

Early Modern Consumption

History

Current Challenges and Future Perspectives¹

57

WOUTER RYCKBOSCH

Stimulated by wide-ranging theories on its cultural and economic significance, the history of early modern consumption in the Low Countries has received a remarkable amount of attention in historiography during the last three decades. During this period the growing body of empirical evidence, as well as shifting theoretical frameworks, have gradually altered our understanding of early modern patterns of consumption, their causes and consequences. The current article presents a review of the main tendencies in the field of early modern consumption history, and the challenges to this historiographical field these have presented. Based on these challenges, the article suggests new avenues for future research.

Vroegmoderne consumptiegeschiedenis. Hedendaagse uitdagingen en toekomstperspectieven

Gestimuleerd door verstrekkende nieuwe theorieën over haar culturele en economische betekenis, heeft de historiografie met betrekking tot vroegmoderne consumptie in de Nederlanden op opmerkelijk veel aandacht mogen rekenen tijdens de voorbije drie decennia. Daarbij hebben zowel een groeiende beschikbaarheid van empirisch bronnenmateriaal, als verschuivende theoretische perspectieven, geleidelijk aan ons begrip van vroegmoderne consumptiepatronen, en hun oorzaken en gevolgen grondig veranderd. Het huidige artikel biedt een overzicht van de belangrijkste tendensen in het domein van de vroegmoderne consumptiegeschiedenis, gevolgd door nieuwe uitdagingen en toekomstperspectieven.

Introduction

When the English ambassador Thomas More was introduced to the Portuguese traveller Raphael after Mass at Our Lady's Church in Antwerp, somewhere around the beginning of the sixteenth century, the latter's tales of a distant island with a 'perfect society' formed the basis of More's 'Utopia' (first published by the Dutch humanist Erasmus in Leuven in 1516). In striking contrast to the England, Brabant and Flanders of More's own time, there was no such thing as exchange of goods in Utopia. All families would bring their produce to the urban marketplace,

[...] in which all things of a sort are laid by themselves; and thither every father goes, and takes whatsoever he or his family stand in need of, without either paying for it or leaving anything in exchange.²

Although the radical redistribution of wealth and the suppression of exchange and private property certainly helped, they did not entirely do away with excessive consumption – for which More saw no place in Utopia. He acknowledged that besides fear (of want, w.r.) 'there is in man a pride that makes him fancy it a particular glory to excel others in pomp and excess', but added that such practices of conspicuous consumption were prohibited by 'the Laws of the Utopians'.

Later utopian thinkers also drew attention to the world of consumption and shopping when imagining their fictitious social and economic orders. This centrality of consumption is evident too in the nineteenth century utopian novelist Edward Bellamy's imagination of his hometown of Boston at the end of the twentieth century. When Edith, the daughter of his host and 'an indefatigable shopper', showed him around the 'magnificent' shops of the future, she explained how stores displayed samples 'of a bewildering variety' of goods, without clerks or assistants 'trying to induce one to take what one did not want or was doubtful about'. When walking home after the shopping excursion Edith explained how consumer behaviour in the twentieth century had become wholly 'a matter of taste and convenience'. This was in contrast to the protagonist's own nineteenth century times, of which she had read that 'people often kept up establishments and did other things which they could not afford for ostentation, to make people think them richer than they were'. Thus utopian practices of consumption, purged of all but the expression

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the financial support of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen) and to express his gratitude to

Bruno Blondé, Bert De Munck, Joost Jonker and three anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.

2 T. More, *Utopia* (New York 1965; 1516) 103.

of personal taste, were a central element in Edward Bellamy's dreams of a harmonious future.³

Such visions of future consumption have not been confined to early modern humanism or modern romanticism. Despite usually appearing trivial, daily acts of consumption anchor people firmly in society at large – today as well as in the past. The grand schemes of society, in politics, economy and culture are sometimes most thoroughly felt in the quotidian acts of shopping and consuming. This myriad of almost unconsidered acts in turn actively helps to shape these societies through their intrinsic association with production, wealth and status, and through sheer repetition.⁴

In the mind of past and current observers, the acts of consumption and the concrete material culture they bring about can clearly serve as powerful indicators of all that is good or bad in society. It is therefore remarkable that for a long time consumption has been ignored as an autonomous object of study in historiography – and especially so in economic and social history. On theoretical grounds approaches based on either classical economics or Marxist theory naturally favoured the predominance of production over consumption during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, they almost always considered changes in consumption to follow those in production, commerce and technology. This only changed from the 1980s onwards when post-structuralist theory gradually undermined the then dominant paradigms of social science history, neoclassical economic history and Marxist history. As a result, in recent decades the histories of consumption and material culture have now emerged as vital and influential sub-disciplines of historical studies.

Despite the success of historical consumption and material culture studies in overturning many established views in economic, social and cultural history, this historiography now faces entirely new challenges. On the one hand, from social history the question emerges whether the scholarly work of the recent decades has not overestimated the autonomous agency of consumers in expressing choices and meanings through consumption. On the other hand, anthropological and sociological developments have increasingly urged historians to take the 'materiality' of objects more seriously and cease to approach *things* as if they were *words*.

3 See M. Beaumont, 'Shopping in Utopia: Looking Backward, the Department Store, and the Dreamscape of Consumption', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 28 (2006) 191-209.

4 The anthropologist Daniel Miller for instance, has argued for consumption as 'the vanguard of history'. In the fragmented acts of consumption performed all over the globe, he imagines

that consumption rather than production harbours the potential to radically change global society and ultimately bring about a new, post-capitalist, global mode of production. D. Miller, 'Consumption as the Vanguard of History', in: D. Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London 1995).

This dual challenge calls for a re-orientation of the history of material culture and consumption, without questioning its position as a fundamental aspect of historical change since the Middle Ages. The current review article presents a comprehensive overview of recent tendencies in the historiography of early modern consumption, with particular focus on the Low Countries. That region holds a special place in the historiography of early modern consumption, and therefore is well suited to a more detailed exploration of the wider issues involved. It is, after all, in the Low Countries – and sixteenth century Antwerp in particular – where we are most likely to encounter for the first time a specific ‘Renaissance attachment to things’ outside Italy.⁵ Other scholars have emphasised how new attitudes and approaches to the material world developed, particularly in seventeenth century Holland, largely influenced by the rapid expansion of commercial contact with the rest of the world.⁶ It is also in the Low Countries that new anxieties concerning the increasingly commercialised and commoditised material world came clearly to the fore in early modern art, collecting and even in collective (tulip) mania.⁷

What is more, since matters of consumption are often held to be central in the social, economic and cultural development of the early modern Low Countries, a review of this historiography is of wider importance. The most influential argument is that precisely the kindling of a consumer society in the early modern Low Countries would have spurred industriousness, economic growth and eventual industrialisation across Western Europe.⁸ For these reasons, a particular focus on the Low Countries as the presumed ‘birthplace’ of new forms of materiality and consumerism seems particularly useful for both the historiography of consumption and of the social and economic history of Europe in general. The general focus of the article is on the history of the social and economic significance of consumption, rather than on the wide variety of cultural forms in which it was expressed.

5 R. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore 1993); M. O'Malley and E. Welch, *The Material Renaissance* (Manchester 2007); B. Blondé, 'Shoppen met Isabella d'Este. De Italiaanse renaissance als bakermat van de consumptiesamenleving', *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2 (2007).

6 H.J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven 2008); P. Boomgaard, *Empire and Science in the Making: Dutch Colonial Scholarship in Comparative Global Perspective, 1760-1830* (London 2013).

7 S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987); A. Goldgar, *Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago 2007).

8 J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge 2008); J. de Vries and A. van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy* (Cambridge 1997).

In the first part of this article I introduce briefly the concept of the ‘consumer revolution’ and then summarise the main results that have since fundamentally qualified and altered its propositions. I argue that new empirical evidence produced during the last two decades has altered dominant views of early changes in modern consumer practices in three main respects – its geographical scope, its temporal dimension and its social reach. In the second part of the article I turn to the challenges recently presented to early modern consumption history by considering critically the relative autonomy it grants to consumer culture as a historical actor, and by drawing on the insights from recent developments in economic anthropology and sociology to point out a relative neglect of other loci of agency. The article concludes with a plea for more comparative (and) global history, with more systematic attention given to structural and material forms of agency and their historic contingency.

In search of origins: the consumer revolution

The recognition that changes in consumption potentially played an important role in the key transformations of early modern society has in no small part been fostered by the high stakes in the debate on what is known as the ‘consumer revolution’. When Neil McKendrick first introduced the idea of an early modern revolution in consumption in 1982, he associated it directly with such major transformations as the industrial revolution, the abolition of an estate-based society and the origins of the rise of the West. What constituted McKendrick’s consumer revolution in eighteenth century England was essentially the unprecedented spread of a growing range of material commodities:

More men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before, and, for the first time, to be within the legitimate aspirations of almost all of it. Objects which were once acquired as the result of inheritance at best, came to be the legitimate pursuit of a whole new class of consumers.⁹

9 N. McKendrick, ‘The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England’, in: N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London 1982) 1.

The will to consume was not necessarily new, according to McKendrick, but the ability to do so was. Crucial to this newfound ability were the greater aggregate wealth available and its more equal distribution in society. The relatively closely stratified English society permitted an unusual degree of social mobility, which in turn stimulated the emergence of a dynamic social system driven by emulation and ‘trickle down’ effects.¹⁰

McKendrick’s consumer revolution offered a highly optimistic reinterpretation of the classic standard-of-living debate. It suggested an elevated degree of material welfare and declining social inequality as the consequence of the British industrial revolution. The consumer revolution thesis moreover inscribed itself in a barely disguised Whiggish narrative of modernity. Referring explicitly to Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, McKendrick situated early modern consumer change at the ‘take-off’ on a path with ‘a society of high mass consumption’ as the eventual destination of history.¹¹ This was inextricably associated with the intellectual climate of the Cold War, when the prototype of a democratic and consumerist American society became frequently pitted against its Soviet antithesis.¹²

Although McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb’s *Birth of a Consumer Society* is often seen as the most provocative account of changing consumption patterns in early modern Europe, it remained fairly conventional compared to much of the historiography that followed it. Perhaps the fact that histories of consumption rarely give much time and space to issues of definition, and as a result the often multi-interpretable use of terms such as consumerism and consumption have helped to obscure the differences between earlier and later accounts of consumer change. According to widely accepted definitions in economic anthropology *consumerism* can generally be understood in a fairly restricted sense as acquisitive purchases of goods in the marketplace. *Consumption* on the other hand, denotes the more general use that people make

10 The concepts of emulation and trickle-down in relation to consumption have been introduced by Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel respectively: T. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York 1899); G. Simmel, ‘Fashion’, in: D.N. Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms* (London 1971; 1904) 294-323.

11 W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge 1960).

12 J. Brewer, *The Error of Our Ways: Historians and the Birth of Consumer Society* (S.I. 2004); S. Kroen, ‘A Political History of the Consumer’, *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004); F. Trentmann, ‘Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004). In this respect, McKendrick’s reasoning followed the general line of D. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York 1973). For a more detailed treatment of this Cold War debate, see A.S. Martin, ‘Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework’, *Winterthur Portfolio* 28 (1993).

of their surroundings, including time, space and social relations, both on and out of the market. Whereas the latter is a universal human practice evident in all societies, the former usually refers more specifically to acts of consumption within commoditised market economies.¹³ In this sense, Neil McKendrick's revolution was mostly a redirection of certain types of already extant consumption from a domestic economy to the commercial consumer market. This did not necessarily entail a fundamental change in consumer behaviour, other than the natural consequences of the growing commercialisation and industrialisation of society. McKendrick's own empirical work was primarily concerned with the commercial production and marketing by individuals like Josiah Wedgwood, and was thus more obviously connected to 'consumerism' as a consequence of budding industrialisation and commercialisation than to 'consumption' as an autonomous force in causing these processes.

It was up to other historians to take the consumer revolution thesis one step further by separating the early modern transformations in consumption and material culture from the early industrialisation process and positing consumerism as a more or less autonomous force in the social and economic history of Western Europe. By freeing McKendrick's consumer revolution from Rostow's late eighteenth century 'take-off', it was reconnected to an older undercurrent in (British) economic history – a historiography in which the demand side of the economy claimed a more prominent place in explaining long-term change. As early as 1932 Elizabeth Gilboy had suggested that consumer demand might have given impetus to the industrial revolution, but it is only in the past few decades that this argument resurfaced and was put forward seriously.¹⁴ As Keynesianism became the unofficial orthodoxy in economic policy and Kenneth Galbraith wrote his bestselling *The Affluent Society*, it is perhaps not surprising that historians from the 1960s onwards again started looking for changes in demand lying at the roots of the industrial revolution.¹⁵ Moreover, while the debate on the so-called 'Great Rebuilding of Rural England' demonstrated that pre-industrial material cultures were not necessarily static, Joan Thirsk saw confirmation for the potential importance of home demand for early modern economic growth in the gradual increase of consumer goods in English households from the end of the sixteenth century

13 I. Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in: A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1986); Brewer, *The Error of Our Ways*; P. Glennie, 'Consumption, Consumerism and Urban Form: Historical Perspectives', *Urban Studies* 35 (1998); S. Pennell, 'Consumption and Consumerism in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal* 42 (1999).

14 Gilboy's article was reprinted in 1967 as E. Gilboy, 'Demand as a Factor in the Industrial Revolution', in: R.M. Hartwell (ed.), *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England* (London 1967).

15 J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York 1958).

onwards.¹⁶ From the 1980s these efforts were increasingly met from the other side: historians of the industrial revolution were progressively downgrading industrialisation's importance as a sudden and total rupture in economic history.¹⁷ Crafts and Harley's gradualist reinterpretations of the industrial revolution implied a greater importance of economic growth before the traditional period of industrialisation.¹⁸ The quest for the roots and causes of the industrial revolution thus could begin to be reconciled with the alleged importance of home demand in the early modern economy.

It is within this tradition that Jan de Vries' thesis of an 'industrious revolution' preceding the industrial revolution has emerged as one of the most influential theories of recent economic history. In 1975 De Vries already made a case for re-imagining early modern peasants in Friesland as being perfectly capable of making heightened demand for and increased consumption of household goods.¹⁹ He saw evidence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of important investments in peasant housing, the gradual introduction of curtains for windows and mantel cloths, a diversification in the ownership of tables and chairs, the spread of new glass, tin and earthenware table and kitchenware, as well as the introduction and spread of mirrors, clocks and books. Although individually these changes were not in themselves revolutionary, taken together they reflected a gradual adoption of urban cultural practices that ultimately transformed the consumption patterns of the

16 W.G. Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570-1640', *Past and Present* 4 (1953); J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford 1978). Hoskins' 'Great Rebuilding' was followed by Margaret Spufford's seventeenth-century 'Great Reclotting': M. Spufford, *The Great Reclotting of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London 1984). See also D.E.C. Eversley, 'The Home Demand and Economic Growth in England, 1750-1780', in: E.L. Jones and G.E. Mingay (eds.), *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution* (London 1967) as one of the proponents of a demand side perspective. For a critical account of this literature and a more pessimistic interpretation: S. Horrell, 'Home Demand and British Industrialization', *The Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996); B. Fine and E. Leopold, 'Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution', *Social History* 15 (1990).

17 N.F.R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (New York 1985). A critical appraisal of this revision in P. Hudson and M. Berg, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution', *The Economic History Review* 45 (1992).

18 For a small selection from a wide array of literature on this topic, see E.A. Wrigley, 'The Quest for the Industrial Revolution', in: E.A. Wrigley (ed.), *Poverty, Progress, and Population* (Cambridge 2004); J. de Vries, 'Economic Growth before and after the Industrial Revolution: A Modest Proposal', in: M. Prak (ed.), *Early Modern Capitalism* (London 2001); J.L. van Zanden, 'The "Revolt of the Early Modernists" and the "First Modern Economy: An Assessment"', *The Economic History Review* 55 (2002).

19 J. de Vries, 'Peasant Demand Patterns and Economic Development: Friesland 1550-1750', in: W.N. Parker and E.L. Jones (eds.), *European Peasants and Their Markets: Essays in Agrarian Economic History* (Princeton 1975).

Dutch rural population.²⁰ In later publications De Vries continued to make a strong case for the consumption potential of the rural peasantry, meanwhile expanding the argument to incorporate the changing household economy and developing proto-industrialisation.²¹ As the availability of consumer goods on the market increased, households changed their allocation of resources and labour increasingly to the market. Rural households thus became progressively more deeply involved in production for the market, as well as consumption from the market. Specialisation increased and the division of labour grew, ultimately affecting productivity gains and reducing relative prices. According to De Vries' thesis, it was the transformation of consumer desires – the search for comfort, pleasure, novelty and identity that define the 'active searching consumer' – that preceded the industrial revolution and would eventually help to trigger it.

The potential of early modern changes in consumption demand to bring about economic growth has spurred a venerable tradition of empirical studies attempting to establish the early origins of consumer society. Initially such endeavours remained concentrated mostly on those regions for which important consumer changes had been postulated, such as the eighteenth century England of McKendrick's consumer revolution, the seventeenth century Dutch Republic of De Vries' industrious revolution, or the Renaissance Italy described by Goldthwaite. The majority of these studies attempted to trace changes in household possessions by using large collections of probate

20 Most of the evidence relating to an expanding material culture relates to De Vries' upper category of farmers owning ten cows or more, who would not necessarily fit the definition of 'peasants'.

21 J. de Vries, 'Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe', in: J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London 1994); De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*; J. de Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', *The Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994).



▲
This moralising print in Jan Luyken's *Het Leerzaam Huisraad* (Amsterdam 1711) showcases the new material and mechanical marvels of the early modern home, in this case a large hanging clock.
Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

inventories – a loosely defined source type recording the movable possessions found at the house of recently deceased individuals.²²

In 1988 Lorna Weatherill's pioneering study already demonstrated a remarkable growth in the ownership of twenty commodity types in English households between 1660 and 1750, based on a diverse sample of approximately 3,000 inventories.²³ Peter Earle (1989) also used probate inventories to assert an even more impressive material affluence among the emerging seventeenth century London middle class.²⁴ Around the same time a number of local case studies based on similar inventories appeared for the Low Countries. Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis (1987) showed how domestic material cultures in the Dutch town of Delft continued to expand even during a period of economic decline²⁵, and Hans van Koolbergen (1987) found that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Dutch provincial towns and their rural surroundings the material culture evident in probate inventories became considerably richer.²⁶ Case studies of inventories in the city of Ghent

- 22 Important regional and temporal variations exist in the practice of drawing inventories. For instance, the English inventories do not generally contain real estate, outstanding debts and the property of surviving female spouses, whereas those in the Low Countries do. A general outline of English probate practices in J. Cox and N. Cox, 'Probate 1500-1800: A System in Transition', in: T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds.), *When Death do Us Part: Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England* (Oxford 2000), and for the Dutch situation in A.J. Schuurman, 'Probate Inventories: Research Issues, Problems and Results', in: A. van der Woude and A.J. Schuurman (eds.), *Probate Inventories: A New Source for the Historical Study of Wealth, Material Culture and Agricultural Development* (Wageningen 1980); A.J. Schuurman, 'Probate Inventory Research: Opportunities and Drawbacks', in: M. Baulant, A.J. Schuurman and P. Servais (eds.), *Inventaires après-décès et ventes de meubles: Apports à une histoire de la vie économique et quotidienne (XIVe-XIX siècle)* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1988); T. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'Boedelinventarissen', *Broncommentaren* 2 (The Hague 1995). For Flanders see W. Ryckbosch, *A Consumer Revolution under Strain?: Consumption, Wealth and Status in Eighteenth-Century Aalst (Southern Netherlands)* (Antwerp 2012).
- 23 L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London 1988), updated and considerably expanded by M. Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, New York 2004).
- 24 P. Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (London 1989).
- 25 T. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de gevels van Delft. Bezit en bestaan van rijk en arm in een periode van achteruitgang (1700-1800)* (Hilversum 1987); T. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'A Matter of Taste: Lifestyle in Holland in the 17th and 18th Centuries', in: A. Schuurman and L. Walsh (eds.), *Material Culture: Consumption, Life-Style, Standard of Living, 1500-1900* (Milan 1994).
- 26 H. van Koolbergen, 'De materiële cultuur van Weesp en Weesperkarspel in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw', in: A.J. Schuurman, J. de Vries and A. van der Woude (eds.), *Aards Geluk. De Nederlanders en hun spullen van 1550 tot 1850* (Amsterdam 1997).

(1988) and its countryside (1986) suggested that a similar change in domestic consumption occurred in Flanders as well – if perhaps only by the second half of the eighteenth century.²⁷ Since those pioneering studies from the 1980s, this empirical tradition of searching for the pre-industrial origins of consumer society has expanded its scope in three important ways – spatially, socially and temporally.

Early modern consumer change across space

Expanding the geographical scope of inventory studies in recent years has put the original findings for the North Sea area in a much wider perspective. A considerable number of studies have drawn attention to the fact that many aspects of the ‘consumer revolution’, such as the unprecedented spread of new luxury goods among broad layers of society, also occurred in the more peripheral regions of Europe. In the eighteenth century Scandinavian and Baltic areas for instance, the changes in consumer habits do not appear to have been radically different from those found earlier for Western Europe.²⁸ For relatively peripheral economies such as early modern Ireland and eighteenth century Portugal, recent research has established how new patterns of ‘luxury’ consumption attained an unprecedented (social) reach during the eighteenth century.²⁹ Similar observations regarding the rapidly, and sometimes even spectacularly, growing levels of luxury consumption during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been made for the European settlements overseas. A variety of studies, both old and new, has made this point for the colonies on the American East Coast (Southern New England, the Chesapeake Bay area in Virginia, and South Carolina) based on extensive probate inventory data.³⁰ Furthermore, a new inventory study by Johan Fourie has drawn

27 H. Soly, ‘Materiële cultuur te Gent in de 18e eeuw. Een terreinverkenning’, *Oostvlaamse Zanten* 63 (1988); C. Schelstraete et al., *Het einde van de onveranderlijkheid. Arbeid, bezit en woonomstandigheden in het Land van Nevele tijdens de 17e en de 18e eeuw* (Nevele 1986).

28 K. Ronnback, ‘An Early Modern Consumer Revolution in the Baltic?’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 35 (2010); R. Hutchison, ‘Bites, Nibbles, Sips and Puffs: New Exotic Goods in Norway in the 18th and the First Half of the 19th Century’, *ibid.* 36 (2011).

29 S. Flavin, ‘Consumption and Material Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland’, *The Economic History Review* 64 (2011); A. Duraes, ‘L’Empire à la maison: Consommation à Lisbonne du XVIIIe siècle au début du XIXe siècle’, *Histoire et Mesure* 27 (2012).

30 L.G. Carr and L. Walsh, ‘The Standard of Living in the Colonial Chesapeake’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (1988); G.L. Main and J.T. Main, ‘Economic Growth and the Standard of Living in Southern New England, 1640-1774’, *The Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988); R.C. Nash, *Domestic Material Culture and Consumer Demand in the British-Atlantic World: Colonial South Carolina, 1670-1770* (S.I. 2007).

attention to the remarkably widespread ownership of luxury items and their availability, even to poor consumers in the eighteenth century South-African Cape Colony.³¹

Perhaps even more noteworthy is the evidence of similarly profound consumer changes in the early modern period outside Europe and its colonial offshoots. Craig Clunas' work on material culture in Ming China has long served as a warning that European exceptionalism in early modern histories of consumption should not be taken for granted and recent probate inventory work on consumer growth in the early modern Ottoman Empire has yet again strengthened this point.³²

Most of the studies on regions outside of the core Atlantic economies of Western Europe thus have indicated how the expansion of material culture and changing consumption patterns were closer to those in England or the Low Countries than was implied in the early work on the 'consumer revolution' by, for instance, Neil McKendrick or Lorna Weatherill. However, if this were to lead to a more cautious understanding of consumer change in a comparative perspective, it is important to note that there are also crucial exceptions to this view. Most notably, based on evidence from the central European Württemberg region, Sheilagh Ogilvie has argued that outside the North Atlantic economies, traditional institutions could significantly delay and limit consumer changes – nevertheless without being able to block them entirely.³³ In order to be able to discern precisely to what extent the new empirical studies on early modern consumer changes outside of the core economies in the North Sea regions should lead us to redefine the early modern 'consumer revolution' as a more general and widespread phenomenon than was previously thought, we are in dire need of more directly comparative studies and of a more clearly defined analysis not only of the changes, but also of the long-term continuities in consumption patterns.

31 J. Fourie, 'The Remarkable Wealth of the Dutch Cape Colony: Measurements from Eighteenth-Century Probate Inventories', *The Economic History Review* 66 (2013).

32 C. Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Social Status and Material Culture in Early Modern China* (Cambridge 1991); C. Clunas, 'Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999); E. Karababa, 'Investigating Early Modern Ottoman Consumer Culture in the Light of Bursa Probate

Inventories', *The Economic History Review* 65 (2012). A *status quaestionis* of consumption history of (pre-industrial) Africa in J. Prestholdt, 'Africa and the Global Lives of Things', in: F. Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on the History of Consumption* (Oxford 2012).

33 S. Ogilvie, 'Consumption, Social Capital, and the "Industrious Revolution" in Early Modern Germany', *The Journal of Economic History* 70 (2010).

Early modern consumer change over time

In the last decade not only important modifications have arisen with regards to the original geographical scope of the consumer revolution, but also to its temporal span. Several studies on late medieval and sixteenth century trade and (more rarely) household possessions indicate a remarkable growth of domestic luxury consumption in England, the Low Countries, and even in Ireland and Denmark well before the period of what was originally described as the consumer revolution.³⁴ Yet the most persistent criticism of those who look for the early origins of modern consumer society in eighteenth century England or seventeenth century Holland has come from scholars of the Italian Renaissance. Richard Goldthwaite in particular, has argued that the Renaissance indulgence in material objects and its effects upon commerce and production in Renaissance society already foreboded the essential characteristics of modern consumer society.³⁵ Lisa Jardine's high-profile book *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* largely followed this perspective by presenting the rich material world of the Renaissance as an exponent of Jakob Burckhardt's notion that Renaissance man was the 'firstborn among the sons of modern Europe'.³⁶

Although other scholars – most notably Eveline Welch – have explicitly resisted the tendency to inscribe the Italian Renaissance in such a linear and modernising perspective, the renewed attention to an expansion of consumption before the classic period of the consumer revolution has rightfully served to qualify the revolutionary aspect of the latter.³⁷ A similar narrative has recently emerged in the context of the Low Countries. There renewed attention to the material culture of the late medieval Flemish cities and of Antwerp during its sixteenth century 'golden age', is beginning to

34 G. Heley, *The Material Culture of the Tradesmen of Newcastle upon Tyne 1545-1642: The Durham Probate Record Evidence* (London 2009); W.A. Harwood, 'Trade and Consumption Patterns in Central Southern England: The Supply of Iron and Wax to Winchester College c. 1400-1560', *Southern History* 29 (2007); M. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge 2010); Flavin, 'Consumption and Material Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland'; B. Poulsen, 'Trade and Consumption among Late Medieval and Early Modern Danish Peasants', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 52 (2004); S. Pajung, 'Commercialisation and Consumption in South

Western Jutland, c. 1500-1650', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 97 (2010).

35 R. Goldthwaite, 'The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Maiolica', *Renaissance Quarterly* 42 (1989); Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art*.

36 L. Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London 1996); J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London 2010; 1860).

37 E. Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1350-1600* (New Haven 2005); O'Malley and Welch, *The Material Renaissance*; M. Ajmar-Wollheim et al., *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London 2006).

suggest that the consumer revolution of seventeenth century Holland sprang from deeper roots than is often assumed.³⁸

Although this renewed interest in earlier episodes of consumer change has certainly added valuable new insights to late medieval and Renaissance society, it also confronts us with new issues of interpretation. For one thing, the different nature of earlier sources renders it difficult to discern whether the observed consumerism in this earlier period did indeed obtain a social scope similar to that revealed by the probate inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is particularly difficult in the case of the largely unrepresentative museological collections and elite sources often used in the research on the Italian Renaissance, or in the case of the aggregate figures on luxury trade produced for early modern Ireland or Denmark.³⁹ As a result, it remains virtually impossible to properly compare and differentiate between several periods of changing consumption patterns (we return to this point in the next section).

Samuel Cohn has raised a second problem worthy of more thorough discussion with regards to these revisionist results. The notion of linearity often implicit in this literature is in question.⁴⁰ Italian wills reveal for instance, that in comparison to the commercial revolution of the thirteenth century, the Renaissance 'attachment to things' might have been *inversely* related to processes of commercialisation. Far from signalling a turn towards economic growth and modernity, the Renaissance obsession with material splendour in fact, should be situated in the context of a less vibrant economy than that of the period that preceded it.⁴¹ It is an argument that has also been made with regards to the Burgundian splendour of the late medieval

38 Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*; Blondé, 'Shoppen met Isabella d'Este'; C. De Staelen, *Spulletjes en hun betekenis in een commerciële metropool. Antwerpenaren en hun materiële cultuur in de zestiende eeuw* (Antwerp 2007); B. Blondé and W. Ryckbosch, 'Arriving to a Set Table: The Integration of Hot Drinks in the Urban Consumer Culture of the 18th-Century Southern Low Countries', in: H. Hodacs, F. Gottmann and C. Nierstrasz (eds.), *Goods from the East: Trading Eurasia 1600-1800* (London forthcoming). Contrast this with, for instance, the larger emphasis on transformations during the Dutch Golden Age in Cook, *Matters of Exchange*; Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*.

39 Exceptions are P. Hohti, 'Conspicuous' Consumption and Popular Consumers: Material Culture and Social Status in Sixteenth-Century Siena', *Renaissance Studies* 24 (2010); Heley, *The Material Culture*; De Staelen, *Spulletjes en hun betekenis*.

40 S. Cohn Jr., 'Renaissance Attachment to Things: Material Culture in Last Wills and Testaments', *The Economic History Review* (2012).

41 *Ibid.*, 1001-1002. There is a parallel here with Burckhardt's own understanding of Renaissance modernity as a rather ambiguous form of individualism spilling over from political turmoil and war, rather than from harmony and prosperity.

Low Countries, but which has since been more or less neglected.⁴² In a more fundamental sense, this observation holds for the wider research tradition that looks for the early roots of consumer society before the eighteenth century. The further these origins have been pushed back in time, the harder it has become to associate them with rising living standards, commercialisation or economic growth.

Early modern consumer change and the social world

Not only the geographic and temporal spread of early modern consumer change have been subjected to close scrutiny in the historiography of the past decades, but also its social scope. However, in this field progress has not been nearly as impressive, nor have its results given rise to such a degree of optimism. Even though Neil McKendrick originally envisioned the consumer revolution as being ‘unprecedented in the depth to which it penetrated the lower reaches of society’, the empirical support for this claim remains fairly thin.⁴³ Sara Horrell’s study of English household budgets from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries seems to offer little support, concluding that such ‘hypotheses that have given a central role to working-class demand for manufactured goods over industrialization have not been upheld’.⁴⁴ Instead, she argued that working-class demand remained largely directed towards the agriculture-based sector until well into the nineteenth century. This seems to be consistent with the evidence of the falling of wages in real terms that persisted throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe. Only Jan de Vries’ ‘industrious revolution’ manages to offer an alternative interpretation that reconciles declining real wages with the evidence of expanding consumerism among the lower social strata, by hypothesising a simultaneously growing input and intensification of labour.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, in recent years the equation of industriousness, expanding consumption and rising living standards implied by De Vries’ thesis has also been gradually subjected to qualification. In a recent study on seventeenth and eighteenth century England and Italy, Paolo Malanima and Valeria Pinchera have pointed out that consumption among unskilled

42 R. Van Uytven, ‘Splendour or Wealth: Art and Economy in the Burgundian Netherlands’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 10 (1992).

43 McKendrick, ‘The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England’, 11; De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 146-153 provides an overview on the topic.

44 Horrell, ‘Home Demand’, 597.

45 De Vries, ‘Between Purchasing Power’.

labourers could also increase during times of declining purchasing power.⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Robert Allen and Jacob Weisdorf have argued that, at least for English rural labourers, an industrious revolution might have occurred more as a result of economic hardship than as the result of growing consumption desires.⁴⁷ Craig Muldrew has argued for a somewhat more cautious view of the industrious revolution in the context of stagnating economic growth after the commercial boom of the sixteenth century.⁴⁸

Nor has research based on probate inventories been very helpful in shedding light on the living standards of the lower social groups in early modern society. Inventories are rarely suitable for providing clues on this issue because their existence and survival is itself considerably skewed towards the social middle groups and above. For this reason, some early students of inventories did not extend their claims for consumer change to the lower social strata. Lorna Weatherill for instance, had maintained that English consumer change between 1660 and 1760 was limited to the middle groups and above, and thus that no real ‘mass consumption economy’ came about. Others saw consumer change as a more widespread phenomenon. John Styles for example, argued that the plebeian working classes did participate in the growing market for new household goods.⁴⁹ Cissie Fairchilds also argued on the basis of a sample of Parisian inventories that a true democratisation of new ‘populuxe’ goods did occur among the lower classes. By means of inexpensive imitations of aristocratic luxuries such as fans, umbrellas, or snuff boxes even the Parisian lower class could now participate in the ‘aping of the aristocracy’.⁵⁰ Yet since the majority of Fairchilds’ sampled inventories pertained to shopkeepers and master artisans it is uncertain whether these findings are truly representative of the poor masses that inhabited eighteenth century Paris.

Kenneth Sneath and Craig Muldrew encountered a similar problem when they recently unearthed large quantities of probate inventories pertaining to English labourers. Although it is quite clear that such labourer households were much poorer than the average probated household, it is far from obvious whether their circumstances were typical of the labouring

46 P. Malanima and V. Pinchera, ‘A Puzzling Relationship: Consumptions and Incomes in Early Modern Europe’, *Histoire et Mesure* 27 (2012).

47 R.C. Allen and J.L. Weisdorf, ‘Was There an “Industrious Revolution” before the Industrial Revolution?: An Empirical Exercise for England, c. 1300-1830’, *The Economic History Review* 64 (2010).

48 C. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge 2011).

49 Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 21; J. Styles, ‘Manufacturing, Consumption and Design in Eighteenth-Century England’, in: J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London 1993).

50 C. Fairchilds, ‘The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris’, in: *ibid.*

poor as a whole.⁵¹ A comparison with tax records for instance, indicates that these labourer inventories were not necessarily drawn mainly from the poorest part of the total population, but in most cases from the lower middle groups.⁵² Nonetheless, even in such labour inventories from seventeenth, and eighteenth century Huntingdonshire Sneath found almost no evidence of the spread of consumer goods such as forks, curtains, pictures or items associated with hot drinks. Only by the second half of the eighteenth century did the ‘consumer revolution’ seem to make its cautious way to these English lower social strata – that is, after the industrial revolution had begun.⁵³ Likewise, although the after-death inventories from the Amsterdam *burgher* orphanage collected by Anne McCants unquestionably represent a group of sub-average means, it is not entirely clear if the majority of them were in fact destitute or poor households.⁵⁴ To what extent the diffusion of colonial ‘luxury’ commodities evident in these inventories can be considered as indicative of a budding society of genuine ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ consumption thus remains open to debate.⁵⁵

Probably the most cautious study of lower-class inventories so far has been undertaken by Peter King, who studied a sample of 50 English inventories of pauper households receiving relief from the parish.⁵⁶ He demonstrated that Weatherill’s reservations with regards to the social penetration of consumer change only ceased to be applicable during the second half of the eighteenth century. Only then did a broad range of new commodities find their way into these pauper households, even though their

51 K. Sneath, *Consumption, Wealth, Indebtedness and Social Structure in Early Modern England* (S.I. 2009).

52 Of Muldrew’s 1,000 inventoried labourers 68% possessed farm animals and over half of them grew agricultural crops – implying that the majority of these households were certainly not fully proletarianised. Furthermore a comparison with the seventeenth century hearth tax demonstrates that only 37% of the (matched) labourer inventories were exempt from the tax, compared to 32% of the total population. Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, 166, 188.

53 Sneath, *Consumption, Wealth, Indebtedness*. A similar position was taken by K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village, Terling 1525-1700* (New York 1979).

54 For a comparison between these inventories and broader socio-economic stratification criteria, see: A. McCants, ‘Inequality among the Poor of Eighteenth Century Amsterdam’, *Explorations in Economic History* 44 (2007).

55 See A. McCants, ‘Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking about Globalization in the Early Modern World’, *Journal of World History* 18 (2007); idem, ‘Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: The Diffusion of Tea and Coffee Drinking in the Eighteenth Century’, *The Economic History Review* 61 (2008).

56 P. King, ‘Pauper Inventories and the Material Lives of the Poor in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, in: T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicles of Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840* (London 1997).

total wealth did not increase. Moreover, King portrayed a far from optimistic picture of these households, since the scattered evidence suggests that although these new commodities entered the material culture of the lower classes, their position relative to the middle groups and upper classes almost certainly deteriorated.⁵⁷

This latter observation has recently been emphasised anew, contradicting the opinion expressed by earlier scholars of the consumer revolution. Daniel Roche for instance, had perceived the diffusion of new clothing styles in eighteenth century Paris as part of a turn towards a less unequal social order:

[...] the hierarchical society, encased in the heavy and durable broadcloths and costly silks which were the mark of court elegance and its urban imitators, was succeeded by a more open, less stiff and more frivolous world.⁵⁸

Across the Channel, Maxine Berg had similarly argued that the spread of Indian calicoes, Chinese porcelain and Japanese lacquers in English society ‘undermined the uniformity and clear social hierarchies previously imposed by sumptuary legislation, and made individuality and variety an option to much broader parts of society’.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, more recent research has begun to emphasise how the changing patterns of consumption in early modern Europe often reinforced existing patterns of inequality and shaped new ones. Michael Kwass has interpreted the spread of wigs in France in terms of ‘inequality transformed’, and as

[...] a new model of distinction in which the status meanings of consumption would be mediated by principles of utility, authenticity, individuality, and, one could add, cleanliness, taste, and health.⁶⁰

A similar argument has been made for Flanders, where the unprecedented social reach of novel consumer goods was accompanied by new opportunities for social distinction and growing levels of inequality in income and wealth.⁶¹

The scarcity of evidence corroborating the extension of consumer change to the lower social groups of society before the industrial revolution

57 *Ibid.*

58 D. Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the ‘Ancien Regime’* (Cambridge 1996; 1990) 504.

59 M. Berg, ‘New Commodities, Luxuries and Their Consumers in Eighteenth-Century England’, in: M. Berg and H. Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and*

Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850 (Manchester 1999) 6; M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford 2007).

60 M. Kwass, ‘Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France’, *The American Historical Review* 111 (2006) 658.

61 Ryckbosch, *A Consumer Revolution under Strain*.



▲ The custom of tea-drinking, especially as it became a rather elaborate form of domestic sociability, brought forth an expanding material culture, as well as new import substitution industries. This teapot made in white and blue Delftware (ca. 1710-1740) is just one of many examples.

Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

and the renewed pessimism with regard to the egalitarian effects of such consumer change, both urge caution in interpreting the impact of any early modern 'consumer revolution'. Whether the profound consumer changes experienced in many places and times in which they had previously been thought inconceivable did indeed reflect raised absolute living standards or relative social positions of social groups below the middle strata of society, largely remains open to debate. More than anything, the impressive growth of new empirical data on pre-industrial consumerism has strengthened the urgency to reconsider the conceptualisation of both consumption and change.

From cultural to material histories of consumption

The growing evidence of consumer change prior to the industrial revolution has generally led to renewed importance being given to cultural approaches to the history of early modern consumption. If changing habits of consumption were indeed the cause rather than effect of transforming mechanisms of production and distribution, then explanations for this change are likely to be sought in the cultural sphere. Jan de Vries for instance, has situated consumer change in seventeenth century Holland within the context of an emerging culture of the urban bourgeoisie who increasingly abandoned the traditional, moral restraints on luxury spending. These restraints were replaced by a gradual embrace of a 'new luxury' consumption, practiced by 'active consumers' in search of utility maximisation in the sphere of comfort, pleasure novelty or a general 'groping for modernity'.⁶²

The idea that the early modern culture of consumption experienced profound changes and affected a transformation of consumption practices has been based in no small measure on the opinions expressed by contemporary thinkers. Throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries English and French philosophers and political economists debated the virtues and dangers of luxury consumption as part of a larger discussion on the nature of trade, mercantilism, economic policy and progress. In these 'luxury debates' the idea that material luxury could improve men's lot in a justifiable and even laudable way was developed by people like Nicholas Barbon, Bernard Mandeville and David Hume in England, and Jean-François Melon, Georges

62 De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 44-58. A critical appraisal of this perspective from the perspective of urban consumer culture in Brussels in V. De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers. Kunst- en luxebezit in het spanningsveld tussen hof en stad, 1600-1735* (Amsterdam 2011).

Dumont and Voltaire in France.⁶³ By the middle of the eighteenth century the ability to consume free from moral and legal restrictions became a central tenet of Enlightenment ideas on liberty and personal happiness in the economic as well as the political sphere.⁶⁴ In the dominant paradigm of current economic history, this Enlightenment notion of the liberation of the consumer from traditional moral constraints and sumptuary legislation has largely been interpreted as the historical emergence of the economic actor within a rational choice model of individual agency.⁶⁵ Following a formalist tradition of historical reasoning, the removal of pre-modern barriers to rational consumer behaviour thus enabled the emergence of the utility-maximising *homo economicus* of neo-classical economics.

The emergence of this new consumerism has most often been situated in the context of the rise of the bourgeoisie. Peter Earle and Lorna Weatherill in England and Thera Wijzenbeek-Olthuis in the Dutch Republic already discerned the most innovative consumer patterns among the ‘taste groups’ of the social middle layers of society (i.e. those who were prosperous, but did not generally belong to the aristocracy). This notion has been expanded upon from a more thorough cultural perspective during recent years. Strongly influenced by structuralist and semiotic methodological traditions, this field of research has frequently endorsed the idea of the relative autonomy of cultural consumer change from transitions in the social and economic sphere.⁶⁶ Thus a great number of comprehensive cultural discourses have been identified in which these changes were embedded, such as Woodruff Smith’s ‘culture

63 J. Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollet* (Baltimore 1977) 113. See also P. Slack, ‘The Politics of Consumption and England’s Happiness in the Later Seventeenth Century’, *English Historical Review* 122 (2007); M. Kwass, ‘Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France’, *Representations* 82 (2003); A. Firth, ‘Moral Supervision and Autonomous Social Order: Wages and Consumption in 18th-Century Economic Thought’, *History of the Human Sciences* 15 (2002).

64 For instance David Hume, in his *Political Discourses*, held the materialism and individualism of England’s consumer culture responsible for its unique parliamentary system and political freedoms; Sekora, *Luxury*, 119.

65 Detailed studies of historical sumptuary legislation over longer time periods, and of intellectual histories on luxury, have been considerably more nuanced with regards to the scope for change in the eighteenth century: G. Guerzoni, ‘Liberalitas, Magnificentia, Splendor: The Classic Origins of Italian Renaissance Lifestyles’, *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999); A. Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York 1996).

66 This issue is explicitly confronted in the epilogue to W.D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London 2002). See in more general (and provocative) terms: M. Bianchi, ‘Consuming Novelty: Strategies for Producing Novelty in Consumption’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998).

of respectability'⁶⁷, Colin Campbell's 'romantic ethic'⁶⁸, the inventions of 'comfort'⁶⁹ and 'cleanliness'⁷⁰, and such contemporary notions as 'politeness'⁷¹ or 'decorum'⁷². Woodruff D. Smith for instance, described the transition in the dominant cultural context of consumption in the early modern Anglo-Saxon world from a culture of 'gentility' to a culture of 'respectability'. Whereas the former was characterised mainly by status-conform conspicuous consumption, the latter was based on a democratisation of 'bourgeois' consumerism – an indulgence in comfort and pleasure, but kept in check and mediated by intricate repertoires of rationality, restraint and taste.⁷³ With regard to the Southern Netherlands, Johan Poukens and Nele Provoost have argued that the same move towards 'respectable' forms of bourgeois consumption can also be discerned in the provincial cities of the eighteenth century.⁷⁴

As a result of this relatively autonomous cultural approach to consumer change, a considerable variety of case studies has emphasised the ways in which early modern consumers exercised discrete, individual choice in order to express specific meanings and identities – through their clothing styles and domestic interiors, or wearing wigs or drinking tea.⁷⁵ This optimistic interpretation of the agency of the consumer to enact change – in the cultural, political, social and economic spheres – in the early modern world is open to two important qualifications.

67 Smith, *Consumption*.

68 C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford 1987).

69 J.E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort* (Baltimore 2001); E. Shove, 'Comfort and Convenience: Temporality and Practice', in: F. Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford History of Consumption* (Oxford 2012).

70 G. Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1988). For the reverse view of this issue, see: B. van Bavel and O. Gelderblom, 'The Economic Origins of Cleanliness in the Dutch Golden Age', *Past and Present* 205 (2009).

71 H. Berry, 'Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002).

72 J. Styles and A. Vickery, 'Introduction', in: J. Styles and A. Vickery (eds.), *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven 2007).

73 Smith, *Consumption*. A similar argument in Kwass, 'Big Hair'.

74 Based on a case study of Lier in Brabant: J. Poukens and N. Provoost, 'Respectability, Middle-Class Material Culture, and Economic Crisis: The Case of Lier in Brabant, 1690-1770', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42 (2011).

75 P. Allerston, 'Clothing and Early Modern Venetian Society', *Continuity and Change* 15 (2000); M. Ponsonby, 'Towards an Interpretation of Textiles in the Provincial Domestic Interior: Three Homes in the West Midlands, 1780-1848', *Textile History* 38 (2007); W. Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants* (New York 1992); C. Fairchild, 'Fashion and Freedom in the French Revolution', *Continuity and Change* 15 (2000).

A first issue to be addressed is how this firm attribution of agency to consuming subjects can be reconciled with the limits imposed by structures in the cultural, social, economic and political spheres. Contrary to the historiography on *modern* consumer culture, the literature on *early modern* consumerism has remained remarkably impervious to the perspective of critical approaches such as those of the Frankfurt School, or the later ‘objectification’ tradition of Bourdieu.⁷⁶ As a result, the ways in which the individual agency of early modern consumers related to the power structures of their time remain largely a less studied area. This is also the case when poststructuralist readings of material culture as ‘texts’ (as in the case of Daniel Miller) have failed to take into account the ways in which issues of power are pervasive in these semiotic systems.⁷⁷ If we want to understand how consumer change can be understood in the context of long-term transformations – such as the formation of a capitalist mode of production, the disenchantment of the world, or processes of proletarianisation and industrialisation – historians would be well-served by looking at the more complex and nuanced ways in which subjective agency is conceptualised in current sociology or anthropology.⁷⁸ Central to such theorising is the idea that the agency of subjects is historically contingent, and dependent on the specific relationship between people and their means of communication (including material ones) within a given society.⁷⁹

A second challenge for the historiography that emphasises the relative autonomy of consumer behaviour in affecting change in the early modern world would be to deal with materiality in a more conscious way.⁸⁰ Already long-standing developments in economic anthropology, archaeology and sociology have refocused attention on the ability of material objects to exert agency. In economic anthropology this notion can be traced back to Marcel Mauss’ distinction between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ (1924). Mauss saw the gift as a form of exchange typical of pre-modern societies and characterised by

76 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass. 1984); H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (New York 1964); R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School, Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (Cambridge 1995).

77 This is a crucial difference when compared to the perspectives of, for instance Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault. In as far as the comparison with texts serves as a metaphor only, it can be noted that issues of power are far more pervasively comprised in acts of consumption than in

structures of language. W.H.J. Sewell, ‘A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation’, *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992) 23-24 and also W.H.J. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago 2005).

78 M. Emirbayer and A. Mische, ‘What is Agency?’, *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998).

79 See for example W. Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Oakland 2007).

80 F. Trentmann, ‘Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics’, *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009).

the fact that its value is determined by the nature of the giver. In commodities, on the other hand, no trace of the producer or giver remains in the object itself. Although later anthropologists such as Arjan Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff dismissed this dichotomy and the modernisation theory it implied, the underlying premise that the boundaries between persons and things are culturally variable has not been discarded. Instead, they developed the notion that the nature of objects is not fixed, but instead is dependent upon the regimes of value in which they are embedded. All objects should thus be seen as potentially either gifts or commodities, depending on the contexts through which they circulate.⁸¹

In this tradition, the idea of the ‘biographies of things’ has also emerged, i.e. the idea that objects can transform from gifts to commodities and vice versa – and as such can build different layers of meaning. From there, it has been but a small step to seeing that objects can also have effects on subjects, and thus can also have an agency – albeit dependent on the context in which they are embedded. The result has been a growing attention not just to the (semiotic) *meaning* of things, but also to the very relationship of objects and subjects.⁸² As in the work of Patrick Joyce, for instance, the central question has become not what things *meant*, but what they *did* in the social, cultural and political sphere.⁸³ This anthropological perspective has found its counterpart in the sociological field of ‘Actor-Network Theory’ (ANT), where both value and agency are taken to be located in the interwoven networks (‘agencements’ or ‘assemblages’) of objects, concepts and actors – rather than in any of its components separately.⁸⁴ From this perspective, Bruno Latour’s concept of ‘purification’ holds particular promise for re-interpreting early modern changes in consumption. It refers specifically to the (imaginary, yet real) drawing of a clear line between human agency and natural determinism in the process of modernisation.⁸⁵

Yet overall the impact of this ‘material turn’ in early modern consumption historiography has been remarkably slow.⁸⁶ A rare exception is

81 A. Appadurai, ‘Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value’, in: idem (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1986); I. Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’, in: *ibid.*

82 J. Hoskins, ‘Agency, Biography and Objects’, in: C. Tilley et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London 2006); A. Gell, *Art and Agency: A New Anthropological Theory* (Oxford 1998).

83 P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London 2003).

84 B. Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris 1991).

85 See also the ways in which this concept was put to historical use in Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

86 An overview in Trentmann, ‘Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics’. For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there are some important pioneering works: J. Vernon, ‘The Ethics of Hunger and the Assembly of Society: The Techno-Politics of the School Meal in Modern Britain’, *The American Historical Review* 110 (2005); Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*.

presented by the work of sociologist Chandra Mukerji, who has consistently emphasised the contribution of material objects in actively establishing economic, scientific and political processes during the early modern period. Mukerji has argued for instance, that the coming about of a commerce in prints, maps and decorated calicoes during the sixteenth century both modelled *and* itself diffused a new orientation toward material objects.⁸⁷ In the political arena, she has furthermore demonstrated how the material culture of the built environment itself has served as an instrument of domination.⁸⁸ Recent work by Bert De Munck has similarly shown how going beyond the semiotic value of things and taking the so-called ‘material turn’ seriously can shed new light on the main transformations of early modern society. De Munck demonstrated that the well-established evidence on the declining position of early modern craft guilds, and the related changing appreciation of commodities (which became less valued for their intrinsic value than for their design and modishness), can be interpreted in the perspective of ANT-studies to signal an underlying shift in subject-object relations, and hence in the very epistemology of consumer value.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, such innovative research that concerns the agency of both consumers and objects in order to confront the great transformations of early modern society remains rare.

Concluding remarks and future perspectives

The search for the early origins of a consumer society in the pre-industrial period has brought forth a wealth of insights into the changing nature of material culture, distribution, consumption and production in the early modern world. At the same time, the recent extension of these insights to places and times previously not imagined to have taken part in the ‘consumer revolution’, and the growing challenge to its theoretical foundations from developments in sociological and anthropological fields, prompt the need for a methodological and conceptual re-evaluation of this perspective. Based on recent developments, three avenues for future research look particularly promising to deal with these issues.

87 C. Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York 1983).

88 C. Mukerji, ‘Material Practices of Domination: Christian Humanism, the Built Environment, and Techniques of Western Power’, *Theory and Society* 31 (2002).

89 B. De Munck, ‘Guilds, Product Quality and Intrinsic Value: Towards a History of Conventions?’, *Historical Social Research* 36 (2011); B. De Munck, ‘The Agency of Branding and the Location of Value: Hallmarks and Monograms in Early Modern Tableware Industries’, *Business History* (2012); B. De Munck, ‘Products as Gifts and Skills as Hybrids: Opening a Black Box in the History of Material Culture’, *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

A first item on the agenda for future research should be a more conscious methodological focus on well-defined comparative research. The recent growth of empirical studies discerning significant consumer changes all over the late medieval, early modern and modern world clearly exposes the difficulty in establishing the contours of continuity and change from (a multitude of) single case studies. Notwithstanding the amount of scholarly attention (and funding) invested in this research field, it remains difficult to compare the degree to which consumerism was a more pervasive force in – for instance – sixteenth century Tuscany, seventeenth century Friesland, eighteenth century England or Ming China. In this respect the Low Countries can be regarded as an excellent testing ground, with its many regional differences in economic, political and religious structure during the early modern period providing sufficient potential for a long-term comparative study of both continuity and change in consumption. Moreover, it could serve as a testing ground for the development of comparative methodologies that could then be applied on a more global scale.

On a larger scale, the recent developments in consumption history underline the need for a more conscious stance on global history. The current approach, which takes evidence of growing consumerism anywhere in the world as proof of early economic modernisation and capitalist development, tends to interpret separate local processes as particular instances of a single, euro-centric modernisation process.⁹⁰ Such a perspective fails to take into account the various ways in which global consumer change during the early modern period was not a unidirectional process⁹¹, as well as of the interdependencies in play on a larger scale. Thus far studies of single commodities such as sugar or cotton have been somewhat more successful in the field of global consumption history.⁹² Instead of insisting on the diffusion of a single European consumer culture, these have generally framed our understanding of early modern consumer change in the context of long processes of global convergence in consumption and specialisation in production. It is a perspective too often missing from the early modern consumption literature in general.

90 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton 2007), but see also the criticism in V. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London 2013). On explicitly material mediation in local processes of globalization, see again Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

91 See for instance M. Norton, 'Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics', *The American Historical Review* 111 (2006).

92 The best examples are S. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York 1985); G. Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that made the Modern World* (Cambridge 2013).

Apart from this methodological challenge, the main task of future research in early modern consumption history will be to delve more deeply into both the consequences and the causes of the changes it has laid bare. In past research it has been taken for granted too often that consumer growth signalled rising living standards, lessening social inequality and ultimate commercialisation and economic growth. On the other hand, more recent research has pointed out that more, but cheaper and less durable forms of consumption, have allowed consumerism also to take shape in the context of economic decline and rising social inequality. A more cautious evaluation of the changes that consumer behaviour affected in early modern economy and society is thus needed. A similar observation applies to the ultimate causes of early modern consumer change where the traditional theories on the liberation of a modern, ‘rational choice’ consumer are increasingly challenged by notions of both limited agency from a post-structuralist perspective and of material agency from an anthropological and sociological perspective.

In all, the historical study of consumption has provided important and refreshing new insights into the economic, social and cultural world of the early modern period. Yet we should remain cautious – and perhaps increasingly so – not to imagine the early modern past to have been a consumerist utopia, like the futures projected by Edward Bellamy or Thomas More. ◀

Wouter Ryckbosch (1984) obtained his PhD in history from the University of Antwerp in 2012. He specialised in early modern economic history and has published on issues of social inequality, public services and consumption. He currently works as a postdoctoral fellow of the FWO – Vlaanderen at the University of Antwerp and as a lecturer in early modern history at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Recent publications: Bruno Blondé and Wouter Ryckbosch, ‘Arriving to a Set Table: The Integration of Hot Drinks in the Urban Consumer Culture of the 18th-Century Southern Low Countries’, in: H. Hodacs, F. Gottmann and C. Nierstrasz (eds.), *Goods from the East: Trading Eurasia 1600-1800* (Palgrave Press, forthcoming); Ellen Decraene and Wouter Ryckbosch, ‘Household Credit, Social Relations, and Devotion in the Early Modern Economy’, *Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 11:1 (2014) 1-28 and Wouter Ryckbosch, ‘A Consumer Revolution under Strain?: Consumption, Wealth and Status in Eighteenth-Century Aalst (Southern Netherlands)’ (PhD dissertation University of Antwerp & Ghent University; Antwerp 2012). Email: wouter.ryckbosch@uantwerpen.be.