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To be published in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy, eds., *Global Economic History*
Bloomsbury Publisher, forthcoming 2018.

**From Wages and the Standard of Living to Consumer Culture
Consumption and Global History in the Early Modern Period.**

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Introduction:

There is a large recent historiography on consumption and social and cultural history, yet there is much less on consumption and economic history. Recent textbooks of British economic history have no chapters on consumption. Instead there is a traditional place for chapters on wages and the standard of living.¹ Though the most recent edition of the *Cambridge Economic History of Britain* does have a chapter on consumption, a closer look reveals that this too is mainly about wages and the standard of living. And yet consumption is a key factor in economic policy formation, for it is currently the source of much British tax revenue.— the proportion of business taxes on profits has shown a downward trend since the 1980s, while those on consumption have gone up; the corporation tax rate in 2008 was 28%, is now 20%, and will be 18% by 2020, and VAT is now 20%, after rising from 17.5% in 2011. During the eighteenth century, too, a key source of much government revenue was excise taxes and customs duties, that is, taxes on consumer goods. Political debate over these taxes fuelled radical reform movements, and contributed to the American Revolution.²

Consumption, and especially luxury consumption was the key factor in debates on sources of economic improvement during the Enlightenment, and indeed this discourse stimulated the emergence of political economy as an intellectual subject area. Today consumer economic theory and other social science theory raise many fascinating subjects, and have moved out in recent years to behavioural psychology.³ And yet economic historians, apart from a few exceptions, have been reluctant to engage in analysis of its significance in economic change.

Economists from Jevons to Marshall introduced analysis of consumption in terms of marginal utility.⁴ But mainstream economists showed little interest even at

the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in the wider aspects of consumption. It was those of heterodox views who took it up: Veblen, Ruskin and Hobson. Heterodox voices converged between the end of the nineteenth-century and the First World War to analyse, deconstruct and criticize a period of rapid growth of new wealth and luxury expenditure in Europe and America. Luxury goods, excess consumption and collecting were manifestations of Europe's and America's new superrich bourgeois classes. Banking and industrial families built palatial residences to be filled with all manner of globally-sourced luxury goods, and they collected antique objects, pictures and other art objects. There was a whole fin-de-siècle debate on the decline of capitalism, moral corruption and social division. Sombart, Simmel and Veblen all published their critical texts on the hedonism of a fin-de-siècle age during this period.⁵ Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, first published early in the eighteenth century, reappeared at this time in a new American edition published by Kaye, and it was at the same time translated into German.

There was some interest in consumption among economists in the 1960s and 1970s, but again for the most part the subject remained on the margins of mainstream economics. While product development was advancing rapidly in this period, economists focussed on productivity change. There was much discussion of consumer choice, but this was conceived as a choice between price and quantity; tastes, products and qualities were assumed by most economists to be fixed. Two critical voices from within mainstream microeconomic theory, Kelvin Lancaster and Duncan Ironmonger, pointed out in the 1960s that consumers selected not just a consumer good, but among the many characteristics and qualities contained by such goods, but few took up the analysis of tastes that this implied.⁶

A few years later Tibor Scitovsky argued the case for the importance of novelty to consumer choice. Habituation in meeting demands needed to be punctuated by novelty and uncertainty; thus he highlighted novelty, variety, complexity and surprise which aroused the senses and stimulated pleasure.⁷ In recent years Marina Bianchi has used these ideas to develop her concept of the 'active' consumer, one who is not a passive price taker, but actively engages to form tastes, who responds to new goods and combines these in diverse ways to make an identity. This active consumer might well base her choices on sensual satisfaction over everyday convenience and even necessity.⁸

The use by these economists of 'hedonic indices' and the psychological theories underpinning these has also stimulated the economic historian, Avner Offer, to use these theories to explain twentieth-century consumer trends. He argues that many economists assume that individuals can rank their different wants consistently, that they want as much as they can get, and that they act on their preferences. But this is not even frequently the case. Wants become less compelling the more they are satisfied; and many people shift their preferences sequentially to more psychologically pressing ones. We live in states of anticipation and consummation, seeking the serial fulfilment of our transient desires.⁹ True prosperity in Offer's view

is a good balance between short-term arousal, and long-term security; the challenge is not to maximize consumption, but to pace it back to a level of optimal satisfaction.¹⁰

These issues of the factors lying behind consumption, the choices, the stimulus and the complexities of satisfaction are central to explaining a history of consumption in the early modern world. What difference has global history made to the histories we have written of consumption? What part has consumption played in the factors considered in global economic history?

2. The Great Divergence and Consumption

First we can turn to consider the part accorded to consumption in explanations of the Great Divergence. Pomeranz compared consumption and luxury consumption across Europe, China, Japan and India to argue these were not significant factors behind differences between the great regions of the world. He compared; he did not connect, and so he offered little analysis of the global connections in commodity trade as a factor behind the great divergence.

Let us look first at his findings on different consumption patterns between East and West, and then to the differences accorded by other historians to global commodity trade. Pomeranz's findings suggested that Chinese sugar consumption in 1750 was higher than in continental Europe, even as late as 1800; but at some point after this China's per capita consumption of sugar declined, while Europe's went on to grow very rapidly indeed after 1840.¹¹ China's tea consumption was also much higher than Europe's at 11 oz. per person as compared to Europe's 2 oz. per person in 1780s.¹² He also compared the consumption in both regions of textiles and clothing to argue that Chinese textile consumption compared quite well against that of Europe in the mid to late eighteenth century.

There was, furthermore, evidence of a moral debate on excess consumption among the popular classes and peasants in the Lower Yangzi region of China and in eighteenth-century Japan. And there was a fashion system in clothing and some consumer durables in Ming China and Muromachi and Tokugawa Japan, though not in India or South-East Asia.¹³ Pomeranz attributed this to the role in these latter regions of personal dependency as the central organizing principle of society.¹⁴ There was less change in the use of houses and the generations they contained than in Europe, and fewer changes in styles. But there was nevertheless a market for high-quality purchased goods even in villages in China's backward macro-regions. There were likewise many Japanese consumer products in late Tokagawa and early Meiji era villages.¹⁵

Pomeranz reinforced his support for the case for high standards of living in eighteenth-century China. He found higher consumption there of tea and silk than in Europe as a whole, a widespread consumption of tobacco, and per capital cloth consumption on a par with Germany. There was a very high expenditure on ritual,

and though meat and dairy consumption in China were lower, there were comparable levels of protein intake to Europe's.¹⁶

What did differ was the role of trade and imports in this consumption? The Chinese consumed their own domestically-produced sugar, tobacco and tea. These products that became so crucial to Europe's changing consumer habits, in China produced only a low profit-margin trade among small merchants, no significant revenues for the state, and thus no powerful lobbies to encourage their increased consumption. Europe, by contrast, grew all its sugar, tobacco and coffee in its colonies, and bought tea from China with silver from the Americas. And Europe drew its cotton from colonies or ex-colonies, while China grew much of its own.¹⁷ The regional connections of commodities was thus missing from the divergence debate. As Jan de Vries has pointed out recently, trade was toppled in this new historiography from the central role ascribed to it by Andre Gunder Frank. Instead Pomeranz focussed on the Chinese trade that did not emerge in the Ming/Qing period. There was no extensive specialization and inter-regional trade, and the Chinese trading diaspora in SE Asia did not give rise to a large trade in tropical goods to the Chinese metropole.

Both Pomeranz and Parthasarathi argued that China and India did not cultivate long-distance trade links because they had no need of them. The need for silver in both places did, however, generate a supply of goods for export sufficient to elicit from Europe an influx of silver capable of 'oiling the wheels of the Chinese economy' and acting as the 'motor' of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁸ The point made by Pomeranz, and following him on South Asia, Parthasarathi, was that both parts of the world, East and West, had at least similar levels of consumption of goods such as sugar, tobacco, tea and textiles, but the part played by traded goods in this consumption was much higher in the West, and it grew much more rapidly there as trade escalated in the eighteenth century.

What part then, did traded consumer goods play? Our recent global histories have focussed on commonly-shared experiences among different major regions of the world; they have not investigated the trade connections that linked these. The most recent work assessing the impact of these trade connections on the economy, Jan de Vries's 'The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World'¹⁹ set out the comparative levels of East India Company trade between Asia and Europe on the one hand and Atlantic trade on the other. His data showed that Atlantic trade grew more than twice as fast as the Asia-Europe trade, and contributed twice the value to European GDP, and yet the indirect effect of the Asia-Europe trade was disruptive and highly significant in shifting consumer cultures.

Standard explanations for the appeal of Asian commodities in early modern Europe are that they were exotic, unique or superior, and cheap. But more important than this was the information flows they brought in their wake. Merchants brought new knowledge about goods, and participated in developing innovative ways of incorporating these into European lifestyles with new uses and new products.²⁰ The East India companies were effective in gathering, processing and analysing large amounts of information about access to goods and ways of developing markets

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for them. In Europe most of these imported Eastern goods were sold at the outset in the company auctions, but distributing these goods out to wider European markets and the re-export trade beyond Europe was left to private trade. The variety of these goods, and gradations of quality brought a new signifier to taste and product development in Europe. Such goods drew more households into the market. In de Vries's words, 'information and industriousness were highly correlated.'²¹

Pomeranz recognized the impact of new goods on shifting social behaviours. He acknowledged Adam Smith's fine analysis of the role of exotic baubles that appealed to the senses in motivating elites to acquire objects in lieu of retainers. Exotic goods, Pomeranz wrote, also stimulated societies with strict sumptuary laws; because such goods were previously unknown and thus not yet assigned or forbidden to any specific group. Goods with remote origins were more easily mystified, and acquired greater 'value' than local or known goods with similar uses.²² Pomeranz accepted Jan de Vries's case for an 'industrious revolution', that is that the demand for newly available goods helped to create new worker and consumer behaviours, but he did not provide any analysis for what difference this might have made for diverging paths of economic development.

Part of the reason for this lies in the view of China's historians that external trade was just less important for Chinese industry than it was for that of Western economies. As we have seen, sugar and cotton were internally produced. Europeans, facing supply constraints and high transactions costs in acquiring these goods externally, were stimulated to seek substitutes in other parts of the world that they controlled as colonies or through their own process and product innovation. Europeans learned to produce to Asian standards, varieties and qualities.

The key external commodity which stimulated the economies of China and India was silver; but even this was not, in Pomeranz's view, transformative. Since the publication of *The Great Divergence* there has been much research on various aspects of consumption in many parts of the world, China amongst these. Zheng Yangwen's *China on the Sea: How the Maritime World Shaped Modern China* (2012) investigates the taste for European goods in early modern China. Goods from fragrances and clocks, to foodstuffs and architecture were 'indigenized' and contributed to commercial specialization. There may be parallels in the transformation of the Chinese economy and society by foreign goods to the European experience, but they did not entail the connections that de Vries drew between the 'industrious revolution' and the industrial revolution.²³

Much of the more recent research on the history of consumption in other parts of Asia is focussed on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and addresses social and cultural history.²⁴ But on India there research on the Mughal and princely courts reveals fashions and rapid changes in taste and styles led by the courts. But this did not penetrate deeply into urban communities.²⁵ Bayly depicted this consumer culture as a collecting culture, and a part of what he termed 'archaic globalization'. Rulers

Commented [WU2]: Put in a section here on consumption in India drawing on Gommans and Parthasarathi.

amassed goods from distant lands, and there was also a tributary flow of consumption; the nawabs & other rulers controlled flow of goods and services for the rest. The courts also sought unique or highly specialist goods. Whereas modern complexity demands the uniformity of Levi's and trainers, the archaic simplicity of everyday life demanded that great men prized difference in goods...In one sense archaic lords...were collectors, rather than consumers.²⁶

This also affected the type of domestic goods produced for courtly consumption. Demand across the Mughal then princely courts centred on highly specialist cloth and decoration dependent on specific groups of skilled workers. For South India this entailed extreme specialisation by caste and sub-

caste in the textile economy. Producing the finest products for local rulers and European merchants left South India with the model of 'luxury in a poor country.' Dynasties of fine handicrafts were based in early learning and created unique forms of quality, deserving of their high reputation on world markets. Specialist techniques were guarded by caste exclusivity. Sarees came in dozens of different kind; silk Kanchipuram sarees for weddings offered the choice of dozens of different border designs. Growing wealth and markets contributed to more specialisation and with it more status distinctions, and further refinements of skill; global markets tapped into this capacity to produce unique forms of 'quality'. But there were limits on the impact of this high degree of specialization on wider consumer cultures and the economy itself.²⁷

Ritual display and bodily adornment were more important than consumer goods fixed in home furnishings. The Indian courts held *darbars* or ceremonial gatherings where courtiers brought gifts and the Mughal emperor or the nawabs awarded other gifts: *khil'ats* (robes of honour), land titles & allowances. The biggest consumer in the Nagpur region was the Maratha court. It bought three quarters of all fine muslins, shawls, and *kinkhabs* (silk brocades with gold and silver thread) for itself, retainers and soldiers.²⁸ Textiles for dress reflected the wearer as much as the manufacturer: specific textiles reflected the moral and physical substance of the individual. Many Muslims avoided wearing silk next to the skin, following the sayings of the Prophet against men wearing pure silk; instead 'mashru', a cotton-silk mix was developed. Yet Hindus valued silk above cotton, and would not wear the stitched cloth worn by Muslims. The result was a highly- segmented consumer market. Indian wealth was more fragile and fluid than in Northern Europe. The courts dominated consumer behaviour that was increasingly expressed in movable goods, and focused on the physical body.²⁹

While imported goods, fashion and extensive product and quality differentiation were significant to consumption in India, this did not reach out to wider urban society, nor embed themselves in the everyday life of large groups of the population. While they existed, they were not the stuff of the kind of 'industrious revolution' of Northern Europe.

3. Historiography – is there an economic history of consumption?

To what extent do we have an economic history of consumption for the early modern world, or even parts of the early modern world apart from Europe? When we look to Europe, that historiography is focussed on Jan de Vries's 'industrious revolution'. What debate we have in the historiography generated in the wake of the 'great divergence' is not one over consumption, but over wages and standards of living. Again, this is a debate over comparisons not connections. It does not tell us about consumer goods, or incentives to produce or to buy these; it does not tell us about the impact of some parts of the world on others, for example the impact of the Columbian exchange of foods, plants and diseases; of colonial groceries, of the impact of a global trade in resources and materials, nor of that in manufactured goods.

What can we glean from that debate on wages and standards of living? Carole Shammas asks 'when and why did consumption of material goods become the measure of the 'standard of living'?³⁰ Up to the years immediately following World War II the standard of living was conceived in purely material terms, that is the goods and services at one's disposal. Thus GDP per capita became the yardstick, but as we know, these indices did not show inequality or investment in human capital. Now most indices of well-being skip over household budgets and real wages, and turn instead to life expectancy, health status and heights, as well as other indices of well-being such as education.³¹

Shammas summarized a widely-accepted position on European living standards to date: earlier estimates of early nineteenth-century income growth were revised downwards, and pre-industrial standards were revised upwards. New products were brought into Western Europe; diets were more varied, cotton fabric entered the clothing market, and textile prices dropped. Brick and stone replaced wood and clay in many centre cities, glass windows became widespread, and interior furnishings improved. This was not due to lower grains prices, but to higher real incomes, lower costs of durables and semi-durables or better use of household labour.³²

Among economic historians of the early modern period, there has been intense debate over levels of wages and living standards, most of this centred on explaining industrialization and divergence. Was there a great divergence in 'wages and prices'? What does this add to an older debate on wages and the standard of living led by Hobsbawm in the 1960s? The purpose of the debate in the 1960s and after, and in more recent configurations in studies of working class budgets led by Horrell and Humphries was to discover the impact of industrialization on the poor. The purpose for the current wage-divergence debate is different. That purpose for one leading contender, Robert Allen is to discover high wages in Britain compared with the rest of the world, and thence to argue that this wage premium could explain her

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prescient and rapid pace of technological change, and subsequent industrialization.³³ His book, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (2009), made this case in key chapters, 'Why England succeeded' and 'Why was the Industrial Revolution British?'.³⁴ He argued first that Europe's ascent began in the century before the major impact of Atlantic and Asian commerce. High wages in England and the Low Countries continued from the seventeenth century alongside population growth; their economies grew fast enough to sustain both. Britain, especially, he argued was a 'high wage, cheap energy economy'. This combination provided the key stimulus to the technological innovation underpinning the industrial revolution. High labour costs provided an incentive to substitute cheap fuel for labour. Britain's high wages induced technological change that substituted capital for labour.³⁵

Like Simon Kuznets' projects of the 1950s to create large comparative data sets of income and productivity estimates, we now have many comparative data sets on wages and living standards, and aspirations to estimate these over large regions of the world in the early modern period. Allen's comparators are based on silver exchange rates and on few cities. Basing wages instead on grain and rice prices gives greater comparability in China and India to Europe. Indeed rice consumption and ownership of cattle contributed to living standards in different regions of India.³⁶ Turning to Japan, rising agricultural productivity in peasant farm households allowed wages to keep pace with economic growth. New cash crops such as cotton and sericulture and rural commercialisation did not produce proletarianisation.³⁷ Despite the findings of these critics, Allen sums up his comparisons using silver exchange rates to find real wages in Japan at similar levels to Britain, but those of India and China much lower, even one third those of England. He thus holds onto his position that high real wages were only to be found in NW Europe, and especially in the urban areas of England and the Low Countries.³⁸

These debates over wages do not, however, take us much further into the history of consumption beyond that of basic foodstuffs. Allen's work remains a good example. He refers to an Indian diet of rice, millets and pulses; in some areas fish provided the only source of animal protein. He writes of the poverty of 'scanty clothing and barefoot', of mud huts with thatched roofs, of few furnishings beyond bamboo mats, of cooking done in earthen pots. His sources are Raychaudhuri and Habib from 1982.³⁹ He finds similar minimalism in China, based on an account of Charles Lockyer, an early eighteenth-century merchant traveller. It seems obvious to him that northwest Europe with its white bread, meat, dairy products and beer had the highest standard of living. But is this so clear? The new histories of food and its preparation need to be linked to the wage baskets used by economic historians. Allen's brief discussion of the consumer revolution refers to statistical evidence of increased consumption of luxuries and novelties: tropical foodstuffs such as tea, sugar, coffee, and chocolate and imported Asian manufactures – cotton, silk, porcelain and British and European imitations, but he does not investigate their consumption; their existence is just further evidence of the high wage economy of

England and the Low Countries.⁴⁰ Economic historians now need to look more deeply into the consumption of specific types of goods – those associated with inequality and those that shifted behaviours.

4. Inequality

Recent research on inequality focuses on the macroeconomic picture of the distribution of income and wealth. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2015) compares rising inequality in the period from the 1970s with the growth in inequality in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Piketty compares the wealthy elites inheriting patrimonial wealth with the growth of elites from the eighteenth century whose wealth was increasingly based on interest earned on private holdings of government debt. Rentiers living off increasingly lucrative investment earnings contrasted with the labouring poor whose relative wages did not rise in any degree until after the mid nineteenth century. Furthermore, property incomes rose from the mid eighteenth century in Europe, and increased inequality.

Technical change during the late eighteenth and in most of the nineteenth centuries in Western Europe and in the USA reinforced this inequality, as capital was substituted for labour in many manufacturing processes. Factories employed less skilled labour; processes were simplified and products standardized for mass production in factories.

What impact did these trends to rising inequality as well as changes in technology mean for consumption? Once again the research we have is about wages and assumptions over what goods comprised the wage basket. Comparisons of wages and standards of living have focussed on the working classes consuming ordinary commodities, and budget studies are mainly based on foodstuffs. But as we know the rich and the poor consume different things. Philip Hoffman has argued that the price series economic historians have relied on overuse staple products especially food, standardized older products, internationally traded goods, physical goods, and they underuse luxury goods, labour-intensive goods, new products, non-traded products, retail products and services.⁴¹

Luxury goods in the eighteenth century became cheaper relative to staple foods, but their impact is as hard to quantify as that for introducing new goods and services into today's cost of living indices. Fashion and luxury goods changed constantly, frustrating the search for consistent time series. Hoffman looked at price changes over a whole series of standardized commodities, and found the biggest advances of prices in fuel, rent, and cinnamon, and the greatest reductions of prices in textiles, sugar, silver, paper, beer, and unskilled labour. He found rising food prices and falling wages of unskilled labour. Many of those luxury products falling in price made use of factors that were getting cheaper across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: clothing and textiles, paper, chocolate, pewter, and sealing wax became cheaper along with the labour that went into them.⁴² Adjusting the cost of

living index with clothing, light, fuel, and beverages shows standards of living declined a little less in the period than previously estimated. But we also need to look further to class –specific cost of living indices.

Lower prices of luxury and staple goods brought real income gains for the wealthier and for richer regions. Hoffman also charted the temporal cycles in this inequality. Between 1500 and 1650 the top income groups experienced a 20 per cent reduction in their cost of living. But between 1650 and 1750 there was a reversal with the common people gaining. This swing reversed again in the second half of the eighteenth century, with wealthier groups gaining from the impact on prices of luxury goods of greater trade and new technologies. It was not until the last half of the nineteenth century, that inequality moved again in favour of the lower classes.⁴³ In the period 1500-1650 the wealthier benefitted most from cheaper new luxury goods as well as old luxuries such as domestic servants, and higher land rents added to their wealth. The poor faced scarcer food, and higher costs of housing and land. In England a second inegalitarian trend took place between 1740 and 1795/1815.

Hoffman poses that these trends favouring the wealthier classes in early modern northwest Europe might help to explain the great divergence. The gains to the early phases of industrialization might well have contributed to changing behaviours associated with the ‘industrious revolution.’

5. The Problems with Budgets, Probates, Orphans and Thieves

Accounting for inequality addresses some of the problems we have with diametrically opposed, but equally widely-accepted positions on standards of living even within only Europe. But much speculation, new sources and different data sets remain at odds. Horrell and Humphries investigated 1,350 household accounts and budgets of the labouring poor in Britain over the period 1790-1850 to draw a pessimist case on trends in family incomes over the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴ Their results, though resting on data from the end of the eighteenth century, also led them to give little credence to ideas of an ‘industrious revolution’ or a ‘consumer revolution’ reaching below the levels of the middling classes.⁴⁵ Horrell’s recent summing up reinforces earlier positions. ‘Studies of the standard of living in the classic Industrial Revolution have failed to find evidence of increases in material welfare reflected in the consumption patterns of the mass of the population between 1790 and 1850.’⁴⁶ She argued that most studies based on probate inventories might support a hypothesis of rising consumption, but only for the middling classes; they anyway showed only a very gradual spread in the ownership of innovative goods across England.⁴⁷

Wider European probate inventories, however, indicated greater ownership of new goods, both imported and British and European; these inventories were gathered from many parts of Britain and Northern Europe. They were gathered from

those of the middling classes, but also included many from the labouring classes.⁴⁸ These demonstrate possession of new and imitative consumer goods, and evidence of new eating practices, with the use of ceramics, glass and cutlery replacing pewter and wooden platters. Jan de Vries put the social history of new consumer practices in Europe together with probate accounts gathered for England and some other parts of Europe especially for the Netherlands to underpin his concept of the 'industrious revolution.' This has been the one serious analysis of an economics of consumption for the early modern period that was not about prices and wages, but about changing tastes and household behaviour. De Vries drew on Gary Becker's analysis of household allocation of time to argue for a shift in household labour priorities from home produced goods and services to market production. More within the household in early modern Europe sold their labour, and bought some of those goods they had formerly made themselves. They also worked longer and harder in order to satisfy a new taste and demand for goods imported into the locality or region, imitations of these or entirely new goods. De Vries called this more intensive labour across the household an 'industrious revolution.' Decisions about consumption could be seen, therefore, as intra-household decisions on time use and expenditure, with wider effects on labour supply and intensity. Though wages were falling in the second half of the eighteenth century, probate inventories and other evidence of material possessions indicated that ownership of material objects was increasing. De Vries thus provided an explanation for this paradox, and one that engaged directly with an economic history of consumption. His case has been challenged by those who argue that labour intensification was driven by necessity rather than consumer aspiration.⁴⁹

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His position was further endorsed by research on other records. Orphans' accounts from the Netherlands and textile identifying markers from the London Foundling Hospital indicated wide use of tea and tea and coffee wares and textile ownership in Amsterdam, other Dutch cities and London. Records of the London orphans and foundlings indicated widespread ownership of printed cottons and mixed cotton and linen fabrics. Anne McCants in her analysis of the Dutch orphans parental inventories found wide evidence of Chinese and Japanese ceramics reaching right through the middling classes and even down to artisans of very modest income levels. In further research she has found a wide range of types of textiles owned by these groups, including some expensive Indian printed calicoes. She argued there had to be a widespread consumer demand for these commodities so that they were incorporated into budgets and daily routines in sufficient amounts to alter overall standards of living.⁵⁰ Coffee was consumed by low wage workers by late 1720s, and by the mid eighteenth century coffee and tea were no longer luxury commodities. The taxing authorities believed tea and coffee consumption to be universal by the mid eighteenth century.⁵¹ Styles used unusual records such as the mid to later eighteenth century Foundling Hospital records of thousands of swatches of mothers' clothing that were attached to records of the infants they left in the orphanage. The large numbers of printed cotton and especially fustian (or

cotton/linen mix) fabrics worn by predominantly poor urban women demonstrated not so much the huge penetration of Indian textiles, but the rapidly advancing imitations of these made in small Lancashire mills.⁵²

Toll records in Hamburg also indicate the rapid uptake of colonial goods, and especially coffee in Germany and Northern Europe. Hamburg's imports of colonial goods made up 46.9 percent of overseas imports in 1733-42, but rose to 70 per cent from 1769. Coffee imports between 1736 and the 1790s increased more than ten fold in real terms. Average annual coffee consumption rose to 2.6kg, and in the course of the eighteenth century, 'coffee had made significant inroads into the everyday consumption patterns of the German population.'⁵³

It was not only orphans who revealed the hidden material lives of the poor, but thieves. Beverly Lemire and John Styles drew on the records of stolen goods in the Old Bailey to show the wide use in London of cotton textiles, of fashionable items and accessories.⁵⁴ More recently Jane Humphries, Sara Horrell and Ken Sneath also used these records to construct a database showing a much greater impact of fashion aspiration and the desire for variety and differentiation amongst common people than the earlier research on working class budgets of Horrell and Humphries had conceded. Some of these goods had come from Asia, and many more were European imitations of these. These recent findings point to fashion and tastes influencing the ownership of items, though with some space for price and income. They see evidence of changing fashions in rising, then falling thefts of silver buckles, aprons and sleeves, and found significant theft of tea-drinking equipment after 1750.⁵⁵ They found cotton stockings popular items of theft from the poor, and the theft of napkins and table linen from those lower down the social scale as incomes rose.⁵⁶

6. Where is the Economic History of Consumption?

We appear to have reached a stalemate on the economic history of consumption in the early modern period. Most of the research has been on Northwest Europe. It is still focussed on wages and standards of living, with a great divide between those making the case for higher wages and/or more food and material possessions, and those arguing stasis or immiseration. Wage baskets are estimated on mainly on basic foodstuffs. Can an approach through large data sets take us in new directions? What analysis and questions lie behind the data sets? What was consumed, who consumed it, how and why did they consume it?

I suggest we move down to a micro scale in order to connect an economics of consumption with the significant research on the social and cultural history of consumption. We can then engage with issues over choice and new products, encountering and integrating strange goods, desire and stimulus seeking in the Scitovsky model, but also social interaction and awareness. We can investigate why

and when taste mattered, the choice of qualities over quantities, and the role of fashion.

Foodstuffs are one example. Grains, as we have seen, need to be converted to flour for consumption. Different, and even mistaken estimates of the quantitative impact of flour milling technologies can have large-scale and misleading effects on our assessments of food consumption.⁵⁷ Food, furthermore, needs to be prepared and cooked. Even within early industrial Britain there were great differences in cooking practices related to the availability of coal. The labouring poor in Yorkshire cooked their meals and heated their homes. Those in the South of England, though there were fewer women working in arable areas, faced much greater fuel constraints; they cooked much less and bought their bread.⁵⁸ Different food baskets also connected to different work regimes. Coffee consumption spread quickly in the proto-industrial regions of Germany. Textile workers consumed less grain and protein-rich foods than agricultural labourers. Coffee could be prepared quickly, it increased concentration on long hours of repetitive tasks, and it suppressed hunger. Merchants organizing the textile trade also dealt in coffee, and often paid their outworkers in coffee.⁵⁹

Tastes and fashions for exotic goods are another case. Economic historians Horrell and Humphries have very recently conceded the part played by fashion and tastes on the ownership of goods. Their data sets indicated that consumers substituted towards more expensive cotton stockings and counterpanes and away from worsted and linen. This was not about emulation, but about respectability, politeness, and differentiation. They sought greater variety and higher quality.⁶⁰ Jan de Vries argued that the information spread by trade with the East was also one of product differentiation; information had a demonstration effect on European consumers.⁶¹ He summed up the several historical explanations for the attraction to Europeans of Asian goods: they were exotic, they were superior, and they were cheap. But in most cases they were not indispensable; some could be cultivated elsewhere, and import substitutes provided a similar and more dependable experience. The goods themselves, therefore, were less important than knowledge about the goods. They were the type of goods that changed tastes, and created new markets and products. Asian imports, especially the textiles and the porcelain stimulated a commercialization of societies in retailing, and drew households into the market.⁶²

Lynn Hunt's *Writing History in the Global Era* (2014) links a cultural history of society and the self in later seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe to how exotic goods were experienced and chosen. Internal European factors interacted with wider global connections. Europeans developed a culture in which exotic goods made sense. Larger numbers, especially in specific places with higher discretionary incomes wanted more choice. A desiring, stimulus seeking self developed in tandem with social awareness – different varieties and individual choices amongst these demarcated new social groups. Tastes changed as experiences of the self changed.⁶³

We can thus understand the varieties of goods carried in East India Company cargoes and constantly sought in East India Company orders. This was no random collection of goods, but one constantly responding to large-scale buyers at the Autumn and Spring company auctions, these were closely affected in turn by the

choices of all the small retailers and peddlers they sold on to. French colourways dictated Swedish silk imports from China; Company orders went out with letters criticizing the colours of earlier cargoes, and demanding dynamic, responsive and intuitive designs and patterns. Dutch and English East India Companies and private European and Indian merchants competed vigorously for the finest figured jamdammie muslins. The fashion demand that underlay the issues of agency and identity behind the sense of self also developed in a social framework. Cities were a part of this story. The close urban integration of towns and cities in the Low Countries and Britain provided a context for the sociability that fostered new experiences of consuming Asian goods. That sociability demanded goods that signalled gentility, politeness and respectability, and increasingly from the mid eighteenth century, sensibility.

7. The Case of Textiles

A global history of the consumption of cotton textiles provides an opportunity to address for some of these issues. As in the case of consumer durables in the early modern period most of the research has focussed on Europe, but there is now more on the Americas, Africa, South Asia and East Asia. In all of these regions fashion, sumptuary codes, tribute and gifts dominated incentives to consume a commodity that was newly-traded between some large areas of the globe, then newly-manufactured in Europe and the Americas. Cotton is also the subject of two recent large-scale global histories: Giorgio Riello's *Cotton: the Fabric that Made the Modern World* (2013), combined extensive research on museum collections of printed cotton textiles with archival research to argue for the existence of a wide globalized economy based in the wider world trade in printed cotton textiles from India throughout the early modern period. This trade stimulated industrialization in Europe, and especially Britain as Europeans sought to build an industry to match the fine material attributes of these cottons at low consumer prices.⁶⁴ Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: a Global History* (2014) provided another history of raw cotton and cotton manufacture, but mainly in Europe and America in the modern period.⁶⁵

What are the key markers of this consumption across the early modern world? The entry of cotton into European ways of dress was slower than we once thought. Merchants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries needed to 'educate' their potential market, and cotton only became truly popular from the mid eighteenth century. Colour fastness, novelty and new distribution channels were all important to their uptake. The Dutch consumed the new fabrics right down the social ladder by the early eighteenth century; at least a quarter of households in the Amsterdam inventories had them. By later in the eighteenth century there were many substitutes, and cottons were widely used in the dress of wage earners in Paris and in Castille.⁶⁶

Well before Europe's encounter with Indian cottons Gujarati traders tapped into a lively demand in East Africa. The Portuguese traded cotton from Gujarat, Sindh and Cambay for slaves that were then sold on at a very high profit in Brazil, Mexico and the Caribbean. By the late seventeenth century the Gold Coast

imported 20,000 metres of European and Asian cloth a year, and between 1690 and 1800 cloth made up 68 per cent of all commodities exported from England to Africa; 40 per cent of this was from India.⁶⁷ Sumptuary codes on colour and high demand for geometric patterns and stripes in vibrant colours shaped the trade. From an early period Indian cottons were a highly desirable luxury good in many parts of Africa.⁶⁸

Gujarati cottons exported to East-Central and South-east Africa responded to highly-specific and changeable tastes. They were used as a currency, were important in social, cultural and political life in both coastal and interior areas. Cloth bestowed moral and social qualities; it marked high and low status, was a significant diplomatic gift, and marked political and cultural ceremony. Taste and fashion dictated these markets.⁶⁹

The Latin American market was divided into higher quality imported goods and cheaper local products. Indian cottons came to Mexico via the Pacific Manila-Acapulco route or via European imports, and were preferred in bright colours and floral patterns. Cottons entered rapidly into the wardrobes of the colonists of French and British North America and the Caribbean; consumers sought a 'more refined and expensive product'. By the last decade of the eighteenth century one quarter of London's cotton imports went on to Africa; and high proportions were also re-exported to the Americas. In Riello's words, 'cotton became a global commodity.'⁷⁰

Historians are now exploring the motivations of cotton's consumption in these different regions of the world. A commodity that connected India to Europe, East Asia, Africa and the Americas also conveyed very different meanings to its consumers. Plebeian families distinguished between 'best' and working clothes; they owned changes of clothing and duplicates, and dressed up for church and popular festivities. They focussed their consumer expectations on clothes; they were a sign of self-respect. They chose and they benefited from new kinds of fashionable clothing made from cotton.⁷¹

In the North American and Caribbean colonies cotton was worn in the seventeenth century by male officials, merchants and professionals, but by the early eighteenth century was the fabric of choice of free urban dwellers, and used increasingly by women.⁷² In Spanish America cotton was first worn by slaves and Indians; it was associated with non-Spanish, non-European ways, but this too shifted quickly in the early eighteenth century when fine Indian calicoes and European imitations reached Spanish America in large quantities through Dutch and English traders and smugglers. Strict sumptuary codes connected with racial categories perceived by the Spanish rulers. But soon Spanish cottons were promoted, and cottons conveyed different identities of Indians, slaves and creoles.⁷³

Early modern India's consumption of cotton textiles reveals some of the factors we have seen discussed by Bayly in his idea of a shift in consumption regimes from archaic to modern globalization, where consumption was about the

tributary flow of goods, and the priorities of rulers and elites centred on collecting.⁷⁴ But there were also highly diverse markets for many medium-quality as well as fine-quality materials. These cottons changed over time; they appealed to different social status and aesthetic preference. Their markets also revealed fashionability, and finishing in dyeing, printing, and embroidery appealed to consumers across India and outside.⁷⁵

8. Conclusion

An economic history of consumption has eluded many economic historians. Many have continued instead to create larger data sets and to compare like with unlike on levels of wages and standards of living. In the space left by Pomeranz in the Great Divergence debate they have debated whether wages were different between regions of the world, and whether this factor drove other economic stimulants such as technological change. But all those factors explored by social and cultural historians behind changing consumer behaviour from status and social structure to gifts, diplomacy and display, and on to fashion, sensibility and identity have remained beyond the purview of most economic historians. The window opened to such investigation by Jan de Vries's concept of 'industriousness' has still provided little illumination into key consumer practices. Global economic history in fact turned attention away from such investigation. The dearth of economic analysis into these many motivations behind consumer behaviour underpins an economic history which continues to avoid the history of consumption in favour of the history of wages.

A global economic history must include global connections as well as global comparisons. The impact of exotic goods and of encounters between merchants from different parts of the world helped to transform the contents of the probate inventories, toll registers, thefts, founding hospital identifiers, and indeed food baskets. Individual, micro and local studies are now revealing these in research such as that recounted here on cotton textiles. Different products and distinctive qualities, different preparations and presentations affected food baskets as much as domestic interiors and dress.⁷⁶ There is much for global economic historians to discover at the micro level that will move us beyond the now very dated questions and materials still informing the big data sets of wages and prices.

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- ⁹ Avner Offer, 'Consumption and Well-being', in Frank Trentmann, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 653-672.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 666.
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- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-6.
- ¹⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz, 'Standards of living in eighteenth-century China: regional differences, temporal trends and incomplete evidence' in Robert C. Allen, Tommy Bengtsson, and Martin Dribe, *Living Standards in the Past. New Perspectives on Well-being in Asia and Europe* (Oxford, 2005), Oxford Scholarship on line, 2015, pp. 1-30, pp. 7-10, 21-24.
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- ²² Kenneth Pomeranz, 'Commerce' in Ulinka Rublack, ed., *A Concise Companion to History* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 105-131, p. 111.
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