

sugar plantations. The small, previously desert island became a manna for its Portuguese lords and Italian merchants—and a hell for its tens of thousands of slaves. Europe's dramatic prosperity during the sixteenth century created a considerably larger group of people who could afford to indulge their sweet tooth.

To meet this new demand, the Portuguese decided to expand production further by bringing sugar to Brazil. America became the fourth continent to be pulled into the world sugar market. It was a truly international crop, combining an Asian plant, European capital, African labor, and American soil.

Although Columbus was the first to bring the spice to the Americas since his father-in-law owned a sugar plantation on Madeira, it was in Brazil that sugar first flourished on a large scale. For a hundred years the Portuguese dominated world sugar production. In 1513, to demonstrate his newfound majesty and wealth, the king of Portugal offered to the pope a life-size effigy of the pontiff surrounded by twelve cardinals and three hundred four-foot-high candles—all made of sugar!

Then came the Caribbean's turn and particularly Haiti's moment of glory. The lush tropical French island became a vast sugar plantation and slave prison. Some 30,000 free whites shared the island with a like number of free mulattos and 480,000 slaves. Sugar brought the ancient labor form of slavery and the modern forms of industrial capitalism into a gruesome marriage. The sugar plantation was perhaps the first modern factory. It had a large, disciplined labor force and specialization and integration of tasks almost in assembly line fashion. It required sophisticated refining techniques and expensive equipment. The planters were often prominent absentee members of the French bourgeoisie such as merchants and bankers.

But they relied on an archaic and brutal form of labor. Slavery had died out in Europe and was on the wane in Africa when sugar combined with the Age of Discovery (read: imperialism) to give it new life. Between 1500 and 1880 some 10 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic under the most indescribably horrible conditions. Most of these people were destined for sugar plantations, a large share for Haiti (which imported twice as many Africans as the United States). No wonder that the historian and former prime minister of Trinidad-Tobago, Eric Williams, after noting: "no sugar, no Negro," raved: "Strange that an article like sugar, so sweet and necessary to human existence, should have occasioned such crimes and bloodshed." Williams went on to claim a second paradox: he made the controversial argument that it was the profits accumulated from the sugar-inspired slave trade that financed the industrial revolution in Europe.

In Haiti the contradictions between industrialism and slavery, between the bourgeois and the archaic could no longer be contained once the French

3.6 Sweet Revolutions

Tens of thousands of Haitian refugees have landed on U.S. shores to flee the misery of their island. Haiti, with its staggering child mortality rates (about one-tenth die in their first year), life expectancy of about fifty years, per capita income of under \$400 a year, and 25 percent literacy rate is the American disaster area.

Two centuries ago, however, the island was coveted as one of the richest in the world—the pearl of the Antilles. But while sugar made her delicious to outsiders, it rotted the fabric of Haitian society.

Sweetness was a taste little known to mankind before the early modern period. Honey was the only natural sweetener (which is why paradise was a land of milk and honey), and it was not in great or widespread supply. People had to rely on bland diets of gruel, or rice, or tortillas. Only seasonal fruits relieved the tedium.

Sugar began its march to global acceptance in the Far East or perhaps the South Pacific. A tall grass, it was first domesticated in India by 300 B.C., but spread slowly. A thousand years later it had reached China, Japan, and the Middle East. The Arabs were the first great sugar cultivators; Egyptian sugar was regarded as the world's finest. The bitter Arabian conquest of the Iberian peninsula brought with it the planting of the sweet spice. Other Europeans became familiar with this new plant as they battled their way to Jerusalem during the Crusades. Sugar and violence became intertwined.

The merchants of Venice used their large commercial fleet and navy, combined with their forts and trading posts that dotted the Mediterranean, to dominate the European sugar trade of the Middle Ages. They prospered though the spice was still a luxury good with a small market.

Sugar continued its westward march with the rise of the Ottoman Turks who, by the fifteenth century, had deprived the Venetians of their Moslem sources. The Italians turned first to the recently reconquered areas of Sicily and Iberia. Then they joined with the Portuguese in a momentous departure that would reshape the world economy.

Sailing their seaworthy and maneuverable *naus* and *caravelas*, the Portuguese discovered Atlantic islands such as Madeira and, off the African coast, São Tomé. In São Tomé, sugar production was revolutionized. But it was a terrible revolution. Africans were enslaved and brought to work on

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had their revolution. The island exploded when the bourgeois Rights of Man clashed with French colonial intentions. Although the revolutionaries in Paris were willing to extend suffrage to free white Haitians and eventually to free brown ones, they had no intentions of undermining one of France's main sources of revenue by abolishing slavery. So Haiti's black jacobins freed themselves. The world's first modern war of national liberation was also arguably its first race war. Fighting almost continuously from 1791 to 1804, the ex-slaves seized the island, killing or exiling the free population.

After more than a century of the bitterly harsh slave regime, the freedmen were ready for a vacation. Once they returned to work, they refused to work for plantations; instead they undertook their own land reform, breaking up the large estates into small parcels. The black jacobins became black peasants. They also refused to grow sugar. Although the individual black peasants no doubt were far better off than they had been while the sugar economy was booming, Haiti no longer played a role of importance in the international economy. Today the island ranks 112 out of 125 countries in per capita exports. The island found itself with little infrastructure, little capital (for sugar's wealth had always been mostly invested in France), and an uneducated peasantry with no political experience. A small mulatto aristocracy arose who exploited the population for their own benefit but brought little development. When their rule wavered, the United States lent a hand (as during the U.S. occupation between 1915 and 1934) to maintain "stability" and keep the peasants quiescent. After 1804 Haiti found nothing to replace sugar as the island's population swelled. Certainly an economy based on exporting baseballs and blood was not likely to be dynamic. Europe's sweet tooth turned a tropical paradise into a miserable, impoverished backwater. The world economy does not only bring progress.