

The Sugar Culture

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- evaluate the impact of sugarcane upon the growth and development of Brazil.
 - assess the relationship between the institution of slavery and the growth of the sugar economy.
 - analyze the socio-political structures that evolved out of the plantation-based economy of Northeast Brazil.
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Materials

- Student Handout: **The Story of Sugar**
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Activities

1. On the chalkboard, write the phrase “Cotton is king.”
 - a. Ask students to explain the meaning of this statement for American history. For what part of the country was this true? When?
 - b. Ask students to explain the relationship between the cotton culture of the American south and the institution of slavery? Why did the south struggle against the abolition of slavery?
 - c. Write the phrase “Sugar is king” on the chalkboard, and ask students what they think this means?
 - d. Explain that early Brazilian history was rooted in the production of sugarcane and that the sugar culture contained certain parallels to the cotton culture of the American south.
 2. Distribute the student handout entitled **The Story of Sugar**.
 - a. Direct students to read the sections entitled “Introduction” and “Sugarcane.”
 - b. Ask students to think about how their diet would be changed if sugar was completely removed from their lives. How significant is sugar to the taste palate?
 - c. Ask students to imagine living in a world where sugar is a very rare commodity. How much would they be willing to pay for a pound or half pound of sugar?
 - d. If sugar was a scarce commodity, why would it encourage people to look for places to produce sugarcane?
 - e. Ask students to compare the amount of sugarcane it takes to plant a new field to the yield it produces. Is this cost effective? Would there be a substantial profit margin? Why or why not?
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**Activities
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3. Direct students to read the section entitled “Sugar and Slavery.”
 - a. Direct students to examine the third sentence in the second paragraph. Why would the production of sugarcane require “lots of labor?”
 - b. To reinforce this point, ask students to re-read the previous section on sugarcane production and to select examples that highlight the labor-intensive nature of sugarcane production.
 - c. Ask students to explain why the labor-intensive nature of sugarcane production would encourage the growth of slavery. How does this compare to the growth of slavery and the cotton culture in the United States?
 4. Direct students to read the section entitled “The Sugar Plantation.”
 - a. Ask students to assume the role of a slave on a *fazenda*. Direct them to write a paragraph in the first person describing what their life would be like during harvest season.
 - b. When students have finished their writing, ask for a few volunteers to read their first person accounts.
 5. Direct students to read the section entitled “The Sugar Barons.”
 - a. Ask students to explain why the sugar *colonels* would view everyone on the plantation as part of an “extended family.” Would his views of plantation life agree with those of a slave? Why or why not?
 - b. Ask students to explain why and how the sugar plantation enabled the *colonels* to play a key role in society and politics. If they were sugar barons, would they want to give up their lifestyle? Since their lifestyle was built on slavery, would they be willing to emancipate (free) their slaves? Why or why not?
 6. Concluding Activity
Conduct a formal debate on the issue of slavery and emancipation, with one side representing the viewpoint of slaves on the sugar plantation and the other representing the viewpoint of the sugar barons.
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The Story of Sugar

Introduction

We find sugar everywhere. It is in our soft drinks, our snacks, and forms a central part of our diet, accounting for a significant portion of the total calories consumed around the world. But it wasn't always this way. Until relatively recently in history, sugar, particularly in its white, or refined, form was a luxury food. What was once a rare and precious substance in Europe became a commercial commodity because of the spread of large plantation-style sugar production, and it had a tremendous impact on the growth and development of Brazil.

Sugarcane



Sugarcane, *Saccharum officinarum*, is a perennial grass that requires a tropical or semitropical climate, and it prefers the former. It demands a rich, moist soil for best growth. The plant grows 9 or 10 feet in height, and its thick stem is full of juice that is rich in sucrose. Like other grasses, it grows back when cut, so once in production sugar cane fields do not need to be replanted.

To start a new cane field, the well-worked soil is furrowed deeply and the seed cane placed therein and covered with several inches of soil. Several tons of seed cane may be required to start each acre. Several crops can be harvested from a single acre, but each crop is less productive than the preceding one, so that new planting is necessary to maintain production.



Sugar cane only reaches its full yield when irrigated. The growth of each new crop must be cultivated frequently to destroy weeds and maintain good drainage and tillage.

The growth of cane is rapid and prolific. The accumulation of sugar occurs in the last period of growth. Once mature, the crop must be harvested and processed promptly in order to obtain the optimum yield of sugar. The dense, jungle-like growth of mature cane is cut by hand at ground level and stripped of leaves and upper portions in the field.

The stalks are then transported to a mill where the juice is separated from the stalk by crushing the stalk. Purification of the raw juice consists essentially of the addition of lime to the heated solution and then removing most of the water by heating and evaporation at high boiling temperatures so that sucrose separates from solution by crystallization.

The amount of sugarcane that can be harvested varies depending on climate and soil fertility, but 20 tons per acre may be considered a fair average. At an average sugar content of 14%, this amounts to 2.8 tons of sugar per acre.

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Sugar and Slavery

Brazil had originally been of little interest to the Portuguese, but a few merchants noted that it had great potential for sugar production. Brazilian merchants began to plant sugar in the middle of the sixteenth century. By the end of the century, Brazil was the world's leading sugar producer.

The center of Brazil's sugar production was the area of Bahia, surrounding the city of Salvador. It lies 12 degrees south of the equator, and contains 14,000 square miles of ideal sugar ground. To coax that bounty from the cane requires labor – lots of labor. Before the modern era, sugar cane required at least one worker per acre. As a result, increase in sugar production went hand in hand with an increase in the use of slave labor.

The Portuguese developed the initial slavery-based sugar cane plantations on the island of Sao Tome, which lies off the coast of the modern African nation of Gabon. It was here that the link between African slavery and sugar production was forged. This model was exported to Brazil when, in the 1560s and 1570s, the Portuguese started importing Africans to replace the Indians. By 1600, the labor force on the Brazilian plantations was overwhelmingly African.

More plantations meant more slaves, and imports of Africans increased accordingly. Between 1750 and 1780, between 16,000 and 17,000 Africans per year arrived in Brazil. That number rose to 18,000 per year in the 1780s, to 23,000 per year in the 1790s, and to 24,000 per year in the first decades of the 1800s. By 1800 Brazil had received a total of 2.5 million Africans.

The Sugar Plantation

Working and living conditions on the plantations (*fazendas*) varied from place to place and over time. They tended to be somewhat less harsh during periods of economic downturn, when owners had less incentive to wring maximum productivity out of their slaves. Nowhere, however, could conditions be described as good.

During periods of economic expansion, they could only be described as hellish. Underfeeding, malnutrition, and overwork led to high levels of disease and accidents, especially during the harvest period, when workdays of 16, 18, and even 20 hours were not uncommon. "The work is great and many die," noted an observer of the Bahian sugar industry in the early 1600s. Some 100 years later, Jesuit priest Joao Antonio Andreoni described the plantation zones in Bahia as "hell for blacks;" In the late 1790s, another observer expressed his disgust at "the barbaric, cruel, bizarre way that the majority of masters treat their unfortunate working class."

The biggest labor demands came during harvest. The amount of sugar in the sap begins to decline as soon as the cane is harvested. So there can be no delay in moving the plants between harvested field and the place where it will be processed, usually on the plantation itself.

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The Sugar Plantation

At the center of each plantation or cluster of plantations was a mill. In the mill was equipment used for crushing the cane and extracting the juice, a boiling house where the juice was cooked down, and storage sheds where the sugar was separated from the molasses and formed into loaves for final refining, usually elsewhere.

During the harvest, the mills usually ran around the clock, and the conditions were hellish. Crushing and boiling cane in a hot, steamy atmosphere for long hours.

Plantation slavery was predicated on the rigorous control and supervision of slaves, both on the plantations (through overseers and guards) and off (through police, militia, and hunters of escaped slaves).

The Sugar Barons

The sugar economy was organized around the plantation, and each plantation became a social community in its own right characterized by the great-house (*casa grande*), a mill, a chapel, and the slave quarters. It also resulted in an aristocratic society dominated by these great agricultural proprietors who acted as a form of nobility. It was also a society of limited social mobility; everyone knew his/her "place."

In essence, the society was masculine and patriarchal in nature. The plantation owner saw himself as the head of a large agricultural "family," a patriarch. The "family" included not only his immediate biological family but also all of the people on the plantation, including the slaves. It was also a system of dependency, where the father-figure of the plantation owner "took care of" his family, but could also punish when necessary.

In addition to having control over his "extended family," the wealth of the plantation and his "aristocratic bearing" also provided both social prestige and an avenue into politics. Even if he did not hold direct public office, a wealthy plantation owner could exert considerable influence on those in authority. Sugar was power. Gilberto Freire, in his work *Casa-grande & senzala*, referred to them as "the most powerful colonial aristocracy in America."

Sources

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 - *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*. George Reid Andrews. Oxford University Press. 2004
 - *Trading Tastes: Commodity and Cultural Exchange to 1750*. Erik Gilbert and Jonathan Reynolds. Pearson Education, Inc. New Jersey, 2006.
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