

Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade, c.1500–1820

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In Gurinder Chadha's 2002 movie *Bend it like Beckham*, the football-loving principal protagonist Jess Bhamra, daughter of Punjabi parents living in Hounslow, is upbraided by her mother for being too keen on sports to be able to make 'aloo gobi' properly, which gives this dish the appearance of being a key component in the repertoire of any suitably marriageable Punjabi girl at the start of the 21st century. The 'aloo' part of it is the potato, which, like the chilli that imparts the spice for which South Asian cuisines – and Thai, and Hunan and Sichuan, to name just a few others – are known is not native to any part of Asia, reaching that continent only through the process sometimes known (somewhat euphemistically in my view) as the Columbian exchange, the (often surprisingly rapid) adoption of American and Asian products of various kinds across continents. What did the potato mean for South Asian consumers? Clearly enough for it to have become ubiquitous in most cuisines from that part of Asia today; but when did this happen, and why? What effect did the wholesale adoption of things like the potato and the chilli, and tobacco as well, have on consumer habits, household economic behaviour, and the nature of consumption and the economy as a whole in the many parts of the world where these things were unknown as recently as 500 years ago, but now seem to be integral to their cultures?

The history of consumption has normally been practiced both as a history of luxury, high-status consumption, and as it pertains to Europe and North America. Books have been written on the impact of sugar and tea and tobacco and cotton on the economies, politics, and cultures of those regions; but none so far on the potato or the chilli in Asia. In this important work, Beverly Lemire takes a big step towards rectifying the imbalance in scholarly attention, albeit not with regard to the potato or the chilli, nor indeed with respect to changes in consumption patterns of indigenous goods, whether in Asia or anywhere else. Her focus is on the growth of what she calls a cosmopolitan material culture that emerged as a result of the exchanges of goods and information in from c.1500 onwards and was not – an important point all too often ignored in earlier scholarship – restricted to the consumption habits of the elites, nor – an equally important point – to populations of the colonial powers. The broad theoretical framework underpinning this book is Jan de Vries's theory of an 'industrious revolution': people wanted more and different things, and that caused them to change their household economic behaviour so that they could earn more to buy more.⁽¹⁾ Lemire's

arguments are also explicitly framed against those of Braudel and his school, who propagated a view of a mass of humanity below the level of the elites whose habits and cultures remained more or less static for centuries.

In successive chapters, Lemire examines the expansion of consumption of textiles and fur, efforts to regulate dress, informal and illegal ways of accessing new consumer goods, the spread of tobacco and the power politics involved therein, and the diffusion of different kinds of decorative motifs in embroidery and the cultural meanings these were imbued with. She shows very effectively that, for example, the indigenous peoples of North America were not just trappers who purveyed furs to European traders, but also discerning consumers of European and Asian cloths, who also made these items, over time, an integral part of their own culture. Similarly, it was not just Indian cotton that made its way from Asia to Europe, but also European woollens that had an impact on consumer habits in China and Japan. In Asia and Europe alike, governments sought, unsuccessfully, to regulate clothing, which was closely attached to social, legal, and economic status; but everywhere consumers found ways of accessing and adapting new fabrics to get around the increasing amounts of regulation attached to clothing in this period. Perhaps the most spectacular example of a truly cosmopolitan consumer culture is provided by tobacco, which by the early seventeenth century was consumed, it seems, everywhere (the potato and sugar would be other examples). Like sugar, tobacco is an addictive substance, and although she only cites Sidney Mintz's work on sugar in passing (2), Lemire's arguments regarding the coercive uses of tobacco are similar: it had a calming influence on slaves and other coerced labourers and was used deliberately to avert unrest, while simultaneously creating a dependence than could only be satisfied by the agency of the owners or employers. Indeed, one of Lemire's most important contributions is to stress how significant an economic impact coerced consumers would have had: tobacco and clothing for slaves, sailors, and soldiers, all captive markets in one way or another, would have generated tremendous demand for these products. Unfortunately, her efforts to quantify this are rather patchy, and this is one area that could do with further development.

Lemire's main point is effectively made: it was not just in Europe that 'new' everyday luxuries and other kinds of consumer goods were diffused broadly throughout the population in these centuries, and as a result, similar kinds of consumption – albeit imbued with different cultural meanings, and structured by different relations of power, agency, and coercion – can be found across most parts of the world by 1800. Furthermore, although she hesitates explicitly to criticise de Vries's paradigm of industriousness, she does refine it significantly by stressing the coercive aspect – or rather, *one* coercive aspect – of the new consumer culture. But there is another form of industriousness and coerciveness that is completely missing here: the fact that many people now had to become consumers because they no longer had access to the things they needed. This sort of consumption might not have been so 'cosmopolitan' – in the first instance, what such people needed was food and cheap textiles, rather than tobacco and fur – but it was, I think, equally a part of a consumer revolution that built modern consumer society. After all, our consumer society is in the first instance such a society not so much because we consume all kinds of more or less unnecessary stuff – everyday luxuries, from fancy clothing to the latest 'smart' gadget – but because, more fundamentally, we make nothing that we ourselves need, and thus need to be consumers on the market to survive. This aspect of the consumer revolution of this period – and the question as to whether or not any such revolution can be found in regions outside Europe – is unfortunately not addressed, though arguably it fed into and was in turn influenced by the patterns of change Lemire examines. For example, Lemire's discussion of labouring women as consumers in the market for second-hand clothes would have gained more nuance if she had considered the extent to which such women might have needed to purchase cheap clothing because manufacturing it was no longer a part of their household economy. A useful counterpoint here is provided by Julie Marfany's work on Catalonia, where she shows that 'industriousness' stemmed not from some sort of 'consumer choice', but rather from subsistence needs generated by changing patterns of landholding, and the associated patterns of consumption were thus, directly or indirectly, a form of coercive consumption.(3) For this reason, the frequent rather general and mostly unquantified – and possibly unquantifiable? – statements about the consumption of various goods by non-elite layers of society that (as indeed often in de Vries's work on 'industriousness') fail effectively to link the expanding, 'industrious' work force, and those who

engaged in ‘cosmopolitan consumption’ are ultimately quite unsatisfying; it is quite possible that these were not always the same populations. As I have suggested elsewhere, there is some tantalising evidence to suggest that both forms of industriousness and consumption might have been in evidence in 18th-century South Asia, but much more research is needed on non-European regions before we can truly attempt any sort of comparison – a fact that Lemire also acknowledges.[\(4\)](#)

The creation of a consumer society and of cosmopolitan consumption, moreover, need not be a matter solely or even primarily of imported goods. Lemire herself approvingly cites Joan Thirsk’s pioneering work on lower-class consumerism [\(5\)](#), based on products like lace, pins, kettles, needles, and stockings (pp. 15–17); but much of this consumption was of locally-produced stuff, and as I suggested above, the purchase of these items over the market was in many cases motivated not least by the fact that people were being transformed from producers to consumers. And we need to ask as well: was there an analogous consumer revolution elsewhere? Were there changes in the habits of consumption of tea in China, or cotton or sugar in South Asia? In other words: were consumer cultures transformed in similar ways at this level of consumption, even though the objects of consumption were different? It is certainly worth asking, I think, whether there was a creation of a cosmopolitan consumer culture that was characterised not just by the consumption of the same stuff, but equally by a change in habits and the nature of the stuff consumed, and by whom. There are some suggestive glimpses in the scholarship on South Asia, for example, that such processes might have been taking place there too – but we need a lot more research on this subject. We might also ask: how do these forms of consumerism intersect with Lemire’s cosmopolitan consumer culture? A further aspect of this question is also, surely, the question of aspiration, on which consumer cultures are based. That people aspired to project something about themselves by wearing silk or cotton or fur and smoking tobacco is clear enough from Lemire’s exposition; but she is less interested in what precisely they wanted to project, why through these specific products, and whether there might have been any element of coerciveness in the creation of such aspirations.

These are all, however, no significant criticisms of Lemire’s achievements, and indeed it is a mark of the quality of her work that it stimulates so many questions. A work of synthesis bringing together diverse fields of scholarship in a way that has never been done before, this book also simultaneously opens up new areas of research. The way in which the author joins up worlds of exchange and consumption, and different commodities and practices of consumption in different spaces, shows us just how much more there is yet to be done in understanding the nature of the convergences and divergences of early modern economies before we can even begin to think about the causes of these transformations. This is a book that deserves to be read by any historian interested in this period, and should certainly be required reading on all early modern global history courses.

Notes

1. Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Harmondsworth, 1985).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Julie Marfany, *Land, Proto-Industry, and Population in Catalonia, c.1680–1829* (Farnham, 2012).
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Shami Ghosh, ‘How Should We Approach the Economy of “Early Modern India”?’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (2015), 1606–56, at 1638–45.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298981>