

Global History and the History of Consumption: Congruence and Divergence

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Something very interesting has been happening at the edges of economic history for the past quarter of a century or so. This is the emergence of a new sub-discipline in academic history departments known as ‘world history’ (or sometimes in what is a more or less contested historiographical space as ‘global history’).¹ Now obviously in some banal way, all history as it has ever been practised, whether professionally or otherwise, contributes to a history of the world. So if it were to be truly new, the object of this line of inquiry had to go well beyond the mere illumination of additional individual pieces to the larger puzzle of human experience. Indeed, as the Mission Statement of the North American-based World History Association (established in 1982, hereinafter WHA) notes, the goal of world history is ‘to advance scholarship and teaching within a transnational, trans-regional, and trans-cultural perspective. Through the researchers, teachers, students, independent scholars, and authors who are its members, the WHA fosters historical

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241

analysis undertaken not from the viewpoint of nation states, discrete regions, or particular cultures, but from that of the human community'.² In other words, world history is characterized by its methodology rather than by its specific object of study. It calls for both the tools of comparative analysis and a shifting of one's frame of reference away from the traditional (that is, at least, since the nineteenth century) objects of historical study, most especially the nation state and its projects. While the whole world—at all times and in all places—is obviously too much for any one mind to grasp in terms of all of its particulars, the call here was to think about any given historical problem in terms of its connections to other places, and perhaps also to other times, although how chronology will ultimately fit into the world history methodology still seems to be an open question to this historian.

But why begin this chapter with the claim that the rise of world history took place at the edges of economic history? To anyone working in the Anglo-American academic context, this may seem especially odd, as economic history as a formal sub-discipline has all but disappeared from many history departments. Instead, it is mostly studied in economics departments, certainly if the institutional affiliations of the membership of the Economic History Association are any guide. Nonetheless, as our colleagues have lamented recently in various forums, economic history faces a relatively grim prospect within economics departments as well.³ Yet despite these setbacks, one research agenda of economic history is clearly flourishing and even garnering well-deserved public attention. This is the comparative history of long-term economic development and its alter-ego economic inequality. This is a research agenda that lies precisely at the intersection between the concerns of economic history and the methodologies of world history. The 2014 runaway bestseller by Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, is far from the only example of recent successes. Major books with wide readerships that address one or both of the twin questions of economic growth and distribution have been written by Robert Allan, Philip Hoffman, Deirdre McCloskey, Joel Mokyr, Ian Morris, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, Bin Wong and Anthony Wrigley, most of whom self-identify as economic historians.⁴ Most notably, Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* (2000) spawned an entire cottage industry of 'divergence' research published in an ever-expanding output of articles and books. Pomeranz himself recently served a term as President of the American Historical Association, and conference sessions with 'divergence' in the

title continue to draw reliably large audiences. Historians are genuinely interested in understanding how the economic world came to look as it does today, and while they may have turned their backs resoundingly on the 'cliometric' history on offer from the economics department from the 1970s onwards, they cannot seem to get enough of a 'big history' in search of answers to fundamentally economic questions.⁵

Not only does the new world history find common ground with economics, especially in the particular areas noted above, it also shares a methodological imperative and some basic questions with the political science sub-discipline known as the 'international political economy' (IPE). As another relatively newer sub-discipline (dating from the late 1970s), IPE also faces contested boundaries, but its well-established core mission is to understand the influence of political factors on the shaping of the international economy. As such, it must draw from the historical record if it is to be at all effective in explaining change over time. Moreover, like world history, IPE scholars have rejected nation-focused explanations of economic developments in favour of those that demonstrate a full accounting for an integrated and interconnected global system. Not surprisingly, then, an increasingly recognized name for this field is 'global political economy' (GPE). But whether the modifier employed is global, international or world (and serious disagreement about the use of these terms persists),⁶ the point of overlap in the research agendas of world historians, economic history and the IPE/GPE wing of political science has opened up some of the strongest connections between the historical profession and other social science disciplines in many a year.

A key element of the shared research agenda I have suggested above has been first and foremost to understand the timing, direction and volume of commodity flows, of both raw materials and manufactured goods around the globe. Other queries have been focused on the multifaceted characteristics of labour migration(s),⁷ the diffusion of new technologies, the coordination of prices across expanding zones of commerce and, of course, the coordination and exchange of monetary units. While cultural exchanges are likewise of interest to world historians, much of the intellectual energy behind the new journal offerings and scholarly associations that explicitly claim the mantle of world (or global) history came from those whose work was primarily focused on commercial exchange and the macro-economic processes surrounding it. These phenomena are all closely associated with popular notions

of globalization, a process that the public widely ascribes to the very recent past. But world historians have found equal or even more resonance for their agenda in periods that pre-date the twentieth century. Indeed, one early focus for this new kind of history was the increasingly well-documented rise of a ‘consumer society’. The first historians of the nineteenth century highlighted the possibilities for a new kind of consumption with the rise of department stores and other mass public spaces. The eighteenth-century historians were not far behind in demonstrating the veritable explosion of new consumer goods to be found in their period, a phenomenon that Michael Kwass has called ‘a buying spree of historic dimensions’⁸. Yet further research has even pushed the site of the consumer revolution earlier into the seventeenth century, especially for precocious locations such as parts of Flanders and the Dutch Republic. In every case the early work of documentation was centred squarely in either Europe or America (in terms of both the location of the historians themselves and also the objects of their study). Yet it was impossible to go very far in this pursuit without having to engage with the flood of exotic commodities coming into Europe and America from other parts of the world, which were moreover themselves such a strong catalyst for the new kinds of consumer desire being described by historians.

1 THE EARLY MODERN CONSUMER REVOLUTION

It is this specific connection between the rise of world history as a sub-discipline and the discovery of a ‘consumer revolution’ by early modernists that I want to pursue here. Indeed, this chapter began with a hunch: that the burgeoning historiography of consumption, the discovery of one or possibly several ‘consumer revolution(s)’ and a new interest in the history of commodities themselves were all in some way critically linked to what seemed like the almost simultaneous take-off of world history as a recognized field worthy of its own associations, journals and graduate training programmes. To probe this hunch empirically, I first checked the English-language corpus of books available for review using the Google Ngram Viewer. Running a search across the twentieth century and into the current one (1900–2008) on the phrases ‘world history’, ‘global trade’, ‘global history’ and ‘consumer revolution’ yields the graph reproduced in Fig. 1. ‘World history’ is by far the most common of these phrases, rising steadily from even before the Great Depression



Fig. 1 World History' as a subject in 20th c. English language books. *Source* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 8 July 2016)

and peaking twice, first in the context of the Second World War and then again in the mid-1960s. 'Global trade', 'global history' and 'consumer revolution' by contrast all only make a first barely noticeable appearance as phrases in the 1940s. It is not until the 1980s that each of them gains some real traction. However, what becomes clear when we refine this exercise further is that they gain that traction together. If we remove 'world history' and 'global trade' from the search, and limit the chronology to 1940–2008, it is possible to get a more nuanced reading of the remaining two terms. The results of this exercise are shown in Fig. 2. Clearly, at least in the English-speaking world, interest in global history (likely a more accurate reflection of the scholarly agenda outlined above than the more generic phrase 'world history') and in the consumer revolution moved in tandem with each other, both really taking off in the 1980s, exactly as we would expect given the chronology of major publications in both fields.⁹

A similar spike of interest in the history of consumption is also evident in French-language books as tracked by the Google Books database. Using the search terms 'société de consommation', 'histoire mondiale' and 'histoire du monde' for the French corpus gives the graph in Fig. 3. Several things are noteworthy about the comparison with the similar (acknowledging the different nuances, of course) English phrases. First, the tight link between the rise in usage of global history and the consumer revolution is not present in French; indeed, there is no link at all. Second, the remarkably sudden emergence of writing about a 'société de consommation' pre-dates the English discovery of a consumer revolution by at least a decade. Here the rise already begins in the 1960s, peaks

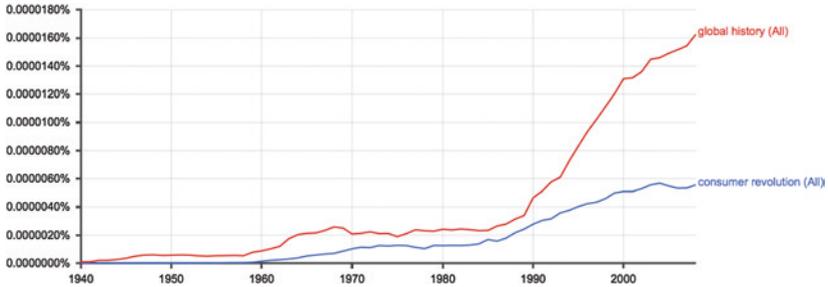


Fig. 2 The rise of ‘Global History’ since 1940. *Source* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 8 July 2016)



Fig. 3 World history as a subject in 20th c. French language books. *Source* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 8 July 2016)

in the early 1970s and diminishes thereafter. In fairness, if one searches using the more directly translated English term ‘consumer society’, the rise also begins in the 1960s (with a peak in the late 1990s). But this latter term also captures a good deal of writing about contemporary consumer culture (for both the French and Anglo-American cases), whereas the specifically English usage of consumer revolution is predominantly an historical phenomenon. So while the French-speaking world took notice of consumption and its connection to society at about the same time that the English-speaking world did, it did not then go on to develop a special fascination with an historical episode labelled as a consumer revolution. Nor did it see any particular simultaneous rise of interest in world (or global) history.¹⁰



Fig. 4 World history as a subject in 20th c. German language books. *Source* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams> (accessed 8 July 2016)

What this exercise suggests is that the rise of global/world history as a distinct sub-field of history and the simultaneous move by historians to see the origins of modern consumer society in an early modern consumer revolution were indeed linked very strongly, particularly in the English-speaking world. Which interest may have sparked the other is of course impossible to say. Nonetheless, it is hard to even think about the broad concerns of global history in any context that does not include globally traded consumer goods as an object of particular interest. We might even wonder then if consumption history is a *sine qua non* for global history. Or was it our increasing awareness of extensive global connections in the period before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that made us start paying attention to the history of consumption in the first place? The remainder of this chapter explores the larger themes of these two sub-fields of history by posing some questions that arise from my own research on eighteenth-century consumption of new goods in the Old World.

2 THE OBJECTS OF CONSUMPTION

Presumably there are many other ways of understanding global interconnectedness than just via the exchange of consumer goods. As already argued above, labour and technology circulate, as do ideas, art, literature, modes of political organization, and religious values and practices. And to our collective sorrow, there always seem to be armies on the move. Still, we might wonder whether it is possible to be a global person if not via consumption. All of these other facets of the human experience are inextricably linked to the material goods with which they are instantiated. Art requires artifacts,

literature insists on books and implements of writing, and new processes depend on the gadgets that make them effective. Even religious ideas are more often than not inseparable from their objects of devotion, instruction or ritual. Without goods, whether as raw materials or as highly finished products, or anything in between, very little could be communicated across a distance. Causality runs in the other direction as well, as Michael North has argued persuasively. The cumulative research amassed on this subject for Western Europe in the eighteenth century ‘has shown that consumption – including cultural consumption – also created identities.’¹¹ Europeans increasingly came to define their regional and even local identities by the periodicals they read, the music they listened to or performed, the foods they ate, the clothes they wore and the objects on display in their homes, even when a good many of those items in fact came from somewhere else, often for that matter the other side of the world. It is certainly consistent with the evidence to say that it would be difficult to imagine a consumer revolution taking place without the availability of consumables from the whole world, just as it seems impossible to have a global history without globally traded consumer goods.

My own research on a collection of nearly 1000 after-death household inventories drawn up by the Regents of the Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage (the *Burgerweeshuis* or BWH) between 1740 and 1782 has been especially productive for thinking about the link between cultural identity formation and new kinds of consumption. To be eligible for admittance into the Municipal Orphanage, a child had to have lost both of his or her natural parents, both of whom also had to have been citizens of the city for a period of at least seven years. Citizenship could be inherited, but also purchased. Thus, the BWH archives contain inventories on a remarkably diverse collection of households, displaying much more heterogeneity than the typical range of households captured by notarial records. Decedents whose estates were surveyed by the orphanage included married as well as widowed men and women—the married ones having remarried with a second or higher spouse after the death of their first. There are also single men and women who had been formerly orphans themselves and by virtue of dying without heirs of their own, the BWH could claim their estate. Many of the households surveyed by the BWH were also exceedingly poor, a group that rarely finds its way into the documentary records of inheritance or probate. Finally, the data sample also includes both native-born Amsterdammers and those who were successful migrants to the city such that they could afford to pay the fairly steep fee for citizenship status.

It is this diversity of sample population, especially into the ranks of the extremely poor, that makes the surprisingly wide diffusion of Asiatic textiles (or Asian-inspired European imitations) as well as housewares associated with the consumption of colonial groceries of such interest to historians of consumption. Nearly 60% of the households (533 out of 912 complete inventories) owned at least one item for the making or serving of tea or coffee. A total of 54% (492 households) owned delftware and a remarkable 38% (341 households) owned real porcelain, even if some of it was described as old, chipped or otherwise in poor condition. Asiatic textiles seem not to have as yet penetrated the BWH population as fully as had exotic tablewares, but nonetheless 23% of households owned something identified as made of cotton and more or less the same percentage owned items made of silk (213 households for cotton and 207 for silk). Even highly prized Indian chintz was present in 134 of the homes of BWH affiliates (that is 14.6% of the BWH population). Of course, a sizeable quantity of the clothing listed in these inventories was also in poor condition and thus was not described in any detail at all. While it seems likely that identification would be more forthcoming from the bookkeeper tasked with making the inventory if the materials used were of exotic origin, nevertheless it is safe to assume that these percentages represent the absolutely lower bounds for the presence of cotton and silk in the homes of poor to middle-income eighteenth-century Amsterdammers.¹²

The factors that allow (or even encourage) some individuals to purchase new goods, acquire new tastes and take on new habits are much debated. It seems obvious (even if somewhat circular in its reasoning) to suggest that it was rapidly increasing wealth that allowed early modern Europeans to assume new consumer behaviours with such enthusiasm. But at the same time, it has been the documentation of the ownership of these goods that has been instrumental in supporting the claim that Europeans were growing richer. This logical problem notwithstanding, social and cultural historians have argued more recently that it is not enough just to be able to afford new consumer practices regardless of how that economic capacity might be identified; it is also necessary for there to be both flows of information and community norms of behaviour to facilitate the diffusion of new commodities across the landscape, whether this is understood in physical, sociological or economic terms.

The BWH population offers a remarkably clear test of the relative importance of wealth versus social learning because of the different wealth profiles of those born in the city of Amsterdam versus those who immigrated to it later in life (but nonetheless became citizens by

paying the required entry fee). BWH immigrant parents were almost twice as wealthy (as measured by the asset valuations of the inventories themselves) as their native-born peers. The median household wealth of the latter was only 40.5 guilders, while the former enjoyed a median household wealth of 78.8 guilders. Other measures of wealth, such as the number of rooms in their dwelling and the size of the debts left unpaid at death (higher debts are a sign of greater wealth and economic activity in a society where so much ordinary business was conducted using credit and assets were necessary to getting credit), also favour the immigrants over the native-born¹³. As my work has shown, despite the economic advantage held by the immigrants, their enthusiasm for the eighteenth-century craze for *chinoiserie* nonetheless paled in comparison to that of their relatively less prosperous native-born neighbours, for the latter consistently reveal themselves to have been eager participants in the new consumption practices. They adopted new products sometimes to an even greater extent than their much wealthier peers, but always just as soon as they could possibly afford them, even if it meant the acquisition of only one item and in a context of very few other material possessions. The immigrants, on the other hand despite their wealth, seem to have added exotic tablewares and fabrics only once they were first relatively well supplied with more traditional goods.

In short, people have to learn how to become consumers of new things. It is this learning process that makes for especially rich fodder for the new world/global history. We overlook at our peril the importance of information flows and social learning (sometimes location-specific as in the global emporium that was seventeenth and eighteenth-century Amsterdam) to informing consumer choices. Living in a port city overflowing with products from the entire world such as one found in Amsterdam towards the end of her 'golden age', must have complicated those choices considerably. But growing up in that environment also seems to have equipped people, even those who were desperately poor by our reckoning, to make such choices with a surer hand than their economic fortunes alone might have suggested possible.

3 CONCLUSION

This essay began with a hunch, that the veritable explosion of research beginning in the late 1980s on the history of consumption among both economic and cultural historians, along with the concomitant discovery of one, or more likely several, "consumer revolutions," was part and

parcel of the broader phenomenon of the takeoff of world history as a distinct field complete with professional associations, dedicated journals and doctoral research programs. There are of course a good many paths towards global interconnectedness beyond just via the long-distance exchange of consumer goods. Appropriately, historians have not neglected the circulation inherent in labor migrations and technological diffusion, nor the rapid speed-up in the spread of other kinds of ideas via art, literature, political organizations, and religious institutions. Nonetheless, the emergence of the global citizen seems to have been most fully captured as an historical phenomenon through an examination of these citizens' new patterns of consumption. What remains to be done by historians of consumer culture, and likewise by global historians more generally, is to more completely document the mechanisms by which this thoroughgoing transformation took place. How did formerly locally focused communities become educated to both a desire for, and useful knowledge of, goods from the entire world? That is to say, how did the global citizen-consumer come into being? The consumer habits of poor and lower middling citizens of Amsterdam in the middle decades of the 18th century offer one very good place for historians to begin their quest.

NOTES

1. That the emergence of the sub-discipline of world history is a relatively recent development as well as a real growth area for history departments is easily attested to by a few basic facts. When I began graduate school in the mid-1980s none of us would have identified ourselves as interested in world history, even though there was already then a growing desire to study more of the world than just Europe and the USA. Now the WHA lists 116 PhD programmes in the USA alone that offer a specific field option in world history. While the rest of the world has been somewhat slower to join this movement there are also 16 such programmes outside of the USA, including nine in Canada, two each in Germany and the UK, and one apiece in Australia, Hungary and the Netherlands. At the secondary level, the College Board introduced a World History Advanced Placement exam in 2002. There are also three referred scholarly journals dedicated to the field: the *Journal of World History* (begun in 1990), the *Journal of Global History* (begun in 2006) and the *New Global Studies Journal* (begun in 2007).
2. <http://www.thewha.org/about-wha/history-mission-and-vision-of-the-wha> (accessed 3 July 2017).
3. See, for example, Temin 2014.

4. Indeed, in the first issue of the *Journal of Global History*, four of the total of six articles were by economic historians, along with one article by an historian of technology and one early modernist.
5. The WHA lists the following areas of specialization on its website under the rubric of ‘Economic Themes of World History’: commodities; economy; globalization; industrialization; maritime trade; mono-cultural economies; nomadic and pastoral peoples, impact on trade; overland trade; plantation economies; southernization; trade diasporas; and transoceanic voyaging. See <http://www.thewha.org/about-wha/areas-of-specialization-in-world-history> (accessed 3 July 2017).
6. See, for example, Mazlish and Buultjens 1993; and, more recently, Olstein 2014.
7. A good example of this can be seen in the major research endeavour at the Humboldt University of Berlin called ‘Arbeit und Lebenslauf in globalgeschichtlicher Perspektive’ (‘Work and Human Life Cycle in a Global Perspective’).
8. Kwass 2003: 87.
9. For the consumer revolution, two critical publications both appeared in the early 1980s: McKendrick et al. 1982; Williams 1982.
10. A similar exercise can be conducted for the German-language literature stored in Google Books, but once again the specific terms of interest do not translate particularly well. In the German case, I searched on the terms ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ and ‘Weltgeschichte’. The latter shows a steep decline beginning in the late 1940s, perhaps not surprisingly given the traumatic aftermath of the Second World War. The former, ‘the history of everyday life’, made its appearance in the 1980s at more or less the same time that the consumer revolution was being explored for the first time by English historians, but the use of this term had diminished greatly by 2000, unlike for the consumer revolution, which lives on strong into the present. See Fig. 4.
11. North 2008, p. 171.
12. For details of the data cited here see, McCants 2015 and 2016.
13. McCants 2015, Table 2; and Muldrew 1998.

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