How has sugar affected the history of the world around it?

Sugar. A commodity that has integrated itself so well into society that now life without it is unimaginable. After all, almost every grocery store is bound to have it, and it isn’t very difficult at all to get ahold of. However, sugar itself has had a tremendously long and impactful history, and the path that that box of sugar lying on the shelf in the bakery aisle has taken to get there is anything but simple. The amount of ways through which sugar has impacted humanity, and the world itself, throughout the course of history is remarkable considering that it is in itself nothing but a sweetener. It has affected the societies in which it grows by serving as an impeccably desirable commodity, causing for a boom in trade throughout the world. It was one of the triggering factors that caused for the age of exploration due to its desirability; it brought the world together as a whole, enhancing collective learning by increasing interconnection throughout, blending cultures and knowledge from all corners of the Earth.

In order to fully understand the history and impact of sugar, one must examine what sugar truly is, elementally speaking, and what natural conditions it needs to have in order to properly grow. Going back to the third threshold, elements, table sugar is made up of disaccharides known as sucrose. Sucrose is made up of a single molecule of glucose, which is linked to a molecule of fructose (Clarke, Singh). Fructose is a form of plant-based sugar, which means that sucrose is found in nearly every plant in existence. Despite this, it is only truly harvestable from a few specific plants: sugar cane, sugar beet, sugar maple, and date palm. The reason for this is simply that those are the only plants that contain sucrose in harvestable amounts. Out of these four sources, sugar cane was the first to be used, and is still the most commonly used source of sucrose to date. This information is very relevant in the world of
chemistry, as scientists can use it to attempt to harvest sugar through other, simpler and more plentiful means. Relating to the fifth threshold, life, Sugar cane is a very delicate and easily perishable crop, only able to grow in specific places under certain conditions. “Since sugar cane is a tropical plant, it can only be cultivated in countries near the equator, or in areas where there are average temperatures of 24°C (75°F), combined with strong sunshine and heavy seasonal rainfall or plentiful supplies of water for irrigation” (Cane Sugar), limiting the growth of the crop to places, such as Brazil, India, South Africa and Indonesia. These limitations cause for sugar to not be available to most of the world, which is what sparked the drastic increases in trade that came in the following years. Without this seemingly simple commodity, there is a high chance that the world would have experienced much less trade and therefore a much smaller spread of culture and knowledge worldwide.

Sugar was a catalyst for the boom in expansion and interconnection that spurred worldwide in the 13th and 14th centuries, causing for a major increase in collective learning across the planet. This impacts the seventh major threshold of increasing complexity, agriculture, as it was one of the major factors that formed the agrarian world during that time period. One major event that happened during these centuries was the age of exploration, which in turn lead to the notorious slave trade. One important agricultural detail about the production of sugar is that it is extremely labor intensive, and a very difficult process. Sugar was mainly cultivated through plantations, which involved many acres of land devoted to growing and processing sugar. These plantations therefore required an enormous amount of manpower to operate, which would have cost the industries a hefty sum to pay all of the workers (Burns). This is where slavery comes into the picture. While slavery has always existed, it was never very commonplace until the age of exploration. Until then, slaves were usually just prisoners of war, and slavery was used as a type of temporary punishment that people could not simply be born into. During this
era, everything changed, as slaves began to be seen as commodities that were meant for nothing but to be sold into labor (Rodriguez). The increasing demand for sugar worldwide was in fact one of the reasons for this increase in slavery, due to the fact that free labor on plantations caused the economies of sugar-producing countries to flourish. Another reason for which slaves were needed in these plantations is simply that they were the only ones available to do the work necessary. This is shown as, “the combination of the exhausting labor of cutting tough sugar cane and the islands' hot, dry climate proved so unbearable that even those desperate to work refused ... Slave labor soon replaced the indentured contract workers” (Girod). As slaves were the only people with no choice in the matter of what labor they did, they were forced to work under these brutal, inhumane conditions. In fact, the death rate in sugar plantations was so high that traders and owners used to ship in far more slaves that necessary to compensate. Sugar was shipped far and wide to all corners of the Earth, connecting the world through its vast trade networks. Alongside the exponentially expanding slave and sugar trades came an immersion of culture worldwide, which lead to the world being more interconnected than ever. This interconnection throughout the world lead to a sharp rise in collective learning, propelling the world in an entirely new, innovative direction.

The ways in which the sugar-processing industries have changed throughout the modern revolution are tremendous, as are the ways that it in turn influenced the revolution itself, shaping the commercial world into what it is today. Throughout this eighth threshold of increasing complexity, sugar has impacted and changed the world in innumerable ways, increasing acceleration and industrialization. The main change that occurred in the sugar industries during this time of rapid change was that it became much more affordable and accessible to the working class (Chocolate Class). This is mainly due to the fact that slavery had been abolished in most places, and if not abolished then drastically reduced since the age of exploration. A lack of a
consistent source of labor forced sugar industries to look into new technologies, leading to the aforementioned steep decrease in cost. This opened the doors for inventors and industries to create methods to harvest sugar more efficiently in a cost effective manner. Increased innovation during this time period is the main cause for the rapid growth and acceleration of the world during this time period. One commonly used technology during the industrial revolution was the sugar mill. Sugar mills can be horse-powered or powered by a waterwheel, and their purpose is to crush sugarcane, extracting juice that can later be processed into table sugar (Sugar Mills). This abundance of sugar changed the lives and diets of the working class tremendously, and it provided many economical advantages as well. Diets before the 19th century were highly un-economical, as a highly disproportionate amount of money was spent on the luxury of meat, leaving little money for anything else. Sugar fixed this issue by providing a highly calorific and cheaper alternative, while still providing variety in taste from bland starches such as potatoes, as, “After the industrial revolution, sugar came to be used as a nutrient, an absolute requirement for the sustenance of many middle class families, due to its source of cheap energy during a time when the rise of an industrialized economy necessitated such sources for productivity” (Chocolate Class). Sugar also began to be used as a method of preservation, through canned fruits, jams, and syrups, changing lifestyles and diets of the working class forever. The industrial revolution is truly what made sugar so accessible and commonplace today. It is during this time period that safe, cost-effective, and sustainable methods of processing sugarcane into table sugar were established, changing diets, lifestyles, and economies across the world.

Of course, it could be said that sugar is just a simple commodity that hasn’t impacted the world other than in a dietary fashion. However, this could not be further from the truth, as sugar was one of the biggest cash crops throughout history, and it served as a primary driver for the age of exploration and the slave trade. The reason that sugar was so impactful on society was
because plantations were so profitable, and therefore many nations wanted to claim as many plantations for themselves as they could (Whipps). This meant that they needed a surplus of labor to maintain all of them, triggering the slave trade. The slave trade was one of the most impactful “fruits” of the age of exploration as it changed and established the social and political dynamics throughout the world for the years to come. While a lot of African culture and heritage was lost due to the slave trade, a lot of it migrated to the Americas, where it drastically affected society and culture. The slave trade is the main reason why African roots and heritage extend so deep into the history of America, and all of this was due to a single commodity: Sugar.

Overall, sugar has done far more than just make food sweeter, as it has played such a defining role on earth and society. It was the driver of the age of exploration, had a huge impact on the modern revolution, and has formed the world as we know it. Sugar trading worldwide has caused for so many different cultures to interact, and for so much knowledge to be spread around the globe. As a whole, this simple commodity brought the world together and increased the level of interconnection all over, creating the vast network of collective learning and innovation that exists today.
Annotated Bibliography


This source contains a lot of very interesting and useful information, and it summarizes many of the affects that sugar has had on the world globally throughout history. This source is trustworthy as it comes from a database which is well known for having reliable information, and that contains many other reliable sources. The information found in this source lines up with all the information found in other sources, with no bias present. This article talks about the African slave trade, and how that has impacted trade and growth. One commodity that it mentioned a lot in particular is sugar, as sugar plantations were a huge part of the slave trade. It is this and other special commodities that launched the age of exploration into full swing, and that caused for the slave trade to grow so massive during that period of time. This information links back to the 8th threshold of complexity, that being expansion and interconnection. This is due to the fact that it shows just how sugar caused the world to be more interconnected, and how it ties in with the history of humanity as a whole.


This website contains a lot of useful and reliable information that brings together a concise and clear understanding of the effects of sugar over the years. First of all, this source is very trustworthy as the information from it matches up with information found with other reliable sources. Another reason for which it is trustworthy is as it has no evident bias, and provides statistics and data to help bolster and strengthen any points made. This article is very useful, as it links sugar back to the 5th threshold (which is life). It does so by providing information on the conditions and locations that sugar cane needs to be in to properly grow. It essentially lists all the “goldilocks conditions” that it needs to have in order to exist and live, which is something of great importance to its evolution throughout history. It also connects back to threshold 7, which is agriculture. This is because it mentions how to properly cultivate and grow sugar cane crops, which leads into its history and how it affected the future of humanity.


This source is a very trustworthy source, and it also contains a lot of useful information that pertains to the topic of sugar. The reason that this source is trustworthy is first and foremost because it comes from a website that is know to be very scholarly and reliable, Britannica.com. Another reason why this source is trustworthy is because it contains a lot of information that matches up with information found in other reliable documents. This source is very useful, as it talks about many different aspects of sugar and its history. One thing in particular that it focuses on is the chemical composition of sugar, and the elements that it is made up of. This is extremely important as it connects
sugar to the third threshold of increasing complexity, which happens to be elements. This source also talks about where and how sugar grows, and the climate and requirements that it needs. This is useful, as it shows how sugar has spread through the world, and how it has impacted mankind (relating back to thresholds 5 and 8).


This source is located in a database that is very well known for its reliability and accuracy when it comes to facts about history, namely ABC-CLIO. This is one of the main reasons that this source is so clearly reliable, the other being that information from this source matches with that of other scholarly sources. This article, titled “Antigua and Barbuda”, contains a lot of information on the colonization of Caribbean islands, and the exploits of Columbus during the age of exploration. This relates back to the impact of sugar as it has a lot of information about the role of sugar throughout all this, and how it lead to the colonization of many of these formerly native-run islands. This especially connects to the 7th threshold of increasing complexity, which happens to be agriculture. It describes the conditions that the slaves had to face while harvesting these crops, as well as the process that they must go through, and how sugar became mass produced. This also relates to the 8th threshold, as it talks about the way sugar spread throughout the world, and how it affected the socio-economic dynamics between different countries.


This source is very useful, as it includes a lot of information that is very important and relevant to the topic of sugar and its impact worldwide. This source is also very trustworthy, as it comes from a scholarly database, namely ABC-CLIO. Another reason is that Junius Rodriguez (the author of this webpage) is very well known for writing educated history papers and articles, most notably on the topic of slavery. A lot of the information in this source matches up with information that can be found in other reliable sources. The reason that this article is so useful is because it contains a lot of information on the atlantic slave trade, as well as the way that sugar was involved with it. This is hugely important as it shows the ways how sugar was spread throughout the world, and how it has affected humanity to this day. This all relates back to threshold 8, as this trade of sugar and slaves demonstrates how truly interconnected the world was, and how it expanded.


This document is very interesting, and contains a lot of useful information about sugar as a whole and its affect on the world throughout the years. The main focus of this article is on the industrial revolution, and how it affected the role that sugar played in
society. It also focused on the affect that the revolution had on the process of making sugar, and the cost of the commodity. This article also briefly examines the affects that sugar has had and has across the world throughout many different countries, truly exemplifying just how much processed sugar as a commodity has affected the world in so many different ways. This article is trustworthy, as it is written in a manner that is historically accurate, through a very unbiased lens. This article also contains a works cited page at the bottom, which is full of resources from very scholarly sources. The information in this article is very similar and lines up with the information found in other, reputed scholarly sources, furthermore enhancing its reliability and its usefulness.


This resource is very short, as it only includes a few sentences of text and then two photographs. However, despite its lack of length, it still provides very useful information and visuals that help formulate an understanding on how sugar affected the world and changed throughout the industrial revolution. This article focuses on sugar mills, which is a technology that was invented during the modern revolution in order to facilitate the processing of sugar. The two images of sugar mills present in this article truly illuminate the complexity and function of this innovation, providing very useful insight on the industrial revolution as well as the process through which processed sugar is made. These insights are what come together to create a clear understanding of the affect that sugar played throughout history. This source is reliable as it comes from a very famous scholarly source that is known for having reliable information (PBS). Due to its reliability as well as the useful insight it presents, this source is very useful to fully understand the impact of sugar on the world throughout history.

Whipp, Heather. “How Sugar Changed the World.” Live Science, 2 June 2018, www.livescience.com/4949-sugar-changed-world.html. Accessed 1 June 2018. This source is a very useful and valuable source, as it eloquently and completely summarizes the affect that sugar has had on the world over the course of history. It focuses mainly on the way that sugar has impacted the world during the age of exploration, relating it back to concepts present in the 7th threshold of increasing complexity (Agriculture). This article clearly shows all the different ways that sugar impacted various parts of the world, showing how its impact changed depending on where and who it was affecting. All of this information in a clear concise format is what makes this source so useful in formulating a complete view of its impact on the world. This source is evidently trustworthy, as the information present in it matches up with the information present in other scholarly sources, such as those from databases. It simply summarizes all of the information that can be found in other, more specific sources.