

The impact of the sugar and silver trade webs on the pertinent nations



The Impact of the Sugar and Silver Trade webs on the pertinent nations and the rest of the world (15-18th Century) The world we currently inhabit is one of fierce globalization, where international trade has been flourishing for centuries, and we find ourselves at a point in human existence where almost 90% of the goods such as electronic items sold in the United States are produced in Far East Asian countries such as China and Taiwan.

A few centuries ago, though, the world was a far more closed place - there wasn't even an accurate representation of the countries of the world on a map the 1500's, and to delve into how the world became from almost 'closed economies' to having every product traded globally is fascinating. In their books, *The Origins of the Modern World* and *Captives as Commodities : The Transatlantic Slave trade*, Robert Marks and Lisa Lindsay respectively explore how the world developed from the early 16th century onwards, and look at the way the world, and in particular the nations that were heavily involved in trade were affected.

Through the course of this paper, the focus will primarily be on the webs of sugar and silver trading established over the course of the 16th century, and beyond, and the affects this trade had on the countries involved, the people who inhabited these lands and helped establish the globalized world we live in today. The painting in the prompt has a woman holding a silver tong and is using it to take sugar out from a bowl made from porcelain. Britain never and till date, doesn't have a home grown supply of silver due to a lack of the natural resource.

The silver tongs in the picture were probably manufactured using silver that was mined in South America. Silver was a resource in great demand in the 1500's. Silver was used as currency in one of the world's largest economies at the time - China#, and was also in growing demand across the continent of Europe. The European Nations at this time, though not far ahead of the rest of the world in many aspects, were the most militarily advanced and had fierce colonial ambitions.

The Spanish, whilst trying to further their colonial conquests, discovered and then ventured into South America in the late 15th century. In their exploration of South America, they found a city with an almost insurmountable amount of natural silver - Potosi. In their attempt to expand their empire, and also motivated by the chance of becoming European pioneers of trade in silver, increased by their desire of colonial ambitions in China, aggressively took over large areas of South America.

Rapidly, Potosi was turned from a city of few inhabitants to the largest city in South America in a matter of decades, as it was the focal point of silver mining and production. # The silver mined and produced in South America was taken via ships to China, where the Spanish gained a strong foothold in terms of trade relations due to the exceedingly high demand for silver due to the aforementioned use of silver as currency in the Chinese economy at the time#.

The silver was also taken to Europe and traded for other goods the Spanish desired, such as coal and ship parts, trading areas in which the British were preeminent, and such webs of trade lead to the woman in the picture in

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context holding silver tongs that had been mined all the way across the Atlantic, in South America. The trading of silver during the 1500's was one of the keystones of modern day globalization. This trade and globalization, though, had severe repercussions for the nations whose natural resources were being exploited. The silver the Spanish traded throughout the world was never theirs to trade in the first place.

The Spanish seized control in South America by brute force - the initial inhabitants of the lands in South America were practically enslaved and forced to work for long hours in perilous conditions to try and satisfy the Spanish's desire for silver, silver trade and all the benefits it brought them. The Andeans were forced to work in the mines in Potosi - in conditions so brutal that at a time, seven out of ten mine workers would end up dead due to a mining accident or the excessively high levels of mercury in the mines during their working lifetimes.

The conditions in Potosi made it a place where everyone dreaded to work and led to Potosi's ill-famed tag of the "Mouth of Death"#. During this time period, Andean society was completely restructured from top to bottom. Peasants were forced to work in mines for an obscene 18 hours a day with minimal pay, and taking the death rates of mine-workers into account, saying the Spanish were cruel colonialists would be an understatement for the ages.

As time went by, the local population in South America started diminishing rapidly due to the exceptionally high death rates of people associated with silver mining and production, and slave labor from Africa was brought in to

bear the burden of the world's demand for silver and the Spanish desire to be at the center of one of the most crucial trade webs at the time. For the Spanish, the Chinese and other European nations that gained access to silver in quantities like they never had before, the web of trade of silver brought nothing but good to their economies and societies.

Silver, initially during the early parts of the 16th century had become a symbol of wealth in nations such as Britain, and was an item predominantly used in an ostentatious manner. Over time though, the large supply of silver coming in from South America made it more accessible and it became more of a necessity, expanding the vicious cycle that had the helpless South Americans, and then the African slaves# at the bottom - being exploited for long hours and risking their lives working in a city termed the Mouth of Death.

Another trade web that had a significant impact on the world at this time was the trade of sugar. Like silver, sugar too was a good used for ostentatious purposes in the early 15th century, but growing industrialization and a realization of the uses of sugar across the European continent caused an exponential increase in demand for the product#. The picture in context sees wealthy women using sugar and silver tongs and only such people (belonging to the upper echelons of society) could afford sugar till a point in time.

Britain at the time was leading the industrial charge in Europe, and the working classes were coming to realize the benefits of sugar in terms of calories, that helped them work for longer hours in the hope of prospering.

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The English at the time, like the Spanish and other European nations had colonial ambitions in the early part of the 16th century, the French and the English started to gain a strong foothold in the Caribbean Islands - the lands there were lush and were ideal for sugar production.

Prior to this, most of the sugar in Europe came from Brazil and other South American nations, but the rapidly increasing sugar demands in Europe lead English and French to start their own sugar plantations in the Caribbean#. The need for manpower in sugar production was huge, and the rise of sugar trade across the Atlantic simultaneously saw a rapid increase in slaves being taken from Africa and being transported to work in sugar plantations in the Caribbean colonies. The British bought thousands of slaves from Africa at this time, as did the French, and much like what the Spanish did o the Andean populace in Potosi, they made the ' slaves' work for countless hours, while providing them with little or no money and food. #The fact that these people being taken from Africa at the time were treated as objects rather than normal human beings, made their working and living conditions even worse than their enslaved Andean counterparts in South America. # The growth in trade in sugar allowed sugar to become a commonly used product instead of something only the rich and more fortunate could use.

The benefits for groups of people such as the British working class were innumerable, and the demand for sugar kept increasing steadily through the decades and centuries. The common European populace benefited greatly, and so did the British and French empires, which had expanded their colonial conquests, and also become the leaders in sugar trading across the world alongside the Portuguese. The Colonial Powers benefitted greatly financially
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as well, as slave labor cost them next to nothing, and prices for sugar, though driven down due to its acceptance as a necessity rather than luxury good, still garnered huge profits.

The production of sugar though, caused insurmountable damage to the Caribbean Islands, in a very similar manner to what happened in the region of modern day Bolivia where Potosi is located. The creation of sugar plantations saw thousands of hectares of natural farmland destroyed, causing irreparable damage to the land. Moreover, the original inhabitants of the land were forced into slavery, and made to live in subservient conditions, and those who resisted were brutally tortured or murdered.

The African Slaves who were brought in were treated in a horrific manner - and slave trade became a key part of the sugar trade web that was being created across the Atlantic. As Lisa Lindsay aptly states in her book, " The plantation models came to involve millions of doomed Africans in one of the most profitable collective enterprises the world has ever seen" # The trading connections established across the Atlantic, and between countries such as Spain and China were some of the early cornerstones of modern day globalization.

Through trade, the world finally started moving from self-sufficient nations, or at least nations that attempted to be to nations that used their specialties to trade in goods and products desired in their nation that could not be home-grown as well. The colonial powers depended greatly on the lands they conquered to get such goods - Spain in South America is a prime example.

Their dependency on the silver mined in Potosi was huge - it enabled them to keep their dream of possibly colonizing China one day alive.

Burgeoning trade across the continents helped bring about this concept of 'specialization' where nations started producing more of goods they were more suited to producing, and traded in higher qualities of other goods in exchange; goods they were possibly not great at producing themselves. This chain of trade on the whole led to an increase in quality and quantity of products such as tea, jute, silver and sugar across many countries in the world, and helped increase average living standards greatly.

The trading routes established in the early 16th century also started a move away from the tributary system to an increasingly more capitalistic approach worldwide, with nations competing to gain an upper hand on newer technologies or inventing better ways of producing goods. The lure of gaining financially through trade and in land via colonization compelled the European nations to push themselves to new heights - and the world benefitted from this ambition greatly.

The trade of sugar and silver across the world from the 15th century onwards helped globalization increase rapidly and was, from a European perspective at the time, a win-win situation. The Colonial Powers gained land across various continents, enslaved labor and brought African slaves to satisfy the growing demands for silver and sugar in their countries and more to trade across the continent and with nations such as China and India in the Far-East. Increase in worldwide trade increased international

interdependency and helped the process of globalization to start during this time too.

This progress, though great, came at a significant cost - societies such as the Andeans were completely destroyed, the original populations of these areas were enslaved against their will, their land was exploited and they were made to live in horrific conditions. Over 32 million pounds of silver was exported from Potosi itself during the era of Spanish rule there. # With the European thirst for control of trade and expanding their empire, the slave trade grew through this time, and a countless number of innocent African Americans were abused for hundreds of years.

Eventually, through these trading webs, the world became a more interconnected place and in time(1848) slave trade was eventually abolished, once the world came to its senses about the hedonistically cruel treatment of their fellow humans based on something as trivial as skin color, but the impact of that still echoes in the world we live in today. Sugar and Silver through these trading webs eventually became household products that everyone could use, increasing living standards significantly at the time.

The picture in the context of this paper is one that leads up to this era, and though the British, Spanish and other colonial powers got what they wanted, they fulfilled their desires through mistreating and misusing people and land that was never meant to be under their control to begin with. Bibliography: Lindsay, Lisa. Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2008. Chapters 1-3 Robert Marks, The Origins of the Modern World, United States: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007, chap.

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