In November 2014 a sugar bowl sold at Christie’s in London for £3,500. True, it wasn’t an ordinary sugar bowl. This one was a piece of Sèvres, a Vincennes blue lapis (Pot à sucre ‘Herbert’ et couvercle, 2me grandeur) – an exquisite piece of 18th-century craftsmanship from the porcelain workers and artists at the French factory in Sèvres. The company had been founded in 1738, moving to Sèvres, close to Madame de Pompadour’s palace (today the Elysée Palace), in 1756, and becoming a royal factory three years later. Its porcelain ware quickly established itself as the most desirable of luxury items for wealthy elites across Western Europe. Prosperous Britons traveled to Paris simply to acquire their own Sèvres. In 1756–1757 Horace Walpole, for example, (though not so prosperous) spent £400 on Sèvres porcelain during a trip to Paris. A decade later the actor-manager David Garrick returned from Paris with his own Sèvres tea set. The sugar bowl from that collection eventually found its way into the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. There, it jostles for space with numerous other 18th-century sugar bowls; in porcelain, earthen ware, silver and pewter, all of them testimony not merely to fashionable table ware, but to the astonishing Western addiction to sugar.
Slavery in Small Things

Sèvres porcelain was (and is) so beautiful, so exquisite in design and decorative finish, that it created its own voracious demand among wealthy people anxious to display their taste and opulence. Yet behind the Sèvres factory (and similar companies – notably Dresden, Meissen, Worcester, and Wedgwood) there lies a more complex history. At first glance the story of European porcelain in the 18th century seems but one aspect of the remarkable expansion of material and luxurious consumption during that century. But it was also directly related to the much less obvious story of global trade, empire – and slavery.

Sèvres sugar bowls were normally manufactured as integral items of larger sets of table ware – tea and coffee sets – all aimed at the appetite for tea and coffee. Tea (from China) and coffee (from the Horn of Africa, from Arabia and later from newly acquired European tropical colonies, from Java to Jamaica) had, by the 1700s, established themselves as fashionable drinks of the wealthy. Soon they also became the ubiquitous drinks of ordinary people. But tea and coffee (like chocolate – the other emerging drink) had a naturally bitter taste, and were enjoyed in their native regions in their bitter form. Western consumers, however, came to expect their drinks to be sweetened by the addition of cane sugar. This was no accident: the transformation from bitter to sweet drinks took place when sugar from Europe’s slave colonies began to flow back to Europe in remarkable volumes. The tea and coffee sets, disgorged in ever growing numbers from the factories and workshops of Western Europe and North America, provided all the accessories familiar today: tea and coffee pots, cups and saucers – and beautiful and delicate sugar bowls. It is, at the very least, an astonishing curiosity that this single fashionable item – porcelain sugar bowls from Sèvres and other manufacturers – were filled with a commodity cultivated in the most brutal and degrading of circumstances: sugar from the slave colonies of the Americas. Here was one of the
paradoxes of slavery: callous oppression bringing forth Western fashion and luxury.

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At the time Louis XV designated Sèvres a royal factory, France’s major Caribbean colony had become the world’s largest exporter of sugar. By 1770, St. Domingue (later Haiti) produced 60,000 tons a year (compared to Jamaica’s 36,000 tons.¹) All this was made possible by massive importations of Africans. By the time slavery in that colony, and the economy which it sustained, were destroyed by the great slave upheaval after 1791, no fewer than 790,000 Africans had been imported into St. Domingue. Of course, by then the West’s addiction to sweetness in all things was well established. But who, even at the time, made the link? Who realized that the refinement of the Sèvres tea and coffee services, and their sugar bowls, was connected to the brutalization of armies of Africans in the Americas? It is a curious story which needs further explanation. But so too do many other historical artifacts: everyday items of 18th-century life, common today in museums and galleries, and all related to slavery.

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The history of the world’s taste for sweetness in food and drink is intimately linked to the story of African slavery.² Before the development of plantation societies in the Americas, cane sugar had been rare and costly. Though honey had been the traditional sweetener in the West, small quantities of sugar had reached Europe from early plantations in the Mediterranean. Sugar cane cultivation had spread slowly from New Guinea, across Asia, each stage characterized by improvements in cultivation and sugar technology. This geographic spread of
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cultivation and consumption gathered pace under the wing of Arab expansion and trade. When Europeans moved outside the traditional center of their trading world, in the Mediterranean, and into the Atlantic, settling islands and making maritime contact with the Atlantic coast of Africa, sugar traveled with them. Long before Europeans crossed the Atlantic, they were cultivating sugar cane in Madeira, the Azores, Cape Verde, and on Sao Tome in the Gulf of Guinea.

Sao Tome, only 320km from the African coast, was a well-watered location, and ideally placed for replenishing ships’ supplies as they explored and traded up and down the African coast. It proved an ideal location for sugar cultivation. Moreover, close by, on the coast of Africa, there were plentiful supplies of slaves to toil in the labor-intensive work of the sugar plantations. Clearing land, planting cane, harvesting the sugar cane, all demanded regular and plentiful supplies of labor, and Africa offered labor in abundance. Plantations in the Mediterranean had traditionally used a combination of free and unfree labor, but on Sao Tome in the 15th century, the pattern began to change. As that island’s landscape came to be dotted with plantation settlements, its laboring population became predominantly African – and enslaved.

The capital needed for these pioneering settlements was available from Italian and Spanish merchants, keen to find new outlets for their money. To round off this increasingly complex commercial nexus, the finished product – raw sugar – required further refinement in distant refineries. Starting in Antwerp, but soon spreading to a growing number of major European port cities, sugar refineries were constructed to provide the finishing touches. Cane sugar was then dispatched for sale to the increasing number of European shops and outlets, via traveling salesmen and peddlers. Sugar thus passed to consumers across the length and breadth of Europe, and all this was in place before
European explorers and settlers put down roots in the tropical Americas. What had emerged was a remarkable commercial and laboring network which drew together the continents of Africa and Europe. It was a system lubricated by the sweat of a burgeoning population of enslaved Africans.

Sao Tome’s planters were easily persuaded of the benefits of slave labor because African slaves regularly passed through the island on a slave route between Kongo, Old Calabar, and the Gold Coast. In the early 16th century, Sao Tome boomed, with a population of 100,000, dominated by Portuguese planters, and its landscape dotted by as many as 200 sugar mills. But the island went into rapid decline when Portugal began to settle the apparently unlimited bounty that was Brazil and by 1700 the Sao Tome sugar industry had all but vanished. Compared to what was to follow in the Americas, the numbers of Africans involved looks insignificant (except for the individuals concerned). Perhaps 2,000 Africans were landed as slaves each year in Sao Tome. Yet those figures tell only part of the story.

What had happened on the Atlantic coast of Africa, in the Atlantic islands, and in Sao Tome had established an economic and social pattern, and a highly profitable one at that, which became a blueprint for pioneers and settlers on the far side of the Atlantic. Even before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, Europeans became accustomed to acquiring Africans to work as slaves on plantations. Europeans also recognized that the plantation provided a social and economic tool for bringing untapped but luxuriant lands into profitable cultivation. Behind it lay European consumers with their apparently insatiable appetite for sugar. Sugar from Madeira, the Canaries, and then Sao Tome whetted the European appetite for sweetness.

Like many other exotic products, sugar had gained an initial foothold in Western societies as a medicine. Long a part of Arab pharmacology and medicine, it was prescribed for a host
of ailments and cures. Along with other exotic crops from the East, sugar arrived via trade routes from societies influenced by Arabic science and medicine (themselves well ahead of their European counterparts). Sugar had long been advocated as an important medicine in a handful of Arabic scientific writings. Those medical texts, translated from Arabic into Latin, encouraged the use of sugar in Western medicine. Crusaders, for example, returning from the Eastern Mediterranean brought with them not only cane sugar itself, but knowledge of the way sugar was used for medical purposes. Greek and Byzantine physicians and writers thus incorporated sugar as an ingredient in contemporary pharmacology and medicine, and their influence spread throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages. Though some scientists and philosophers disputed its benefits, sugar rode the controversies to maintain a niche in Western medicine through to the apogee of slave-grown sugars and beyond.

When in the 16th and 17th centuries cane sugar began to arrive in Europe in ever greater (and cheaper) volumes, it became a familiar aspect of contemporary medical practice and learning. It was to be counted among the standard items found in European apothecary shops. Like other medicines, however, it had its opponents: doctors and writers who challenged its alleged medical virtues and who argued that sugar was actually harmful. Yet sugar was to triumph not as a medical ingredient but as a sweetener. The medical harm of mass and massive sugar consumption belongs to a more modern era, by which time sugar had long since lost its medical pretensions.3

The European settlement in the tropical Americas, especially in Brazil and the Caribbean, transformed everything. Brazil led the way, with early sugar plantations in Bahia and Pernambuco copying the patterns of Portuguese planters in Sao Tome. As Brazilian sugar production grew, so too did the importation of African slaves. By the mid-17th century, the Dutch were
As early as 1630, more than one quarter of a million Africans had been loaded onto slave ships bound for Brazil, setting a pattern in the South Atlantic that was to dwarf all other regions of Atlantic slave trading. By the time the trade to Brazil ended, Brazilian and Portuguese slave traders had carried more than six million Africans across the South Atlantic. No less astonishing is the fact that 2.8 million Africans were loaded onto slave ships from a single African port: Luanda in Angola. Brazil was, then, the first and the last: the first to establish a slave-based sugar economy in the Americas, and the last to abolish it – in 1888.

Slavery was an adaptable institution which could be turned to a huge range of activities. The vastness of Brazil allowed slavery, in time, to be adapted to a wide range of economic enterprises (mining, forestry, cattle, coffee, and tobacco). But sugar led the way: the original crop which proved that the rich lands of Brazil could produce a lucrative export crop. And it was sugar which persuaded planters to turn to Africa for slave labor to make everything else possible. Brazilian sugar plantations thus established the pattern for colonial settlement and development which encouraged other settlers, in other parts of the Americas, to do the same.

The British followed in the early 17th century, settling smaller islands in the Eastern Caribbean (notably St. Kitts and Barbados), then Jamaica in 1655. Colonists there tried a range of crops, and experimented with a number of labor systems before they, like the Portuguese before them, realized that sugar cultivated by enslaved Africans on plantations offered the best chance of commercial success. As ever more Africans were shipped into the islands, increasing volumes of sugar flowed back to Britain's major ports, and thence onward throughout
Britain and Western Europe. The figures involved are staggering. Eventually, almost one million Africans were landed in Jamaica (though many were promptly shipped elsewhere; some 485,000 went to the tiny island of Barbados). The French, starting slightly later, did much the same. Their Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique absorbed 290,000 Africans, and St. Domingue 750,000. On all these islands, and throughout the Americas, Africans and their enslaved descendants undertook every job imaginable – from sailor to cowboy, from seamstress to nurse, miner to craftsman. But the dominant form of slave work, throughout the tropical Americas, was sugar. Indeed, an estimated 75% of all Africans crossing the Atlantic were destined, initially at least, to work in sugar.

Slave-grown sugar was produced in enormous volumes, packed into large barrels (hogsheads) and shipped to European ports, where newly established sugar refineries converted the crude sugar into the different forms of marketable sugars which were then dispatched, as sugar cones, to commercial outlets across Europe. At first the price of sugar remained high, partly because the initial costs of cultivation, production, and shipping (over enormous distances) were high. Sugar plantations were, from first to last, dependent on the outside world, and could only function thanks to regular importations of people and goods: labor from Africa, and goods from Europe and North America. The finished products – sugar and rum – were then shipped thousands of miles by sea (with all the attendant dangers) to Europe and North America. In 1600 the only American exporter of sugar was Brazil, but from mid-century, a string of Caribbean islands were producing their own sweet product (after experimenting with a number of other crops – notably tobacco). With Spain preoccupied in Central America, it was the island colonies of Britain and France that began to export substantial volumes of sugar. In 1650 Barbados was exporting
7,000 tons. Fifty years later, British Caribbean colonies dispatched 25,000 tons – more even than was exported from Brazil (22,000 tons). By 1700, ten colonies in the Americas exported 60,000 tons of sugar (half of it from the Caribbean). Yet even this astonishing figure was surpassed, within a lifetime, as new colonies, and newly settled regions, turned to sugar cultivation – and slave labor. In 1750, 150,000 tons of sugar left the slave colonies. On the eve of the American War of Independence it stood at 200,000 tons (90% of it coming from the Caribbean). This huge expansion in sugar production was not due to new systems of cultivation, or of production. It was a result of the rapid expansion into new sugar lands. And that meant a need for ever more African slaves.

The fate of the Africans involved – their torments on the Atlantic slave ships, their wretched health and difficulties as they adjusted (or failed to adjust) to the new environment and work in the first years (the years of greatest mortality and sickness among newly imported Africans) – forms the grotesque backcloth to this entire story. The starkest yet most revealing evidence is the crude data. Although some 11+ million Africans stepped ashore from the slave ships, more than one million had not survived the Atlantic crossing. For the survivors, the years that followed were years of suffering – that ‘time on the cross’ most vividly etched on popular imagination (in part because the slaves’ anguish became the core of fierce abolitionist agitation in print, and in politics from the late 18th century). Graphic images of slave distress became an obscene caricature in an expansive illustrative culture designed to foster hostility to slavery in all its forms. Yet the misery of the slaves stood in stark contrast to the fruits of their labor, most strikingly in the wealth and luxury of the most successful planters and slave traders. Of course, not all planters were successful, and many lived more humble lives than is often imagined. Even the prosperous could
be brought down, without warning, by natural disaster, a twist of economic circumstance, or warfare. Still, the richest and most powerful, owning an assortment of estates and possessing hundreds, often thousands, of slaves, lived in considerable material splendor. Wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice they were able, in the most spectacular cases, to return ‘home’ to Europe and live in a style which befitted their wealth and status (though it often belied their humble origins). These were the ‘sugar barons’ and ‘plantocracy,’ able to hold their own in the socially competitive world of home-grown aristocrats and Indian nabobs. Often the object of derision and scorn by those to whose company they aspired, the émigré planters surrounded themselves with the lavish trappings of 18th-century wealth and splendor, often in custom-built stately homes and grand rural retreats which stood in landscaped gardens and grounds, and which they filled with treasures and paintings. They were paragons of taste and wealth. But it came courtesy of African sweat on the sugar lands.

Britain’s major slave ports – London, Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow – were dotted with grand homes belonging to returned planters, but especially to merchants, traders, and shippers involved in the slave business. Yet it was the West Indians who caught the eye, living up, as they did, to the popular phrase, ‘As wealthy as a West Indian.’ The most prosperous planters established a reputation for conspicuous wealth and consumption. The family of Edwin Lascelles, who had once been modest farmers in North Yorkshire, acquired fabulous riches in the Caribbean, as traders, contractors to the Royal Navy, merchants, money-lenders, and finally planters, mainly in Barbados but also on other islands. Edwin Lascelles crowned the family fortunes by building Harewood House between Leeds and Harrogate. The family’s status was confirmed when Edwin was made Baron Harewood. A similar pattern of striking opulence can be seen wherever sugar grandees put down local roots: the
Codringtons of Barbados, for example, developed an estate at Dodington in Gloucester. But the grandest – and most famous by far – were the Beckfords. A family of Jamaican planters, they returned ‘home’ to move in high political circles and display their fabulous wealth in their lavish home at Fonthill Splendens. The Beckfords were friends to Prime Ministers, and were collectors on a grand scale, as well as hosts of legendary dinner parties. They also spawned eccentricities and eye-catching excess at home and abroad. By the time slavery was ended, the Beckford fortunes had also disappeared: swallowed by mad, spendthrift recklessness.

Others were more cautious, buttressing their British positions by political power in parliament – their access to plentiful cash guaranteed the purchase of parliamentary seats and hence political sway. By 1765, no fewer than forty MPs were ‘West Indians,’ and were able to secure and promote the interests of the slave-based sugar lobby against all-comers. Until, that is, they were outmaneuvered and out-gunned, quite suddenly, by the abolitionists in the last twenty years of the 18th century. Prior to that, the West India lobby ensured that the interests of those producing slave-grown commodities (and those providing the vital supplies of African slaves) remained a prime concern in the corridors of power in London.

It was relatively easy for the West India lobby to persuade London’s political elites of the importance of the slave system. They had only to point to the crowded British quaysides, packed with vessels heading for, or returning from, West Africa and the slave colonies. In the background was a supporting chorus of financial interests, of money-lending and insurance, which underpinned everything, and a huge array of industries and manufacture which sustained Britain massive maritime fleet, and which filled outbound vessels with goods and equipment for sale and barter on the African coast and in the plantation
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colonies of the Americas. Here, by the mid-18th century, was a commercial cornucopia, the benefits of which seemed unchallengeable. Everyone seemed to benefit, from the rough deck hands manning the slave ships, through the workers constructing and sustaining the ships and their cargoes, right up to the greatest sugar planters returning with their extremes of wealth. Yet behind it all, out of sight and largely out of mind, lay the armies of Africans, 5,000 miles distant, literally over the horizon, toiling to make it all possible.

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Though slaves in the Americas produced a range of commodities for export, sugar dominated, at first. It employed the largest numbers of Africans, who lived and worked in the largest slave concentrations. Sugar was the cause and occasion of some of the harshest of working conditions on slave plantations. And it was sugar, directly and indirectly, that dominated the shipping patterns to and from the Caribbean and Brazil. But why had sugar become so dominant? What was so special – distinctive – about sugar?

The taste for cane sugar began as a luxury among the rich. Initially it often took the form of fashionable and elaborate creations, molded and shaped into impressive decorative forms for the tables of rulers and the wealthy. Extravagant carvings and ornate displays shaped from sugar graced the homes and social worlds of elites. These ostentatious sugary exhibitions of wealth and power were also signs that the hosts and organizers had the wherewithal to acquire exotic sugar and transform it into fanciful objects for entertainment and taste.11

From the very first, there was a stark, glaring contrast between the lives of African slaves on the sugar plantations and the extravagance of early sugar consumption which was at its
most elaborate – outrageous even – among Europe’s monarchs and rulers. In 1549 a feast given by Mary of Hungary in honor of Philip II included sculptures of deer, boar, birds, fish, and fruit – all fashioned from sugar. More elaborate still, in 1566 when Maria de Aviz married the Duke of Parma, the city of Antwerp gave her a gift of 3,000 sugar sculptures, which included whales, ships, and even a model of her new husband, fashioned from sugar. Courtly excesses across Europe made use of sugar to entertain, feed, and amuse the court and its guests. Queen Elizabeth – famed for her sweet (and rotten) tooth – was entertained to a ‘sugar banquet’ in 1591.12

Naturally enough, men whose wealth could match that of their rulers (wealth acquired from Europe’s burgeoning trade and commerce) sought to emulate and even surpass their social betters. We can even catch a glimpse of the process in the pages of the new cooking and domestic handbooks which began to appear in the 16th and 17th centuries. (Between 1651 and 1789, at least 230 were published in France alone.) The world of 18th-century popular and accessible print utterly transformed the Western world, from politics to cooking. As sugar entered the culinary and social world of less vaunted people, the earlier sugary sculptures were rivalled by something quite different: an array of simple, sweet desserts which were much less extravagant than earlier versions. European cooks and households adapted sugar to their cooking, in the process learning to discriminate between different kinds of sugars. Sugar thus entered the mainstream European diet and found a place in a range of desserts gracing the tables of prosperous people. The list of sugary dishes which became popular in the 17th century is remarkable, not least because they remain so familiar to modern readers – and diners. “Hot puddings, cold puddings, steam puddings, baked puddings, pies, tarts, creams, moulds, charlottes and bettys, trifles and fools, syllabub and tansys, junkets and,
ices, milk puddings, suet puddings...\textsuperscript{13} Most famously perhaps, sugar formed the basis of ice cream, which became hugely popular on both sides of the Atlantic by the late 18th century. However, the spread of sugar consumption was driven forward not by foods and desserts, but by drinks. Sugar became popular, rapidly and unpredictably, in the course of the 17th century in particular, via its close association with the new fad for exotic drinks – themselves imported from far-flung regions. The British took to tea from China.

By 1600, the Dutch had established trading links to Asia, and had developed a complex network of trading and military routes linking Europe to South Africa, India, Indonesia, and on to China. Exotic commodities of unknown places began to arrive back in Europe via Amsterdam, and the Dutch trade inevitably attracted other European maritime powers. Most of them established trading companies to Asia (East India Companies), all keen to share the astonishing riches and valuable commodities of Asia – among them tea. Tea from China (where it was consumed as a bitter drink without any additives) was introduced to Europe by Portugal, which had pioneered trading links to China. British tea drinking was first adopted in the court of Charles II after the arrival of his Portuguese queen, Catherine. Within a generation, courtesy of the recently developed sugar islands in the Caribbean, the British were sipping their tea sweetened with sugar.

The British developed their own trade to Asia, greatly assisted by new types of ship, managed and directed by the East India Company. But the key to the burgeoning British success in Asia was the tea trade to and from China. It involved, however, a long, perilous voyage, at risk from pirates, hostile European powers, and the natural dangers of oceanic travel. The British developed an effective monopoly in tea, providing a lucrative commodity that amply compensated for the risks. Though Europeans knew little about how the tea was cultivated in China, or even how
it reached the dockside of Canton (thence onto the European-bound ships), they purchased it in growing volumes.

The British market for tea was small in the mid-17th century. Samuel Pepys confessed to his first drink of tea in 1660, but seven years later his wife was making a pot of tea at home, because the apothecary had recommended it as a cure for a cold. (Like all the other new-fangled spices and drinks from exotic lands, tea was initially promoted for its medicinal qualities, and could be purchased from apothecaries.) Tea drinking on a mass scale seems to have taken off in the 1690s, and rapidly became a feature in London shops and in the social routines of polite metropolitan and fashionable society in the provinces.

By the 1720s the price of different types of tea had dropped substantially, greatly accelerating the consumption of tea among people previously excluded by cost. The Scottish theologian and lawyer Duncan Forbes noted at mid-century that the price of tea had fallen so low “that the meanest laboring Man could compass the Purchase of it…”14 Thereafter, tea became a major industry, imported in increasing volumes, both by the monopolistic East India Company and by gangs of smugglers. The early problems of securing tea from China were overcome after 1713 when the East India Company struck a deal to ship tea direct from Canton. Four years later British ships began to trade directly to and from that distant port. These home-bound ships, packed with silks, porcelains – and tea – made possible the development of the fashionable taste for chinoiserie. And as more tea arrived, the price dropped and tea drinking spread. Yet because of a thriving smuggling industry (mainly via the West Country), and largely in response to the excessive duties on tea, there were periods when the East India Company imports accounted for only a quarter of the nation’s consumption.15 A substantial part of the 13.5 million pounds of tea shipped to Europe was re-exported – smuggled – into Britain. Indeed, throughout much of the 18th century, a great deal of the demand for tea
was satisfied by smugglers. Even respectable people who traveled to Europe resorted to returning with tea hidden about their person.

The British simply could not get enough of it, and by the mid-18th century, more than one pound of tea was being landed for every head of the population. By the time the government slashed the duties on tea, in 1784 (from 120% to 12.5%), the British were each consuming two pounds of tea every year.16 In 1820 something like 30 million pounds of tea were consumed in Britain, accounting for 5% of the British gross domestic product.17

In the course of the 18th century, tea drinking, with its complex social rituals, became a familiar aspect of British life. Tea-drinking rituals, in fashionable homes, in poor dwellings, and in a variety of public places, became a characteristic feature of British social life by the mid-18th century, the habit, like sugar, moving down the social scale from the prosperous to the poor. In Bath, for example, fashionable society revolved around the town’s various assemblies, adjourning when the mood took them to the Assembly Rooms’ smaller tea rooms for refreshments. More formal balls in the same building began at 6pm: about 9pm… “the gentlemen treat their partners with tea…”18 At much the same time, people keen to escape the noise and smell of Central London would decamp to the summer tea gardens of Bagnigge Wells and White Conduit House, in Islington and Primrose Hill.

Ah I loves life and all the joy it yields,
Says Madam Fussock from Spittle Fields,
Bon ton’s the space twixt Saturday and Mundy,
And riding in a one-horse chair Sunday:
’Tis drinking tea on Summer’s afternoons
At Bagnigge Wells with China and gilt spoons.19
These, and many others, were favorite weekend haunts of family groups, who wished to get away from the city for a short while to enjoy the refreshments on offer. The *Universal Chronicle*’s Zachary Treacle (created by Dr. Johnson), dragged out by his wife to one such tea shop on Sunday, begrudged the cost of “tea, and hot rolls, and syllabubs for the boy.” It was no accident that in the 1790s, the campaign against the slave trade targeted the fashionable use of slave-grown sugar. That campaign, in its turn, attracted the mischievous attention of caricaturists – mocking both the fashion of sweet tea and the abolitionist campaign. By then, tea drinking was virtually a universal habit among working people and their social superiors.

The tea chests loaded onto the *East Indiamen* contained much more than tea. Tea leaves were ideal packing material for the delicate ‘China’ which was exported in astonishing volumes. The rise of Western tea drinking confirmed the pre-eminence of the Chinese porcelain industry. At a time when Europeans had not mastered the skills of manufacturing porcelain, the Chinese produced exquisite items which quickly became fashionable and were sought after in Europe and North America, and feverishly copied once Europeans learned the techniques of porcelain manufacture. But initially the Chinese alone could provide what their European customers wanted: both the finest of craftsmanship from the 3,000 kilns of the great factories of Ching-te-Chen near Nanking, and then, increasingly, huge volumes of less elaborate but serviceable tableware: tea and coffee sets for the homes of ordinary people in all corners of Europe and colonial North America.

For years, European manufacturers tried in vain to copy the Chinese prototypes but did not make a breakthrough until after 1712 (and then only via leaks provided by insiders). Thereafter, the French, Germans, Flemings, and English began their own
mass production of refined porcelains and ceramics. By then, Chinese tableware and tea services had become commonplace. Curiously, porcelain had initially been shipped to Europe as ballast to the main cargoes of Chinese tea and silks. Six tons of porcelain were loaded for every ton of tea, and Chinese porcelain quickly acquired a market of its own. As more arrived, as taste and demand spread, there was a consequent drop in the price asked for Chinese porcelains. In 1723, 5,000 imported teapots cost one penny and a half each. The numbers involved were amazing. At its peak, some 5 million items were imported each year. In 1718, for example, a 29-ton lot contained 250,000 pieces. A 40-ton lot, imported six years later, contained 332,000 items. By 1791, when the East India Company stopped shipping porcelain imports, an estimated 215 million items had been imported. Objects which had once been rare and exotic had, in a cheaper, simpler format, become mundane and unexceptional features of domestic life across a wide social spectrum of Western society. Yet even the finer items of Chinese porcelain sometimes had a way of finding their way down the social scale, as employers handed on chipped, damaged, and broken tableware to their servants and helpers. The end result, in what became a familiar pattern, was that previously exotic and costly objects were now commonplace.

Not everyone approved of the rising popularity of tea drinking. To some it seemed bizarre that the poor and even the wretchedly humble came to regard tea as a necessity. Here was an exotic produce, imported from the far corners of the world, now vital to the lives of the poor. One diarist recorded “with some Degree of Indignation” that “a ragged and greasy Creature” came into a shop, with her filthy children “asking for a Pennyworth of Tea and Half pennyworth of Sugar…” This was the critical mix – tea and sugar – which came together to form a brew of two exotic products, the one from China, the other
from the tropical Americas where it was cultivated by African slaves. For all the fashionable etiquette of tea drinking in London and the spa towns, the practice became a simple domestic habit. It was easy and cheap to make and was consumed overwhelmingly in the home. In fashionable houses it was served via the most lavish of tea services, but in the humblest of garrets and cellars, tea was drunk from chipped and broken cups and mugs, acquired in the way the poor acquired all their meager personal effects. Over the course of the 18th century, families came to own more and more things – clothing, furnishings, and kitchenware. On both sides of the Atlantic families left an increasing number of material objects from one generation to another. And among the most striking features of those possessions were the tea and coffee accessories which had been effectively unknown until the mid-17th century.24 Even among the ‘lower class’ in France in the 18th century, historians have found a striking increase in the ownership of accessories for tea.25

The Chinese manufacturers of tea and coffee sets, alert to what was required in Europe, adapted their products to the market. The Chinese did not brew their tea in the type of teapots favored by Europeans and Americans, for example, nor did they sip tea from cups with handles, but from small rimless, bowl-like cups, as they still do. But both were now provided in shapes which conformed to Western taste. More striking still, though the Chinese did not add sugar to their tea, Chinese manufacturers were more than happy to provide sugar bowls for the purpose. The success of imported ‘China’ (the name itself an abbreviation of ‘China-ware’) can be seen by the fact that the name was absorbed into the vernacular by the late 17th century as a generic term for crockery of all kinds.26 Enterprising Europeans were also prompted to imitate these China wares. There was, however, more to this than merely copying the finest and most costly of elaborate fashions, once Europeans had learned
how to create and work with porcelain. It was clear enough that there was a growing market for *locally* made tableware. Josiah Wedgwood led the way in Britain, aiming initially at the fashionable tastes of the wealthy. His new London showroom offered a variety of attractive items for the kitchen and dining room. But Wedgwood also set out to *popularize* his wares, manufacturing goods at prices within the reach of the middling orders. A clever mix of new manufacturing systems and—above all—marketing techniques enabled Wedgwood’s products to find their way into all corners of British domestic and social life. He also aimed at an international market, and soon his pottery could be found scattered around Europe. His salesmen’s efforts were helped by fashionable society’s adoption of Wedgwood products as gifts for like-minded friends. Much of his trade was, however, exported to the tables of Britons wherever they lived and worked, from North America to India and beyond. Travelers regularly noted the presence of Wedgwood pottery wherever they traveled abroad: in France, the Low Countries, and Russia, in Spain, in North America, and in the slave colonies of the Caribbean. At his death in 1795 Josiah Wedgwood left a fortune of half a million pounds.

Wedgwood’s commercial success provides an important clue to a much broader process of social change. He aimed initially at the prosperous, at the very people first influenced by the habit of tea drinking. In the process he helped to create a mass market with high prices. Once his goods had secured their niche in fashionable society, others—less fashionable and less wealthy—followed. He spotted and capitalized on one simple principle: fashion tended to start at the top and work downward. Thus it was with tea drinking and with the domestic acquisitions of tea sets.

The British had become infamous tea drinkers by 1800, and tea drinking was firmly rooted as a feature of public, social, and
domestic life. Something like 30 million pounds of tea were consumed in Britain by then. As we have seen, for the British, tea and sugar went together, and the graph for the import and consumption of the one more or less mirrored the graph for the other. Supporters of the sugar lobby – planters and slave traders – knew that their firmest support was to be found not only among those who favored slavery and the slave trade, but also among those who promoted the importation of tea. Like tea drinkers, the West Indian sugar planters needed tea from China.

Europeans, by contrast, tended to prefer coffee, though the development of coffee drinking took a similar pattern to that of tea. It, too, took hold initially in elite circles, before becoming a popular habit via the proliferation of coffee shops and cafes throughout urban Europe. A common drink in Arabia and Turkey for centuries (British coffee shops often went under the sign of ‘The Turk’s Head’), coffee created a distinctive niche in Western city life. Served in bowls or cups, with sugar added to remove its naturally bitter taste, coffee drinking became the focus for male social and economic life across Europe. In Paris, cafes multiplied, the cost of coffee fell, and coffee drinking established itself as part of public and private social life. The French heaped so much sugar into their coffee that, according to an English visitor, the spoon could stand up in the cup. It was consumed in royal palaces and sold on the streets of Paris by vendors working from a wooden bench in the street. Parisian coffee shops came in an enormous variety by the late 18th century, from the most fashionable and costly to the lowest of dives offering warmth and shelter for the poor – alongside a cup of hot sugary coffee. Men on their way to work early in the morning could buy a cup of cheap coffee – made from coffee dregs mixed with warm milk – from female street pedlars.27

London had its own coffee culture. In the City of London alone there were 82 coffee shops by 1662, perhaps 550 in Greater
London by 1740. Over the period 1650 to 1850, 2,000 coffee shops existed in London. The coffee house had become “a chief focus of social life.”

Here was the key to its universal importance. Men gathered over coffee to conduct business, to organize finances, to provide insurance, to supervise and scrutinize shipping and manufacture. In time the coffee shop became a gathering point for political and sectional interests. They were home to thespians and the world of theater, trade associations, political groups, and conspirators. They attracted high life and the lowest of low life. They became the natural habitat of London’s great artists and caricaturists of the 18th century, and some were famed for their gatherings of writers and wits. Others were infamous as brothels and bagnios. This extraordinary variety of coffee shops provided a meeting place where coffee (and tobacco) was consumed, and where sugar was added to the black bitter drink, as taste required. In the coffee shop, as in the servants’ quarters and in kitchens across Europe, the dictum ‘sweeten to taste’ was the golden rule. It was also an unmistakable sign of the pervasiveness of slave-grown sugar.

Coffee itself had, like tea and chocolate, come from an exotic location, and as with other exotica, it arrived on a wave of medical and social controversy. Like sugar, tea, and tobacco, coffee had its medical backers (and it too, initially, could be bought in the apothecary shop). Some worried that coffee attracted groups of men who wished to take part in nefarious discussions: in societies beset by political and religious strife, another venue for political and perhaps seditious debate was a worrying trend. But the drift to coffee proved impossible to stop, not least because of the simple social pleasures it afforded, especially when assisted by tobacco. The coffee shop thus became an essential feature of Western urban social life. Men gathered round their bowls of coffee, sweetening them with slave-grown sugar, their pipes filled with the new-fangled weed of tobacco (from the slave
fields of the Chesapeake), for the prospects of good company and the inevitable arguments about any topic under the sun. Unlike the tavern and ale house, where arguments could disintegrate into drunken dispute, the coffee shop debates remained rational and controlled (despite the stimulus of coffee itself). Not surprisingly, some called them ‘penny universities.’

The medicinal qualities claimed for coffee were soon set aside in favor of its simple personal and social pleasures. Like tea and sugar, coffee could be had in ever greater (and cheaper) volumes, thanks to coffee cultivation in Europe’s tropical possessions. Europeans settling into their new tropical colonies were always on the hunt for commercial tropical produce, transplanting crops from one corner of the world to another. Coffee was henceforth cultivated in new colonial locations; at higher altitudes in the Dutch settlements in Java, in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, and in the hilly and mountainous spine of St. Domingue (Haiti) – and much of it was cultivated by African slaves. At first the bulk of coffee in Britain was imported from the Levant and the Mediterranean (much of it had originated in the Yemen) but by 1720 coffee from the Red Sea port of Mocha was being imported by the East India Company, with substantial volumes of British imports of coffee re-exported to European customers (overwhelmingly to Holland). The data is again confused by the story of smuggling, that contraband industry which sought to evade state duties on imported coffee. The peculiar feature of this story, however, is the parallel trajectories of tea and coffee. Just when the British were re-exporting much of their coffee to their coffee-drinking European neighbors, British coffee drinking was being overtaken – and at a remarkable pace – by tea. Stated simply, in the course of the 18th century, tea replaced coffee as the national drink in Britain. Today, and despite a thriving coffee culture, we simply assume that the British are primarily a tea-drinking
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people. Yet the British consumed ten times as much coffee as tea in 1700.

By the 1720s, all that had changed. In that decade the value of imported tea (most of it for domestic consumption) was much higher than that of coffee. But as the cost of tea fell, the popularity of tea drinking was confirmed and expanded. At much the same time, and as coffee took root in Europe's various tropical colonies (the Dutch in Java and Surinam, the French in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean), Europeans were no longer reliant on coffee from the Red Sea. In the British case, tea held its commercial advantage by being cheaper. Hot sweet tea was the undisputed king by the late 18th century: it was now the drink of British working people. Those so poor in the 1790s that they could not afford to buy tea would simulate it by pouring hot water over a burnt crust. Contemporaries regularly scratched their heads at the apparent contradiction; the very poor had come to think of hot sweet tea as a vital ingredient of everyday life. In 1757 Jonas Hanway was irritated that "your servants' servants, down to the very beggars, will not be satisfied unless they consume the produce of the remote country of China." In Europe, it was different. In Germany, coffee was "the drink of all, to the very porters and postilions." So too in France, where coffee was enjoyed by the highest and the poorest of French society by the late 18th century. But in Britain, coffee had lost out to tea.

Three hot drinks (tea, coffee, and, to a lesser extent, chocolate) which were widespread and popular by the late 18th century were made palatable to Western tastes by the addition of sugar. So, too, was a range of Western food. The very phrase 'sweeten to taste' could now be found where it remains to this day: in cookbooks, domestic manuals, and recipes. Cooking – like beverages – had absorbed sugar, part of the broader process which saw diet and taste transformed by Western involvement
with foodstuffs from throughout the world. The data, again, provides a statistical outline for what had happened. Sugar, which had cost about one shilling per pound in 1660, cost half that twenty years later. In 1700, the English consumed 7lbs of sugar a year – each – the equivalent of two tablespoons a day. Sugar was used not only in drink and food but was also incorporated into a growing number of manufacturing processes (brewing and distilling, for example), in preservatives and medicines. Sugar was a feature of British cooking by the late 17th century and became even more widespread as the 18th century advanced, especially via the spread of ‘French cuisine,’ with its widespread use of sugar for its great variety of desserts and puddings. By then, sugar was indispensable and integral to Western taste.

The whole process was dependent on African slaves in the Americas. Yet who even thought of the slaves in St. Domingue as they lavished sugar into their Parisian coffee? Who even considered the African slave when they spooned sugar into their coffee in Philadelphia, or into tea in British homes? Indeed, what could be more British than a sweet cup of tea? Did anyone think about the role played by gangs of Africans toiling in the Caribbean when they lovingly handled their Sèvres sugar bowls?

Notes
2. For the classic study of sugar, see Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York, 1986.
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