

Impact of slavery on industrial and consumer society



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What part did slavery play in the emergence of an industrial and a consumer society in Britain in the period 1700-1820?

Slavery did play a part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society in Britain during the period 1700-1820. Slavery did play a part in the emergence of an industrial and an consumer society, but not significantly. Firstly, Slavery enabled large quantities of commodities to be produced and imported to Britain, which led to the consumer society. A consumer society is defined as (Dictionary, 2017)" a society in which the buying and selling of goods and services is the most important economic activity". The consumer society in Britain was on the up during the period 1700-1820, with valuable commodities such as tea and sugar appearing in most homes in Britain. But slavery's part in the emergence of an industrial society was that it was that the profits contributed to the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution was an economic advance for the country. It was the transition to a new and different process where the sugar industry wasn't dominant. Industries such as textiles and Iron were more important to the industrial society. Slavery's profits are believed to have funded the industrial revolution. The idea that slavery played a part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society will be explored further using various sources and examples such as text from Inikori, Blackburn, Eltis and evidence from *Sugar Dynasty* a DVD source.

Firstly, slavery played a key part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society because the slave trade produced valuable commodities for Britain, the main example of this is Caribbean sugar. This argument is supported by Joseph Inikori, a Nigerian scholar who studies Atlantic history in <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-slavery-on-industrial-and-consumer-society/>

America. Inikori states that (Inikori, 2002, p. 481) “enslaved Africans and their descendants were the only specialised producers of commodities in the Americas for Atlantic commerce.” This would mean that slaves were part of the emergence of a consumer society because they were the only way of producing certain commodities such as sugar which was exclusively made abroad as. Evidence from the DVD source *Sugar Dynasty* also argues that the part slavery played in the emergence of a consumer society in Britain. The narrator of the DVD explains how sugar was imported back to Britain where even labourers’ families could buy sugar for their tea. This doesn’t mean it was cheap to buy. Frederick Eden explains how much was spent on these commodities in his book *The State and the Poor Vol 3*, and more was spent on tea and sugar than on rent. Sugar is recorded in this text as costing 9d per pound. This will link later to how profits of slavery played a part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society, as evidence of how much Caribbean sugar was being sold for and how the profits from it could have funded industrial change. Although it was a valuable commodity it wasn’t cheap. Others have argued that slavery’s part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society has been exaggerated. David Eltis is one historian who has argued this. Eltis argues that the slave trade only formed a tiny share of Britain’s Atlantic trade. Eltis uses quantitative data to support this. He states (Eltis, 2001) “The slave trade thus accounted for less than 3 percent of British shipping tonnage.” this data from Eltis shows how little a part slavery played in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society in Britain. Also, Eltis makes a good argument that if slavery and industrial growth were linked and if it did at all contribute significantly to

industrialization then Eltis says that the first industrial economy should have
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been Portugal. As Portugal (Eltis, 2001) “ managed to carry 40 percent more slaves across the Atlantic than did the British.” Therefore, he argues slavery did not play a part in the emergence of a consumer society in Britain.

Instead, Eltis argues that the emergence of an industrial and consumer society was down to other industries. The sugar industry which was produced by the slave trade was not a large enough industry and therefore couldn't have funded industrial change in Britain. Eltis shows this again with the use of quantitative data (Eltis, 2001) Table 10. 1 in Eltis *Europe and the Atlantic Slave System* shows the values adding in millions and the total labour forces of different industries in 1805. Iron, Woollen textiles, sheep farming and coal all had a higher value added than Caribbean sugar. Iron for example has a value of output at 16. 2 million compared with Caribbean sugar at 5. 47 added. Eltis uses a lot of quantitative data in this work. The advantage of this is that it is more reliable and therefore leads Eltis to state that Caribbean sugar was not the largest contributing industry to Britain, as it provided relatively small inputs to other industries. The important point here that Eltis makes is that (Eltis, 2001)“ Sugar was just one of hundreds of industries in an economy that was already complex” this explains to us that it would be difficult to pinpoint what part slavery played when the economy was already complex. Although he does not deny that Slavery played a part in the emergence of an industrial and a consumer society, that part was to supply the country with commodities from a small industry. And contribute to the industrial and consumer society, but in a very minor way. Therefore, slavery did play a part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society as the slave trade provided the country with valuable commodities.

Furthermore, the part that slavery played in the emergence of an industrial and a consumer society is that it produced the profits which funded the industrial revolution. They boosted the economy of Britain. Eric Williams argued this with his thesis 'Williams thesis'. He claimed in *Capitalism and Slavery* (Williams, (1961 [1944])) "that the profits of slavery were such as to fertilize every branch of national production and set British capitalism off to a flying start." Williams believed this was down to the 'triangular trade'. The triangular trade was the route taken by Europeans to transport goods to Africa and exchanged for slaves, that were then taken to the America's. Therefore, slavery's part in the emergence of an industrial society was that the profits funded industrial capitalism. However, Williams book is criticised by Blackburn for having (Blackburn, 1997) "attempted no quantitative demonstration of its thesis" which would have helped greatly with his argument. As discussed above, quantitative is important as it is supportive with numbers and figures. There are several tables in Blackburn's *primitive Accumulation and British Industrialization* that attempt to pin point a figure of profit made from the slave trade. But despite this there is no table that states how much profit was directly invested into the industrial revolution. Referring to the DVD *Sugar Dynasty* it gives us an idea of where profits could have been going. The DVD shows us that the planters indulged in rich and expensive food and drink. The narrator of the programme then goes on to say how the excess consumed by planters discussed visitors to Jamaica. This can be interpreted to mean that they were consuming ridiculously expensive food. We can refer to Blackburn's writing to build further on this, (Blackburn, 1997) " Since a large number of plantation owners were absentees, they were inclined to remit profits to Britain with some adjustment according to <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-slavery-on-industrial-and-consumer-society/>

their estimate of commercial prospects” this builds on the idea that some profits could have been retained by plantation owners to fund their lavish lifestyles. So, slavery did play a part, but more importantly it was the profits which played a part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society. But it is unknown how much profits were invested, it would be difficult to determine how much was invested and to what impact it had.

In conclusion, Slavery’s part in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society in Britain in the period 1700-1820 was that it provided valuable commodities which was important to the consumer society in Britain at the time. As these commodities were in most households but was also very expensive. Also, Slavery’s profits were believed to have played a part in the emergence of an industrial society in Britain as they contributed to the investment of Britain. However, we went on to find out that the slave trade made up for only a minority of the investment into the industrial revolution. Overall slavery played only a few parts in the emergence of an industrial and consumer society in Britain.

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