

# Calories and capital sugar and economic evolution in pre- industrial society term

...

[Parts of the World](#), [European Union](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [Calories to Capitalism: Sugar as an agent of change](#) \n \t
2. [Taste makes the difference](#) \n \t
3. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Levers that set the wheels of social change in motion often seem banal and insignificant from a modern perspective. In the 17th century, sugar was little more than a dietary novelty, a foreign curiosity that improved the taste of brackish teas and sedimentary coffee for the wealthiest members of English society. A century later, the uncanny growth of the cane-based product had made it an irreplaceable commodity that would saturate the British market and lead to a sea change in Western Europe's economic framework. The means by which sugar was produced and financed helped to revolutionize the very principles upon which English and, later, other European economies functioned. In a world where rat-borne fleas could kill millions and determine the course of history, it should come as no surprise that anthropologists and historians would see human culinary habits as driving social evolution. The taste bud, it seems, was mightier than the sword.

## **Calories to Capitalism: Sugar as an agent of change**

Sugar plantations operated according to an organizational structure, a mechanical efficiency and plentiful labor force that anticipated Capitalism and helped spur the Industrial Revolution. Though the early plantations in

the Caribbean and the Western Atlantic relied on slavery in order to maintain productivity, they featured a high degree of stratification, with a “ capitalist,” a layer of management and a slave labor force. The capitalists in this equation, of

As anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues in *Sweetness and Power*, the rapid growth in the sugar trade depended upon the establishment and exploitation of new colonies and, especially, of native populations (Mintz, 55). This provided an off-shore source of revenue not available in Europe and brought not only unprecedented amounts of capital into European economies (England’s in particular), but a popular dietary supplement that would pervade the continent’s populations for centuries. “ The Caribbean plantations were a vital part of this process, embodying all of these features, and providing both important commodities for European consumption and important markets for European production” (Ibid, 55). The plantations were a lucrative investment for English investors, who were often friends and business partners of the plantation owners. The introduction of investment capital into the burgeoning sugar industry through the 17th and 18th centuries is seen by many as stimulating a Capitalist mode of production, since this money could be reinvested, used to improve the means of production and purchase more workers.

The classical debate is over whether the early sugar plantations can be defined as capitalistic, or whether they presented a functional framework for the development of commercial Capitalism. The issue typically turns on slave labor, which runs counter to the idea that capitalist economies are based on

free labor. Yet in Industrial Age Europe labor was to a large extent coerced, insofar as workers lacked alternative opportunities and lived without the hope of finding subsistence beyond a very narrow economic scope. Thus, similarities between the slave labor of early, pre-Capitalist Caribbean plantations and early industrialized Europe are close enough that one may confidently assert that the great industrialists of Britain and other parts of Northern Europe had simply found a way to “legitimize” a system the sugar plantation owners had set in motion. For Marx, there was no difference between the cynical exploitation of the slave owner and the factory owner. “The practical agents of capitalistic production and their pettifogging ideologists are as unable to think of the means of production as separate from the antagonistic social mask they wear to-day, as a slave-owner to think of the worker himself as distinct from his character as a slave” (Marx, 667). Both labor types produced tremendous amounts of money for their investors and, to a degree, both were self-sustaining.

In fact slavery, as evil and indefensible as it was, may have served an unexpected purpose in the development of the Western economic model. It greased the all-important wheel of production that made sugar the true “cash crop” of the 17th and 18th centuries. “The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly. But in so doing it helped to create the industrial capitalism of the 19th century, which turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works” (Williams, 210). Can we truly consider ourselves surprised to find that the industrial workers of whom Marx wrote, who labored under conditions that approximated those of

slavery, were the building blocks of a capitalist system that had its origins in the slavery of the British Caribbean colonies? Slavery and commercial monopoly opened the door to European wealth; the downtrodden minions of Europe's Industrial Revolution and its aftermath brought Capitalism to its full flowering.

### **Taste makes the difference**

The nascent capitalist systems that developed through the production of, and investment in, the region's sugar industry helped establish an economic modus operandi that came to define the sugar producing islands. "The historical evolution of the region was formed within the historical processes of capitalist modernity even as it contributed significantly to the making of a modern world" (Tomich, 67). It took an economically robust agricultural product like sugar to foment such change. Taste made the difference: the early financial backers, whose money turned sugar into gold, would have been unlikely to plow resources into a supplementary food product they themselves didn't enjoy, or that they weren't confident would catch on. Substantially increases its utility (Mintz, 9). This, he says, sums up the evolution of sugar, which began as a secondary food substance but became a "carbohydrate core." This principle goes that a given food in a preindustrial society can be considered a carbohydrate core source if it helps support an entire population and serves as a flavor enhancer for other foods (Ibid, 9). In the Caribbean, sugar was also an indispensable staple of the slaves' diet. In England, pairing sugar with other food commodities - tea in particular - had an unprecedented impact on the nation's dietary habits...and

imbued it with social meaning. Sugar had been a novelty item for the upper classes of English society, but widespread consumption among working class families made it a national staple. By the 19th century, sugar consumption had reached unimagined levels. According to estimates, the national consumption of sugar stood at about 300 million pounds in the early 1800s. By 1852, it had risen to a billion pounds, and continued to increase in succeeding years (Mintz, 143). Sucrose-laden foods, such as jams, puddings, treacle and other “treats” exploded in popularity across all segments of the population, helping to make sugar a substantial part of the average person’s daily caloric intake (Ibid, 143).

Sugar’s addictive properties doubtless had much to do with the explosive growth in its consumption in industrial England and its attaining social meaning. Sweetening helped make the taste of already broadly consumed foods and beverages considerably better. Tea and coffee were the most notable examples. Sugar made these “crude, often bitter and unconsumable” drinks considerably better tasting and accounted for a considerable jump in the use of both (Hobhouse, 80). “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” (Ibid, 80). The relationship between tea and sugar gradually forged a cultural identity that fed on itself and affected financial and employment customs. “As the workers...became habituated to increased consumption of tea and sugar,

their eating and spending habits shifted. In order to afford the quantities of tea and sugar to which they were accustomed, workers started to spend less money on nutritious food and thus, in the long run, their health suffered” (Delaney, 377). Delaney argues that a cynic might well say that tea time helped power the Industrial Revolution at a lesser cost than would have been possible with more nutritious, more expensive foodstuffs (Ibid, 378). A very cynical observer might conclude that the importers of tea and sugar were the pushers of their day, providing an addictive stimulant and causing poor health and bad teeth among easily exploitable sections of the population. “ Pushing” tea and sugar on England’s workers was good for Capitalists: its consumption by the working class helped ensure that the country’s economic engine remained strong. This coincided with the trend toward urbanization, which resulted from the nation’s industrialization. For the masses who moved to the cities, many of the healthy foods which were once readily available in pastoral settings were no longer accessible. Tea and sugar combined to give the newly urbanized, mostly poor populations sufficient caloric intake and helped replace the farm products they had consumed for generations (Rose, 2010). Tea and sugar also proved more conducive to worker productivity (and safety) than other traditional “ staples.” In pre-industrial societies, drinking water was often a rarity, due to the prevalence of various impurities. As such, beer and wine were more reliable but far from ideal for industrial workers. “ Beer drinking could

be tolerated in workers doing primarily manual labor, as was the case in pre-industrialized economies, but it posed a serious problem in the industrialized

sectors of Britain's economy, where fine motor skills were required" (Ibid, 2010). As well, beer consumption was taking up large quantities of the wheat harvest, reducing the amount of grain available for making bread (Ibid, 2010). Tea and sugar, combined with food staples such as bread and meat, offered English laborers enough caloric sustenance to be productive (and remain sober) in the workplace.

Slave labor, profitability and investment made the sugar trade the foundational model for industrial capitalism, clearing away the vestiges of the old feudal system. Sugar also radically changed the dietary customs of Europeans, leading to fundamental cultural and economic changes. Sugar, in combination with beverages such as tea and coffee, provided workforces with a plentiful and energy-laden (if not entirely healthy) caloric supply, which accorded with the logistical restrictions and nutritional needs of the newly urbanized societies of the 18th and 19th centuries. No other supplementary food product has been so influential in the evolution of an economic paradigm, or in the establishment of a nation's cultural identity (it's impossible to imagine England without tea time). Sugar's addictive nature can be said to have "hooked" the English consumer and seduced early English investors seeking lucrative new ventures. Other European nations followed suit, as did the United States. Sugar continues to be a pervasive dietary commodity, one that is found (in various forms) in most mass-produced foods.



## Works Cited

Delaney, C. L. Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology. Malden,

MA: Blackwell Publishing. 2004.

Hobhouse, H. Seeds of Change: Six Plants that Transformed Mankind. New York: NY:

Shoemaker and Hoard. 2006.

Marx, K. Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. New York, NY: Charles Kerr and

Company. 1906.

Mintz, S. W. Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History.

New York, NY:

Viking Penguin, Inc. 1985.

Rose, S. For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed

History. New York, NY: Viking Penguin. 2010.

Tomich, D. " Spaces of Slavery, Times of Freedom: Rethinking Caribbean History in World

Perspective." Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. 17(1) 67-70. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1997.

Williams, E. Capitalism and Slavery. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

1944.