

READING 1

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, "Commerce and Change: The Creation of a Global Economy and the Expansion of Europe," in *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 491–508.

Abstract: This essay explores the creation of an Atlantic economy based on sugar and slaves. It details the ways in which labor-intensive and lucrative sugar production led to a marked rise in the demand for slaves from Africa after the seventeenth century. In addition to focusing on the economic aspects of the sugar/slave system, this essay also examines the human experience of the slave trade, its effects on African communities, and the ways it was resisted.

The Creation of an Atlantic Economy: Sugar and Slaves

The European entry into the world of the Americas had catastrophic effects on the indigenous peoples, who succumbed to diseases and genocidal policies of the Europeans; and in the wake of Amerindian population decreases, other forms of coercive labor, including slavery, were exploited in the construction of the "new world." Central to the growth of Atlantic commerce were two commodities: sugar and slaves. The history of Atlantic commerce is inseparable from the history of slavery, and the transfer of both labor and capital across the Atlantic is closely connected with the production of sugar. Technology and culture were intertwined in the development of the sugar industry, one of the mainstays of the new Atlantic economy.

Expansion of Sugar Demand and Production

Before the sixteenth century, northern Europe's only local source of sugar was bees. By the fourteenth century, the growing demand for sugar led first to cane sugar plantations on the Mediterranean coast and the islands of Cyprus and Sicily and then, by the fifteenth century, to Spanish and Portuguese plantations on Atlantic islands such as the Madeiras and São Tomé and Príncipe off the west-central African coast, where African slave labor was exploited, and finally in the Americas. Sugar sold for high prices as a rare spice or medicine. Its production and trade soon became enormously profitable.

With the increase in prices, expansion of sugar cultivation dominated the list of profitable Portuguese investments in Brazil and the Caribbean. The demand for sugar grew, and as supplies also expanded, new uses for sugar were found. French and Dutch merchants vied for power. Europeans came to crave the taste of sugar, especially as a sweetener for two other products from the Afro-Asian world, coffee and tea. These became popular additions to the European diet, especially valued as stimulants and comforts by workers in European factories, the products of which in turn fed the markets of the Atlantic world with cheaply manufactured goods, such as hoes and cast iron pots.

The Dutch Sugar Industry

The Dutch were pioneers in the technology and trade of the Atlantic. The Dutch West India Company seized and controlled the richest sugar-producing area in Brazil (around Recife) from 1630 to 1654. Dutch sugar enterprises in Brazil served as models for other large-scale Caribbean ventures. Dutch merchants controlled the copper trade that supplied plantation boiling houses with pots. These entrepreneurs relied on the systems of credit, insurance, and finance that Dutch trading companies experimented with and that were necessary to risky overseas enterprise. Corporate financing and state support jointly promoted the development of sugar plantations and, along with them, slavery. Creditors in Amsterdam, London, and other cities, who accumulated capital from the sale of both goods and people, financed shipping concerns involved in the transfer of these goods and people and invested their profits in manufacturing.

Exploitation and the Problem of Labor

Sugar cultivation in the Americas required both large investments of capital and a steady supply of labor, and investors were needed who could guarantee both. In order for sugar production to return a profit, expensive plantations, large-scale plots of land at least 80 to 100 hectares (33 to 41 acres) in size, were essential. Many of the largest plantations were run as businesses by absentee landlords across the ocean. Their successful operation required both skilled and unskilled labor, as well as a supply of industrial equipment to support the processing of crops and products for export.

Indigenous Laborers

Providing labor for Caribbean plantations was a constant problem. Initially, Amerindians (mostly Arawaks and Caribs) had been enslaved and ordered placed in *encomiendas* (land grants) by the Spanish. Europeans demanded labor in exchange for their “protection” and “civilization,” almost completely destroying indigenous populations and cultures. Many indigenous peoples resisted and were killed, and others fled into the most inaccessible regions of the interior of large islands and the mainland. Those who were not as fortunate succumbed to European diseases. In Mesoamerica, the population declined from 25.2 million in 1519 to 16.8 million in 1532 and 0.75 million in 1622. As entire villages of Amerindians disappeared, Europeans turned to other available sources of labor, including Europeans.

European Migrant Laborers

Few European migrants were attracted to the Caribbean, and those who came were attracted only by the lure of gold and silver. Efforts were made by plantation owners to contract European bond servants, people who were offered meager land grants (that often did not materialize) in return for

providing labor on plantations, and European convicts and prisoners of war also were shipped by the hundreds and even thousands. In this way Scots and Irish prisoners, for example, were brought to Jamaica.

African Slave Labor

Since neither Amerindians nor Europeans adequately answered the labor needs of the plantations of the Americas, Africans became the solution. African slaves were brought across the Atlantic within a decade of Columbus's voyages. First in small numbers and later in astounding ones, regular supplies of slaves were provided by traders who had bought them in Africa, where most originated as war captives from conflicts between Africans. Even under appalling conditions, though, African slaves fared better than Amerindian slaves had. The African slave populations had come from often tropical environments, similar in many ways to the Caribbean; they were accustomed to heat and humidity. If they survived infancy and childhood, they already had, unlike adult Amerindians, developed resistance to the most deadly Old World (Afro-European) epidemics, including smallpox, and many tropical diseases.

In the end, costs favored the use of African slaves. The lower death rate of the Africans and their agricultural and technological skills, weighed against the hostility of European free and indentured laborers who knew the master's language, culture, and weaknesses, made African labor preferable. The reliance on slavery was so complete that by the eighteenth century Africans significantly outnumbered those of European descent in the circum-Caribbean region (by ratios typically as high as eleven or thirteen to one). Their darker skin colors also made them more easily identifiable as slaves, not free men; as "black" came to be synonymous with "slave," racism was born. Out of the European justification of the enslavement and trade of Africans emerged an ideology of superiority based on skin color. This ideology came to assert the superiority of white Europeans and their cultural values over the rest of the world's peoples.

The Plantation as a Social and Economic Unit

The system of plantation slavery that developed across the Caribbean was unprecedented as an economic, political, and social institution. The sugar plantation was a landed estate that specialized in export production. It combined large-scale tropical agriculture, African labor, European and African technology, European animal husbandry, Asian and American plants, and the climate and soils of the Americas. The typical sugar plantation was a big-business establishment, both farm and factory. Sugarcane was grown, raw sugar manufactured, and molasses distilled into rum.

Managing a Plantation

Plantation owners were often absentee proprietors, who used attorneys or other Europeans as overseers. Managers, bookkeepers, carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, coopers, and doctors provided essential services. The breaking in or “seasoning” of slaves involved great brutality and coercion that imposed processes of cultural transformation and extracted gang labor from the workforce that survived. The “Great House” on the hilltop of the sugar plantation housed Europeans and their staff, while slave villages were usually situated down below at some distance from the master’s house.

Life on a Plantation

Plantation slave villages tended to replicate African social and spatial patterns, with small houses clustered around a common courtyard. Houses were built using lashed poles and lathes that were covered with mud; thatched roofs resembled those typical of West Africa. Because the food supplies provided by the plantations were insufficient to maintain the slave population, slaves grew their own provisions to supplement their diets. In about 1740, Charles Leslie described the slaves of Jamaica:

Their owners set aside for each a small Parcel of Ground, and allow them the Sundays to manure it:

In it they generally plant Maiz, Guiney Corn, Plantanes, Yams, Cocoas, Potatoes, &c. This is the Food which supports them, unless some of them who are more industrious than others, happen to raise a Stock of Fowls, which they carry to Markets on the Sundays (which is the only Market-day in Jamaica) and sell for a little Money, with which they purchase Salt-Beef or Pork to make their Oglions or Pepper-Pot.

The slaves developed an informal economy, based on West and Central African practices of bargaining and exchange, that often relied on specialized women traders called higglers. Higglers became critical agents of interplantation communication and slave resistance.

The Business of Slavery

The effects of the slave trade on Europe are perhaps not quite so obvious but nevertheless profound. Europeans benefited not only from the profitable use of cheap labor in the Caribbean but also from their control of the Atlantic trade that connected Europe to Africa, Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean, and the Caribbean and the Americas to Europe. European merchants and business interests were involved as suppliers of goods traded for slaves, as shippers of those goods and of slaves, and as dealers of goods produced by slave labor. The organizational experience and demands of the Atlantic system produced unrivaled entrepreneurial expertise and capital.

Europe's control of the Atlantic world provided the means for its later world dominance.

Trade with Africa and between Africa and the Americas resulted in the expansion of seaport towns such as Bristol, Liverpool, Nantes, Bordeaux, and Seville. Profits from slavery and the slave trade directly financed such diverse enterprises as Barclays Bank, founded by David and Alexander Barclay, who engaged in the mid-eighteenth-century slave trade; Lloyds of London, which evolved from a small London coffeehouse to one of the world's largest banking and insurance houses; and the steam engine invented by James Watt, who was backed by West Indian slave owners.

Slavery as Mercantilism

Many European states profited from involvement with the Atlantic slave trade. In 1602, the Dutch formed an East Indies Company to protect and encourage government control over commercial activities that were the result of their conquests in the East Indies. Two decades later, in 1621, by establishing a West India Company, the Dutch showed others how to spread the costs and profits of the slave trade among many investors. Shortly thereafter, the British and other European governments followed their example by founding companies that were granted monopolies for the sale of slaves in their colonies, thus bringing mercantilist practices to bear on the slave trade. In 1672, the British Royal African Company found backers among rich British merchants and aristocratic landowners, as well as members of the royal family.

Both private companies and companies enjoying government monopolies set up operations in African coastal towns, where they built forts and castles on land rented from African communities. Tropical diseases against which European adults had no immunity and a climate and environment considered harsh and difficult by Europeans prevented them from moving inland from the coast much before the nineteenth century. Moreover, their coastal trading stations satisfied the purposes for which they had come to Africa: they became the entrepôts for amassing wealth.

The Slave Trade

Captains of slaving ships acquired their cargoes either by sailing along the West or Central African coast and purchasing slaves from several independent African dealers or by buying slaves directly from a European agent, called a factor, at one of the large coastal trading stations, called factories. These slaves were provided to the dealers mostly by African states. Slaves usually originated as war captives; they were victims of a period of numerous wars and a general atmosphere of political instability and personal insecurity that was common to many inland regions of the African continent during the era of

the Atlantic slave trade. African hostilities, fueled by the possession of firearms acquired from European traders, became increasingly violent.

Slaves and Guns

A vicious cycle of slaves and guns developed gradually. Europeans supplied guns selectively to African states that became trading partners. The use of guns altered the patterns of rivalries between Africans and made warfare increasingly violent. Originating as war prisoners, African slaves were sold to European traders in exchange for guns and other manufactured goods. Guns created slaves which were traded for more guns, which would be used to “make” more slaves. This exchange sometimes made independent African states dependent appendages to European capitalist expansion. Slaves were exchanged for such imported goods as cloth, metal, and guns, which were prestige goods used by African elites to enhance status. African elites also kept slaves, especially females, who contributed to productivity and furthered prestige. African slavery, conceived in social and political terms, eventually gave way to economic slavery, states relying on a slave mode of production, in which the production of wealth was dependent on slave labor. The Atlantic era resulted in the transformation of many Africans into dependent consumers of cheap European products living in increasingly violent slave societies.

Slavery and the African Diaspora

Slaves supplied by the Atlantic system represented the largest known transfer of people prior to the nineteenth century. Between 1518 and 1860, an estimated 15 to 25 million Africans were transported to the Americas. The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the circum-Caribbean region is most obvious in the patterns of plantation production and profits, the legacy of Caribbean economic dependency on Europe, and the region’s ethnic diversity.

The Middle Passage

The journey of the slave ships across the Atlantic was known as the Middle Passage. Survival was by no means certain. Slaves were placed in iron shackles below deck, and ships were inhumanly packed with bodies. Foods of the Americas, which had been grown by slave labor, were fed to cargoes of slaves out of animal troughs. Provisions were minimal, and the trip could last from six to ten weeks. Only about half of those enslaved in Africa and traded by European merchants reached destinations in the Americas. Africans who arrived in Brazilian, Caribbean, or North American ports had left their homeland without material possessions, but their languages, skills, memories, beliefs, and cultures could not be left behind or easily forgotten.

The creation of an African diaspora (literally, “dispersal”) across the Atlantic world relied on the survival of individuals and their ability to piece together a life in the Caribbean or Americas that owed much to their African heritage. There were obstacles to African cultural continuity. For example, slave masters outlawed drumming and separated persons speaking the same language in order to discourage communication and solidarity among slaves. Such conditions made African family life difficult and sometimes impossible. Yet the vitality of the hundreds of distinct African languages and cultures, together with the courage and resistance of African peoples in the Americas, ensured their continuity in the face of slavery and oppression even as they negotiated a new identity.

African Resistance

Resistance to the conditions brought about by merchant capitalism was immediate and continuous. The success of resistance helped keep alive African cultures, while providing an ongoing source of African identity that promoted survival against great odds. Within both the societies of escaped freedom fighters and those of the plantations from which they came, African continuities in dance, language, food, informal economic systems, technology, music, dress, pottery, family organization, religion, and other areas are well documented in Caribbean and American life. They attest to the processes of transformation, in which both continuities and discontinuities create the patterns of historical change and determine its direction and scope.

African Transformations: African Societies, Europeans, and the Slave Trade

No better example of the transforming effects of transatlantic slavery on African society can be found than the west-central African kingdom of the Kongo. The Kongo was already a centralized state when the Portuguese arrived there in the mid-fifteenth century. In the kingdom of the Kongo, early European traders found an elaborate court life, richly enhanced by locally manufactured textiles and other material culture. Portuguese traders brought with them Jesuit priests, who successfully converted the king to Christianity, a conversion that permitted the kingdom to maintain diplomatic ties with the Vatican and other seats of European power. When the Kongo king and his court converted to Christianity after 1482, it was for perceived trade and diplomatic advantages rather than merely religious beliefs.

In the wake of traders, priests, and artisans who accompanied the process of conversion, there was a fusion of European and Kongo cultures that resulted in the creation of a new Kongolese elite culture. The early trade with European merchants was monopolized by the kingdom’s rulers, who then circulated imported prestige goods, especially fine textiles, to their

dependents in exchange for tribute in the form of labor and goods, which traditionally gave status to powerful rulers. The availability of European trade goods after the fifteenth century provided a new set of status markers for Kongolese royalty and their dependents. Local velvets made of palm fibers were replaced by foreign brocades and silks.

By the time of King Afonso I in the early sixteenth century, members of the ruling elite were forced to buy imports in increasing amounts to exchange for the traditional tribute that was the basis of their domestic power. They adopted Portuguese dress, titles, technology, and language. To pay for imports, Kongo traders had to acquire goods desirable to their European counterparts. Increasingly, their payment to the Europeans took the form of slaves; dependents and captives were traded to the Portuguese, who transported them across the Atlantic to supply labor-hungry markets in the Americas. In 1526, Afonso complained to the Portuguese:

Many of our subjects eagerly covet Portuguese merchandise, which your people bring into our kingdoms. To satisfy this disordered appetite, they seize numbers of our free or freed subjects, and even nobles, sons of nobles, even the members of our own family. They sell them to the white people... This corruption and depravity is so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated by it... It is in fact our wish that this kingdom should be a place neither of trade nor of transit for slaves.

Despite some African objections, trade expanded.

The Impact of the Slave Trade on African Societies

The expanding frontiers of enslavement in Africa produced violence and uncertainty and had devastating effects on African societies. To protect members of their lineages, Africans required arms, and to pay for guns, more Africans had to be captured for the slave trade. Thus the possession of guns produced increasing numbers of slaves while destabilizing traditional African society. The escalation of violence can be seen in estimates that in the eighteenth century 60,000 guns were imported along Central Africa's Angolan coast, producing about half that many slaves for export.

Other African states also became the targets of European commercial interests. As trade expanded, competition for African markets increased. European states relied heavily on their investments in slavery and the slave trade as the primary source of capital accumulation. Inter-African competition for access to European goods also intensified. The violence and insecurity of those made vulnerable by slaving activities undermined and destroyed some societies; and larger, more trade-dependent polities were created as people came together for purposes of defense. Trade routes in West Africa had for centuries linked environments and peoples across the Sahara. In the Atlantic era, the coast became a magnet, attracting trade and people to the opportunities of its seaport towns, while redirecting interior trade routes.

Independent African Societies

Still other African societies maintained their independence despite centuries of involvement with Europe and the slave trade. For example, the kingdom of Benin was in continuous contact with European merchants from at least 1471. The king's palace established a special guild to trade with European merchants. The guild's language, based on Portuguese, was a state-guarded secret.

The forest state of Asante in the region of the Gold Coast emerged through the consolidation of political interests and military expansion beginning in the late seventeenth century. Although the existence of its capital at Kumase was well known, it was never visited by European traders, who were limited in their access to the interior until the nineteenth century.

Traditions from Oyo, a state on the edge of the forest, claim that hundreds of messengers sent by one early ruler to greet the Europeans never came back; thus Oyo avoided contact with Europeans for generations. Oyo's involvement in the slave trade was avoidable, in part due to Oyo's reliance on cavalry and more northward rather than seaward commercial and political orientation before the late eighteenth century.

Oral traditions record Africans' suspicions about greedy European trading partners. In Angola, the widespread death and dying caused by the slaving activities surrounding European trading ventures convinced some Africans that the Europeans were cannibals. Observing the Portuguese taste for red wine, Angolans claimed to have seen Europeans drinking the blood of slaves from the large barrel casks stored on board their ships. Cauldrons in which food was cooked were also watched with fear and suspicion by the slaves boarding the Atlantic's "floating tombs."

The Demographic Effects of the Slave Trade

The widespread slaving activities altered much of African life. More men than women were traded to the foreigners, who found that African societies valued female slaves and preferred to keep them for their productive (not reproductive) capacities. The loss of population was dramatic and left African demographic change stagnant for centuries. The loss of potential sources of labor affected agricultural productivity, though this was somewhat offset by the introduction of new food crops from the Americas such as cassava and maize that could be grown in marginal agricultural environments. It has been argued that the lack of natural levels of population increase was responsible for Africa's technological stagnation and developmental lags during the time that slavery's profits were being reaped and reinvested by Europeans. Thus, Africans involved in the Atlantic world, both as consumers of European manufactured goods and as laborers exploited in European enterprises, provided the basis of the growth of the new global economy.

The Social Impact of Europeans

Ideological and social changes resulted from the complex cultural and economic negotiation with European traders. Elite classes of merchants were created in some places – the *compradores* or merchant princes of West Africa, for example – and culturally and materially impoverished groups were the results elsewhere, such as the South African Hottentots, a derogatory term given by the Dutch to Khoisan servants, who adopted Dutch language and dress in a desperate attempt to buy back their land and cattle and who eventually were decimated or absorbed by their contact with Europeans. Especially in coastal regions, the impact of merchant capitalism was deepened by the transformations of slavery and the accompanying political and social violence. The acceptance of human labor as a commodity after the sixteenth century was reflected in the increased reliance within African states on slavery and labor coercion, and in the rise of prostitution in urban areas. Alongside cheap European wares, both women’s bodies and the titled ranks of gentlemen could be purchased without reference to traditional, ritually sanctioned, and inherited cultural categories of identity and access to power. These and other contradictions would be recalled to form the basis of resistance to European colonialism in later centuries.

African Merchants in the Atlantic World

During the centuries of the Atlantic era, African women and men became great traders in the Atlantic economy. Many were known as “merchant princes.” The most successful were able to circumvent the conventional pathways to political office. In the early eighteenth century, for instance, John Konny of the Gold Coast (Ghana) was one of a number of powerful coastal Africans who gained political influence through their accumulation of economic wealth. Konny’s fortune was based on trade in foodstuffs, slaves, and other goods and on his ability to manipulate prices because the forces of supply and demand were in his favor. Konny maintained an army and controlled territory in the manner of an African state. Merchants such as Konny and his West African contemporary John Kabes used their wealth, rather than a traditionally inherited right, to claim political authority. Such independent African political economies resulted in their opposition by European alliances, such as in the Anglo-Dutch attempt “to repel the insolences of the Negro [Konny]” in the Konny War of 1711.

Some of the activities of the African merchant princes need to be understood against the background of competition and rivalries between Europeans. Wars between European trading partners were fueled by manipulative and clever African traders and these wars furthered the mercantile interests of both African and European merchants, while undermining traditional African chiefs and kings. A new African elite was born of the encounter with

Europeans, an elite whose power was based on wealth derived from the Atlantic economy. Written descriptions of John Kabes describe him as everything from “famous” and “faithful” to “ungrateful defrauder” and “dishonorable knave.” In the Senegambia and the Kongo, women traders sometimes used marriage to European merchants, whom they tended to outlive, to ensure their positions of wealth and power.

As links in the coastal access to inland producers, African traders were essential to the success of European ventures. In their turn, African merchant princes were dependent on their European counterparts for the guns and trade goods consumed by Africans who supplied captives for the slave trade. It seems that many of these traders launched their enterprises from the personal position of being caught between two cultural worlds, sometimes as the descendants of liaisons between African women and European men or as the inheritors of positions of providing service to European companies and/or African rulers.

European Dependence and Acculturation

Like John Kabes, who had a penchant for wearing a fine, lace-embellished hat and carrying a silver-headed cane, African merchants often adopted European lifestyles at least partially. If they were well versed in the commercial diplomacy of the time, which they might use to create political power, their own dependents, and even armies, merchant princes who remained independent of European companies could amass enormous wealth. As individuals whose wealth was achieved at the expense of the collective good (since their presence undermined traditional states), merchant princes were evidence of the overall pattern of political and economic transformations that took place in Africa following the establishment of transatlantic connections.

While some eighteenth-century freed slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, wrote passionate treatises against slavery from new homes in England, other former slaves, notably Afro-Brazilians, participated in the shipping and sale of slaves between the Atlantic ports of Ouidah and Luanda in Africa and Bahia in Brazil and grew rich in the trade. As Africa became a part of the Atlantic system, the economic and political fortunes of Africans were inextricably tied to the European-dominated economy.

Among the longest-lasting consequences of Africa’s participation in the Atlantic trade system was the loss of independence by indigenous African economies that had become integrated into and dependent on the needs and demands of the triangular trade among Europe, Africa, and the Americas. As African merchant princes amassed great wealth and acquired political power, their status became dangerously vulnerable to outside manipulation, since it was based on the successful cultivation of the Atlantic trade rather than on

the traditional, inherited patterns of African political systems. African merchant princes replaced traditional political authority and economic practices with socially upsetting relationships and personal profit dependent on Europeans, thus fulfilling the African proverb warning that “the river’s mudfish grows fat to the crocodile’s delight.” Ultimately it would be the European capitalist crocodiles who would consume their African counterparts of the Atlantic world.