba, and Hispaniola, and Columbus had brought back to the greedy merchants of Seville not only gold but bananas, cotton, parrots, curious weapons, mysterious dried and living plants and flowers, many dead birds and beasts never before seen in Europe, and five Amerindians, probably Arawaks, taken to Spain for baptism. Columbus returned to a hero’s welcome, because, though he had discovered neither Japan nor China, neither the Philippines nor Indonesia—which was the object of the expedition—he had found the New World. By the time of his 4th voyage, in 1504, he was a dying man, but he had discovered most of the West Indies, initiated settlement in at least 20 islands, and already brought back to Spain enough wealth to have paid all his expenses several times over.13  Span-

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13. Comparing the voyages of Columbus, which achieved much, and those of Amerigo Vespucci, which achieved little, one is yet again, and forcefully, impressed with the importance of public relations. Columbus died almost in disgrace; Vespucci, a great “communicator,” gave little but his first name to the New World. Columbus suffered from near-disrepute in his homeland; in the Americas, his name is celebrated in every country, while Amerigo Vespucci, once honored in Europe, is all but forgotten in the Western Hemisphere.
iards were reluctant colonists: Fewer than half a million of them emigrated to the Caribbean or to mainland America in the 1st century after Columbus, and fewer still wanted to remain there, so that the government had to use land grants to persuade some of them to settle permanently. It was the ambition of every Spaniard to make enough money to become a Don and buy an estate back home in Spain. Some of them, for example the followers of Cortes and Pizarro, did this in a very few years. Only a small number of men were involved: 600 with Cortes, 180 with Pizarro; there was enough Inca or Aztec treasure for all. But in the West Indies there was no comparable treasure. The new owners found that they either had to work themselves, a fate they had crossed the Atlantic to avoid, or find someone else to work for them. However, those few indigenous natives who had not been destroyed by the settlers were hiding, shy and frightened, in the mountains, or actually eating the Spaniards (2 landowners were eaten by Caribs in Hispaniola—modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic—in the 1520s).

Though African slaves had been imported to Cadiz and Seville by the Portuguese since 1450, and many were at work in the sugar fields and rice paddies of southern Spain, there was not a surplus to permit the required export of 12 with each gentleman adventurer to the New World. Prices of slaves inevitably rose, and the gentlemen adventurers became deservedly unpopular. Blacks had to be imported in quantity to replace those crossing the Atlantic. Ultimately, the obvious solution presented itself, and from about 1530 slaves were sent direct from Africa to the Caribbean.

In 1514 Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) was granted a block of land in the Spanish colony of Cuba; attached to his land were about a hundred native Amerindian Caribs. The attachment of native humans to land conquered by a successful army was a standard European procedure and an acknowledged part of the feudal system. Witness, in the years following the battle of Hastings, the transfer of Anglo-Saxon serfs from English to Norman “ownership,” formalized in the Domesday Book. The Spanish had used this method (known as ripartimento) to reward successful survivors of the battles to reconquer Spain itself from the Moors, then in the settlement of the East Atlantic islands, and then in the Americas.

In the Caribbean, the native Amerindian Arawaks had been superseded on most of the islands by the much more aggressive Caribs. The Arawaks were a short, squat people of gentle disposition, widely dispersed through what was to become Latin America, from southern Brazil and Bolivia to Florida and the Bahamas. Arawak means “meal-eaters” and they were vegetarians, cassava being their staple food. They were skillful weavers and workers In stone and metal, including gold. The Arawaks were no match for the Aztecs, Incas, and Caribs, all of whom displaced them, enslaved them, destroyed their social structure.

The Caribs were so named by the discoverer of Cuba, Columbus, from the Spanish cariba, meaning “a valiant man.” They were cannibals, and gave the English language that word by corruption and as a pun, “caribal” being transduced into “cannibal” in allusion to the canine voracity of the race. They needed animal protein, refused vegetables, and probably came from the very middle of Brazil, migrating to the Caribbean in continual search of meat, which they preferred to be hunted, not domesticated. Like the Arawaks, they objected to their harsh treatment as slaves, and many of them either pined or contracted white man’s diseases and subsequently died. It was after probably more than half the natives had died that in 1517 Las Casas suggested the African Negro as an alternative.

Las Casas on his Cuban landholding was a good example of the muddled thinking which leads men to espouse the lesser evil. It was because the native Caribs and Arawaks were being forcibly made to work at jobs they could not or would not do, and because the majority showed every inclination to be killed, or to pine to death, rather than adopt slave status, and because in Peru and Mexico even worse treatment of the natives was considered quite normal, that Las Casas had suggested the introduction of blacks. They were known to be docile, apparently not to object to servility, and to work well and willingly. Thus began the transatlantic slave trade.

But Las Casas lived long enough to repent his choice. If the treatment of the native Indians all over Latin America was bad, the cruelties of the African slave trade turned out to be a great deal worse. Las Casas, the 1st priest to be ordained in the Western Hemisphere, became Bishop of Chiapa in Mexico and was known as the Apostle of the Andes on account of his work for the underprivileged Indians. Much of the
trouble with both Indians and blacks arose because although the ruler of Spain, or a viceroy, would promulgate laws which were humane and decent, there was never anyone on the spot to make sure that they were put into practice. The most dreadful abuses became so commonplace that Las Casas resigned his bishopric and returned to Spain in 1547. By the following year he was conducting a nationwide campaign against the trade that he himself had started in order to save the Indians. His efforts failed but, if they had succeeded, the resulting law would probably have prevented the enslavement, transportation, and early death of half the total number of Africans ever shipped. In 1554–55 Las Casas thought he had persuaded the Emperor Charles V to endorse emancipation. Instead, Charles was overcome with the need to save his own soul. He abdicated, and went to live in a little house next to the monastery of Yste, in Estremadura.

It would not be the last time that the imperative need for private and personal salvation would contribute to the public condemnation of slavery and the slave trade. It is, however, a fairly rare event in history when the godfather of a new development has seen the error of his ways and tried to remedy his gross misjudgment. Las Casas was soon forgotten, and it would be 200 years before slavery and the slave trade were as vigorously questioned and then successfully attacked. By then sugar was the most important commodity traded in the world.

The sugar trade multiplied at a compound rate of 5% per year in the 17th century, by 7% in the 18th, and by nearly 10% in the 19th. The interrelationship of sugar, naval power, taxation, mercantile policy, capital investment, and, above all, bondage and slavery is a complex one, perhaps best illustrated here by the story of 3 Caribbean islands, Barbados, Jamaica, and Cuba, which each epitomize the developments in each of 3 centuries. None of the French islands has been included because, owing to English concern over the West Indies, 5 Anglo-French wars were fought in the 18th century and damaged the French sugar trade so much as to make French sugar production, distribution, and exchange an activity promoted only during the intervals of peace. The sugar history of modern Haiti proves the point beyond argument.

All the sugar colonies, of whatever nation, had a white-dominated presugar history. Most of the colonies were established for mining, or to support mining, or for trade, or for piracy, or as the speculation of some individual feudal capitalist. 17th century Europe was dominated by religious conflict, by the Thirty Years’ War, by the struggle between King and Parliament in England, by the decline of Spain and Portugal, and by the expansion and trading eminence of the Netherlands. These disturbances induced large numbers of dissidents of all types to settle in the New World and, in an age when life was uncertain, sea travel very

14. The Emperor was a humane man. He had already “emancipated” the slaves in 1542, but this was disregarded by his subjects, as was the Bull of Pope Leo X in 1514: “Not only the Christian religion but Nature cries out against slavery and the slave trade.” A moment’s thought will indicate that a thriving public opinion is needed to turn round an all-pervading feature of life such as slavery, torture, or the maltreatment of prisoners. Again and again the will of the despot, however benevolent, is insufficient to ensure observance.

15. Modern Haiti consists of the western third of the island of Hispaniola, the 2nd largest West Indian island after Cuba. The eastern two-thirds forms the Dominican Republic. When Columbus arrived from Cuba in 1492, the island as a whole, Hispaniola or San Domingo, was densely inhabited by native Amerindians who, the Spanish claimed, were feeble minded and physically weak. The Indians were replaced by Negroes from Africa, and sugar was introduced, rapidly becoming the staple crop. Haiti became French in 1697, and after 1740 developed into a very prosperous and successful sugar producer, with better land and more opportunity for irrigation than elsewhere in the Caribbean. By 1780 Haiti was the greatest sugar producer in the world, but because of the activities of the Royal Navy had difficulty in getting its produce to Europe in wartime. In 1793 the population consisted of a privileged caste of white planters, black slaves, and free half-castes who, however, lacked civil rights. The Negroes were overhastily emancipated by the French Assembly in 1794 in accordance with the best revolutionary principles. The whites objected; the half-castes havered. Chaos and much cruelty ensued, and the French metropolitan government intervened. So did the British, who after 1794 were at war with the French. The most unspeakable atrocities of every kind were perpetrated by all sides. A great black leader, Toussaint l’Ouverture, appeared and ruled by ancient, animistic means. More economic chaos resulted, and most of the whites left for Cuba, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. From being the greatest sugar producer in the world in 1790, the colony degenerated into a voodoo-ridden “free” slum, without economic importance of any kind, and with little political freedom. Thus has it remained.
dangerous, and knowledge of the Western Hemisphere scanty, the pressures put upon emigrants must have been very high. Most of the emigrants from Europe were men, leading to an acute imbalance between the sexes in the colonies. Some of them must have stayed only a few years in each place before moving on, restlessly, to see if they could improve their luck in another colony; many must have ended their unrecorded lives in perhaps their 3rd or 4th country of settlement. The numbers are not known for certain, and thousands of the more adventurous among them must have wandered all over the Caribbean without leaving any mark or trace of their peregrinations other than the travelers’ tales related to skeptical companions.

An exploratory mission would find an uninhabited or little inhabited place. Upon the expedition’s return to Europe, capitalists\(^{16}\) would be induced to subscribe and send their younger sons, or some other relative, to settle. The gentlemen adventurers would persuade men of the landless classes to accompany them, and often buy indentured servants, who were debtors or petty criminals, to settle with them. These indentured whites (“redlegs”) were sentenced to 7 years or more of bondage, following which they were free men, but debarred from returning to Europe. In such a manner was Barbados settled by the English, though Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese seamen were aware of its existence.

A virtually empty island the size of the Isle of Wight, or less than one-tenth the size of Long Island, Barbados had a relatively favorable climate, almost no native quadrupeds, an abundance of water, and masses of timber. By the time of Charles II’s Restoration in 1660, Barbados had become one of the most densely populated agricultural regions in the known world, supporting perhaps 40 thousand people of whom more than two-thirds were white—a population density of 240 to the square mile.\(^{17}\) In the decade 1660–70 Barbados was the greatest sugar producer in the trade, but by then all its timber had been cut down, and the soil had become exhausted in more than a generation of growing sugar—as a result it became the 1st island to import cattle in large numbers, in the hope that the land could be restored to fertility with cow dung. In the original settlements small proprietors had grown tobacco, indigo, cotton, and ginger and other spices for export, and cassava, plantains, beans, and corn for home consumption. By 1660, other opportunities occurred elsewhere, and thousands of small proprietors left the island, and sugar, slavery, and petty capitalism established the monoculture which was to be the common pattern all over the Caribbean. The 1st of the dissatisfied whites left to try their luck on other islands and in the Carolinas and Virginia, which at an early stage established a close relationship with the West Indies in general and Barbados in particular. The American connection involved the great and the good both before and after the Revolution: Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson all had interests in Barbados.

Alone of all the West Indies, Barbados never changed hands in the interminable wars which went on until 1815. But already in 1670 there were fears that the white proprietors had become too few for defense. Proprietors owning more than 100 acres numbered nearly 16,000 in 1643. Because of land exhaustion and emigration, this class fell to 5000 in 1670. In addition to the white proprietors, there were over 30,000 indentured bondsmen and black slaves. These were better treated in Barbados than elsewhere since the island was always, even after monoculture was established, a place of smallish estates. Barbados also experienced fewer slave revolts than other islands. The average in the late 17th century was about 200 acres, each with its own sugar mill driven by water, wind, or oxen. But the population had changed drastically. In 1645, according to one account, there were 18,000 whites, of whom only 7000 were free, and only 4000 blacks, all of them slaves. The slaves despised the white bondmen, many of whom had a nastier life than the blacks, since the purchase of their services was cheaper than the cost of a black man’s labor. By 1675, blacks at 32,000 outnumbered the whites at 21,000, of whom fewer than half were free men.

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16. Learned Marxists are in disagreement whether or not the plantation economy was truly capitalist (cf. *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney W. Mintz, 1985). However, Arthur Young invented the word “capitalist” in 1790 and used it, as do most of us, in a less restricted sense than that of Marx and his followers. Coleridge, Southey, and Disraeli all used the word before 1830, at least a generation before *Das Kapital*.

17. The population density of Barbados was probably only exceeded, if at all, by that of parts of the Indus valley in India or the Netherlands or the Po valley in northern Italy. The landed population of little Barbados was absolutely greater than that of huge Virginia until after 1680.
The ratio of black to white in Barbados was never as wide as in other islands, however, and does not seem to have exceeded 5 blacks to 1 white. In some of the islands the proportion was 15:1 or 20:1. But how the census was taken when the population was as mobile as it was, and the next Island was only hours away by small boat, no one today can tell.

The small size of the Barbadan estates meant that many proprietors were actually working farms not much bigger than similar holdings in England. Any crop except sugar could have been grown without slave labor, and indeed white men did so before sugar entered the island’s economy. Sugar was then, of course, the supreme cash crop. There was no great demand in the 18th century for cotton; tobacco was more efficiently grown in Virginia; indigo, coffee, and cocoa far less profitable than either. Except for gold, sugar was the only colonial product before 1750 which showed a trade balance in favor of the colony.

It was the boredom and hard work of sugar cultivation twice a year, at planting and at harvest, which made black slavery “inevitable.” Cane planting was done by clearing a pit 3 feet square and a few inches deep, into which the young plant or stem cuttings were dibbled. The object of the pit was to make subsequent weeding much easier. To save manual labor by ploughing was said to be impossible. If digging these pits in the hot sun was hard work, too much for whites, then harvesting the cane, crushing it, and boiling the sugar was out of the question. The canes were crushed in mills, and the sugar then boiled out of the cane in a series of open vats in a sugar house. Refining sugar is similar to refining oil, the heavier and blacker fractions are drained off first, leaving crude brown or yellow sugar, which is then redissolved and recrystallized into the whiter and finer varieties. Today, every grade of sugar can be obtained from cane sugar—molasses through black sugar, the various browns, and then the finer whites. In the 17th century a small, primitive, on-farm mill would only produce molasses and 1 grade of sugar. The heat was fierce, since there was no means of cooling the sugar house. Temperatures of 140ºF were recorded, and even at night, the temperature near the vat would be well over 120ºF. Humidity would also be very high and therefore exhausting. It was a job for blacks, not whites, slaves, not free men.

After the timber had been cut down, around 1680, the Barbadans imported timber to fuel the vats from other islands, from mainland Guiana, and from the Carolinas; they even imported coal from Newcastle in England. Even with imported fuel, there was little incentive to refine sugar beyond the necessary work to make it exportable, for the conditions in the fields and in the sugar house at harvest time were such that no white man would do the work, and no black man would work without the lash. Or so it was said. Thus came about the brutalization of slave and master alike.

Barbados offers a continuous statistical picture from 1637 through 1808, when the slave trade came to an end, until 1834, when the slaves were emancipated. Barbados is unique in being continuously British-ruled from the time of Charles I, and stands out among the sugar islands because of the absence of any apparent evidence of gross misery. Yet Barbados had to import, legally, 350,000 slaves in a period of 175 years, plus nearly 100,000 white indentured servants; to these must be added whatever children were born during the lifetime of the estimated 100,000 female blacks who lived, at one time or another, in Barbados. If we allow 1 birth per female (surely not excessive), about 550,000 slaves, white and black, old and young, male and female, lived and died in Barbados in those 175 years. More than 40,000 indentured white and black slaves existed in 1675. Only 66,000, all black, were emancipated in 1834.

Strenuous efforts have been made in recent decades to work out the numbers involved in the whole transatlantic slave trade. Deer in 1949 gave a total of 12–13 million actually imported into the Americas. The consensus today is for less; the apparent figures are 11.7 million exported and 9.8 million imported into the New World between 1450 and 1900. This all-embracing figure does not include 2 further kinds of losses. The 1st, which must be set against all forms of the slave trade, consists of the losses ashore in Africa, of which the numbers are unknown. There were losses caused by the warfare, raids, and ambushes instigated to produce prisoners to enslave; there were losses sustained during trafficking, marketing, and transport; there were losses at the barracoon (or stockade) at the port of export; and there were losses as a result of disease, injury, attempts at escape, and so on. The 2nd, unique to the sugar industry, consists of the losses, unknown but obviously large, of the infants not surviving. When, after the abolition of the slave trade in the United
States, the 19th century cotton industry found itself short of workers, and slaves were energetically encouraged to breed, the slave population, with minimum imports, increased by 9 times in 60 years—nearly twice the free rate. This was despite a shorter expectation of life for slaves than for free women.

Depression among slaves on sugar estates lowered their animal spirits. Subjugated people have a low conception rate, and there was in any case an imbalance between genders, with males outnumbering females. Young slaves could do little real work until their teens, and it was cheaper to buy an adult slave than to debit the enterprise with a dozen years of keep for the young. The survival of infants born to slaves, therefore, was very much subject to the mood of the parents, who could see little hope for their children and did not strive officiously to keep them alive. Mortality before the 1st birthday was 80% on some estates. There was little incentive to breed, both from the slave’s and the master’s point of view; indeed, deliberate breeding of slaves was considered by some Christian masters to be more wicked than the horrors of the slave trade. So, by accident or design, breeding was as discouraged in the sugar industry as it was later encouraged in the cotton kingdom.

In a notional plantation containing 50 slaves, 5 adults would need to be replaced every year just to maintain that number. 20% of those shipped from Africa died on board ship, so in order to end up with 5 live slaves in Barbados, between 6 and 7 would have to be shipped. There were further, unquantifiable losses incurred on the long march from the interior to the port in Africa and among babies stillborn, aborted, or unreared in Barbados.

Between 1637, the date of the 1st sugar planted in Barbados, and 1808, when the last slave was legally landed in the West Indies, the value of a slave in the Caribbean varied between that of half a ton of sugar before 1700 and 2 tons in 1805. The average in the 18th century was about a ton per slave’s life, 2 tons just before abolition of the slave trade. Two tons of sugar is less than a thousand modern schoolchildren in one school might consume in a week in junk food, soft drinks, and ice cream.

For a very long time the average slave only produced one tenth of his value each year. So 1 ton represented the lifetime sugar production of 1 slave who had been captured, manacled, marched to the African coast, penned like a pig to await a buyer, sold, chained again on board ship, sold on the island market, and then naturalized to the conditions of the Caribbean (“seasoned”) before he showed any profit to the plantation owner. The slave, bewildered if surviving at all, would have seen the matter in rather a different light. But few slaves would know that a black was worth just about the same as 1 ton of refined sugar, not per hour, not per week, but for the whole of his life.

Sugar is a substance which we now know that we can well do without, even today when it is cheap and freely available. Why, when its use caused so much death, cruelty, and misery, did sugar move from a luxury afforded and used by a few in 1600, to a necessity for many 200 years later? For every ton consumed in 1600, 10 tons were consumed in England in 1700 and 150 tons in 1800. In 1600, little of the sugar was slave grown and none came from the West Indies directly to England. In 1800, nearly every ton of sugar imported into England was grown and harvested by slaves, and the ratio was 1 black man’s life to 2 tons of sugar. In 1801 the population of England was about 9 million, and sugar consumption about 17 pounds per head per year. This gives a total consumption in England of over 70,000 tons of sugar in that year. That was equivalent to twice the number (35,000 plus) of black slaves consumed in the islands in the production of sugar. On average, for every 250 English men, women, and children, a black died every year.

This is the central social problem. Why did a relatively advanced society become so dependent on Sugar as to allow such a slaughterous addiction? The sugar addiction in 1801, wherever it existed, killed proportionately more people than the drug trade does today. The drug trade differs, of course, in that it kills those hooked on the product, while the sugar trade mostly killed slaves.

Sugar, then, is the most notable addiction in history that killed not the consumer but the producer. Every

18. “Seasoning” (which would today be called acclimatization) involved certain severe changes in the Negroes’ life-style. The diet consisted mainly of cassava and corn—it was better than that on board ship, but not so good as in Africa. New diseases, of which the worst was yellow fever, threatened them. The work was strange, the “education” very painful, and the overseer almost certainly a brute. Curiously, men survived seasoning better than women.
ton represented a life. Every teaspoonful represented 6 days of a slave’s life. Put that way, would anyone in 18th-century England have touched sugar? But, of course, few people in the 18th century did put the problem quite like that. It was argued then, after the slave trade and slavery had become such a major part of European life that it was impossible to remain neutral on the subject, that the life of the black in Africa was marginally worse than that of the black slave. Warfare, starvation, and African slavery itself made it likely that the black’s expectation of life in his country of origin was no higher than that of the black slave in white ownership. (This argument is morally akin to that of the hunter who says that as the prey will die a horrible death anyway, no ethical harm results from hunting the animal.) What these specious forms of apologia for slavery and the slave trade failed to recognize was that the deleterious effect upon the slave owners and other beneficiaries of slavery was probably morally more damaging than any harm which, on balance, the black might suffer from being brutally removed from Africa, from the horrors of the Middle Passage, and from the degradation of the market and “seasoning” in the West Indies. The analogy is with the fox, the foxhunter, and the society formed around fox hunting. The fox’s life is not much worse than in nature; the foxhunting society is.

Sugar production also created demands for a return to Roman mass slavery. While Mediterranean slavery, both Moslem and Christian, continued up to and beyond the 16th century, it was of a particular nature. Slaves, like gold, jewels, works of art, and wine, were luxuries, not necessities; they were part of what we would now call “conspicuous consumption.” Slaves were paraded, displayed, bought and sold, given and received as objects indicating status. Their economic function was not much greater than that of any other ornament.

Sugar slavery was of quite a different order. It was the first time since the Roman latifundia that mass slavery had been used to grow a crop for trade (not subsistence) in a big way. It was also the 1st time in history that 1 race had been uniquely selected for a servile role. Spain and Portugal voluntarily abjured the enslavement of East Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or European slaves to work in the Americas. They also made considerable efforts to end Amerindian slavery. It matters little that there were excellent if different reasons for these decisive actions. Experience led other Europeans to the same conclusions.

The saddest point about sugar slavery was that it was probably unnecessary. By 1600 it was within the capabilities of Englishmen and Dutchmen to use oxen rather than men, brain rather than brawn, and to adopt “feudal” share cropping rather than slavery. But in 1600 feudalism was considered old-fashioned by the Dutch and English, just as it was in 1800 by the new Americans. The slave population in the West Indian canebrakes, and later that in the American cotton plantations, were the 1st in history to exceed the figure of 2 million in the Roman Empire at about A.D. 100.19

But we should not, in our cosseted, sterilized, medicated 20th century, forget that life for probably the majority of white men was also nasty, brutish, and short. For seamen, the lash was commonplace. For all except the privileged, hunger, or at least uncertainty about food supplies, was the norm. Disease could strike rich and poor alike at any moment, usually with no possibility of prevention or certainty of cure.

Expectation of life, class by class, income group by income group, occupation by occupation, cannot be precisely established before about 1850; but there is no evidence that there was an immensely greater expectation of life in Europe than in the West Indies or Africa. The margin might be of the order of 25% at any age, certainly no more. On the other hand, for those interested in the quality of life rather than its duration, there is also no comparison. The white man might be badly treated by circumstance, or his fellow men, or disease, but he had expectations, and it was the removal of expectations, however modest, however

19. Though the black slave suffered from psychological morbidity compared with the more cheerful nature of the indentured white, the black had significant health advantages. The pure Negro’s high susceptibility to the inherited disease of sickle-cell anemia makes him immune to malaria. However this medical advantage did not compensate for the hopelessness of the Negro’s outlook. No one in the Caribbean appeared to have thought of manumission (emancipation) as a policy. After all, if the expectation of life was only 10 years, then manumission at that time might well have improved output meanwhile. This solution was dismissed in Virginia in the 1780s as being impractical because of what was considered to be the essentially childish nature of the black.
unlikely, however faint, which ruined the life of the slave.

The introduction of coffee, tea, and cocoa into Europe provided the well-off with an alternative to alcohol for the 1st time in history. Chocolate drinking, coffee houses, and afternoon tea all acquired a gentility far removed from ale house bawdiness, and became 1st a luxurious amenity, then by the 4th quarter of the 17th century a middle-class necessity. But all 3 were crude, often bitter, and unconsumable, it was said, without sugar. From about 1680 the fashion for these hot drinks became a potent factor in the surge in sugar demand and consequent increased production, which progressively raised the sugar trade to the point of importance which it had assumed by 1700.

During the 2nd half of the 18th century the temperance cause developed into an important social movement, initiated by various Protestant denominations and therefore strongest in northern Europe, in countries such as Britain and the Netherlands. Sugared tea became the respectable alternative to beer or wine long before water was safe to drink without boiling. These changes in social habits significantly increased the demand for sugar and were probably responsible for about half of the increased trade. By the time sugar had become “the indispensible companion of tea,”20 Jamaica had overtaken Barbados as the most important English Caribbean island.

Jamaica is a large island, more than 25 times the size of Barbados. It was discovered by Columbus in 1494, settled by the Spaniards in 1500, and then neglected for a century and a half. Like other islands, it remained a historical enigma for a long period after the 1st European intrusion. We do not know which islands still had the wild, indigenous Arawak vegetarians, which had been conquered by the fierce Carib cannibals, and which were empty. Most of the Arawaks and Caribs, as mentioned earlier, had been wiped out by the 17th century. In 1796 the British finally shipped all the Caribs they could find in their possessions to Honduras and Nicaragua, which may explain something of the turbulent history of those 2 countries. The Jamaicans, however, claim in their most romantic moods that some Caribs, either “red” (pure) or “black” (half Negro) were still on the island when the British arrived in 1655. However no Caribs were reported—only a total population of 3000, white and black—when Cromwell’s troops occupied the island as part of his Grand Design of defeating Spain by capturing her colonies.

The Spanish whites were made prisoners, while the blacks took to the hills and squatted. Their descendants, called maroons, squat in the hills to this day, and formed a focus of disaffection for the black slave population throughout the period of servitude. For 15 years this great empty island, denuded of its productive population by circumstance, remained in a kind of suspended animation, acknowledged to be neither Spanish nor British. Port Royal, near the modern Kingston, was the resort of outcasts and outlaws: buccaneers, thieves, convicts, and whores. Their unrecorded life forms the basis of the tales of piracy, murder, treasure trove, and seedy glamour which have thrilled or disgusted generations. They gave Jamaica a slow, semicriminal start in the modern world.

Sugar and the slave trade developed in the last quarter of the 17th century, but it was not until the 1720s that Jamaican sugar production exceeded that of Barbados. Jamaica, however, was a great entrepot for every trade in the West Indies, particularly the slave trade, and Kingston and Port Royal were the natural centers for the whole of the British Caribbean. Yet the white population was tiny. It was not until after the American War of Independence that the white population of Jamaica exceeded that of Barbados. In 1783 Jamaica had about 20,000 whites compared to the 17,000 in Barbados; but while Barbados had declined in population to 160 whites per square mile at that date, huge Jamaica had only 4. While in Barbados there were only 4 slaves per white, in Jamaica there were 10 slaves to each white man. And they were disaffected, even bitter, 10 times more likely to cause “trouble” than in Barbados.

Despite its emptiness, Jamaica had an aura of claustrophobia, induced perhaps by the mountains which form a spine along the island, with the peak called Blue Mountain, more than 7000 feet high, brooding and often cloud-capped, with forests all round, full of fierce maroons or other escaped slaves who were always ready to strike at the whites and to liberate their black brothers still in bondage. Jamaica never felt like a happy place.

20. Dr. Johnson.
Under slavery, Jamaica became an island of large, relatively unproductive estates. In 1783 there were
over a hundred estates in all, each averaging more than 700 acres in extent, nearly 4 times the size of the
average plantation in Barbados. An average estate would have more than 500 worker slaves, compared to
under 20 on Barbados. Each worker slave in Jamaica produced only half the annual sugar crop of each slave
in Barbados. Jamaica was therefore an island of low output per acre and low output per man, exacerbated
by a difficult climate with a tendency to hurricanes and earthquakes. A condition of agricultural equilibrium
was never achieved, as it was in Barbados. Because there was more land, it was not properly cultivated.
Investment in slaves was far higher than that in land, perhaps 4 times as much. It is difficult to avoid the
conclusion that when the economy of Jamaica became mature, in the period from 1770 to 1810, the interest
of the trade became the engine for the survival of slavery itself. By 1795–1800 Jamaica was to become the
greatest sugar exporter in the world.

At the beginning of the 17th century, every trader to West Africa was offered slaves in exchange for
his European goods. Early traders sometimes refused to trade for slaves, and even in 1689, by which time
what was known as the triangular trade had become established, many still had their doubts about the whole
business. Most forcibly expressed were the sentiments of the philosopher John Locke at that date: “Slavery
is so vile and miserable a state of man, and so directly opposite to the generous temper and courage of our
nation, that it is hardly possible that an Englishman, much less a gentleman, should plead for it.” Even if
this were accepted by some, hundreds of Englishmen became “gentlemen” through the slavery of others. In
the 17th and 18th centuries the “new men” of Bristol, London, and Liverpool were elevating themselves in
the social hierarchy of the country by means of the slave trade, and it is the phenomenon of the “new men”
which indicates not only why the triangular trade ever started, but also why it stopped when it did.

During the 1780s, the relative positions of England and any rival had been reversed. Despite the loss
of the American colonies in 1783, the United Kingdom was strong enough to form the core of European
opposition to Revolutionary, then Napoleonic, France, to fight a war lasting over 20 years, with 1 short
intermission, and to win not only the war but a new Empire larger than that lost when the United States be-
came independent. English capacity for recovery was obviously deep-seated, and led to a primacy in trade
and commerce. This primacy was not suddenly discovered, nor was the dynamic that made England the
1st nation to enjoy the splendors and miseries of the Industrial Revolution. The causes go back a long way,
and it may well be suggested that, whatever they were, they made England unique—not, let it be added, the
United Kingdom, which included Scotland for most of the century and Ireland for none of it, but specifically
England. Scotland and Ireland had their own problems, and made their own contribution to the history of
the Americas, but a peculiarly English offering was made to the world by sugar.

The English had turned serfdom into a cash relationship between landlord and tenant far earlier than
had most of the continental countries. The serfs might be pleased to become tenants, but it was the lords
who really benefited. “The English landed class turned lordship into ownership and instead of feudal lords
became real owners of land. This was the most important change in the whole of English History.”21 The
money economy of English land tenure also made possible the institution of primogeniture in its most force-
ful manifestation. Without cash, settling a jointure (the income on a small amount of capital) on younger
brothers and sisters is difficult to achieve. True primogeniture therefore must depend upon a cash economy
in agriculture. Every English duke has worthy relations of an extremely humble nature, who live life as if
they were in no way related; this is a social apartheid impossible to imagine existing in France or Iberia,
England’s rivals in the 18th century. Then, as now, some of these relatives were not so worthy, and in the
past many of them sought their fortune on the high seas, in the colonies, or in any trade which would yield
a quicker profit than the traditional professions for the younger sons of the aristocracy—the army, the navy,
the law, and the church.

Besides the noble sprigs, there were the humbler and more numerous, if equally adventurous, relations
of the landed gentry, or of the burgeoning merchant class, or unsettled younger sons, or illegitimate sons of
professional men, or those who had supported the wrong side in any political dispute, including the Civil
War. Finally there were the indentured, who might be petty criminals, or civil debtors, or merely those who had sold their labor for a period of years in exchange for a free passage. The whole of society on the high seas, or in the colonies, was far more open than at home. “...Broken traders, miserable debtors, penniless spendthrifts and discontented persons, travelling heads and scatterbrains. These and like humours first people the Indies and made them a kind of bedlam, for a short tyme. But from such brain-sick humours have come many solid and sober men, as these modern tymes testify.”

After about 1680, one of the quickest ways to a fortune was in the triangular trade. This economically elegant development made the slave trade pay a dividend on every leg. In essence the trade was, as its name suggests, in 3 parts. The 1st leg was from England to West Africa, with trinkets and baubles (never gold), cast iron bars (the long bar, 9 feet by 2 inches by 4 inches, later became a unit of barter), graycloth, firearms, gunpowder, shot, alcohol, and salt. Apart from salt, none of these was necessary to anyone in Africa except to the native slave trader who needed the guns for use and the other objects for trade. Significantly, salt is the only product on this list still exported in large quantities to West Africa from the United Kingdom. Native chiefs traded inland for captured slaves. Wars were often deliberately started for the sole purpose of capturing prisoners who were then sold as slaves. Sometimes both sides were in league with different white slave traders. The whites found levels of price and quality variable and capricious, and barter might continue for days. Sooner or later, the ship set forth on the Middle Passage.

This dreaded voyage was made unendurable if a ship was “unlucky,” or suffered from an incompetent crew so that it stagnated in the Doldrums for any appreciable time. The Doldrums roughly follow the real Equator, being north of 0 degrees during the northern summer, and a ship becalmed in the Doldrums for more than a month in July–August might lose half its slaves and a quarter of its crew. In the northern winter the passage was cooler, faster and more profitable, so that ships tended to leave London, Bristol, or Liverpool in the early autumn, plan to make the Middle Passage in December–February, and arrive in the Indies in the spring, returning to England again on the 3rd leg, with a cargo of sugar and/or rum, in the milder northern summer.

To prevent mutinies and suicides by jumping overboard, male slaves were regimented, though women and children were sometimes allowed to run freely about the ship. There was a belief, common among the Ibos and Yoruba, but not confined to those tribes, that to jump overboard was a rapid way to return the soul to heaven. From this article of faith the slave, as a valuable piece of property, had to be protected. Adult males were chained together, each in a space about one-tenth of that available to a modern charter aircraft passenger, and there they lay prone, often in their own ordure, for up to 3 months. The stink, the imprisonment, the fear of the unknown, the inability to communicate, the strange white men, all these factors must have added to the natural horror of the sea voyage and help to explain why a number died en route, however skillful the captain, however considerate and competent the crew, however easy the passage.

Having arrived in the Caribbean, the ship might go from island to island, but ultimately the slaves were taken ashore and sold. The vessel was converted from slave trader to cargo carrier and loaded with rum, molasses, and coarse, once refined sugar for the rapid run home on the prevailing westerlies, a voyage of about 30 to 50 days. Allowing for storms, privateers, pirates, enemy ships, and timbers and rigging weakened by tropical pests, the ship would return home with or without a profit.

How handsome were the profits? For the survivors, they were high. In the early days, as many as a 3rd

23. Much skill and even more luck were needed to make a reasonably rapid Middle Passage, a 4000-mile leg. Recorded voyages took as little as 23 days and as much as 95 days. In the latter case, there was more than a taint of cannibalism attached to the survivors.
24. To be fair, some captains were identified whose losses ranged from nil to 5% in a lifetime of voyages. Others, less humane, efficient, or patient, would regard a 25–40% loss as normal. In the end, the competent captains were employed on their record, and the more stupid, brutal, or bungling found themselves out of a job. Almost universally, the correlation is with the individual captain and crew. No other causative factor can explain the very wide differences in the level of loss.
of the ships might be lost to storm or human agency. During times of war, losses were higher. There was also piracy and, not always very different, privateering. Both were gradually brought under control by the Royal Navy. In the early days, the price fetched by a slave in the West Indies was as much as 700–800% of the cost in West Africa (a buying price of £3 and a selling price of £25), but losses en route were very much higher, and the captains less skilled, the ships less suitable, the piracy worse and so forth. The trade became a vast industry, employing as many as several hundred British ships at any one time, and more of other nations. The price of slaves in West Africa rose as they had to be captured and marched from farther and farther inland, and so the profit margin was reduced to, say, the difference between £20 and £30, in other words a markup of 50%. Loss of life en route dropped to a very creditable 5–10%. The mature triangular trade was like any other trade, and the profits of all 3 legs had to be reckoned against the indebtedness of the planters, the price of sugar in Europe, the taxation and credit policies of British and foreign governments, and war and weather risks. The profits of the triangle followed profits in other trades and in other times. When risks were high, the successful made money and the failures were drowned or faded from history in some other way. The mature trade was a stable institution become stodgy and dull, and returned only 25–35% in the event of success, with all the downside risks still present.

It was the mercantilism of the triangular trade that really led to abolition of slavery, not its inhumanity. In 1790, the West Indian trade was easily the most important trading activity of the British nation:

The Triangular Trade

25. Because of imperfect communication, it was assumed until after 1815 that all ships “below the line” were enemies. The line was the Tropic of Cancer, 22½ degrees N. This situation resulted in several bizarre incidents of single-ship actions between French and French, Dutch and Dutch, and English and English, both ships in each case believing the other to be an enemy.
West Indies trade (including triangular) | East Indies trade (India, China, all Pacific and Indian Oceans)
--- | ---
Capital employed but not real property, slaves, etc. abroad | £70,000,000 | £18,000,000
Exports from UK (excluding bullion) | £3,000,000 | £1,500,000
Imports into UK | £7,600,000 | £5,000,000
Duties paid to government in UK | £1,800,000 | £800,000
Tonnage employed | 300,000 tons | 160,000 tons

The figures in all cases exclude government transports, troop movements, stores, and of course naval vessels.26

The West Indian merchants carried such weight that the sugar islands were considered in 1763 as being more important than Canada, both British and French, and by one section of politicians as being more vital even than the American colonies. The West Indian interest, however, was always unpopular because of its arrogance, its get-rich quick propensity, its attractions for nature’s gamblers, and its faint taint of slavery, which carried into the most elegant drawing room. The opposition to sugar and slavery was not confined to the new romantics of the late 18th century, to the dissenters, or to the staunchest and earliest of abolitionists, the Quakers. Dr. Johnson (a good Tory) described Jamaica as “a place of great wealth, a den of tyrants, and a dungeon of slaves,” and proposed a toast at Oxford to “success to the next revolt of the Negroes in the West Indies.” Earlier, Alexander Pope, the great Augustan poet, had quoted with approval the lines from the *Odyssey*: “Jove fixed it certain, that, whatever day/Made man a slave took half his worth away.” From a more calculating, economic viewpoint, Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham both endorsed Jove’s calculation of a 50% loss of productivity in the process of enslaving blacks. Thoughtful men had got out of both slavery and the slave trade early in the 18th century. The early fortunes made in Bristol gave way to a complicated, involved trade based in Liverpool and founded on lines of credit, Manchester manufacturers, Birmingham gunsmiths, gunpowder from Cheshire, and ironmasters from all over. The trade was vertical. Sugar was said to be supporting “half Lancashire and a quarter of all British shipping.” Yet in mercantilist terms, the Triangular Trade in its maturity made no sense at all.27

In the decade 1783–93 the British controlled, by one means or another, more than half of all the sugar trade between the New World and the Old. Yet, of that near 60%, Britain herself consumed almost enough to say that half the sugar brought across the Atlantic went down British throats and out to sea via the drains. In other words, perhaps 25% of English maritime effort, the work of a quarter of a million workers in England, and the sunbaked effort of all those whites and slaves in the colonies—all this was an expensive substitute for alternative sources of energy.

27. The mercantile system grew slowly after the Renaissance and the great European expansion of the early 16th century; it was probably the mirror of Venetian experience in the Middle Ages. After it developed, it became a doctrine which stated that gold and silver–specie–are wealth as valid as land, that there is more value in a dense population engaged in working up manufactures than in a modestly settled people producing food or raw materials, that exports are more valuable than imports, since saving is worthier and more profitable than consumption, that saving, exports, acquisition of gold, and the use of a country’s own ships should be deliberately encouraged by state action. Mercantilism was adopted by the Dutch, the English, and the French, in that order. The English Navigation Acts, instituted by Cromwell, gave a tremendous boost to the power of the state to intervene as well as impetus to help develop trade and empire. Mercantilism was succeeded in the 19th century by Free Trade, a strong incentive for which was distaste for the Big Daddy attitude of government that was necessary to ensure the success of the mercantile theory. Carried to its logical conclusion, mercantilism was unfit for modern life after about 1720, though it lingered on in Russia, for example, until neatly overtaken by the revolutions of the 20th century. Even today, many European socialists—the British Labour Party, for example—are still mercantilist, largely because they believe in “planning.” Adam Smith “proved” in the 1780s that no man, however wise, can plan as well as the market when freely functional. The problem with Free Trade has nearly always been unequal distribution of information, ability, wealth, and opportunity. This makes Free Trade less than free.
Each year during this decade the United Kingdom ingested about 70,000 tons of refined sugar, which replaced about 80,000 tons of wheat in energy value. The wheat was worth during that decade an average of £10.5 per ton. Wheat was roughly in balance during the 10 harvests 1783–92, and the United Kingdom imported during that period an average of less than 15,000 tons, or about 0.5 percent of production, of which most came from Ireland. In most years an extra 80,000 tons of wheat would have been available from the Baltic, from the Americas, and from Ireland. The entire sugar effort, costing the British about £5–6 million net per annum, replaced wheat, which would have cost not much more than £800,000 net per annum. Such is the price, not just of addiction, but of corruption.

The corruption was not only of the consumers, poor addicts that they were, nor of the slaves, degraded by the system which needed them, nor of the slave owners, objects of both hatred and contempt, but of the whole mercantile system as it existed at the end of the American Revolution. Whig mercantilism (“parliamentary Colbertism”) became suspect to the generation that made peace with the Americans; indeed had not the Whig policy led to the loss of America? The Elder Pitt had said so; was this not enough for his son, and his son’s friends and allies? The Younger Pitt came to power convinced that Tory principles should prevail. Trade was to benefit the consumer, not to enrich the native industrialist. Imports were to increase comfort, even luxury, among the people of the importing nation; it was no longer seen as an evil to import in the absence of home production. Exports were necessary, according to the new principles as enunciated by Adam Smith and grasped by Pitt, not to gain and hoard bullion, but to benefit the individuals who made, traded, and transported the exports. The sum of the happiness of individuals became the greatest good. The sum of the individuals’ gain became the wealth of the nation.

Similar sentiments were voiced all over the civilized world, particularly in the new United States, and in France, where the Encyclopedists had defeated the ideas of Colbert. During the decade 1783–93 the foundation of the free trade world was laid by Pitt and his friends. But for the French Revolution and the subsequent wars, the prosperity of that decade might have continued for a further generation, to benefit the whole world instead of only America and England. Yet it was this opportunity that gave both countries a head start in the next century.

As far as the Triangular Trade was concerned, the new men hated the closeted, fetid corruption of the City of London and the West Indian interest. To this hatred of mercantilism, which gave the early free traders a moral edge they never entirely lost, was added the philanthropists’ loathing for the callousness of the slave trade and, worse perhaps, its mercantile justification. If the mercantile, economic justification for “the system” could be blown away by the fresh air of individual responsibility and the individual contribution to the wealth of nations, would not the moral base for slavery disappear?

Thus was born the great alliance of the Tories, under the Younger Pitt, and the philanthropists, under his friend William Wilberforce. Mercantilism was dead as an intellectual belief with any respectability. “Parliamentary Colbertism” was as discredited as the slave trade became.

The new men believed in free trade, and it was a natural alliance to join with those who believed in free men. Both parties saw an immense amount of activity—and misery—which benefited only those who were unworthy, since their profits rested on an illegitimate slave trade. For both practical and moral reasons, it was agreed among the abolitionists that the slave trade should be the first target. It was more horrible, more susceptible to easy abolition, and it would not, above all, need any parliamentary money for compensation. Even so, it took time. Five times Wilberforce was defeated in the Commons, but in the end he triumphed. Within 18 months of Trafalgar the slave trade would meet its own defeat, and thereafter be considered as foreign and as unworthy as any other enemy. Battles are gained or lost because the winner is stronger or the loser is weaker; that is obvious. But in the fight between reform and resistance it is not the strength of reform, but the virtue of reason and circumstance, which overcomes resistance. Reform, as distinct from revolution, is no boxing match, nor a football game, nor a contest between past and future, nor a battle between good and evil. It is the importance of circumstance which makes reform possible, and allows reformers to claim that their point of view has the inevitability of logic. So it was with the abolition of the slave trade. Very few could defend the system once 4 circumstances obtained.
The first was that clever money and “new men” were moving elsewhere, into England’s own Industrial Revolution, into turnpikes and canals, and into trade outside the Triangle. Above all, the bankers were beginning to see that the sugar trade was an incubus in their balance sheets. The planters and traders suffered from hard-core borrowing, on which the debtors were hard-pressed to pay interest, let alone repay the principal. The Triangular Trade was a mature, staple trade, and clever money does not remain long in mature trades.

Secondly, because Britain controlled the seas after Trafalgar, no sugar or slaves could be moved except by permission of the Royal Navy. Rivals could not therefore cheat by engaging in the slave trade or importing sugar produced by cheap slaves without the Royal Navy’s permission, and when peace came, the slave trade, “abolished” by the United States in 1819 and by Denmark in 1803, could be universally condemned not only morally and logically, but also by force majeure, so that no other country could steal British markets with cheaper, slave sugar. Or was slave sugar cheaper?

This was the 3rd reason. No one knew whether sugar was produced more cheaply by slaves or by free blacks. But bankers, many of whom were Quakers, suspected that it could be cheaper to use free labor. What was quite clear was that, if the slave trade were stopped, the value of the remaining slaves in the Indies would rise. Abolition would thus lead not only to a rise in capital values, but also, inexorably, to better treatment for adult slaves, because they could not be replaced in the local market. Thus Christian morality and banking prudence were combined to deal with an institution viewed with distaste, yet representing an enormous investment.

The 4th reason which led reform to overcome resistance was war itself. The Triangular Trade could not be abolished in peacetime without compensation. But in the wartime circumstances of 1807, the nation could use every ton of shipping Britain had, and freight rates were very high. So all parties were compensated without cost. The planters had a rising value in their slaves, the bankers had safer loans, and the shipping interests had immediate other employment for their ships.

It used to be a Victorian morality tale that good men such as Clarkson and Wilberforce triumphed over the evil of slavery, and it was a post-Freudian piece of sourpuss logic that Wilberforce & Co. were more interested in their own salvation than they were in the poor slaves. But all examination of the writings of the time does not support either of these views.

The Encyclopedia Britannica of 1792, the 3rd edition, was a progressive publication edited in Edinburgh. The authors approved of the American Revolution, and of the course of the French Revolution to date—Louis XVI was not guillotined until after the Encyclopedia went to press. The slave trade was condemned as an immoral cruelty which was economically inefficient. Yet the West African black was described thus:

Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness; treachery; revenge; cruelty; impudence; stealing; lying; profanity; debauchery; nastiness and intemperance all said to have extinguished the principles of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are all awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself.

Progressive opinion at the end of the 18th century could not therefore be called unprejudiced. Nor was slavery condemned in itself. It was the trade which outraged progressives of the day, and it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that at any propitious moment the logic of the situation was that the trade, as opposed to the institution, would be abolished. And this is what happened, when all the conditions involving the planters, the bankers, and the shipping industry were favorable.

From 1807 onward the sugar industry of the British West Indies went into slow, then precipitate, decline, Jamaican production falling from 100,000 tons in 1801 to under 5000 tons in 1913. The decline from a wartime peak in 1801–1805 preceded the abolition of slavery itself by a generation. During the Napoleonic Wars, a specifically European development would prevent the return of the Caribbean sugar trade to any kind of boom.

Sugar was the first food (or drug), dependence upon which led Europeans to establish tropical monoculture to satisfy their own addiction. Because sugar cane was a labor intensive crop, the ratio of slaves/28. If the British, with their naval supremacy, abolished the slave trade, the rest of the world lost nothing by following suit, since they could in any case no longer pursue the trade.
sugar always remained at least 10 times greater than the ratios of slaves/tobacco, or slaves/cotton, or any other crop grown in servitude. Perhaps three-quarters of all the Africans transported across the Atlantic, possibly as many as 15 million out of a total of 20 million enslaved in Africa, must be debited to sugar. Yet after 1750 the husbandry existed to grow a different form of sugar in western Europe itself. Only the motivation was absent.

During the Napoleonic Wars French sugar ships had to run the blockade of the Royal Navy in the West Indies. They also suffered the loss of 100,000 tons of sugar a year which had previously come from Dominica (Haiti). Against this background of shortage and high prices Napoleon became aware of the botanical researches of Andrew Sigismond Margraf, of the Berlin Academy. Margraf had discovered that there were significant quantities of sugar in carrots, parsnips, and above all sea beet, a cousin of the beetroot and the mangel-wurzel (a beet relation grown in England for cattle feed). Any child knew that ripe roots were sweet, but it was Margraf who first isolated the sugar in roots. However, it was not until 1801, long after Margraf’s death, that any sugar production took place commercially. Encouraged by the high wartime price of sugar, the 1st selection and crossing of roots for sugar took place. Within 10 years the beet industry was born, and in many continental countries, notably France, it was developed with much *dirigisme* and subsidy after the peace in 1815. The French did not wish ever again to be dependent for their sugar on the goodwill of the Royal Navy.

Within 15 years, beet sugar was threatening the tropical trade. Within 30 years, cane sugar had lost most of its continental markets. In 1885 beet overtook cane in the total world trade in sugar. In some poor, primitive areas of eastern Europe, the only sugar which has ever appeared as an ordinary grocery staple has been made from beet. Since the late 19th century every temperate country can be self sufficient in (beet) sugar if it so wishes.

Against this background, the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 was followed in 1834 by the emancipation of the British slaves. The reason for the delay in bringing about emancipation was the problem of the formula by which the slaves could become ordinary workers, and the question of compensation. These were intimately linked. If the slaves became landowning peasants, there would be no one to work the estates, and the land would become worthless, as in the French colonies. If the slaves became wage earners, they would not know what to do with the money because their basic needs had always been supplied for them. In the end, it was decided that the slaves were to become apprentices for 7 years, and the owners were compensated by up to 60% of the value of the slaves, on the grounds that the apprenticeship period was equivalent to the missing 40% money value. Everyone was happy except the planters. The bankers saw their money again—nearly all the emancipation money went straight back to the City of London to repay the planters’ loans, and was probably reinvested in railways at home. The dissenters and the liberal middle classes assuaged their consciences by the use of government money to right a wrong, just like any modern “democratic” socialist or liberal. The slaves got their freedom. Only the planters had a problem: Instead of working, the “apprentices” ran off to find a piece of ground to live on, or squatted in some corner of a sugar field and raised yams, plantains, and bananas, and thumbed their noses at the overseer. Confidence fell with sugar production, which halved in 5 years. It was to halve again, and again and again.

Ten years after emancipation, when sugar production in the British West Indies was already in steep decline, the free trade party in England carried the day, and all quotas and differential duties were removed on a graduated scale. Parity between British and foreign sugar was to be achieved by 1851. The West Indian interest was effectively bankrupt, if not silent. Between 1832 and 1848 there were 105 trading failures, amounting to bankruptcy, among the merchants in England. There were over a thousand bankruptcies in the West Indies in the 15 years after emancipation. The planters blamed emancipation itself. But they were wrong. They should have blamed the bankers and all the other supporters of free trade.

The wise bankers never lent any more money to the planters. The clever bankers had got out of any commitment to the West Indies years before, during the Napoleonic Wars when prices were high. The wisest of all had dropped support of the West Indian interest during the earlier booms, notably during the 29. Dynamic state control.
Seven Years’ War of 1756–63 or during the American War of Independence, 1775–83. The planters never learned that the virtue of clever money is not the money, which is the same as anyone else’s, but the free advice which goes with it.

Undercapitalized, without any work force disciplined by the need to earn money, their land valueless without labor, their former life-style rotting in the tropical depression, the planters in the British West Indies were never to recover. Sugar production fell until World War I, when the demand for sugar could no longer be satisfied by the usual beet imports from Europe, a situation which temporarily boosted the West Indian sugar cane industry, in particular that of Jamaica. But the great days were over. The sugar addiction was to grow, but it would be satisfied more cheaply by beet, and by the new methods and better land of Cuba, the quintessential 19th century sugar island.

Cuba had been discovered and claimed for the King of Spain by Columbus in 1492. He returned to Spain with tobacco and syphilis as the first imports into Europe from the Western Hemisphere. For nearly 3 centuries this huge island, nearly as big as England, was populated by less than 200,000 people, white and black, and all the permutations possible between the 2 races. Havana, the capital, less than 200 miles from mainland Florida, accounted for more than a 3rd of the population. Cuba was ruled until 1820 by the Spanish viceroy in Mexico and after that date formed, with Puerto Rico, Spain’s only remaining colonies in her once huge American empire. Noncommercial colonists had tried to impose on the land of Cuba the plants of Spain: vines, olives, and wheat. None of these prospered, but the cattle brought over in the 16th century multiplied exceedingly in the hills, so that dried beef was exported to Mexico and Venezuela, and provisioned ships. Leather was exported to Spain, and remained Cuba’s most important export until the end of the 18th century.30

For the Spanish, silver and gold were an annual treasure tribute from the Americas, and the immensely valuable treasure fleet lay in Havana harbor, ignoring the possibilities of the island which was to become the greatest sugar producer in the world. European Spain, like Portugal and Sicily, was self-sufficient in sugar, and trade between Spanish colonies was only permitted with Spain herself—and for 3 centuries only with Seville. The fleet left Havana for Spain fully provisioned, provided with citrus fruits against scurvy and green vegetables as well as dried beef. These commodities came from plants or seeds transferred from Europe, probably via the Canary Islands, which also provided a large number of the poorer white immigrants. The city of Havana, bigger than any 18th century English city except London, was a whore among towns, existing only for the fleet, providing the waiting seamen with what seamen have always thought they wanted: drink, gambling, and women. In 1762, when the English captured and held western Cuba for less than a year, Havana had already acquired its raffish, demi-mondaine reputation, which was only brought to an end by the bourgeois virtues of Communism 2 centuries later, in the 1960s.

It is important to remember that in the Americas the Spanish instinctively reproduced the conditions of 16th century Spain: large cities with cathedrals, civil and military governors, market towns and villages into which were gathered the rural population. The Spanish were a much more urban people than the English in the Caribbean. The English islands, correspondingly, were typically covered with estates of various sizes, as at home.

In the short time available to the English in 1762–63 they could not change much of Cuban trade, but they did open up men’s minds to the possibilities of sugar growing. Cuba was already an important tobacco producer (snuff, not cigars; there were more than a hundred snuff mills in 1763, and more than 2 hundred by the end of the century), and from the Amerindians, long since expired, the Spanish had learned how to grow leather. The importance of leather in Europe and the United States before the invention of vulcanized rubber by Charles Goodyear in the mid-19th century cannot be underestimated. Besides its obvious use for boots, shoes, saddlery, and harness, leather was also used in the same way that paper, rubber, and plastic are today. It was essential for the production of protective clothing, bags, books, boxes, vessels of all sorts, buckets, bellows, washers, seals, pumps, and belts in all kinds of machinery. Huge areas of the world were devoted to the raising of cattle or sheep whose meat and bones were left to rot on the pampas, steppes, or veldt. The demand for leather was apparently insatiable, and shortage sometimes imposed a restriction oil industrial and economic progress.
sweet potatoes, yams, bananas, maize, most of the beans we now know, yuccas, and the American pumpkins and squashes. The Spaniards were not as efficient as the Indians, and were wasteful of land—as indeed they could afford to be. In 1763 the density per square mile was less than five, far less than in medieval Spain or Italy. A hundred years later it was 8 times as much, with a total population of 1.6 million and a density of 40 per square mile. It was still not very crowded, but the difference was caused by sugar.

The introduction of sugar culture entailed not only the discovery of markets other than Spain, which was self-sufficient in sugar, but also the entry of Cuba into world trade, including the slave trade. While there might have been a few thousand black slaves introduced into Cuba before sugar, they were relatively well treated and reproduced themselves without difficulty in an island devoid of the intense pressures apparently inevitable in commercial sugar production. After the 1770s, possibly as many as 2 million may have been imported. The very last recorded import was of 600 slaves in October 1865, on the estate of Don Marty: “The landing is denied by the authorities, but the fact was publicly known at the time.”31

Cuba’s indented coastline made smuggling very much easier than it had been in the British islands, and thousands of slaves were landed during the century before 1865, directly on sugar estates and not through ports. This makes statistical analysis difficult, but it is quite clear that at least 500,000, and perhaps more, were landed between 1830 and 1865. The death rate on the plantations averaged at least 10% a year, no better than a century before in the French or British colonies.

To supplement these illegal Negro imports, between 1847 and 1880 about 140,000 Chinese coolies were shipped round the Horn, or via the Cape of Good Hope, a 15,000-mile voyage. Physically tougher than Negroes and less fatalistic, only 11–12% died en route. Fewer than 25% survived in Cuba, however, and fewer than 1% returned to China—because they only cost the passage money, these “indentured laborers” were in many ways even less well treated than slaves.

The conditions of the slave trade itself, from Africa to the Americas, did not improve after it had been made internationally illegal.32 On the contrary, for obvious reasons it was probably far less humane. The

31. Foreign Office despatches, quoted in Hugh Thomas, *Cuba*.
32. Chronology of the abolition of slavery
   1761 - Slavery abolished in mainland Portugal.
   1775 - Slavery abolished in Madeira.
   1789 - First abolition effort by Wilberforce in House of Commons Slave trade forbidden to Danish subjects as from 1 January 1803.
   1794 - Freedom of all slaves decreed by French Assembly. Export trade in slaves declared illegal by Congress.
   1802 - Slavery reintroduced into French colonies.
   1807 - Abolition of interstate slave trade within USA, 2 March. Slave trade illegal for British subjects from 1 March 1808.
   1811 - Slavery “abolished” in Spain and Spanish colonies. Violent opposition in Cuba. Motion not enforced.
   1813 - Slave trade abolished by Sweden for Swedish subjects.
   1814 - Slave trade abolished by Netherlands. United States and United Kingdom agreed at Treaty of Ghent to co-operate toward suppression of slave trade.
   1815 - Portugal agreed to abolish slave trade north of the Equator. France agreed to abolish slave trade in 1819 (later extended to 1830).
   1816 - Slave owners of Ceylon agreed to free slaves born after August 1816.
   1818 - Slave trade abandoned into Dutch East Indies.
   1820 - Slave trade abolished by Spain.
   1824–40 Abandonment of slavery by most of new Latin American republics.
   1830 - End of French slave trade, but beginning of system of *engagés libres*. These were bought or kidnapped in Africa, transported to the Americas, and became free on arrival: no better, no worse, than forced labor. This system lasted 30 years.
   1833 - British abolished slavery as from 1 August 1834, with five years’ “apprenticeship.”
   1842 - Emancipation in Uruguay.
   1843 - Emancipation in Argentina.
   1843 - Slavery abolished in British India.
moral must be that, to be effective, the reformer has to guarantee that the abuse abolished does not leave
behind an illegal operation more heinous than the open one. The Americans in particular, who defied the
ban on the trade, exhibited the same contempt for the new morality as their spiritual descendants showed
for Prohibition a century later. Laws were made not to be obeyed, but to be circumnavigated, like the world
itself.

After 1820 the Royal Navy maintained continuous patrols off the Bight of Benin in West Africa, in
the trade wind routes, and of course throughout the Caribbean. They were an excellent means of keeping
peacetime crews alert and well-exercised, and constituted an elegant way of justifying naval expenditure
to those who were the natural “economizers” in the nation, and who did not really believe in the Big Navy.
The ships were often commanded and crewed by men who had seen enough of the horrors of the new slave
trade to approach their task with evangelical zeal.

Zeal was needed. Losses at sea were now higher, and ships were faster. Slavers were prizes, even in
peacetime, so that every man’s hand would be against them, and the slave ships therefore avoided contact
with other vessels by using tortuous routes. Disease was rampant. One slave ship was found by the Royal
Navy, floating inert, its entire complement, black and white, slave and crew, blinded with ophthalmia, and
only able to grope about the vessel. Not unnaturally, they were starving in the midst of plenty.

Cuba was, like the ocean, an invitation to avoid the law. The law was such an ass, for a start. The
internal slave trade between Cuban provinces was declared illegal from 1820, but was ignored in the same
way as the same law in the United States. Trade with any country other than Spain was illegal until the
1820s, and that law had been honored in that breach for at least 200 years. Merchants were only allowed
to use Spain’s own creaking banking system, and all letters of credit or other instruments of payment had
to be drawn up more than 3000 miles away. As a result, a great many quite large transactions were settled
in coin. Most of the external trade of Cuba was in the hands of the British and Americans of all kinds, both
from the United States and and from Latin America.

Although it was the English who had introduced sugar into the island, in their short tenure during
1762–63, it was the Americans who recognized the virtues of the fertile land after the emancipation of the
slaves in the South in 1865.

Slave sugar had been produced in Louisiana and other Gulf states before the Civil War, and had proved
to be profitable, when protected by tariffs. But after the abolition of slavery, Southern men and Northern
capital abandoned the canebrakes of the Deep South in favor of the new opportunities in Cuba. Sugar pro-
duction in the United States had proved to be as destructive of the slaves as in any other servile economy,
and “sugar slavery” became a hated, much feared threat for thousands of cotton slaves who knew nothing
of the canebrakes. Life expectation in sugar slavery even in the year before the Civil War was only half that
in other forms of field slavery, and the prospect of working in the sugar estates, even as free men, was not
attractive to the blacks of the Deep South. Americans therefore transferred their attention to Cuba.

The cultivation of sugar cane requires, as has been noted, good land, fuel for the refinery, ample labor,
a home market which can supply the wants of the colony, machetes for cutting cane, caldrons for boiling

32. Continued
1847 - Slavery abolished in Swedish colonies.
1848 - Emancipation in French and Danish colonies.
1852 - Last legal importations of Africans to Brazil.
1854 - Abolition of slavery in Peru. Peonage substituted.
1858 - Portugal abolished slavery in colonies to take effect after 20 years’ “apprenticeship.”
1860 - Abolition in Dutch East Indies.
1861 - Russia abolished serfdom. Emancipation of slaves in Dutch West Indies.
1865 - 13th Amendment to U.S. Constitution formalized abolition of “involuntary servitude” except for crimi-
nals.
1870 - Emancipation in Spanish colonies.
1871 - Abolition of slavery in Brazil, to be effected by 1888.
sugar, and clothing for masters and slaves. In Cuba, as in all the Caribbean colonies in the late 18th century, only land and fuel were freely available, and the shortage of labor was made acute by disease. Although by the late 18th century malaria was contained by quinine, yellow fever was still rampant and mosquito-spread, and not yet known to be a disease associated with insects. It was endemic in Cuba until the Americans eradicated the dirt and disease in the early 20th century.

Slaves provided the labor in the sugar plantations, and whites the artisans. Cuba had hardly any Indians left, if any, in the 18th century. Spaniards from Europe, known as peninsulares, did not stay long, and usually went back to Spain after a tour of duty. If they did stay, and brought up a family in Cuba, the children became known as criollos, or in English, creoles; in English the word has mulatto (half-caste) connotations, but not in Spanish. There were also half-castes, quadroons, and mutations. spaniards were far less racist than the English. There were few taboos against intermarriage in the colonies, and the taboos were more of class than of race. Large numbers of Spaniards in Spain itself have some sort of black ancestry, as in other Mediterranean countries and Portugal.

As slaves became “illegal” and therefore more expensive in the early 1820s, machinery was developed to save labor. Crushing rollers and copper boilers were integrated and steam driven, using for fuel the cane residue known as bagasse. The oxen which had formerly supplied the power were no longer needed, nor were the slaves who had tended them.

After 1855 another great improvement took place: A central sugar mill would service several thousand acres connected by a railway which was often owned by a private American company. The 1st Cuban railway—indeed the 1st in Latin America—was completed in 1845. It ran between Havana and Guines, a distance of 45 miles.

While all these labor-saving devices were employed, using American, French, and British capital, whites of the technician or foreman class, from Europe or the Canaries, would manage the machinery, and contract Europeans would oversee the labor, including slaves and Chinese coolies. Technical improvement was continuous, and the industry survived revolts and civil disturbances. Sugar production per slave per year increased from 200 pounds in 1760 to about 1 ton in 1840 and about 3 tons in 1880, the year slavery was finally abolished. The whole of this advance was the result of mechanization of transport and refining, and there was very little increase of productivity in the field. By the end of the 19th century Cuba was producing 10 times as much sugar as Jamaica at the beginning of it, with only 3 times the labor and about 5 times as much investment in machinery as in land. Of the million tons produced in the 1890s, more than three-quarters came from American interests. The rapid, forced growth of sugar production was to increase again by a factor of 5 by 1925, when production reached 5 million tons.

This huge, fertile island never seemed able to live in peace with itself during the 2nd half of the 19th century. Four American Presidents, 2 before the Civil War and 2 afterward, wanted to buy and annex Cuba.

33. A mulatto is half-caste, with one black and one white parent. A quadroon is the product of a white and a half caste, i.e., one-quarter Negro. A sambo or zambo (from the Spanish zambo = knock-kneed) is a three-quarter Negro, the child of a black and a mulatto (or an Indian); hence, perhaps, Sambo, originally a black servant, and in turn “little black Sambo.” There are very few pure Negroes in the Americas, and there used to be fewer every year, as more and more “passed” as whites. At one time as much as 10% of the black population of the United States was said to be passing. This no longer applies today, because blacks have become proud of their racial origins, and/or taken their parentage for granted, and/or seen themselves as people, not as stereotypes. It is worth emphasizing the difference between blacks and Negroes, though its importance is not recognized in the United States. All Negroes are black, but not all blacks are Negroes (the aborigine of Australia and Melanesia, for example). The definition of a Negro in this book is a human being with sickle-cell anemia. This anemia does not always occur in half-castes, and very rarely in quadroons.

34. The idea of a central mill was not original. It was first proposed in Cyprus in the 15th century in a deal which involved the Venetian family of Martini as bankers. Even then, it may not have been the earliest known example of this particular industrial rationalization. Some mention is made of central mills supplied by barge on the Ganges in India in 200 B.C. But the employment of slaves and the difficulty of rationalizing their organization in large numbers made any movement toward sensible economics of scale (central mill apart) almost impossible.
Some of the Spanish *peninsulares* wanted to join with the *criollos* to demand independence from Spain. Others wanted to unite with Mexico, yet others to enjoy a semicolonial status with America, and others to become an American state. Before the Cuban War of Independence of 1895–1900 there was never a majority of whites, let alone mulattoes and blacks, for any single policy.

The situation erupted and even involved the young Winston Churchill, who as a war correspondent saw some incompetent military action on the Spanish side. The U.S. battleship *Maine* blew up, with great loss of life, in Havana harbor in February 1898. The explosion was in fact caused by stale, unstable cordite, though everyone thought at the time that the explosion had been caused by an external Spanish mine. War was declared by the United States in April 1898, and was over within months. The Americans brought an end to the endemic yellow fever as well as to 300 years of Spanish rule. American intervention guaranteed independence from Spain. It also guaranteed that American capital would remain in some kind of dominant role throughout the 1st half of the 20th century; this was succeeded by the Good Neighbor Policy of the 1940s.36

The Caribbean (“America’s backyard pond”) has enjoyed a past quite different from almost all of the United States, Louisiana perhaps excepted. Cuba, despite the excellence of its tobacco and the attempt in the early 19th century to grow coffee, has been dominated by sugar for nearly 2 centuries. The island was inevitably neglected by the Spaniards during the Napoleonic Wars, and plantations were allowed to develop on laissez-faire rather than mercantilistic lines. Slaves were the losers, but sugar became relatively cheaper, and the cheapening of sugar, and its disposal, became a paramount consideration.

In Cuba, for the first time, “free” workers plus machinery plus good management showed how the whole growing process could be made cheaper, and sugar came down in price to a point very much nearer to that of the alternative sources of energy. Then the markets became the problem. In good times the world is capable of producing 4 to 5 times as much sugar as the most addicted population could ever need. Cuba showed the way, and also revealed the vital post-1945 nature of the market. The supply side problem had been solved; it was demand that was deficient. The United States guaranteed, effectively, to buy every ton of sugar that Cuba could produce during World War II and during the postwar shortage. Cuba responded. But the U.S.A. did not continue to purchase every ton once the worldwide shortage was over in the early 1950s. It was, in a sense, *Yanqui*37 inability to absorb everything that Cuba might produce, which in turn caused the economic stagnation in Cuba that made Fidel Castro possible. But Cuba, like many other places, could

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35. American policy in the 20th century had to take account of 4 competing interests: American beet growers; American cane growers, limited to Hawaii, Florida, and Louisiana; privileged overseas producers such as Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Cuba, and the Philippines. All these islands suffered from the Sugar Syndrome, of Negros, in the Philippines, now devastated, starving, the home of Communist guerrillas, once the producer of half a million tons of refined sugar per annum; and others. “Others” found no room in the American market. Cane production in countries such as Cuba, with low wage levels, was much more profitable than at home. Domestic beet producers could obtain the help of at least 40 senators from 20 states, and to the influence of the beet grower were added the voices of the ancillary industries and the cattle barons, fattened by the beet residues. Beet also involved water rights, a profitable stalking ground for statesman and lawyer alike.

36. The Good Neighbor Policy was a strategic/political/economic development idea of President Roosevelt’s administration in the 1940s. Before 1939 South America was virtually an Iberian/ British sphere of influence, because the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 (aimed at keeping European influence out of the Americas) was dependent upon the supremacy of the British (not the U.S.) Navy to keep the Europeans out. In the 1930s Italian and German influence in Hispanic America prospered notably, while the indigenous governments showed no sign of increased stability. Indeed Argentina, the 6th richest country in the world in 1929, had declined to 43rd place by 1950, largely due to maladministration. In order to prevent a Fascist strategic takeover, and to replace British power, then wholly occupied elsewhere, Roosevelt effectively reinvigorated the Monroe Doctrine, offering some sort of economic advantage to the Hispanics and adding a great deal of rhetoric. Effectively, Latin America was kept at least nominally friendly to the anti-Fascist cause, while the various regimes of varying degrees of corruption made good use of American capital for their own purposes. Little permanent good was done to the “ordinary people” of most of the countries involved.

37. To the fury of American Southerners, every North American is called *Americano* or *Yanqui* in Iberian America.
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not meet the social challenge of successful primary production, which inevitably reduces employment as it
cheapens output. While it had become the world’s largest ever sugar exporter, Cuba had never developed
political institutions suitable for a 20th century state. Communism beckoned with its alternative solutions.

Fidel Castro is the child of an ex-soldier from Galicia in Spain. His father was a tough, sometimes
violent man who made himself the sugar-rich landlord of 10,000 acres. His mother was once the cook in his
father’s mansion. Onto this genetic omelette Castro sprinkled a few years of study, more of revolutionary
effort, and still more of government. On the way, he allowed his allies to bring us to the brink of World War
III in 1962, attempted to communize Latin America in the 1960s, and tried to help the Soviet Union mobilize
the new nations of Africa against the West in the 1970s. Cuba continues to destabilize and impoverish
many areas of the world.

Meanwhile, there is little evidence that Cuba has done more than substitute one sugar buyer for another.
Even the tonnages, though now a state secret, seem to be about the same. Of all the ex-sugar dependencies,
Cuba, which had so much opportunity during independence, is perhaps the saddest failure. It is now only
another sort of colony, feeding the U.S.S.R. with the sugar its inefficient beet industry cannot provide and
which its people crave. Though Castro has tried to reduce his dependence upon sugar, the addiction to produce
remains as strong as ever, and Cuba’s colonial status is confirmed. It is nearly 500 years since Columbus
discovered it, and Cuba has had only 3 mother countries: Spain for 4 centuries, America for rather more
than 50 years, and the Soviet Union for rather less than 30. The quincentenary of Columbus’s discovery of
Cuba falls in 1992. It should prove Interesting.

What has sugar done for the world? We all know what it has done for the consumer, and there is a vast
literature on the subject of rotten teeth, of impaired digestive systems, and of addicted nervous dependence.
Sugar is such an easy substance to consume and so cheap in the 20th century that the food manufacturing
industry has put some kind of sugar into almost every food, from bread through beans and soup to sausages
and convenience meat dishes. Because they eat sugar, people are fatter, more constipated and vitamin de-
ficient. They can also be more prone to disease, inclined to alcoholism, and unable to avoid the dentist. But
the effect on the Caribbean has been even worse.

The Amerindians have disappeared almost without trace. Not even in the United States or in Australia
is the original, indigenous population so conspicuous by its absence. The white elite left the West Indies
long ago, unless it is here once again (for a few years) to make a new fortune out of tourism, minerals, or
bananas. Few islands in the Caribbean have ever made any concerted effort at self-sufficiency, and despite
the fact that the Caribbean has more indigenous food plants than Europe, people even in some of the more
flavored agricultural areas would starve but for imports, usually from Canada or the United States. A perma-
nent trade deficit exists between this region and the rest of the world. There is an absence of know-how, a
disrespect for the connection between hard work and profit, between the long haul and success, and between
problems, incentives, and solutions. Who can blame the inhabitants? They have faith in flash remedies for
social and political despair, and a tendency to favor the less rational forms of religion, including various
forms of Black Islam, voodoo mixed with Catholicism, spiritualism mixed with Protestant sects of various
kinds, and animism mixed with God knows what.

Though bad enough, these are not the worst effects of sugar. The people of the Caribbean are quite
different from the modern African. They have to carry on their backs a couple of hundred years of slavery,
on average, but that does not explain the whole difference. The inhabitants are descended from the survivors
of slaves who were in the same place for no reason of community.

The crucial point is that many islands are overcrowded with incompatible people far beyond any abil-
ity of their adopted homeland to support them in dignity. The culture is raw, new, impermanent, ugly, and
insubstantial, and gives grave cause for concern to all who love the Caribbean, which is increasingly unable
to resist further encroachment from outside.

Perhaps 20 million, perhaps more, Africans were torn from their homes and the survivors transported
to the Western Hemisphere, so that today there is more Negro blood in the Caribbean than in Africa; the
ancestors of three-quarters of these displaced people were brought over to meet the demands of the white
man’s sweet tooth. This displacement did not stop in the West Indies. Probably half the slaves in the United States originally came through the Caribbean.

In modern times, since World War II, West Indians have emigrated from their rural slums to their own cities and in huge numbers to Britain and the United States. The language, the music, the traditions of slaves have transformed parts of American and European popular culture. Attitudes formed during the 440 years of the slave trade make integration difficult, if not impossible. The multiracial society is a mirage, always somewhere ahead, never here today. The Caribbean contains some of the most beautiful islands in the world, but it is difficult to enjoy the present when the brooding past is remembered.

These islands had one great commercial asset in the days of slavery—the work done by slaves. So much were the slaves the most valued commodity that in the wars of the 18th century, or the raids which occurred between the wars, they were the prime target. They were removed or killed in order to damage the enemy. This reinforced the lack of community feeling between the individual islands, which were owned by different foreign powers.

Abolition of the slave trade, followed by peace, improved the slaves’ lives, but when emancipation came, the hollowness of the life-style was exposed. The British islands were without schools, or roads, or sewage or water supplies. None of these was considered “necessary” for agricultural slaves. Parts of the Old Country also lacked amenities, but there was a thriving middle class which would cry out for these advances in every town in England during the 19th century. There was no middle class in the islands. There were no poor whites, nor middling whites, nor actively mobile whites of any kind, as in the American South. There were the former owners, if still there, and the former slaves, who had nowhere else to go.

Detached from any preferential position in British markets in the 1850s, and with demand for Caribbean sugar not increasing until 90 years later, the English islands went through the 1st century of “freedom” in slum conditions, their poverty relieved only by riot, their population increase in no way balanced by increased jobs, or varied diet or occupation. Since World War II improvement has come in fits and starts, and some Caribbean blacks who stayed at home are better off than those who emigrated to Britain in the 1950s. It was true, before World War II, that there was an increasing population of idle people in the West Indies, without much economic function except subsistence, and it is true today of many cities in England that it is the unemployment suffered by the young blacks that is most notable and that leads to the drug culture, way-out music and religion, and occasional street violence. In the Islands, the shiny new resorts have brought some of the population back into the economy, but there are too many people in the wrong places, and it will take generations to build the kind of sense of community that the humblest African peasant takes for granted.