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- **Arbeid van vrouwen in Limburg [Knotter]**
- **Androcentrisme in de historische demografie [Janssens]**
- **Van regionaal naar globaal [Van Nederveen Meerkerk]**
- **Feminationalisme [Schrover]**

Globalized Desires

*European Development and Global Histories of Early Modern Consumption*¹

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Books under review:

Beverly Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures. The Material World Remade, c.1500-1820* (Cambridge 2018).

Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi (eds.), *Living the Good Life. Consumption in the Qing and Ottoman Empires of the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden 2018).

Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things. How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York 2016).

Introduction

The idea of a ‘consumer society’ came up after the end of the Second World War in English-language scholarship and was for the first time substantially conceptualized by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith in his influential bestseller *The Affluent Society* (1958).² It sprang from a new body of literature that formed part of a wider move away from the traditional focus on the supply-side of the economy (production) towards researching the demand-side (consumption), a development

1 This article is an edited version of a review essay that was written as the final assignment for the research master course *Debates in Global Economic and Social History* offered by the N.W. Posthumus Institute. The author would like to thank Matthias van Rossum for his invaluable assistance in submitting this article for publication, as well as the anonymous readers for their helpful comments which helped improve the clarity and quality of the article.

2 J.K. Galbraith, *The affluent society* (New York 1958).

that Frank Trentmann summarized in the catchphrase: ‘*Homo consumens* replaced *homo faber*’.³ After Galbraith, a growing number of studies of ‘consumer society’ and its constituent materialism followed. Many of these works either struck a critical note towards its consequences for civic values and its creation of artificial wants, or instead praised it as a way to enhance personal freedom and societal wealth all at once.⁴ In spite of their differences, these accounts had in common that they generally saw the ‘consumer society’ as a phenomenon typical to the post-war era.

Such claims prompted historians to look into the matter of consumption, signifying the rise of the new field of consumption history in the early 1980s.⁵ At first, these historical studies treated mass consumption as merely an effect of ‘modernity’. Quickly however, historians of the early modern era took on the objective of battling the idea that consumerism was a distinctive element of modernity.⁶ Instead, the early modern era was put forward as the cradle of ‘consumer culture’ and the locus of this ‘birth’ was understood to be eighteenth century Britain.⁷ Such was argued, for example, by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and John Harold Plumb in their pioneering and highly influential *The Birth of a Consumer Society* in 1982.⁸ Nevertheless, as consumption historians departed from their narrow focus on the modern era, the search for the ‘birth’ of the consumer society upheld their preoccupation with industrial societies; Britain and continental Europe in particular.

Ever since McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb’s seminal study, new perspectives have gained prominence within early modern consumption studies. This article explores the current state of the field through the

3 F. Trentmann, ‘Introduction’, in: Idem (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the history of consumption* (New York 2012) 1; C. Clunas, ‘Modernity global and local. Consumption and the rise of the West’, *The American Historical Review* 104:5 (1999) 1497-1511, 1497.

4 Some telling examples of these critical positions are: G. Katona, *The mass consumption society* (New York 1964). And later: J. Baudrillard, *The consumer society. Myths and structures* (London 1998), originally published as *La société de consommation* (1970). Two clear examples of the appraising position are: W. Whitman Rostow, *The stages of economic growth. A non-communist manifesto* (Cambridge 1960). And later: W. Beckerman, *Two cheers for the affluent society. A spirited defense of economic growth* (New York 1975).

5 Trentmann, ‘Introduction’, 3-4.

6 Idem, ‘Beyond consumerism. New historical perspectives on consumption’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 39:3 (2004) 373-401, there 374.

7 Pioneering work in this respect was done by Joan Thirsk. See, for instance: J. Thirsk, *Economic policy and projects. The development of a consumer society in early modern England* (Oxford 1978).

8 N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society. The commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London 1982).

discussion of three recent works that engage in global or world historical comparisons. In order to do so, the article situates the two monographs (Beverly Lemire and Frank Trentmann) and the edited volume (Elif Akçetin & Suraiya Faroqhi) in the field's trajectory from its rise in the second half of the twentieth century to the influential *cultural turn*, and the more recent *global turn*. It will subsequently assess the contributions of these publications and explore their implications for possible future research agendas into the complex history of early modern consumption and its global characteristics. Although the field faces methodological challenges, a promising pathway to explore in the future includes the study of the 'politics' of consumption.

From European modernity to global consumer cultures, and back

The initial occupation of historians like McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb with the quest for the 'birth' of consumer society in early modern Britain was in a sense complementary to the older, classical question of explaining the rise of the modern economy in Europe. This objective followed naturally from the presumption that Western or European 'civilization' possessed some kind of unique characteristic that set it apart from other world regions, a view that was prevalent in the broader field of early modern history at the time. The famous *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel, for instance, observed that European elites engaged in a vibrant fashion culture, whereas other Eurasian societies 'stood still' with respect to material change.⁹ Braudel's refutation of material change outside the small world of European elites substantiated the presumption of Europe's uniqueness, but left ample room for criticism, some of which continues up to this day.¹⁰ At the same time,

9 F. Braudel, 'Superfluity and sufficiency. Houses, clothes and fashion', in: Idem, *The structures of everyday life. Civilization and capitalism, 15th–18th century I* (New York 1985). See especially 312–314 for his account of the lack of 'fashion' outside Europe. This title concerns a translation of the rewritten second edition, originally published as *Les structures de quotidien. Le possible et l'impossible* in 1979. The first edition of this work, published in French in 1967, was originally translated into English as *Capitalism and material life, 1400–1800* in 1973.

10 Beverly Lemire, for example, in her monograph *Global trade and the transformation of consumer cultures*, under review here, strongly criticizes Braudel throughout her work. She typified 'Civilization and capitalism, 15th–18th century' as a 'mammoth flawed project'. See: B. Lemire, *Global trade and the transformation of consumer cultures. The material world remade, c. 1500–1820. New approaches to economic and social history* (Cambridge 2018) 15.

however, Braudel had evoked the idea of a 'material life', the world of self-sufficiency and barter of goods and services within a very small radius, which he understood as an economic domain that existed next to the more measurable and transparent systems of local market economy and international trade that were, according to him, the more usual focus of economic history.¹¹

The interest in this 'shadowy zone' of early modern life, as Braudel described it, would be duly accommodated by the *cultural turn*, having the consequence that consumption became appreciated as a respectable part of 'material culture'. Instead of treating the consumption of goods as motivated by the satisfaction of rational individual wants, new studies in disciplines like anthropology and sociology understood commodities as sources of meaning that were part of a cultural system of information which governed social relations and formed identities. For instance, in *The World of Goods* (1996), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, an anthropologist and economist respectively, defined consumption as relating both to commercial services and social display, as well as to 'making visible and stable the categories of culture'.¹² Such notions of consumption built upon contributions of sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, who had presented consumers as cultural participants with agency in shaping and reproducing material culture through their habits and customs.¹³

When this shift reached early modern consumption history, it produced the significant effect that consumption was reappraised as an active practice that generated actual meaning. Historians, initially pre-occupied with the quest for European modernity, were informed by notions that treated consumerism as an effect of the capitalist production mode. During the 1980s, historians increasingly started studying how the engagement with material culture formed identities and explicated social relations in early modern societies, with goods having a respectable part in constituting a shared system of meaning.¹⁴ As a result, the quest for the 'birth' of the modern economy and its consumer society lost its central importance, and consumption became a concept

11 Braudel, 'Introduction', in: Idem, *The structures of everyday life*, 23-26, there 24-25.

12 M. Douglas and B. Isherwood (eds.) *The world of goods. Towards an anthropology of consumption* (London/ New York 1996, 2nd edition) 38. The first edition of this work was published in 1979.

13 See: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London 1986). French edition: *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (1979). Bourdieu's idea of the social function of consumption patterns as a way of distinguishing one's group from another's became well integrated into consumption historiography.

14 Trentmann, 'Introduction', 11-12.

through which early modern cultures could be understood. Perhaps the most telling offspring of this development was the volume *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800. Image, Object and Text* (1995), edited by John Brewer and Ann Bermingham. With its 26 essays on the utility and meaning of early modern aesthetic artifacts, it stands tall as a hallmark of the *cultural turn* in consumption history.¹⁵

Yet, through its treatment of solely Western European cultures, Brewer and Bermingham's volume still exhibited the conventional geographical focus of consumption historiography. This classical tendency was effectively broken by the *global turn*, the second shift that strongly influenced studies of consumption history.¹⁶ In the *The Structures of Everyday Life*, Braudel had already attempted to compare Europe with other world regions, but recognized that as a Western historian he 'was unprepared, to say the least.'¹⁷ Braudel unfortunately passed away before social scientists and scholars in the humanities started taking up global perspectives in their works more often, most significantly from the early 1990s onwards, encouraged by the new possibilities of an increasingly interconnected world. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, Craig Clunas, a historian of Chinese art and material culture, still felt the necessity to criticize a major three volume series called 'Consumption and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries' for its lack of coverage of the non-Western world.¹⁸ The 'globalization' of consumption history really took off only after the turn of the century, although global studies of commodity-chains and goods were already abound by then. These originated most prominently from Immanuel Wallerstein's 'world system theory' school of analysis. However, such accounts generally upheld the assumption that it was Europe that gave rise to capitalism and was at the core of the early modern global trading system. Moreover, they essentially refrained from incorporating new perspectives on consumption resulting from its culturalist reappraisal.¹⁹

15 J. Brewer and A. Bermingham (eds.), *The consumption of culture, 1600-1800. Image, object and text* (London/New York 1995).

16 Eve Darian-Smith and Philip C. McCarthy define the *global turn* as 'a fundamental shift in analytical perspectives that requires a thorough retooling of our modernist and disciplinary modes of analysis.' See: E. Darian-Smith and P.C. McCarthy, 'Global studies as a new field of inquiry', in: Idem, *The global turn. Theories, research designs, and methods for global studies* (Oakland 2017) 1-28, 2.

17 Braudel, 'Introduction', in: Idem, *The structures of everyday life*, 23-26, there 26.

18 Clunas, 'Modernity global and local', 1404-1405. The three volumes of the series include: J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the world of goods* (London/New York 1993); J. Brewer and S. Staves (eds.), *Early modern conceptions of property* (London 1995); Brewer and Bermingham, *The consumption of culture, 1600-1800*.

19 See: I. Wallerstein, *The modern world-system, vol. I: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the Euro-*

One of the first major efforts at globalizing consumption history that acknowledged consumption as a practice that generated meaning and had social significance was Peter Stearns' *Consumerism in World History* (2001). Stearns' synthesis of existing knowledge serves as a useful illustration of the state-of-the-art of consumption history at the turn of the century. The work brought together knowledge from demand and production side analyses by recognizing the multitude of functions that consumption can exhibit, from its use for commercial purposes, to its meaning for identity and sociability.²⁰ More importantly, however, what distinguished Stearns' work from earlier studies was its widening of the geographical scope to many different regions of the world – including East Asia, Africa, China and the Islamic world – in an effort to compare these regions, an analytical approach that is now so often associated with 'global' histories. In spite of its renewing character, Stearns' work still treated consumerism as an exclusively modern, European phenomenon, born in the eighteenth century and spreading to other parts of the world afterwards. Furthermore, his account did not opt to reconcile demand and production side approaches to consumption into one analytical framework.²¹

Both these aspects were challenged, most influentially but not solely, through the lines of work by experienced consumption historians like Jan de Vries and Maxine Berg.²² De Vries intervened with the thesis that households in seventeenth century Holland and eighteenth century Britain took up more wage labor and became 'industrious' in order to satisfy their new demands for market goods. This shift would have consequently served as an upbeat to the industrial revolution.²³ With this argument, consumption was understood, moreover, as a 'popular' phenomenon, markedly different from the Braudellian association of consumption with elitist luxury. Maxine Berg expanded this line of reasoning by ar-

pean world-economy in the sixteenth century (New York 1974); Idem, *The modern world-system, vol. II: Mercantilism and the consolidation of the European world-economy, 1600-1750* (New York 1980); Idem, *The modern world-system, vol. III: The second great expansion of the capitalist world-economy, 1730-1840s* (San Diego 1989).

20 P.N. Stearns, *Consumerism in world history. The global transformation of desire* (New York 2001) 138.

21 Stearns, *Consumerism in world history*, x.

22 Among others, Giorgio Riello and Anne Gerritsen deserve mention here as scholars with invaluable contributions made to 'globalizing' early modern consumption history, foremostly by setting up research projects that connected Asian and European material cultures. See, for instance: A. Gerritsen and G. Riello (eds.), *The global lives of things. The material culture of connections in the early modern world* (London 2016).

23 J. de Vries, *The industrious revolution. Consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (New York 2008); Idem, 'The industrial revolution and the industrious revolution', *Journal of Economic History* 54:2 (1994) 249-270.

guing that the industriousness of European households was an effect of the demand for global luxury items that had reached European markets through a burgeoning Eurasian trade.²⁴ The idea of the 'industrious revolution' thus laid a firm connection between consumer preferences that were a result of a globalizing material culture on the one hand, and significant changes in European economic productivity on the other.

Informed by this growing basis of comparative knowledge on European and Asian economies and consumer cultures, Prasannan Parthasarathi recently implicated this connection between industriousness and global trade into debates on Europe's 'Great Divergence'.²⁵ Parthasarathi asserted that specifically Britain's industrialization can be attributed to technological innovations that spurred from the will to imitate Indian cotton, in combination with the need to replace wood by coal due to shortages of the former resources. This argument followed after his repudiation of conventional explanations of European development as an effect of supposed advantages in either markets, population, property rights, rationality, state systems or scientific life.²⁶ Thus, early modern consumption history revisited the original problem of Western Europe's 'modern' exceptionality, one which had stood at its cradle in the late 1970s early 1980s.

In the end, the *cultural* and *global turn* together produced an effective undermining of the classical assumptions that underpinned much of the early modern consumption historiography until some two decades ago. First, changes in consumer culture were shown not to be confined to elite circles. Second, claims that consumerism was a uniquely European phenomenon of giving meaning to life or motoring the market economy have become undermined.²⁷ Third, it was argued that the major shifts in the productive side of European economies were intimately connected to the globalization of material cultures, a line of

24 See: M. Berg and H. Clifford (eds.), *Consumers and luxury. Consumer culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester 1999); M. Berg and E. Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the eighteenth century. Debates, desires and delectable goods* (Basingstoke 2003); M. Berg, 'In pursuit of luxury. Global history and British consumer goods in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present* 182:1 (2004) 85-142; Idem (ed.), *Goods from the East, 1600-1800. Trading Eurasia* (Basingstoke 2015).

25 The term 'Great Divergence' was popularized by Kenneth Pomeranz in: K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton 2000).

26 P. Parthasarathi, 'From cotton to coal', in: Idem, *Why Europe grew rich and Asia did not. Global economic divergence, 1600-1850* (Cambridge 2011) 154-157; 162-168.

27 Scholarly literature on the 'Great Divergence' between Europe and Asia has also made significant contributions to bolstering this insight, especially through comparison of Britain and China, see: Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; R. Bin Wong, *China transformed. Historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca 1997).

reasoning which has kept early modern consumption history actively involved in debates about ‘modernity’. These three insights together follow from an effective ‘decentering’ of Europe in consumption history, which dealt the final blow to the classical search for the ‘birth’ of the consumer society in Northwestern Europe. They have in turn supported wider critiques on the projection of the European path to ‘modernity’, ‘consumerism’ or ‘industrialization’ on other geographical areas as well.²⁸ Parthasarathi’s insistence that ‘cotton and coal were solutions to problems that did not exist on the Indian subcontinent’ can be understood in this light.²⁹ In addition, these insights pose questions about the usefulness and precision of the abstract notions of ‘modernity’, ‘consumerism’ and ‘industrialization’. The three publications under review here stand at this interesting juncture in the recent historiography of early modern consumption. So, what can we learn from these works about the state of the field and its future challenges?

The Material World Remade. A cosmopolitan material culture?

In the multi-faceted and impressive monograph *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Culture. The Material World Remade, c. 1500-1820* (2018), the Canadian historian Beverly Lemire sets out to describe how the burgeoning early modern global trade in commodities shaped new consumer cultures in diverse regions of the world, from North-America to the Philippines.³⁰ The structure of the book is arranged thematically and traces the development of what the author terms ‘cosmopolitan consumption’ from 1500-1820.³¹ Lemire places this development against the backdrop of the imperial political structures prevalent across the globe at the time, while also looking beyond mere legal practices by exploring the ‘extralegal’ material life of everyday men, women and slaves.³²

Lemire’s account is innovative by the very combination of the analysis of archaeological and material evidence, with that of textual

28 See, for example: F. Trentmann, ‘Crossing divides. Consumption and globalization in history’, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9:2 (2009) 187-220.

29 Idem, ‘Introduction’, in: Idem, *Why Europe grew rich*, 2.

30 Lemire, *The material world remade*.

31 Ibidem, 10. Only in chapter 6 does the author depart from this timeframe (1500-1820) by extending her narrative into the late nineteenth century.

32 Ibidem, 13.

sources.³³ Furthermore, the extensive description of how 'extralegal' practices of scavenging, beachcombing and smuggling (chapter 4) contributed to spreading commodities to many layers of society gives a more complete image of consumption in the early modern world and surely fortifies her claim of a widespread cosmopolitan material culture.³⁴ What certainly distinguishes this work from other 'global histories' is its almost truly global empiricism. Lemire highlights the fashion of slaves in the Caribbean (chapter 3), the smuggling of shells in Britain (chapter 4), the normalization of smoking tobacco in Japan (chapter 5) and the adaptation of Indian floral motifs in North American indigenous embroidery (chapter 6). Unfortunately, as is frequent in global histories, Africa receives only partial attention, and when it does, it is within the context of the Indian ocean trading system or the Atlantic trade relations and European colonialism.³⁵

Despite this gap, Lemire presents the fascinating argument that there was an emergence of a visual *lingua franca* in the eighteenth century, as is illustrated by the reappearance of certain decorative motifs and styles on different continents.³⁶ In fact, she writes that cosmopolitan material culture was the 'defining paradigm of this age'.³⁷ The 'globalizing' force behind this development is understood to be the burgeoning intercontinental trade in commodities, which was in some cases connected to imperial ambitions.³⁸ An important observation to strengthen the point made by the author is that the spread of cosmopolitan material culture was not confined to an elite minority, but reached many different social groups across various global cultures. Lemire builds this argument on insights derived from the pioneering work of Joan Thirsk in the late 1970s and more recent studies on the cruciality of women and the household to change of consumption pat-

33 See the justification of these methodological and theoretical choices: Ibidem, 7-8. Lemire's integration of 'the agency of things' into her narrative through her innovative methodology is inspired by: A. Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge/New York 1986).

34 See for a discussion of the facets of 'extralegality': Lemire, *The material world remade*, 141. Lemire also discusses 'extralegal' practices in other chapters, for example when she covers the topic of tobacco smuggling and how governments failed to regulate its illegal transport in chapter 5. See: Ibidem, 219-223.

35 See: Ibidem, 33-36; 202-206.

36 Ibidem, 249; 260.

37 Ibidem, 31.

38 Ibidem, 289. Although Lemire only speaks of 'globalization' in her introduction and conclusion, the role she assigns to intercontinental trade in shaping material cultures is similar to 'globalizing'.



Illustration 1 Lambrequin or fragment with chinoiserie in chintz applications (source: Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.307591>).

terns in the eighteenth century.³⁹ She employs Jan de Vries' concept of the 'industrious revolution' to explain such changes. This concept is consequently fitted onto many different global populations by stretching its applicability not only to the activities of wage-earning women and children, but also to more general entrepreneurial activities that in some way advanced the spread and use of commodities among many layers of different global populations.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the argument that a societal wide consumer culture existed both in European and other parts of the world seems to be a bit too generous to the evidence provided in the book. In fact, outside of Western Europe, it is only late Ming and Qing China that seem legible to support this claim.⁴¹ Even in those cases, one wonders whether this was not first and foremost an urban phenomenon, since evidence of practices of material culture for the Chinese countryside is relatively scarce.⁴² Considering the fact that, like much of the early modern world, Chinese regions were predominantly agrarian in the early modern period,

39 Thirsk, *Economic policy and projects*.

40 Lemire, *The material world remade*, 36-40. See also: J. de Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

41 Ibidem, 47. Lemire's account of China relies much on insights produced by Pomeranz' *The Great Divergence*. She also engages in a debate with Pomeranz, challenging his presumption that Europe embraced exotic goods for their prestigious status, while Qing China was 'anxious' towards new commodities. See: Ibidem, 105-108.

42 In fact, Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi conclude that more research is needed to actually determine whether foreign imports were available to the inner and border regions of the Qing empire. See: Akçetin and Faroqhi, 'Conclusion', in: Idem (eds.), *Living the good life. Consumption in the Qing and Ottoman empires of the eighteenth century*. (Leiden 2018) 1-4. I will refer to this book hereafter as *Living the good life*.

Lemire's claim cannot be ascertained for non-elite and non-urban spaces as of yet. More quantitative insights on these regions of Ming and Qing China would be of tremendous value to test such claims in the future.

In a similar fashion, Lemire's conclusion that the shared material culture between different regions of the world points towards 'cosmopolitanism' seems to be somewhat optimistic in the light of the evidence provided. To be sure, her account of the spread of material use and consumption is well-established and convincing. This is exemplified by the diffusion of tobacco consumption styles from North America to Europe and beyond, the widespread demand for Chinese silk and Indian textiles, and the connections produced by the global consumption of furs.⁴³ However, the adjective 'cosmopolitan' would suggest a shared notion amongst people all over the world of what an object's meaning and social function ought to be. Yet, although Lemire acknowledges that societies adapt goods into their habits and practices according to their own system of values and meanings, at times also refusing to embrace certain goods, she subsequently refrains from providing in-depth examples for the case that various global material cultures possessed shared notions of certain objects.⁴⁴

In any case, however, Lemire's methodologically innovative account presents important new imperatives for further research on the spread of consumer culture among society's different social strata in non-European spaces. In addition, having situated the increasing interconnectedness of material cultures at least partially within the context of the expansive nature of merchant capitalism, *The Material World Remade* raises questions on how exactly the more exploitative elements of European trading endeavors contributed to enhancing 'industriousness' both in Northwestern Europe and other global regions. Lastly, Lemire's effort explicates one of the most pressing challenges for current global consumption historians, i.e. the limited availability of source material fit for analysis by scholars trained in European and North-American academia.

Living the Good Life. Working with limits

The importance of the major obstacles of limited sources becomes evident once again in *Living the Good Life. Consumption in the Qing and*

43 Lemire, *The material world remade*, 202-218; 65-69; 46-48.

44 *Ibidem*, 64; 72-73; 86.

Ottoman Empires of the Eighteenth Century (2018), edited by Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi. The editors set out to extend upon ‘models of comparison to liberate the history of empires from Western categories of analysis inspired merely by the Northern European experience’ with the objective of placing the histories of Qing and Ottoman consumption on the scholarly agenda of the history of empires.⁴⁵ The volume hence compares consumer behavior between two non-Western empires in the eighteenth century: Qing China and the Ottoman territories. With many contributions from historians specialized in either Qing China or the Ottoman empire of the eighteenth century, it bundles sixteen chapters that can all be read on their own as well.⁴⁶

Together, these contributions cover a wide range of primary source material and the authors surely deserve to be complimented for the extensive discussions of the sources studied that accompany every chapter. In the Ottoman case, these sources were often the so called *tereke*, estate inventories of the empire’s officials (and sometimes of regular ‘subjects’) that were compiled after their deaths.⁴⁷ The authors are well aware of the opportunities these sources offer for gaining knowledge about the possessions of these Ottoman elites, but they also stress the limitations they have to deal with. For instance, Yıldız Yılmaz examined the kitchen accessories of eunuchs of the sultan’s harem in Istanbul and warned the reader that ‘an analysis of the information contained in these *terekes* is always risky, because it is so often unclear which utensils actually served for preparing or consuming food’.⁴⁸ Despite such obstacles, Suraiya Faroqhi demonstrates how, for example, through creative use of court files, one can deduce certain modest conclusions, like the fact that ordinary Ottoman women must have consumed and possibly also produced textiles.⁴⁹

What is more, this volume highlights the various manners in which individuals and groups in Ottoman and Chinese lands could give meaning to the objects they consumed, as filtered through their particular system of values. Nevertheless, thorough explanations of the origins of such meanings are often lacking and pressing questions about the dif-

45 Akçetin and Faroqhi, ‘Introduction’, in: *Living the good life*, 1-4.

46 Ibidem, 4.

47 As studied in, for example: A. Phillips, ‘Ali Paşa and his stuff. An Ottoman household in Istanbul and Van’, in: *Living the good life*, 90-112.; C. Establet, ‘Consuming luxuries and exotic goods in Damascus around 1700’, in: *Living the good life*, 236-256.

48 Y. Yılmaz, ‘Cutting a fine figure among pots and pans. Aghas of the sultan’s harem in the eighteenth century’, in: *Living the good life*, 113-133.

49 S. Faroqhi, ‘Women, wealth and textiles in 1730s Bursa’, in: *Living the good life*, 213-235, there 233.

ferentiation of the meanings of objects across both social and geographical spaces still persist. Such questions are sparsely addressed in this volume, which is quite understandable however, as most of the contributors had to deal with major source limitations when aiming to ‘map’ the consumption landscapes of Ottoman and Chinese areas. There is at least one notable exception: Hedda Reindl-Kiel wondered about why Kara Mustafa, Ottoman grand vizier in the early eighteenth century, had amassed so many diamond-studded objects. The author reasoned that it must have been for his child-bride, Ummi Sultan. Diamonds seemed to have been an ordinary ornament to Ottoman court ladies.⁵⁰

Despite the empirical limitations and the general fragmentary knowledge on consumption in Qing and Ottoman times, the conclusive chapter of this volume attempts to carefully compare the insights gained from the separate chapters about the Ottoman empire with those on Qing China.⁵¹ The editors conclude that the most significant difference between the two regions is ‘that compared to the consumption of foreign goods for well-to-do office-holders and merchants of the Qing Empire, the Ottoman consumer market was of rather limited extent’.⁵² In fact, for Qing China, the conventional image of the era as one of ‘consumer restraint’ has been significantly challenged in the volume.⁵³ For example, with extensive quantitative data, Wu Jen-shu and Wang Dagang have convincingly argued that in Ba county in the province of Sichuan, during the Qianlong reign, middle social groups came to own a wide range of luxuries and followed fashion trends.⁵⁴ This further undermines the classical idea that merely Britain or Europe went through a unique experience of ‘consumer revolution’ in the eighteenth century. At the same time, however, such conclusions could not be drawn for the Ottoman empire.

All in all, *Living the Good Life* is a significant addition to the historiography on early modern consumption. With this publication, Akçetin

50 H. Reindl-Kiel, ‘Diamonds are a vizier’s best friends or: Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa’s jewelry assets’, in: *Living the good life*, 409–432, there 413; 431.

51 Although still much of the desired knowledge on early modern Ottoman consumption culture is lacking, it is worth noting that the number of these studies had seen substantial increases since the essential kickstarting work of Donald Quataert. See for example: D. Quataert, *Consumption studies and the history of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922. An introduction* (New York 2000).

52 Akçetin and Faroqhi, ‘Conclusion’, in: *Living the good life*, 489.

53 See: A. Finnane, ‘Furnishing the home in Qing Yangzhou. A case for rethinking “consumer restraint”’, in: *Living the good life*, 163–186.

54 Wu Jen-shu and Wang Dagang, ‘A preliminary study of local consumption in the Qianlong reign (1736–1796). The case of Ba county in Sichuan province’, in: *Living the good life*, 187–212, there 189.



Illustration 2 Cambaay. Quilted dressing gown in cotton, stained and painted with multi-colored floral motifs and zigzag lines on red ground, lined with striped silk. The cambaay is of Dutch origin, showing a European interpretation of Asian motives (source: Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.3293>).

and Faroqhi have pushed the recent trend of ‘decentering’ Europe one step further by comparing two non-European geographies, while also having integrated consumption analysis into the historiography of empires. Furthermore, the work displays how the obstacle of limited source materials has an important effect on the type of conclusions historians are able to draw. As Akçetin and Faroqhi recognize for both the Ottoman and Chinese sources, the primary sources offer specific insights into the material culture of local elites and government officials, at best for urban dwellers that possessed moderate wealth.⁵⁵ This makes it rather challenging to make general suppositions about Ottoman and Chinese consumer culture in the eighteenth century, which in turn makes it difficult to maintain stark claims about globalizing material cultures, especially for the extent to which ‘consumerism’ reached far into the different strata of society. At the same time, the empirical contributions made by the authors in the volume illuminate the different ways in which consumer cultures could develop over time, while not necessarily walking an unavoidable path towards increasing and ex-

⁵⁵ Akçetin and Faroqhi, ‘Introduction’, 13.

pansive consumption patterns. The volume thus paints a more complex image of early modern global consumption patterns and development, similar to the main thrust of Frank Trentmann's *Empire of Things*.

Empire of Things. The politics of consumption

Compared to the two works discussed above, Frank Trentmann's *Empire of Things*. (2016) is by far the most extensive and ambitious project. Trentmann, who has serviced his entire academic career to an interdisciplinary study of consumption, set out to overthrow once and for all the classical assumptions about consumer society in his *magnum opus*.⁵⁶ The work offers a most sophisticated account of the history of consumption, underpinned by quantitative data, as well as analyses of textual material, but deals foremostly with North America, Europe, East Asia and India, with other regions discussed only minimally. Thus, as Trentmann modestly notes himself, strictly speaking, the work does not present a 'global' history.⁵⁷ In any case, its historical account of the evolution of worldwide cultures of consumption from 1500 up until the end of the Cold War is impressively comprehensive for the regions it does cover, making up still only half of the book. The second part of the work engages in contemporary societal debates on consumption and will not be of main interest to us here, but it does signify the mammoth-size of this project.

Arguably the most interesting contribution of *Empire of Things* is its implication of 'the politics of consumption' in explaining the rise and demise of global consumer cultures, in particular in relation to empires and their sumptuary policies.⁵⁸ This political dimension of consumption allows Trentmann to explain how the lack of sumptuary restriction left space for the development of mass consumption in Britain and the Netherlands. In short, the argument is as follows: From around the 1500s, there were three 'cultures of consumption' that could have de-

56 A number of earlier relevant publications by Frank Trentmann not dealt with here include: F. Trentmann, *Free trade nation. Commerce, consumption, and civil society in modern Britain* (Oxford 2008); A. Nützenadel and F. Trentmann (eds.), *Food and globalization. Consumption, markets and politics in the modern world* (Oxford 2008); J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds.), *Consuming cultures, global perspectives* (Oxford 2006); F. Trentmann, 'Beyond consumerism. New historical perspectives on consumption', *Journal of Contemporary History* 39:3 (2004) 373-401.

57 F. Trentmann, *Empire of things. How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first* (New York 2016) 16. Hereafter, this book will be referred to as *Empire of things*.

58 *Ibidem*, 11-13.

veloped into genuine consumer cultures: Renaissance Northern Italy, Ming China and eighteenth century Britain and the Netherlands. In principle, Renaissance Italy and Ming China could have developed a consumer culture, were it not that the shared values of these societies and the socio-cultural institutions derived from them were geared towards restricting novelties from entering or developing within their material cultures. Britain and the Netherlands, on the other hand, were less restrictive, leaving open a potential that developed into a culture of widespread mass consumption (chapter 1).⁵⁹ This development was legitimized by thinkers like Adam Smith, who defended private consumption from moral attacks. According to Trentmann, the eighteenth century 'appreciated that individuals' desire for things had social benefits' (chapter 2).⁶⁰ As the nineteenth century progressed, European states encouraged this consumption and commercialization through their imperial projects and facilitated the further expansion of consumer culture, with all the racism and exploitation that went with it (chapter 3).⁶¹ The simultaneous growth of cities was yet another stimulant to consumer culture (chapter 4).⁶² Subsequently, the home of families turned into place where social status was communicated, identities were forged and genuine comfort was pursued, all by means of consumption (chapter 5).⁶³ In the end, liberal political regimes won the competition of promising and delivering the highest living-standard against other ideologies like fascism and communism (chapter 6).⁶⁴ However, this did not produce entirely homogeneous consumption behavior, as there were strong differences among social groups within societies (chapter 7).⁶⁵ In the late twentieth century, then, China, India, Japan and South Korea joined this club of mass consumption cultures, all with their own distinctive features (chapter 8).⁶⁶

Throughout the book Trentmann intervenes in numerous key debates, including one that still lies at the core of early modern consumption history. Trentmann criticizes Jan de Vries' influential thesis of how the 'consumer revolution' in demand for global market goods sparked

59 See: Trentmann, 'Three cultures of consumption', in: *Empire of things*, 21-77, especially 37-38; 48-53 and 71-77.

60 Trentmann, *Empire of things*, 102.

61 See: Idem, 'Imperium of things', in: *Empire of things*, 119-173.

62 See: Idem, 'Cities', in: *Empire of things*, 174-221.

63 See: Idem, 'The consumer revolution comes home', in: *Empire of things*, 222-271.

64 See: Idem, 'Age of ideologies', in: *Empire of things*, 272-337.

65 See: Idem, 'Inside affluence', in: *Empire of things*, 338-354.

66 See: Idem, 'Asia consumes', in: *Empire of things*, 355-399.

the 'industrious revolution'. The author asserts that De Vries' thesis brought together the supposedly contradictory observations of falling wages in the second half of the eighteenth century with the expansion in consumption levels occurring simultaneously. De Vries had explained that the demand for sugar, tea and other market goods made households take up wage labor, work harder and longer, and in the end, become more 'industrious'. As a result, the increased supply of labor would have made wage levels drop, while consumption levels rose around that same time. However, Trentmann argues that families were pushed towards wage labor by rising food prices, not pulled by their globalized material desire.⁶⁷ This argument is quite significant as it undermines the now commonly held belief that the demand for luxury goods from overseas formed the dynamic underlying European industriousness.

Aside from this, *Empire of Things* raises a different, more pressing challenge for the future of (early modern) consumption history. On the one hand, the advent of a global historiography on early modern consumption has strongly nuanced the classical image of a fundamental breach between early modern and modern society in the form of a consumer and industrial 'revolution'. Consumer cultures, as Trentmann's work and the other books under review here have shown, are a centuries-old phenomenon occurring in many places across the globe. Quite importantly, the constituent consumption patterns of these cultures did not unavoidably lead towards the development of industrialized 'modern' economies, although in Northwestern Europe changes in consumptive demand (whether it be for luxury goods or for nutritional necessity) might have ignited to some extent a rise in industrial activity. On the other hand, then, it remains a question what role such demand-side shifts played in the nineteenth century Great Divergence between Europe and other parts of the world. Stated otherwise, can differences in global cultures of consumption explain how the 'industrious' early modern British and Dutch economies fundamentally shifted their productive energy-base and became 'industrial' in the nineteenth century?

This question becomes especially pertinent in light of the recent re-appreciation of arguments that stress the importance of knowledge, technology and science in enabling the widespread application of fossil fuel technologies in production settings in Europe.⁶⁸ If we attempt

67 Trentmann, *Empire of things*, 74-75.

68 See the line of work by Joel Mokyr, for example: J. Mokyr, *A culture of growth. The origins of the modern economy* (Princeton 2016). See also: P. Vries, 'Are coal and colonies really crucial?' Kenneth

to make up a balance, it seems that Europe's 'industrious revolution', understood as following from the demand of Indian cotton textiles, would not by itself have sparked an 'industrial revolution' that relied on the complex technique of coal burning. Yet, as Parthasarathi had suggested, the application of this technique did meet a specific consumer demand, and as such might bear a connection with the same change in demand that geared the 'industrious revolution'. In any case, however, scientific knowledge of the properties of coal seemed crucial in enabling such production techniques to meet consumer demands. In considering this triangle of technology, demand, and production, the explanations above ultimately also raise the question whether early modern consumer demand had any impact on the direction of knowledge development, and if so, how such links operated in practice.

Conclusion

The past few decades have seen the advent of an early modern consumption historiography that, firstly, pays respect both to the significance of demand-side factors in explaining economic change, as well as to the socio-cultural functions of consumptive behavior, and secondly, tests its assumptions and hypotheses against an expanding empirical base through the analytical tool of global comparisons. As a consequence, classical accounts that sought to locate the 'birth' of the consumer society in early modern Northwestern Europe and consequently projected the European path of development on other world regions like China and India, have been effectively challenged. Under the influence of the *cultural* and *global turn*, the 'decentering' of Europe, which took place within the field over the past few decades, has produced at least two notable consequences for the field.

Pomeranz and the Great Divergence', *Journal of World History* 12:2 (2001) 407-446; J. Goldstone, 'Efflorescences and economic growth in world history. Rethinking the 'Rise of the West' and the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of World History* 13:2 (2002) 323-389. Both Peer Vries and Jack Goldstone implicitly recognize, although to varying extents, that the 'industrious' structure of the early modern economies of Europe did not exhibit any direct connection to the industrialization that followed in the nineteenth century. They both suggest that it was rather the scientific culture directly preceding the nineteenth century, that eventually caused the industrialization of Europe to take-off and subsequently throw it spiraling into a Great Divergence with the rest of the world.

First, 'consumer culture' is no longer associated with the narrow socio-cultural space of European elites. This socio-geographical broadening of 'consumer cultures' was a result of an increase in methodological rigor by the implication of not only evidence from non-European regions in analysis, but also the analysis of new types of visual and material sources. By extension, it has become clear that there were various 'consumer cultures' across the globe that displayed different paths of development, trajectories that did not necessarily lead towards 'industrialization'. Nevertheless, much work still remains to be done in order to showcase to what extent similar consumption patterns in the non-European world occurred within a wide range of social strata. In any case, *The Material World Remade* and *Living the Good Life* illustrate clearly the merits of the socio-geographical broadening of analysis, since these works have allowed for a furthering of our understanding of the interconnectedness of material cultures and economies worldwide, while also expanding the body of knowledge on consumption in non-European contexts, respectively. To continue this enhancement, the availability of analyzable primary source material remains an important question and obstacle to overcome in the future.

This second notable consequence concerns a revisiting of the connection between early modern consumption patterns, the 'industrious revolution' and Europe's nineteenth century 'industrialization'. While Trentmann, in *Empire of Things*, challenged the idea that the growing European demand for luxury goods from overseas had a profound impact on the 'industrious revolution', the importance of a globalized consumer demand among Europeans has nevertheless entered debates on nineteenth century European 'industrialization', now held under the header of the 'Great Divergence'. It continues to inform arguments which reason that the early modern demand for Indian cotton textiles sparked not just the 'industrious revolution', but also the application of fossil energy in British textile production. At the same time, it also raises questions on how consumer demand actually related to the *development* of industrial technology, which was in the end crucial to 'industrialization', and not just the *application* of it. In the end, despite the fact that early modern consumption historians moved away from the quest for the 'birth' of the consumer society, questioning the precision of notions like 'consumerism', 'industrialization', and 'modernity' along the way, they must still acknowledge that *something* profoundly changed in nineteenth century Europe, something that triggered and allowed its states to bring much of the globe under their imperialist ambit.

In light of this, a promising future pathway for the field might be to explore the ‘politics’ of early modern consumption, in order to open up new gateways to understanding how European societies developed capitalist consumer cultures that became tremendously powerful during the course of the nineteenth century. This can be done, firstly, by continuing along the directions set out by Trentmann in *Empire of Things*, i.e. by studying political institutions and their impact on consumption patterns and behavior through restraint and stimulation. Such a line of inquiry could be further enhanced by connecting an analysis of sumptuary laws and state policies in relation to consumer demands to the co-evolution of merchant capitalist enterprise and the imperialist ambitions of European states. This could perhaps help us understand better how, in the words of Peer Vries, ‘power and profit’ formed an alliance to lead a process of industrialization.⁶⁹ Understanding this ‘alliance’ could be of aid in connecting changes in demand to the development of industrial technology. Such an endeavor would involve not only shedding light on the role of consumption in the attempts of states to more actively gear their economies towards the goal of ‘growth’, but also linking this to the ‘dark pages’ of history, perhaps most notably the slave trade and slave-based production, and – through the consumption of slave-products – their impact and importance to the economic structure of European societies. For example, concepts like ‘coercive consumption’ – as applied in Lemire’s study of readymade apparel – can provide useful categories when aiming to understand the politics behind certain fashion styles or the uses of certain commodities, like tobacco.⁷⁰

An important aspect of pursuing such a research agenda would be to expand upon the current trend of researching worldwide material cultures not only by way of comparisons, but also in their increasing interconnectedness. Here, the study of consumption would deserve a respectable spot in analyses of the rise of merchant capitalism and its globalizing tendencies, especially in exploring how this impacted on local non-European economies, and how consumer behavior constituted the social order of different cultures by the attribution of certain meanings to market goods, or the distinction of one social group from another through displays of fashion, for instance. Analytical categories like class, race, gender, sexuality or disability will be paramount to such works and will allow for a more ‘political’ perspective on early

69 P. Vries, ‘The California school and beyond. How to study the Great Divergence?’ *History Compass* 8:7 (2010) 740-751, there 746.

70 Lemire, *The material world remade*, 122-135; 223-232.

modern consumption. Further digging out such political dimensions of consumption from a social perspective could also entail the analysis of conflicts of perceived interest between different groups, some of which could either profit much from the expanding consumption of global goods and 'industrious' labor, or otherwise be aggrieved by this development. Surely an implication of the power-balance between, say, merchants and artisans in eighteenth century Amsterdam could help illuminate why certain goods became mainstream products in specific locales, and not in others.

Such future imperatives might build upon the key insights produced by the three reviewed works, which have all offered genuine and valuable contributions to the field of early modern consumption history. This will allow historians to refine and continue questioning grand notions and processes such as 'industrialization', 'modernity' and 'globalization'. Such global histories of early modern consumption will hopefully contribute to understanding how the 'globalized' desires of people from worldwide cultures shaped European development and societies, and possibly also, in the near future, how they impacted upon the development of non-European regions.

About the author

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