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The Sugar Revolution



Slaves at work in the sugar fields

In the seventeenth century both in the English and to a lesser extent in the French islands, a change occurred in the basic cash crop. This change was so rapid and far-reaching that 'revolutionary' is a fitting word to describe it. It ranks in importance with emancipation, for the sugar revolution changed the Lesser Antilles completely. It was not just that sugar replaced tobacco as the chief crop: the population changed from white to black; the size of landholdings changed; and eventually the West Indies became 'the cockpit of Europe'. The list of changes the sugar revolution brought is almost inexhaustible.

The sugar revolution is most clearly demonstrated in the history of Barbados where it occurred in roughly one decade, 1640 to 1650. It was not quite so rapid in the other islands. For example, Jamaica changed to sugar slowly and less completely at a much later date. However, in each island 'revolution' can be used to denote the startling economic, social and political changes that occurred.

Causes of the sugar revolution

Fall in West Indian tobacco prices

The forces which brought about the change from tobacco to sugar all came together about 1640. Tobacco, the crop on which the economy of the Lesser Antilles was founded, started to decline as a result of competition from Virginia tobacco. In 1613 John Rolfe had introduced tobacco to Virginia, the earliest of the North American colonies. A variety imported from Trinidad proved very satisfactory. It is ironic that a variety from the West Indies should be the source of the decline of the West Indian tobacco crop! By 1627 Virginia was able to ship nearly 500 000 lbs (226 800 kg) of tobacco to England in one year. In 1628 the total for St Kitts and Barbados was only 100 000 lbs (45 360 kg). Virginia not only

had the advantage of size, enabling individual plots to be of about 50 acres (20 ha) compared with about 10 acres (4 ha) in the West Indies, but also of quality. As the demand for tobacco in England increased, Virginia was able to meet it easily, but the demand for West Indian tobacco fell because expansion of output was not so rapid and the quality was inferior. Competition also came from the Dutch trading tobacco at Araya in Venezuela, and later at Curaçao. Consequently the price of West Indian tobacco fell and many small farmers went out of production. Sugar came along at the right time to take the place of tobacco.

Another market force at work was the rising demand for sugar in Europe. After the colonisation of India and the Far East, coffee and tea were becoming increasingly popular in Europe and hence the demand for sugar as a sweetener for these drinks. People in Northern Europe had managed without sugar before the colonisation of tropical lands,

SUGAR

Sugar has been used as food for about the last ten thousand years, a method of extracting juice from the cane stems having been discovered in India in about 8000 BCE. Sugar-cane was brought to the lands of the eastern Mediterranean by the Persians, and eventually from there to Europe by the Arabs. To Europeans in the Middle Ages sugar (the word comes from the Hindi *sarkara* via the Arab *sukkar*) was an exotic condiment on a par with the spices obtained from south-east Asia. Its popularity in Europe by the beginning of the sixteenth century was such that sugar-cane was amongst the earliest crops transplanted to the New World after 1492. Sugar then became the one Caribbean product which could compete as a high-value condiment with those of the east, and was soon turned into the most important item of transatlantic trade. Unfortunately, the rise of this trade also brought about that most infamous of all maritime commercial activities, the slave trade. Such is the demand for sugar today that it is the world's biggest food product. The Caribbean region, as defined in this book, now produces less than five per cent of the global consumption of nearly 150 million tons a year.

though it had been known in the Mediterranean lands. Sugar had to be grown in a tropical or sub-tropical climate and the West Indian islands were favourably situated for its growth. A transatlantic voyage made the West Indies accessible to the European market. This journey was much easier than that which brought coffee, tea and spices to the European market.

Chance also played a part. The Dutch and the Portuguese were fighting for Brazil between 1624 and 1654, and when the Dutch were winning, at least in Northern Brazil, they shipped Portuguese prisoners of war north to the islands to be sold as slaves. In 1643 a Dutch ship brought fifty Portuguese slaves to Barbados. They were freed because the enslaving of Christians was not tolerated, but Barbados had fifty labourers experienced in the growing of sugar available. Then, when the Portuguese started winning back Northern Brazil from the Dutch, the Dutch came to the islands of the eastern Caribbean as refugees, bringing with them their expertise in sugar production.

Part played by the Dutch in the sugar revolution

The Dutch contribution was so great that we can say they made the change possible. About 1640 the Dutch were easily the greatest traders in the Caribbean Region, almost having a monopoly of the carrying trade. The Dutch traders and captains were looking for ways by which to increase their trade and they saw that encouraging the planting of sugar was a great opportunity.

Sugar needed capital which the small planters of the eastern Caribbean did not have, but the Dutch came to the rescue by supplying credit. A Dutch merchant would put up the capital on the security of the crop. In this way many planters started. The Dutch took over the export and sale of the crop in return for providing the initial capital.

Not only highly specialised labour, but also the ordinary manual labour was provided by the Dutch as the slave trade was in their hands. The Dutch brought slaves from West Africa to the West Indies at the rate of about 3000 per year. It has been said that the Dutch made the West Indies black. At least they started off the process which led to a decline

in the white population and a meteoric rise in the black.

England could not have provided these essentials for the development of the sugar industry. In any case the English system was not one of supporting the West Indian colonies through a wealthy company or through the government. Colonies and their plantations were individual enterprises which were expected to manage on their own.

Results of the change in land use

Land tenure

Tobacco had been grown by small planters on smallholdings of between 5 and 30 acres (2–12 ha). One man could manage all the processes of manufacturing tobacco by himself. Sometimes the plantation was worked by a white indentured servant, sometimes by the owner assisted by a white indentured servant or a black slave. There were some 5000 slaves in Barbados by 1645.

In that same year there were probably about 5000 smallholdings on the island, owned among a total white population of about 18 500. Only about half the island's 166 square miles (430 sq km) had been cleared by this time, and the average size of a smallholding was probably less than 10 acres (4 ha). This amount of land under tobacco was just about enough to maintain the owner and his family, but in 1645 the change was beginning to be felt. The price of tobacco was falling and 10 acres was no longer enough to ensure a reasonable livelihood.

The smallholders did not have enough capital to buy land so that they could grow sugar. They often moved to other islands looking for a new start with a bigger holding and a better life. Some returned to England. The indentured servants could no longer be supported. Population pressure was giving rise to the situation where there were too many mouths to feed in Barbados, and the black slave, being essential on the sugar plantation, came before the white servant who could be sacrificed. Many of the indentured servants ran away to become buccaneers, or hid themselves in other islands to avoid the law. Some were recruited into the army, for example Cromwell's army of 1655, or the navy. Thus land became available for large sugar plantations in Barbados and the other islands.

Sugar could only be grown economically on large estates. Therefore the landholdings increased in size, and previous smallholdings were grouped together into large estates under the ownership of a rich planter, or a partnership of two planters, or a planter whose credit-rating was good enough for the Dutch to supply him with machinery and slaves. In Barbados the landholdings tended to be smaller than those on the other islands. After the change to sugar, the average holding was about 150 acres (60 ha). A few were 500 acres (200 ha) which would be a very prosperous holding in Barbados. Under 150 acres the owner would be struggling to make a profit. This was because a sugar estate had to be self-contained in those days; that is, it had to supply itself with all its needs, or nearly all. About half the area was under sugar, a sixth would be pasture for cattle to supply meat and milk, another sixth for arable land for potatoes, corn, bananas, cassava, vegetables and fruit, and the remainder would be under woodland for timber for the buildings and the firewood for the boiling house. Any other land on the estate would be used for tobacco, cotton or other crops.

On other islands the increase in size of landholdings before and after the sugar revolution was greater, but over the whole of the island the trend was not so complete; that is, not such a high percentage of holdings changed in the way that those of Barbados did, especially in the French islands, where some smallholdings remained. Landholdings in the Leeward Islands were comparable to Barbados, perhaps slightly larger. In Jamaica landholdings were considerably larger. In the seventeenth century the average estate in Jamaica was about 300 acres (120 ha), but there were some very large estates of over 5000 acres (2000 ha). In Barbados there was not as much wasteland as in the other islands. The soil was fertile and there were no mountains which decreased the productive acreage of islands like St Kitts and Montserrat. However, the intense planting that was practised in Barbados and Antigua brought problems of soil exhaustion.

In the seventeenth century the size of landholdings in the French islands remained small and they continued to produce tobacco. In the next century when the sugar revolution escalated, the process of change to large sugar estates was completed.

The estates in Guadeloupe, Martinique and St Domingue were on average much larger than those in the English islands. The number of landholdings was considerably less, and they were not planted so intensively with sugar. Therefore there was not the problem of soil exhaustion.

The price of land

Under the impact of the sugar revolution the price of land leapt up, in some parts of Barbados by as much as thirty times. For example, a parcel of land of about 10 acres had been sold for £25 in 1630, which gives an average price of under £3 an acre. In 1648, when the sugar revolution was almost complete in Barbados, land was over £30 an acre. Taking 150 acres (60 ha) to be the minimum land required for a sugar estate, the total capital for just the land would be well over £4000, obviously beyond the reach of a smallholder. In 1648 a planter named Thomas Modyford bought a 500-acre estate as a going concern for £14 000 (he had a half-share in it at £7000) and we can guess at the value of the land being £10 000 or £20 an acre (£50 per ha).

Population changes

The sugar revolution brought about a change in the size and composition of the population of each island. In nearly every case the white section of the population declined, as smallholders and indentured servants working side by side on small plots were replaced by a relatively small number of wealthy landowners employing white servants in certain jobs on large plantations. At the same time, as the owners of these plantations imported more and more slaves to form the labour force, so the black population increased.

The planter governments of the English islands tried not to let the black-to-white ratio exceed ten to one, but this became increasingly difficult to maintain as the years went by. The displaced white smallholders who lost their land in the sugar revolution refused to become wage labourers, working alongside slaves on the sugar estates. Some migrated to other islands, but the same revolution took place in these islands too. Some, like Henry Morgan, who began life as an indentured servant in Barbados, became buccaneers, while many gave

up and returned to England. Gradually the white population dwindled proportionally everywhere, and a new picture of West Indian society emerged. In its earliest form this, the sugar society, consisted of a small white elite and a mass of black slaves.

The change which took place in the make-up of the population of each English island, between the beginning of the sugar revolution and the middle of the eighteenth century, can best be seen from the following table (all figures are approximate):

<i>Year</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Total</i>
Barbados			
1645	18 000	5 500	23 500
1660	20 000	30 000	50 000
1690	20 000	60 000	80 000
1712	12 500	52 500	65 000
1748	15 000	68 000	83 000
Jamaica			
1658	4 500	1 500	6 000
1675	8 500	9 500	18 000
1698	7 500	40 000	47 500
1722	7 000	80 000	87 000
1746	10 000	112 500	122 500
St Kitts			
1665	7 000	3 000	10 000
1678	2 000	2 000	4 000
1708	1 500	3 000	4 500
1724	4 000	11 500	15 500
1744	3 000	19 000	22 000
Nevis			
1665	3 000	1 000	4 000
1708	1 500	3 500	5 000
1724	1 000	6 000	7 000
1745	1 000	6 500	7 500
Antigua			
1665	1 000	500	1 500
1678	2 500	3 000	5 500
1708	3 000	13 000	16 000
1724	5 000	20 000	25 000
1744	3 500	28 000	31 500
Montserrat			
1672	1 000	500	1 500
1708	1 500	3 500	5 000
1724	1 000	4 500	5 500
1744	1 000	6 000	7 000

Sugar in other parts of the Caribbean Region

The Guianas

Sugar had been grown in the Dutch colony which had been established around the mouth of the Essequibo River since the 1630s, but not in any great quantity. The sugar revolution reached there and the other Dutch colonies in 1656, the year in which all the Guiana coast was thrown open to settlers. The colony on the Pomeroon and Moruka rivers, which had been given the name of 'Nova Zeelandia', soon outstripped all the others in sugar production. The labour needed on the new plantations was provided by the slaves who began to be imported in large numbers from 1657 onwards.

The output of 'Nova Zeelandia' was itself soon surpassed by that of the English colony of Surinam to the east. Surinam was captured by the Dutch in February in 1667, and retained by them under the

terms of the Treaty of Breda signed later the same year. From then on sugar was just as important to the Dutch in the Guianas as it was to the English and French in the West Indian islands.

The French islands

The sugar revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe took place over a longer period of time than in the English islands. It began in about 1670, but was not completed for another century. The two factors which account for this were the size of the islands, and the continuation of the growing of large amounts of tobacco. The large size of the islands meant that not only was more land available for poor whites, but it was cheaper in price. Even after sugar became the main crop the white smallholders stayed on. There was also difficulty in obtaining the supply of slaves necessary to develop the plantation system more rapidly.



A French sugar mill, c. 1670