

Sugar revolution essay sample

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The Effects that the Sugar Revolution had on the 18th century Caribbean Society

The Sugar became population in the West Indies. The English, French colonies who settled Caribbean island such as St. Kitts in the early 16th grew tobacco in order to make money. For a little while they were able to make the profit. However by 1640's they faced different competition from tobacco grower in Virginia had certain advantages which are Virginia had large lots of fertile land. Virginia tobacco was cheaper and the quality was better. The English and French colonists found themselves in quandary as Virginia tobacco was out selling their tobacco which meant they earned less money. Tobacco prices fell. The abundance of tobacco growers caused a glut on the markets tobacco production suppressed the customer base. The English and French settlers realized that they needed a new cash crop and sugar was chosen due in Europe, honey was hard to access and it was expensive. Sugar was becoming popular as sweeter in Europe. And also the Dutch were willing to assist them in developing a sugar industry by providing capital, credit, slaves and expertise. The adoption of sugar cane as the new cash crop caused far reaching changes in the British and French colonies.

These changes were so dramatic that they were termed the 'Sugar Revolution' which mean the changover of cash crop from tobacco to sugar which caused widespread changes in the colonies socially, economically, demographically and politically. The sugar revolutions were both cause and consequence of the demographic revolution. Sugar production required a greater labor supply than was available through the importation of European servants and irregularly supplied African slaves. At first the Dutch supplied the slaves, as well as the credit, capital, technological expertise, and

marketing arrangements. After the restoration of the English monarch following the Commonwealth (1642-60), the King and other members of the royal family invested in the Company of Royal Adventurers, chartered in 1663, to pursue of the lucrative African slave trade. That company was succeeded by the Royal Africa Company in 1672, but the supply still failed to meet the demand, and all types of private traders entered the transatlantic commerce.

Between 1518 and 1870, the transatlantic slave trade supplied the greatest proportion of the Caribbean population. As sugarcane cultivation increased and spread from island to island—and to the neighboring mainland as well—more Africans were brought to replace those who died rapidly and easily under the rigorous demands of labor on the plantations, in the sugar factories, and in the mines. Acquiring and transporting Africans to the New World became a big and extremely lucrative business. From a modest trickle in the early sixteenth century, the trade increased to an annual import rate of about 2, 000 in 1600, 13, 000 in 1700, and 55, 000 in 1810. Between 1811 and 1870, about 32, 000 slaves per year were imported. As with all trade, the operation fluctuated widely, affected by regular market factors of supply and demand as well as the irregular and often unexpected interruptions of international war.

The eighteenth century represented the apogee of the system, and before the century had ended, the signs of its demise were clear. About 60 percent of all the Africans who arrived as slaves in the New World came between 1700 and 1810, the time period during which Jamaica, Barbados, and the

Leeward Islands peaked as sugar producers. Antislavery societies sprang up in Britain and France, using the secular, rationalist arguments of the Enlightenment—the intellectual movement centered in France in the eighteenth century— to challenge the moral and legal basis for slavery. A significant moral victory was achieved when the British Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, ruled in 1772 that slavery was illegal in Britain, thereby freeing about 15, 000 slaves who had accompanied their masters there—and abruptly terminating the practice of black slaves ostentatiously escorting their masters about the kingdom. In the British Parliament, antislavery voices grew stronger until eventually a bill to abolish the slave trade passed both houses in 1807. The British, being the major carriers of slaves and having abolished the trade themselves, energetically set about discouraging other states from continuing. The abolition of the slave trade was a blow from which the slave system in the Caribbean could not recover.

Before the slave trade ended, the Caribbean had taken approximately 47 percent of the 10 million African slaves brought to the Americas. Of this number, about 17 percent came to the British Caribbean. Although the white populations maintained their superior social positions, they became a numerical minority in all the islands. In the early nineteenth century, fewer than 5 percent of the total population of Jamaica, Grenada, Nevis, St. Vincent, and Tobago was white, fewer than 10 percent of the population of Anguilla, Montserrat, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, and the Virgin Islands. Only in the Bahamas, Barbados, and Trinidad was more than 10 percent of the total population white. By sharp contrast, Trinidad was the only colony in the

British Caribbean to have fewer than 80 percent of its population enslaved. Sugar and slavery gave to the region a predominantly African population.

This demographic revolution had important social consequences. Rather than being a relatively homogeneous ethnic group divided into categories based on economic criteria, Caribbean society had complex overlapping divisions of class and caste. The three basic divisions were free white persons, free nonwhite persons, and slaves.

Whites were divided along status lines based on wealth. In the British colonies these were called “ principal whites” and “ poor whites.” In reality they formed three ranks. At the top, forming an elite, were families who owned slaves and successful plantations. Some of their names became important in the history of one or more islands, names such as Guy, Modyford, Drax, Sutton, Price, Bannington, Needham, Tharp, and Beckford in Jamaica; Drax, Hallet, Littleton, Codrington, and Middleton in Barbados; and Warner, Winthrop, Pinney, and Jeaffreson in the Leeward Islands. Next in rank came the merchants, officials, and such professionals as doctors and clergymen, who were just a shade below the big planters.

At the bottom of the white ranks came the so-called “ poor whites,” often given such pejorative names as “ red legs” in Barbados, or “ walking buckras” in Jamaica. This group included small independent farmers, servants, day laborers, and all the service individuals from policemen to smiths, as well as the various hangers-on required by the curious “ Deficiency Laws.” These were laws designed to retain a minimum number of whites on each plantation to safeguard against slave revolts. A Jamaica law

of 1703 stipulated that there must be one white person for each ten slaves up to the first twenty slaves and one for each twenty slaves thereafter as well as one white person for the first sixty head of cattle and one for each one hundred head after the first sixty head. The law was modified in 1720, raising the ratios and lowering the fines for noncompliance, but the planters seemed more prepared to pay the fines for noncompliance than to recruit and maintain white servants, so the law degenerated to another simple revenue measure for the state. This was true throughout the British islands during the eighteenth century.

Regardless of rank, skin color gave each person of European descent a privileged position within plantation society. The importance of race and color was a significant variation from the norms of typical European society and accentuated the divergence between the society “ at home” and that overseas.

Each slave society in the colonies had an intermediate group, called the “ free persons of color,” an ambiguous position. Governor Francis Seaforth of Barbados colorfully expressed this dilemma in 1802: “ There is, however, a third description of people from whom I am more suspicious of evil than from either the whites or the slaves: these are the Black and Colored people who are not slaves, and yet whom I cannot bring myself to call free. I think unappropriated people would be a more proper denomination for them, for though not the property of other individuals they do not enjoy the shadow of any civil right.” This group originated in the miscegenation of European masters and their African slaves. By the nineteenth century, the group could

be divided into blacks who had gained their freedom or were the descendants of slaves, and the mixed, or mulatto, descendants of the associations between Europeans and non-Europeans. By the time of the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, the heterogeneous free nonwhite population represented about 10 percent of the population of Jamaica, 12 percent of the population of Barbados, and about 20 percent of the population of Trinidad. A number of these free nonwhites had been free for generations, if not centuries, and had carved a niche in the local societies as successful merchants, planters, professionals, and slave owners.

Throughout the British Caribbean the free nonwhites manifested a number of common traits. They were predominantly female, largely urban, and clearly differentiated from the slaves both by law and by custom. Although adult females outnumbered males, the free nonwhite population tended to be the most sexually balanced overall and was the only group that consistently reproduced itself in the British colonies during the era of the slave trade. Moreover, with the exception of Trinidad, where, as Bridget Brereton indicates, just as many free nonwhites lived in the rural parishes as in the towns of Port of Spain, San Fernando, and St. Joseph, the free nonwhites were strongly urban. After 1809, about 61 percent of all the free nonwhites in Barbados lived in the parish of St. Michael in the capital city, Bridgetown. More free nonwhites lived in Kingston, Jamaica, than in all the other parishes combined.

The free nonwhite population faced competition from both ends of the spectrum. At the lower end of the economic scale they had to compete with

jobbing slaves, who were often working arduously to get enough money to purchase their freedom and so join the free group. At the upper end they competed with the artisan, commercial, and semi-skilled service sector of the lower orders of whites. The whites often used their political power—or in some cases their access to political power in Britain—to circumscribe the free nonwhites as much as possible. Laws distinguishing comportment, dress, and residence, denying nonwhites the right to practice certain professions, or limiting the material legacy of individual free nonwhites were common throughout the Caribbean. But at the time of the abolition of slavery, nonwhites were aggressively challenging the political hegemony of the whites, and their successes were very important in the subsequent development of British Caribbean society.