The slave trade contribute to british Economic development essay sample

Economics, Trade

What could be more British than a sweet cup of tea? Has there ever been a more typical or ubiquitous presence in modern social life (until recently) than clouds of tobacco smoke? Wasn’t the post-rationing rush for chocolate characteristically British? The consumption of luxury staples, notably sugar, tobacco, tea, coffee and chocolate – is part of the warp and weft of British life.\n\nYet each and many more of these habits are British only by adoption. The peculiarly British customs associated with these staples developed in a relatively short period of time and involved commodities imported from the very edge of colonial settlement and trade, at a time of increasing mass consumption at home. All took root roughly in the years 1600-1800; i. e. in the period which saw the development of a powerful British imperial and global trading presence. They were in effect one consequence of Britain’s emergence as an aggressive global power, but in the process they changed the nature of domestic British social life forever.\n\nToday Western societies take for granted cheap and readily-available commodities plucked from the far edges of the world and air-freighted to our local supermarkets for our nourishment and pleasure. Yet the history of the consumption of tropical exotica helps to explain key elements of British social life that are of interest both for comsumers and producers alike.\n\nWhy, for example, did the British become attached to sweet tea (quite unlike tea-drinkers in tea’s native Chinese habitat)? And why did the British come to like their chocolate heavily sweetened (in drinking form initially, later as solid eating chocolate), when the indigenous Central American consumers had mixed it with spices and chillies? Why too were those key arenas of eighteenth century male sociability – the coffee house and the tavern – shrouded in clouds of tobacco smoke?\n\nThe answer of course lies in the eighteenth-century British pre-eminence as Atlantic slave traders, and the economic importance of British slave colonies in the Caribbean and North America. Armies of Africans and their local-born descendants toiled, out of sight and generally out-of-mind, to bring forth sugar (and rum) from the luxuriant islands, and tobacco from the Chesapeake – all for the pleasure (and profit) of Europeans. Africa held the key. In the words of one mid-eighteenth-century commentator, Africa could yield slaves `by the thousands, nay millions, and go on doing the same to the end of time’ (Rawley, pp. 231).\n\nThe Atlantic slave trade remains oddly invisible in the commentaries of historians who have specialized in the sources and causes of British industrialization in the late eighteenth century. This curiosity contrasts sharply with the perspective of eighteenthcentury strategists who, on the eve of the industrial revolution, placed great stock in both the trade and the colonial plantations as vital instruments for British economic progress.\n\nSpecifically, Joshua Gee and Malachy Postlethwayt, once described by the imperial historian Charles Ryle Fay as Britain’s major “ spokesmen” for the eighteenth century, both placed the importation of African slaves into the Americas at the core of their visions of the requirements for national expansion. (Rawley, pp. 89) Fay also described both of them as “ mercantilists hardening into a manufacturers’ imperialism.” (Rawley, pp. 89) For such a “ manufacturers’ imperialism” to be a success, both Gee and Postlethwayt saw the need for extensive British participation in the trade in Africans and in the maintenance and development of the West Indies.\n\nHowever, for historians of the industrial revolution, British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade brings forth, at most, a proper and perfunctory moral abhorrence. It plays no part in the stories they weave about the origins of the industrial revolution. Explorations in Economic History devoted to Britain's industrial revolution, to the potential relevance of Eric Williams's (1966) hypothesis that the development of British industrial capitalism bore intimate links to the Atlantic slave system.\n\nThe intellectual invisibility of the economic significance for British industry of the British trade in slaves is reinforced by the peculiar attitude of some economic historians over what constitutes true items of commerce.\n\nThe polite explanation is, of course, that the historians of the industrial revolution have a valid reason for not mentioning arguments that assign a leading role in British industrial expansion to the foreign sector and, more specifically, to the slave trade and plantation slavery. For them, commerce with the colonial plantations and with the African coastal regions was no more than a handmaiden to the British process of industrialization.\n\nForeign trade expanded considerably faster than output throughout the Industrial Revolution. Between 1700 and 1800 the volume of foreign trade grew sixfold. Although the expansion was studded with leaps and bounds followed by sharp retreats, it was on the whole much faster than output and population growth. (Rawley, pp. 58) Perhaps this has led many historians to conclude that foreign markets were indispensable to British industrial growth. They were not.\n\nEngerman constructed what he viewed as overstated estimates of the profits earned from the slave tradeby British capitalists. He then sought to demonstrate that slave trade profits, as a percentage of national income, investment, and commercial and industrial investment for Britain in several years during the eighteenth century, were too small to matter in an explanation of British industrialization. Note, first, that Engerman's intentionally overstated estimates are limited to profits from the British slave trade alone; they do not encompass the entire returns from the trade as well as the colonial plantation system in the British West Indies (see Darity 1982; Solow 1985).\n\nSecond, in light of the more recent range of estimates of the profits from the slave trade, it is not clear that Engerman's numbers constitute a gross overstatement. Third, it is not apparent that Engerman's percentages actually are small in a historical or relative sense, despite their apparent absolute smallness. In a critique of Engerman's argument, Barbara Solow makes exactly such a point: " Focusing on 1770 . . . we find that [Engerman's] overstated slave trade profits form one half of 1 percent of national income, nearly 8 percent of total investment, and 39 percent of commercial and industrial investment." (Rawley, pp. 175)\n\nThese ratios are not small; they are enormous. The ratio of total corporate profits of domestic industries to GNP in the United States today (1980) amounts to 6 percent. The ratio of total corporate domestic profits to gross private domestic investment for that year amounts to over 40 percent. And the ratio of total corporate domestic profits to 1980 investment in domestic plant and equipment (non-residential fixed investment) runs at more than 55 percent. (Rawley, pp. 192)\n\nHow can we be sure the ratio of slave trade profits to national income in 1770 is " small" at half a percent, when the ratio of total corporate profits to GNP today is only 6 percent? If slave trade profits were 8 percent of investment in Britain in 1770, is that " small" when today total corporate profits amount to 40 percent? No industry manages as much as 8 percent. Is the potential contribution of an industry whose profits can “ only” amount to 39 percent of commercial and industrial investment to be ruled out because it is “ small”? ((Rawley, pp. 155)\n\nNaturally it is not my intention to make a serious comparison between 1770 and 1980, nor to claim that these figures make a case for Williams. Engerman never claims that they measure anything but an upper limit on what the slave trade could have contributed to British growth. On the evidence of his figures, the contribution could have been enormous.\ n\nThe best-developed application of Engerman’s small ratios argument to the period of the industrial revolution is Patrick O’Brien ‘ s (1982) attempt to dismiss the importance of trade with the entire periphery (Asia, Africa, and the Americas) for European economic development. O’Brien marshalls estimates of the shares of foreign trade in overall economic activity for all of eighteenth-century Europe to show that the numbers are too small to give credence to the importance of trade of any sort as a critical engine of economic expansion. Presumably, European economic development was predominantly an internal affair that would have proceeded if the rest of the world had not existed from the eighteenth century onward.\n\nThe small ratios argument is the crux of the empirical basis for dismissing the proposition that the slave trade and the colonial plantation system were instrumental in British economic development. It is a weak basis. Another a priori argument that emerges with less frequency (Rawley, pp. 238) is that the slave trade was a highly competitive industry where only “ normal” profits could be earned.\n\nThe inference then drawn is that in the absence of supernormal profits, the slave trade could not have played a key role in Britain’s accumulation of wealth prior to or during the industrial revolution.

But this is an insubstantial argument. As I have pointed out elsewhere , conclusions about the degree of competition in the slave trade industry provide no information about the volume of slave trade profits, slave trade profitability, or the specific channels into which slave trade profits subsequently flowed.\n\nThis is indicative of an overarching scheme of expansion, of which the slave trade and plantations were a critical linchpin and a valuable direct source of funds. Ronald Bailey () finds the answer: " For a source of capital sufficient to finance industrialization, and to support the expensive habits of the British ruling elites, we need look no further than the profits from the overseas trade to the Caribbean, of which the slave trade and related commerce was an indispensable prop."\n\nBut what might be the precise nature of a scheme of British expansion that locates slave trading and plantation slavery at its core? A surprisingly wide variety of answers are available in various economic theories. The point in the discussion that follows is not to establish a single correct approach but to indicate a range of reasonable arguments compatible with a vital role for the slave trade and slavery in the analysis of British industrialization.\n\nAdam Smith's (1976) emphasis on extension of the market as the animus of growth via its positive effects on the division of labor constitutes a case for the importance of a colonial system. Despite Smith's aversion to the monopolistic aspects of British commerce with the American colonies, despite his moral abhorrence of slavery, and despite his pragmatic belief that slave labor is inherently costlier than wage labor, Smith viewed the American colonies as a major economic benefit to Britain–so much so that the benefits more than outweighed the dead-weight loss from what Smith saw as excessive regulation of the colonial trade: “ We must carefully distinguish between the effects of the colony trade and those of the monopoly of that trade. The former are always and necessarily beneficial; the latter always and necessarily hurtful. But the former are so beneficial, that the colony trade, though subject to a monopoly and notwithstanding the hurtful effects of that monopoly, is still upon the whole beneficial, and greatly beneficial; though a great deal less so than it otherwise would be.” (Rawley, pp. 167)\n\nFrom the standpoint of Smith’s theory, the importance of colonial commerce is not to be assessed by calculating trade shares, export or import ratios, or the like. It is the positive contribution, on the margin, of colonial markets to the growth in effectual demand that sustains the dynamic of economic “ progress.” In Smith’s economics, the key to technical progress and growth is the producer’s expectation that a growing market will exist for his wares.\n\nMuch attention has been given to the idea that the industrial revolution was primarily characterized not by an increase in the available factors of production in Britain but by increased productivity of the available factors. While Nicholas Crafts (1987) stands somewhat apart as a skeptic of the magnitude of productivity increases in the industrial revolution, most contemporary economic historians give pride of place to the role of technical change in British industry in the late eighteenth century (Rawley, pp. 196). In McCloskey’s (1985: 65) words, the pace of technical change was such that “ Britain from 1780 to 1860 ate a massive free lunch.” This comes close to the “ wave of gadgets” characterization of the industrial revolution.\n\nThese potential answers must hinge on the inability of British growth strategists–or perhaps, more generally, European growth strategists–

to develop an adequate labor force in the Americas and the Caribbean without resorting to enslavement of Africans. The native population was decimated by the European wars of conquest and exposure to new diseases.\n\nThe natives also could flee inland. The “ free” white laborers in a new and seemingly unsettled territory would be predisposed to acquire their own land, a point often made by the Marxists, rather than work at another’s behest for wages. To work instead as a wage laborer, the free laborer would have to have been paid relatively more, and the differential may have been prohibitive from the standpoint of profitability. Similarly, the expenses required to lure large numbers of free laborers to the Americas might have reduced perceived profitability relative to the use of slave labor.\n\nBritain as a commercial and military power resulting in the often brutal imposition of economic and strategic interests on distant peoples and regions. This is spectacularly true in the case of sugar. What helped create the infamous British sweet tooth was the remarkable development of the atlantic slave system for sugar production. True, the British did not pioneer African labour in the Americas. But they did perfect it, moulding it into an efficient, expansive and profitable business, whose ramifications were deep-reaching. The British transported more Africans than any other nation and it was British ports which waxed prosperous on the Atlantic trade. Of the over 11, 000 British slaving voyages in the eighteenth century, more than half originated in Liverpool.\n\nBut dozens of small ports also joined in this lucrative trade – who today thinks of Lyme Regis, Lancaster or Whitehaven in this context? Few areas remained immune from the contagion of the Atlantic trades. Foodstuffs, produce and manufactured goods from throughout Britain (along with goods transported from Europe and Asia) filled the holds of these African-bound slave ships. (Rawley, pp. 98) The slaves were bought with, or bartered in exchange for, a massive range of British goods and produce.\n\nThe foodstuffs from the lowlands of Scotland and Ireland, metal goods from the Black Country, cloth, clothing, shoes and hats, sails and nails, plates, pans – and hundreds of thousands of firearms – were loaded into the outbound slave ships. Their place in the holds was taken on the second leg – the Middle Passage – by African slaves. The return voyage saw the vessels filled with tropical produce bound for British markets. In the New World the planters and slaves and the communities they forged were sustained by a mercantilist system which formed an umbilical cord between British industries and dependent tropical settlement. They needed Britain, and Britain needed their produce.\n\nThe very great bulk of the 11 million-plus Apricans landed in the Americas – a figure which does not include millions of casualties who died in Africa and at sea – were destined, initially at least, for sugar colonies. Plantations proliferated Brazil, then Barbados in the early seventeenth century and in Jamaica after 1655. Fruitful land, European capital and management and African labour; all came together in the rapid development of the sugar economy. And the whole was kept in place by an increasingly powerful British state, its economic and fiscal muscle flexed by the patrolling Royal Navy.\n\nNaval power kept out other Europeans and was the ultimate instrument for the physical control of the ever-resistant armies of brutalised Africans. Commercial interests, military strategy and economic well-being came together in the creation and maintenance of the slave empires. And all for what? So the British people – and many others of course

– could enjoy, cheaply, the sweet pleasures which only recently had been the costly preserve of their social betters. Sugar entered the British blood stream. The few thousand tons imported in the 1650s had grown to 23, 000 tons in 1700. By 1800 it stood at 245, 000 tons.\n\nThe Scottish theologian, Duncan Forbes, could remember a time when tea had been expensive, recalling how, `Sugar, the inseperable Companion of Tea, came to be in the possession of the poorest Housewife, where formally it had been a Rarity …'. (Rawley, pp. 143) It sweetened bitter drinks; tea from China, chocolate from Central America and coffee from the Yemen. Each of these commodities was later transplanted to other colonial possessions for more convenient and profitable cultivation. The end result was that sugar became a basic ingredient in a host of British dishes, and was enshrined in a range of cookbooks and domestic handbooks. `Sweeten to taste' became the watchword of the British cook.\n\nSlave trades were, by and large, part of that remarkably complex economic exchange which in turn sustained the British appetite for imported pleasures of their own. The slave trade, of course, was only the initial step in New World slavery, and as evolutionary biologists point out, it usually requires several generations of selection pressure for a genetic trait to establish itself in a population. Thus it is important to point out now that during the first few years in the Western Hemisphere the Africans went through a period of " seasoning"–the term " seasoned" was attributed to a captive who survived these first crucial years. Like the transatlantic slave trade itself, " seasoning" was characterized by excessive sweating, diarrheas, and fevers.\n

Bibliography

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