I

The Transformation of Consumer Desire in the Long Eighteenth Century

On April 20, 1697, an advertisement appeared in the Amsterdamsche Courant for a new product: the zak-aardebol, or pocket globe. This globe was no more than two inches (five cm.) in diameter and was encased in a leather cover on the inside of which was presented the heavens with constellations – one of the earliest geocentric representations of celestial space. The producers of this pocket globe, the mapmakers Abraham van Ceulen and Gerrit Drogenham, recommended their new product as “Very appropriate for all devotees of astronomy and other sciences, as well as [all those] who would customarily carry a pocket watch with them.”

The pocket watch was then a recent development of the clockmaking industry, which had extended its markets from church towers and other public structures to private homes with the invention by Christiaan Huygens of the pendulum clock in 1657. Its diffusion through bourgeois and even middling and farm families was remarkably rapid, and the new
pocket watches, adding mobility to the science of time keeping, met with a very positive reception among those who could afford the steep price. Van Ceulen and Drogenham presented their pocket globe as the logical companion to the pocket watch – something that the well-equipped modern man would find essential. The owner of both instruments would always know where he or she was – both in time and in space. The appeal will not be lost on those who move about today with mobile phones and BlackBerrys always on their person.³

As it happens, the pocket globe did not catch on. Peter the Great, who was in Holland at the time of its introduction, picked one up,⁴ but most cutting-edge consumers passed it by. The pocket watch, on the other hand, quickly became a coveted possession of every social class. European watch production rose from the tens of thousands per year at the time of the pocket globe’s introduction to nearly 400,000 per year in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁵ In a ten-year span enough timepieces of all types and qualities were then produced to supply one-quarter of the adult males of western and central Europe (the putative customers in the geographical zone where nearly all watches were produced and sold).⁶
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Timepieces of all kinds, mentioned in less than 10 percent of English probate inventories around 1675, were recorded in over a third of all inventories by the 1720s, and by no less than 38 percent of pauper inventories in 1770–1812. Parisian inventories reveal that as early as 1700, 13 percent of servants and 5 percent of wage earners owned a watch. Later in the century more than half of the owners of stolen watches who brought prosecutions for watch theft in northern English courts were working-class men. By the 1780s, 70 percent of the inventories of Parisian servants mention watches, as do 32 percent of those for wage earners. The pocket watch long remained a costly item – even cheap watches cost several weeks’ pay – but became common because it was one of the chief objects of expenditure for extraordinary and windfall earnings. The sailor returning from years in the East Indies, or from a successful fishing or whaling trip, the farm laborer at the end of the harvest, the recipient of a small inheritance, the successful thief – these and others had a high propensity in the eighteenth century to spend on a narrow range of articles, including pocket watches, that had come to symbolize working men’s status. Many eighteenth-century families that periodically found basic subsistence to be beyond their financial reach nonetheless possessed clocks and pocket watches – but probably not pocket globes.


This episode in the history of product innovation and consumer demand is evocative of current preoccupations at the same time that it calls attention to the early development of historical man and woman as consumers. Given the mixture of anxiety and fascination that colors our efforts to understand the consumer society in which we live, it is natural to inquire into the history of consumption. Does consumer behavior have a history? That is, is there some structured progression to consumer wants? Have there been turning points or points of divergence in the evolution of consumption and consumer society?

Standing behind this seemingly innocent question is a basic problem of the social sciences, the agency–structure problem. Are individuals active, creative agents in consumption, or are their choices in fact highly structured, if not wholly determined, by external forces? Should we focus our attention primarily on the putative agent, the consumer, or on the social, economic, cultural, and political forces (producers, merchants, laws, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, etc.) that constrain and direct the consumer? Investigations of historical consumer behavior, whether written by historians or economists, are usually approached from one or another of these positions, leaving little conceptual space for a history of consumer behavior located between the chaos of arbitrary individual impulses on one side and the remorseless push of overarching structural and institutional forces on the other.

Historians are prone to labor under the misapprehension that one can answer fundamental questions about a phenomenon by seeking its origins. There one hopes to observe naked, innocent acts that reveal the true character of what is later shrouded in mystery and forced into deeply grooved paths by encrusted habit. It does not help our task that historians have claimed repeatedly to discover the origins of modern consumerism, proclaimed as “consumer revolutions,” in at least five distinct eras stretching from the Renaissance to the post–World War II decades. Over and again, historians have ushered Western man, or a large subset thereof, out


12 See the appendix to this chapter for a historiographical overview of the five “consumer revolutions.”
of an Edenic world of customary and traditional consumption patterns, well integrated with all aspects of life, and have chronicled with a mixture of fascination and horror the entry of the objects of their concern into the brave new world of “consumerism.” The consumer revolutions detected before the nineteenth century tend to meet with fascination. For better or worse, these consumers are regarded as pioneers in the construction of modernity; something heroic attaches to even their most ordinary acts of consumption. Thereafter, historians’ accounts tend to darken. The new consumers are more often seen as victims, or as the bitter, alienated fruit of modern society; something tawdry cleaves to even the most beneficial of their new consumer practices.

The interpretation long favored by most historians relied on maintaining a sharp distinction between true and false needs and emphasized the powerful forces – the needs of capitalist producers, the influence of fashion elites, the directives of the state – that prevented individuals from recognizing the difference. The implosion of the worldview underpinning this social interpretation of consumption has left a void that in recent times has come to be filled by a cultural interpretation of consumption. There are certainly many scholars who remain locked in embrace with the lifeless forms of old ideologies, but the now-prevailing academic climate is inclined to celebrate the triumph of the will of the self-fashioning individual. Consumer behavior is viewed as a cultural phenomenon enjoying a broad, if not complete, autonomy, detached from constraining economic and social forces. Consumption is not primarily an economic event; instead, it is thought to serve communicative and demonstrative functions in which consumers play with market signs to “construct their own

13 Consumerism is a term I will seek to avoid wherever possible in this study. Often invoked, it is rarely defined. Stearns ventures to offers a definition remarkable chiefly for its shortcomings: “Consumerism describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display.” Peter N. Stearns, Consumerism in World History. The Global Transformation of Desire (London: Routledge, 2001), p. ix. Steven Miles does not get us much further when he proposes that “the study of consumerism should actually attempt to come to terms with the complexities that lie behind the act of consumption. In effect, while consumption is an act, consumerism is a way of life.” This distinction depends on an uncomplicated definition of consumption that, as we shall see, fails to take seriously the important distinction economists make between the acquisition of goods and ultimate consumption. Once one accepts that an act of consumption gives utility in a variety of dimensions, including cultural dimensions, Miles’s distinction collapses. Steven Miles, Consumerism as a Way of Life (London: Sage, 1998), p. 4. For an overview, see Peter N. Stearns, “Stages in Consumerism. Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization,” Journal of Modern History 69 (1997): 102–17.
meaning for every single product and activity.” \textsuperscript{14} In short, under post-modernism, “the politics of class, based on production, everywhere gives way to the politics of cultural identity, built around consumption.” \textsuperscript{15}

Economists are always ready to acknowledge supply and demand – production and consumption – as paired forces in the shaping of market economies, but they do not commonly accord to demand a causative role in the process of economic growth. Studies of modern economic growth are inevitably founded on a decisive “supply-side” advance, which economic historians have variously located in technological change, enlarged supplies of capital, energy and raw materials, and new institutions that allowed these factors of production to be deployed more effectively. The locus of decision making in these accounts is almost always the firm and the entrepreneur. In all of this it remains true, as Adam Smith put it, that “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.” \textsuperscript{16} But Smith’s language did not leave his readers in doubt as to the direction of the causal arrow connecting supply and demand: The consumer responds to the developing productive forces, not the other way around. \textsuperscript{17}

This is where my interest in consumer behavior began: in trying to disentangle the relations between demand and supply. The Industrial Revolution, with its technology-driven, hence supply-driven, economic growth, long stood as a formidable barrier to any effort to search for economic growth based on any other factors or in any earlier period. Yet the accumulating evidence for an earlier increase of per capita income in northwestern Europe paired with a major refinement of material life casts serious doubt on the orthodoxy that the Industrial Revolution was the actual


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starting point for long-term economic growth. Consequently, I turned my attention increasingly toward a reconsideration of the place of consumer demand in economic development.\(^\text{18}\)

What began as an effort to restore demand as one of the cutting blades of Marshall’s supply and demand scissors led me to an even larger – and even less tractable – problem.\(^\text{19}\) Standard consumer theory posits a “sovereign” individual consumer standing face to face with the market and behaving in a manner calculated to maximize his or her individual utility independently of the decisions of others. However inadequate this focus on the decontextualized individual might be in our own time, its silence concerning the individual’s family ties and obligations in the historical past is too conspicuous to be ignored. Consequently, as demand led me to the consumer, the consumer led me to the family and its household economy.

My project quickly became not simply to add demand to supply but also to relate the behavior of the household to that of the market. Several modern developments in history and economics have guided my thinking about the household economy and consumer demand as historical phenomena. Briefly stated, they are:

1. The Revolt of the Early Modernists. Three decades of work on early modern European agriculture, urbanization, proto-industry, and demographic and family history have fundamentally challenged the conventional belief in a growthless, traditional economy. It is now sometimes conceded that substantial economic growth occurred before the technological breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution, but the dynamics of this process of pre-industrial economic growth remain unclear.\(^\text{20}\)

2. The Revisionist Macroeconomics of the British Industrial Revolution. The currently accepted view of overall British economic performance in the classic Industrial Revolution era, 1760–1830, reduces the earlier


\(^{19}\) Alfred Marshall, in his Principles of Economics of 1890, put the matter as follows: “We might as reasonably dispute whether it is the upper or the under blade of a pair of scissors that cuts a piece of paper, as whether value is governed by utility [demand] or cost of productions [supply].” Book 5, Ch. 3.

This slow macroeconomic growth bathes in a rather less luminous light the traditional arguments about the relative importance of technology and augmented supply factors in “initiating” modern economic growth in this era. It also reduces the contrast with earlier decades and makes pre-industrial Britain as well as several neighboring regions/countries “richer,” more industrial societies than long had been supposed.

3. The Western European Marriage Pattern. The pioneering work of “The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure” established the view that the nuclear family structures of modern western European countries and their offshoots are not a product of industrialization but have much earlier origins. In addition, the seminal articles of John Hajnal called attention to specific characteristics of these conjugal families, which also long predate industrialization, that appear to be unique to western Europe and had far-reaching and not yet fully understood influences on society and economy. While the demographic behavior of this household type has been explored in some detail, its distinctive economic behavior remains an open question.

4. The New Household Economics. Developments in consumer theory and new approaches to the behavior of family members pioneered by Gary Becker and others have illuminated some corners of that notorious “black box”: the family, or household, as an economic unit. Through a focus on the allocation of time, this literature relates production and consumption decisions to each other in a fruitful way. Although some of these theoretical writings date from the 1960s, they have yet to be applied historically, or extended to accommodate historical change in household behavior.


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Together, these discrete literatures offer the raw materials with which to fashion a new way of approaching the economic history of the early modern period – and, indeed, of more than that. This new approach is intended more as a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, earlier interpretations. However, it does aspire to question the claims of the twin revolutions – the British Industrial and the French political – to function as gatekeepers to modern history. In so doing, this study seeks to add to the macrohistorical processes of modern economic growth and state formation that dominate most theorizing about long-term structural change a third, anterior process: the structure and behavior of the household.

The Household and the Market

I recognize that an historian proposing to introduce a new metahistorical concept with an accompanying master narrative in this day and age has a lot of explaining to do. And even more explanation is needed when the name given to this concept is borrowed, imprecise, and, perhaps, just a bit too clever. Thus, my task is a formidable one, and I must begin by

24 For more on the notion that the stark difference between economic life before and after the Industrial Revolution is overdrawn, see de Vries, “Economic Growth Before and After the Industrial Revolution,” pp. 177–94. However much historians have been open to epistemological and philosophical challenges in the past three decades, we have jealously protected a periodization that, because it determines how new generations of historians will be trained, stands as a formidable obstacle to progress in the discipline – to use a figure of speech.

25 Although directed to other ends, a similar claim has recently been made in Mary S. Hartman, The Household and the Making of History. A Subversive View of the Western Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–5.

26 A leading exponent of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, defined this elusive term in 1979 with admirable precision and concision: It is “incredulity towards meta narratives.” Jonathan Clark offers a similar definition: “Postmodernism is the most theoretically expressed version of a rejection of the historical. This rejection is a consequence of the way in which postmodernism has set itself against what it takes to be ‘modernist’ ideas of truth and objectivity, replacing what it sees as a set of grand narratives claiming objective authority with a diverse pattern of localized narratives and fluid identities.” Clark, Our Shadowed Present, p. 3. This study focuses on a major object of postmodern interest, consumption, but seeks to supply it with a history.

27 The term was coined by Akira Hayami to contrast the labor-intensive path of industrial development of Japan with the capital-intensive industrialization of the West. I first encountered the term in conversation with Professor Hayami. The “East Asian” and the “Western” industrious revolutions are compared and analyzed in Chapter 3. On the “East Asian Industrious Revolution” and its relationship to the concept introduced here, see Akira Hayami, “A Great Transformation. Social and Economic Change in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Japan,” Bonner Zeitschrift für Japanologie 8 (1986): 3–13; Osamu Saito, "Population and the Peasant Family Economy in Proto-Industrial
trying the reader’s patience with a discussion of the “nuts and bolts” of the analytical framework of this study.

The key propositions of my argument concern the household (usually a family, or with a family at its core) and the terms of interaction between households and the market economy. The family-based household is an entity that performs functions of reproduction, production, consumption, and resource redistribution among its members, as well as wealth transmission across generations. These functions are all interrelated and involve the interests of individuals with unequal standing, which makes household decision making highly complex. In this book the focus rests primarily on decisions affecting production and consumption. At the household level, as I will attempt to make clear, these decisions are directly related to each other. Consequently, in studying the household economy one can sidestep the chicken-and-egg question of the primacy of supply or demand by focusing on a single set of decisions that simultaneously determines both. Specifically, my historical claim is that northwestern Europe and British North America experienced an “industrious revolution” during a long eighteenth century, roughly 1650–1850, in which a growing number of households acted to reallocate their productive resources (which are chiefly the time of their members) in ways that increased both the supply of market-oriented, money-earning activities and the demand for goods offered in the marketplace. Increased production specialization in the household gives access to augmented consumption choices in the marketplace.


28 The family, a biological/social unit, is based on kinship. In this study the family is normally the nuclear family of conjugal couple plus children. The household, an economic unit, is commonly defined by co-residence with a decision-making process that leads to a degree of coordination in production and of internal redistribution of resources. Ordinarily it refers to a family plus, in the early modern context, possible resident servants and apprentices. However, it also incorporates the economic relations (via earnings remittances and other transactions) between the family and nonresident members such as those engaged in migrant labor, in service in the households of others, or payments made to nonresident grandparents or other relatives. The household defined as a long-term income pooling arrangement is broader than the household defined by co-residence, and this is of particular importance to the themes of this study, because the broader the network of claimants of the household’s pooled income, the more constrained is consumer decision making. Michiel Baud, “Huishouden, gezin en familienetwerk,” in Baud and Engelen, eds., Samen wonen, samen werken? (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), pp. 13–20; Peter Laslett, “Family and Household as Work Group and Kin Group. Areas of Traditional Europe Compared,” in Richard Wall, J. Robin, and Peter Laslett, eds., Family Forms in Historic Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 513–63.