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Private Tooth Decay as Public Economic Virtue: The Slave-Sugar Triangle, Consumerism, and European Industrialization

RALPH A. AUSTEN & WOODRUFF D. SMITH

The only group of clear gainers from the British trans-Atlantic slave trade, and even those gains were small, were the European consumers of sugar and tobacco and other plantation crops. They were given the chance to purchase dental decay and lung cancer at somewhat lower prices than would have been the case without the slave trade. [Thomas and Bean 1974: 914]

ALTHOUGH the quotation above represents a radical departure from earlier economic assessments of the Atlantic slave trade, it shares with them an almost universal assumption: that the real significance of the Atlantic sugar triangle lay in its contribution to the productive capacity of Europe. Thus, concluding that only consumers “benefited” is tantamount to reducing the slave trade to economic triviality. This view of import trades has informed

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historical understanding not only of the factors leading to industrialization in Europe but also of those apparently retarding similar development in the Third World, including Africa and the West Indies (Bairoch 1975: 198–99).

In the present article we suggest that the slave and sugar trade (along with the importation of other “colonial goods”) was essential to European industrial development precisely because it stimulated and ultimately reshaped the entire pattern of Western consumer demand. We will review the role assigned to “luxury” consumption in the literature on industrialization, suggest some ways in which this factor can be better understood, and conclude with comments about sugar-based and related consumerism in later stages of modern economic history.

The simplest measure of the relationship between sugar and industrialization, employed both by Thomas and Bean and by Eric Williams (1944), is the profitability of the Atlantic triangle, which is then linked to protoindustrial capital accumulation. A more sophisticated argument, advanced by several contributors at a recent conference dedicated to the “Williams thesis,” is to reevaluate the share of the Atlantic triangle(s) in overall British trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Inikori 1987; Richardson 1987). Even more complex is the argument that efforts to maintain large-scale long-distance trade in exotic goods, no matter what its immediate economic value was, created new institutional capacities for lowering transaction costs, which were then adaptable to the more productive undertakings of an industrial economy (Austen 1987: 110; North forthcoming). At a more basic level, Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) has contended that the caloric content of imported sugar was critical to the labor capacity of early-modern Europe.

In all of these arguments, the attraction of sugar as a nonessential consumer item in Europe is either explicitly or implicitly treated as negative. For Thomas (1968) and Coelho (1974), the Atlantic triangle was a positive misallocation of resources inspired by the mistaken notions of mercantilist economics. Wallerstein and others go to great lengths to emphasize that the importance of sugar lay in its linkages with the production of other commodities, in part because they do not regard consumption as significant in itself.¹ Thomas and Bean’s allusion to the physical harm resulting from sugar consumption is consistent with Sidney Mintz’s (1985)

view of sugar as a drug disguising real deteriorations in British popular diet. However, Mintz (*ibid.*: 180ff.), in the most challenging account we have of consumerism in the development of European capitalism, insists that it was precisely through their negative nutritional qualities that “sugar and other drug foods” contributed to industrialization; “by provisioning, sating—and, indeed, drugging—farm and factory workers, [these items] sharply reduced the overall cost of creating and reproducing the metropolitan proletariat.”

The literature dealing more generally with European economic history on the eve of the industrial revolution (Mokyr 1977, 1984) has given greater attention to consumption issues—even when they systematically deny that demand factors are autonomously relevant to such change—than most historians of overseas trade have.² However, the explanations for evidently very dramatic rises of domestic European consumption standards from the late seventeenth century are usually framed outside the process of consumption itself and linked instead to changes in agricultural productivity and demography.³ Imports of sugar and related goods become, in these arguments, mainly indicators of increased European effective demand rather than causal factors in new patterns of consumption.

Without denying either that the Atlantic sugar triangle had some role in the development of European productive capacity or that independent changes in that capacity were necessary conditions for consuming new imports, we are convinced that the significance of sugar in the protoindustrial economy can be better understood if we take more seriously its function in the transformation of European consumerism. Our assumption here is that consumption of a commodity like sugar is not a given of human nature, merely waiting for incomes and prices to reach the proper equilibrium, but that consumption systems are social and cultural constructs, linked to broader historical factors no less vitally than production systems are. The importation of large quantities of sugar and the closely related beverage commodities, cocoa, coffee, and tea, in the early-modern era had a decisive role in changing not only the patterns but also the organization and meaning of consumption in Europe. These changes can be seen in the levels and distribution of sugar consumption, in the economic and social institutions linked to this increased consumption capacity, and in the concep-

tions of economy and society provoked by the contemplation of entirely unprecedented experiences of consumption.

MEASUREMENT: SUGAR AS A
MASS-CONSUMPTION COMMODITY

Measurement is the aspect of sugar consumption which has been most carefully studied by previous historians. There is a consensus in the literature that per capita consumption rose markedly from the latter 1600s. What we need to know more fully and precisely, however, is the rate at which such consumption rose before industrialization set in. To what degree did it extend beyond the elite and reach what could be called a "mass market"? Existing studies are ambivalent or even negative upon this point, mainly because the industrial revolution made possible an acceleration of mass consumption on a scale far greater than anything that had appeared before.⁴ However, it is our argument that the qualitative break from elite to mass consumption took place before the industrial revolution and thus was as much its cause as its effect. Quantitative evidence does not suffice to identify the new form of consumerism we seek to define, but it is nonetheless important to examine carefully the relevant numbers and anecdotal evidence indicating how much was consumed in the protoindustrial era and by whom.

Table 1 is drawn mainly from a historian, Sheridan (1973), who has already argued strongly for the role of sugar (and its accompanying beverage, tea) as a major element of expanding consumption in Britain before the industrial revolution. From the rising rate of per capita consumption implied by the retained import statistics, we see that this increased use of sugar must have extended well beyond the elite (however defined) into the middle and even lower strata of society. Sheridan, Mintz, and others have provided ample anecdotal evidence to support such a view. It would be useful also to know something about the urban versus the rural distribution of sugar consumption. If, as naive logic (and the French case, discussed below) would lead us to suspect, a disproportionate part of this consumption did take place in urban areas, then the probability of "mass," that is, wide lower-class, consumption would rise, since the per capita figures within the urban population would be considerably higher. This last issue is even more important in the French situation (Table 2).

Table 1 British sugar consumption, 1698–1775

	Net import (1,000s cwt.)	Growth (%)	Population (1,000s)	Pounds consumed per capita	Growth (%)
1698–1700	280.7	—	6,122	4.6	—
1701–5	262.4	–6.5	—	—	—
1706–10	300.5	14.5	6,352	4.7	3.1
1711–15	342.5	13.9			
1716–20	473.1	38.1	6,253	7.6	59.9
1721–25	571.9	20.8			
1726–30	686.2	19.9	6,183	11.1	46.7
1731–35	741.7	8.0			
1736–40	720.1	–2.9	6,153	11.7	5.5
1741–45	678.4	–5.7			
1746–50	761.5	12.2	6,336	12.0	2.7
1751–55	892.9	17.2			
1756–60	1,102.1	23.4	8,000	13.8	14.6
1761–65	1,063.6	–3.4			
1766–70	1,379.2	29.6	8,500	16.2	17.8
1771–75	1,542.9	11.8			
Net growth		449.7	—	—	253.9

Sources: Net imports, Sheridan 1973: 22; population, Mitchell 1962: 5. We have taken the highest of the England and Wales population series given here and added approximations from the one figure given for eighteenth-century Scotland.

A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals that during the eighteenth century French sugar imports generally equaled, and sometimes exceeded, those of Britain. However, a far lower proportion of French sugar was retained for domestic consumption: France was obviously more committed to mercantilist policies of export balances than to internal consumer demand. Given the much larger French population, this means that per capita consumption was far lower than in Britain and, even within its absolute limits, subject to a much less sustained pattern of growth.

These data appear to support the observations of Sheridan (1973: 24–25) and others, based on literary evidence and more limited statistics, that France did not experience the same sugar

Table 2 French sugar consumption, 1730–90

	Total import (1,000s cwt.)	Retained import (1,000s cwt.)	Retained growth (%)	Population (1,000s)	Pounds consumed per capita
1730–34	590	240	—	23,000	1.0
1735–39	860	260	8.3	23,800	1.1
1740–42	900	380	46.2	24,200	1.6
1743–45	1,000	400	5.3	24,500	1.6
1750–52	900	400	.0	24,600	1.6
1753–55	1,200	450	12.5	25,000	1.8
1767–70	1,200	500	11.1	26,500	1.9
1770	1,640	800	—	27,066	3.0 ^a
1771–73	1,400	650	30.0	27,200	2.4
1774–78	1,200	400	-38.5	27,700	1.4
1784–87	1,600	550	37.5	28,300	1.9
1788–90	1,850	600	9.1	28,560	2.1
Net growth			213.6		1.1 = 110%

Sources: Stein 1980: 5–6; Dupâquier et al. 1988: 64–68.

^aThis is the only single year for which Stein (1988b: 163–64) gives fairly precise import retention statistics. We have corresponded with him, but he is no longer able to supply us with the tabular import data which went into his 1980 published graphs.

and beverage consumer explosion as Britain. Indeed, French sugar consumption at its eighteenth-century high point (1770–73) did not match the level of Britain in 1698–1700.⁵ Moreover, we know that even in the consumption of more basic domestic staples, France had not achieved Britain's security by the 1780s, a decade in which bread shortages remained a major factor in the French national economy (Rogers 1980).

In short, high levels of imported luxury food consumption appear to be linked to other indicators of economic growth pointing toward industrialization, in which France has always been assumed to have lagged considerably behind Britain. However, just as comparisons of French and British economic growth have lately undergone considerable revision, so the role of sugar consumption in these two societies may not be contrasted as simply as national statistical comparisons suggest.⁶

Much less research has been done on sugar consumption in eighteenth-century France than in Britain. However, Robert Stein (pers. com., 1988a; 1988b: 164) has discovered evidence of the

distribution of sugar within France which suggests that per capita consumption in Paris during the 1780s may have been as high as 50 pounds and in Marseilles in 1755, nearly 10 pounds. Moreover, sugar shortages were the immediate cause of the popular Paris riots, which led in 1792 to the final overthrow of the French monarchy.⁷ Thus, by the late eighteenth century sugar was sufficiently accessible to populations in the best-supplied centers of France as to be an established article of mass consumption.

Obviously, we need to know a good deal more about the role of sugar in eighteenth-century French commerce and industry as well as about consumption patterns before we can draw any definitive conclusions about its prominence in comparison to the more evident British case. What the French quantitative evidence does suggest is that the emergence of mass sugar consumption is not primarily created by the labor needs of an emerging industrial economy.⁸ But does such a shift in consumption represent anything more than a “natural” response to cheaper commodities entering an invisible-handed market?

CONSTRUCTING A COLONIAL-GOODS MARKET

The measurement of European consumption of sugar and other colonial products allows us to establish the existence of greatly extended markets for such goods by the eighteenth century, but in itself such an exercise does not explain the structures of the markets, the extent to which their formation was related to major institutional and cultural changes, or the connection (if any) between enhanced colonial-goods consumption and the expansion of industrial production in the eighteenth century. An overview of the issues involved in these matters is possible if one thinks in terms of active construction of a broader European market for overseas goods in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, construction in the sense both of establishing institutions which promoted certain consumer behavior patterns and of assigning new meanings to colonial commodities in European conceptions of the economy.

The structural outlines of the seventeenth-century European market for overseas products are well known. It consisted of a network of interconnected urban markets arranged in a roughly concentric pattern, with Amsterdam (and, by the eighteenth cen-

ture, London) at the center. The European marketing system was linked to its suppliers in a variety of ways, but most notably, for a wide range of Asian products, through large, bureaucratic, and more or less monopolistic companies. Smith (1982) has argued that an entirely new approach to marketing evolved from the peculiar circumstances of the Dutch East India Company. The company imported large quantities of new or previously rare goods for buyers who themselves sold on a continental scale. The bureaucracy in Asia which supplied these commodities (often in the form of "surprise" cargoes) represented a huge overhead cost, was only partly controllable from Holland, and, at best, required an unprecedentedly long lead time for orders. To deal with this situation, the Dutch East India Company (and its English rival) instituted a series of innovations in planning, research, and advertising that were later adapted to selling the output of industrial factories.

To what extent was sugar a part of all this? Sugar was, of course, distributed within Europe through the same general marketing structure as the other overseas products, but it was not really a new commodity, and it was never controlled by semimonopolistic organizations such as the East India companies. And, although it was a subject of considerable public discussion on the grounds of its possible effects on personal and national well-being, there seems to have been relatively little advertising or large-scale promotion of its use.⁹ The expansion of sugar consumption was thus in some sense "invisible," quite literally so when sugar was incorporated into the preparation of other food and drink, such as pastries, puddings, and punches.

And yet, indirectly, sugar also participated in the institutional restructuring of consumer-goods markets, because its consumption came to be tied to that of tea, coffee, and cocoa, the first two of which were introduced in large quantities by the East India companies. The process by which it became a necessary complement to these items changed the nature of demand for sugar at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. As Mintz (1985: 78, 108–50) explains, sugar became a "sweetener" more than a medicine, spice, decorative material, or preservative.¹⁰ The markets for sugar in the latter forms, although dynamic in the seventeenth century, were limited compared to the tea-coffee-cocoa-sugar complex, which grew explosively in

the eighteenth. So it was not by itself but as part of a broader and more complex consumption pattern, one actively expanded by new commercial institutions, that sugar came to have the immense impact that it did.

But how did sugar come to play so central a role? In the areas from which the “bitter” beverages were imported, they were seldom taken with sugar, nor were they originally so consumed in Europe. There is little evidence for a deliberate institutional promotion of the sweetening habit until it had already appeared.¹¹ In any case, the extent to which early-modern institutional marketing could actually create new consumption patterns, as opposed to exploiting opportunities presented by current fashions, was quite limited. It is obviously necessary to take into account the interaction between the set of items of which sugar was a part and sociocultural changes in Western Europe within which the consumption of those items had meaning. We can only point to a few features of this interaction here.

The actual process by which sugar became attached to tea and coffee consumption is not wholly known, but it may have started in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, not in order to sweeten those beverages but rather to encourage the use of tea as a medium for consuming sugar, whose negative effects on teeth and the body were becoming apparent, in a healthy way.¹² However it happened, sometime around 1700 tea and sugar, like coffee and sugar, became part of the daily routine that increasing numbers of Europeans, especially in Britain, practiced in their homes. Previously, the consumption of exotic beverages, usually without sugar, had taken place in aristocratic gatherings or in coffeehouses and teahouses. Much of the increase in coffee consumption in England between 1660 and 1700 had been due to the central role which coffeehouses had come to play in urban social, commercial, and political life. By 1700, the taking of tea and sugar with other foods in the morning and late afternoon had become a central domestic ritual in Britain and some other parts of Western Europe.¹³ It was the generalization of this ritual that sustained the growing demand for tea and sugar throughout the eighteenth century. It also created the institutional and cultural framework within which the tea-and-sugar custom became a source of true mass consumption by the end of the eighteenth century, as tea prices continued to fall and people at lower levels of income adopted the custom.

The significance and impetus of these rituals have been debated. Chandra Mukerji (1983) suggests that they were related to similar developments in dress, which in turn arose from an increasing “materialism” in European social perceptions in the early-modern era. This materialism emerged out of the interaction between new printing technologies and the changing dynamics of European society. The new consumption patterns created a demand for printed Asian textiles which, by engendering competition between importers and domestic textile producers in Britain, helped stimulate technical innovation among the latter and therefore the industrial revolution. One could, in fact, demonstrate a similar linkage between the widespread adoption of the sugar-and-tea ritual and innovations in the pottery industry, but clearly textiles were far more important to early industrialization than “china.”¹⁴ More significant is Mukerji’s linking of demand to social perceptions through rituals of consumption. But where did the rituals come from?

Many scholars have emphasized the effects of “bourgeois” imitation of elite dress and behavior in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is argued that, like most fashions, the taking of sugar by itself and with exotic beverages started as an elite custom and then “trickled down” to a “rising” bourgeoisie anxious to ape its betters (Freudenberger 1963).¹⁵ When the trickle became a flood in the course of the eighteenth century, as yet poorer classes imitated *their* immediate superiors, mass consumption arose. Reductions in price, due to economies of scale in production and (in the late eighteenth century) lower duties on tea, sugar, and the like, obviously played a role as well. The “emulation” theory presupposes an ongoing change in class structure, with luxury consumption a sign of the rising importance of the middle class and accelerating individual social mobility, not an autonomous factor contributing actively to social restructuring.

There are several weaknesses in this sort of explanation. The reason that the emulation process continued for a century and a half—long after sugar and its associated beverages had ceased to be distinctively elite luxuries—is difficult to explain. Mintz (1985: 180–83) is undoubtedly on the right track in indicating that each social group that adopted the sugar-coffee-tea ritual in fact interpreted the meaning of the ritual in its own way, which limits the trickle-down explanation to the initial introduction of a com-

modity to a new group of potential users. Second, the explanation tends to ignore the fact that the mode of taking sugar, tea, and so on and the links to other social behavior actually changed markedly several times over the space of a few generations, and not always because of innovations introduced at the apex of society. The movement of coffee and tea use (at different times) from aristocratic parlors to public establishments to domestic houses shows this, as does the convergence of sugar taking with these forms of consumption. Each form had, for example, different political associations: with inner-elite politicking, with the primary system for clearing political and commercial information (in the coffee-houses), and, finally, with a domestic context in which public affairs were relatively insignificant.

In our opinion, the relationship between the sugar-tea-coffee-cocoa consumption complex and the broader culture of the immediate preindustrial period centered primarily on the phenomenon of respectability.¹⁶ Respectability was not simply a matter of emulating elite fashions, although that was of course part of it. It was a distinctive cultural pattern, incorporating rather strict guidelines for individual and group behavior and an elaborate system of moral legitimation, that evolved in several European countries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its emergence appears to have been connected to an array of economic changes, probably including a degree of income redistribution to the “middling” classes in an expanding commercial economy, but the connection was not an automatic or in every respect a direct one. Such a redistribution does not necessarily produce a particular, clearly defined cultural pattern; a rise in income among a group of people does not automatically mean that they will decide to spend a substantial part of it on sugar and tea. Economic factors fit themselves into broader patterns of thought and action that have immediate meaning to the participants, while deep coherence (such as the connection of respectability to the growth of a commercial middle class) is often the result of later rationalization. Material objects are also fitted into the same sort of pattern, to be manipulated, often in ritual fashion, to produce meaning. From this standpoint, the use of commodities such as sugar, coffee, and tea is not simply a sign of more “real” or “basic” socioeconomic changes but an active process of cultural construction in itself. As signs of deeper social phenomena, tea, sugar, printed cottons, and the like

could easily have been interchanged with other products without much effect; indeed, if their consumption had simply been a matter of fashion, they almost certainly would have been.¹⁷ But they persisted, apparently because the nature and the interpretation of these particular commodities came to play a significant role in shaping the rituals of respectability and thus of respectability itself.

In very-late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England, the consumption of sugar with tea and, to a lesser extent, with coffee became one of a number of significant elements of a cultural pattern that had meaning because it both signified and constituted the respectability of the people who participated in it. In a functional sense, one could say that respectability centered on a demand on the part of certain people for respect from people above them, below them, and at the same level in their society—respect that was to be manifested in different ways, depending on the social position from which the respect was to come. In this sense, taking tea and sugar in certain ways, with the proper implements, at the proper times of day, was connected to a wider array of cultural practices such as wearing fashionable clothes, following the now-generalized rules of “polite” behavior, and so forth. All of these things constituted a demand for respect. Most were tied to modes of moral justification for the respect demanded. Tea was especially significant in this regard, because it was consciously presented as a substitute for alcoholic drink and therefore not only symbolized but also was an aspect of respectable sobriety and concern for health (Short 1750: 28–33). Taking sugar in tea, as opposed to other forms of using it, such as in sugared decorations for foods, displayed and constituted similar qualities. Sugared food decorations symbolized exactly the aspects of aristocratic fashion that respectable people (regardless of their official or conventional social standing, which could in fact encompass nobility) rejected: immoderation and wastefulness, not to mention excessive ornateness. Consuming sugar in tea symbolized contrasting virtues, but it also was an alternate form of behavior that could be seen to have beneficial social consequences (by stimulating commerce without waste and, as part of the tea ritual, sociability without inebriation).¹⁸

That the tea-and-sugar pattern was fitted into the larger cultural pattern of respectability was of course of immense importance

to Britain's overseas trade, especially as respectability became an increasingly significant element of British life after 1700. The lesser importance of the domestic market for sugar and tea in France may have been due in part to the evolution of alternate patterns and rituals of respectability (which featured unsweetened wine rather than tea, one suspects)—although the behavior of the revolutionary mob noted above may indicate that some of the same pattern appeared at the petit-bourgeois level even of French society.

The relationship between the sugar trade and eighteenth-century industrialization, seen from the demand side, is thus an extremely complex one. The rituals of respectable consumption of sugar and its related products did directly stimulate some industrial demand, especially in the pottery industry. But more important was the effect that the availability of commodities like sugar, tea, calicos, chinaware, and the like had on the formation of the rituals themselves and on the way those rituals were related to the social perceptions, political aspirations, and moral expectations that came to be seen as respectable. Respectability was one of the main sources of demand for the products of the early industrial revolution (cottons, tableware, etc.). Respectability is not a general condition of human social life but a very specific cultural pattern that developed in the period immediately preceding industrialization. Much more work on this subject needs to be done, but we can say that to the extent that sugar played a role in the construction of respectability, it contributed to the conditions that made industrialization historically possible.

TOWARDS A WORLD OF (EVER-EXPANDING) COMMODITIES AND CONSUMERS

It is widely recognized that eighteenth-century economic thinkers such as Adam Smith failed entirely to recognize the incipient industrialization whose posthumous ideologues they were to become (Caton 1985). What did capture the attention of economic discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, was the spread of luxury consumption beyond the limited boundaries of elite society.

In the specific cases of sugar and tea, this discussion encompassed concern for the medicinal value frequently claimed by

sellers of these commodities. In the late seventeenth century, evidence of the damage to physical, including dental, health that sugar could inflict was increasingly cited in opposition to the proponents of sugar. As we have seen, the habit of taking sugar in tea may have arisen out of an attempt to reconcile these perceptions.¹⁹ However, the more significant issue was not the effect of hitherto rare or unknown foodstuffs on individual bodies but the social consequence of making such goods available cheaply enough that large numbers of people could consume them.

It is not necessary to explain at length the contradiction between these new conditions and traditional “sumptuary laws” (class-specific restrictions on various forms of consumption) as well as theories about backward-bending labor supply curves (assertions that cheaper consumer goods would decrease incentives to work). The intellectual confrontation between continuing belief in such restrictions and the expanding early-modern consumer market took place very publicly during the period itself and has been widely noted by economic historians (De Vries 1976).

The most serious form of this confrontation came in the debates over doctrines and policies generally referred to as mercantilism. Whether or not a self-defined ideology ever existed under this name, European states did systematically seek to maximize balances of trade and bullion accumulation by encouraging re-export rather than domestic consumption of colonial goods such as sugar. Mercantilist writers were driven not only by their belief in the correctness of these policy goals but also by the interplay of government revenue needs and the wishes of economic interest groups. Sugar importers and plantation owners, like the importers of Asian products, took an active part in the politics of mercantilism in Britain and France, inconsistently over time and frequently in conflict with other, similar interests. On the whole, however, the importing interest tended to argue against the idea that widespread consumerism endangered society and the economy. This position ultimately contributed to the nonzero-sum view of consumerism as public economic virtue advanced in Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, which thus, even without its author’s foreseeing industrialism, became the canon of liberal economics.²⁰

Among the forms of individual self-interest thus vindicated, sugar consumption is quite prominent, if for no other reason than that it grew so rapidly and conspicuously despite the prevalence

of anticonsumerist doctrine in the first half of the eighteenth century. To see the economic role of sugar in these terms is to stand a major portion of the Williams thesis upon its head. Williams argued that the sugar-slave triangle and mercantilism were bonded together as an aspect of “primitive” capital accumulation, to be dispensed with once industrialism and free trade had triumphed. If instead we associate sugar with free trade and consumerism, we can appreciate its importance to industrialization independently of capital accumulation. This change in the evaluation of the products of West Indian slavery parallels our new understanding of slave labor itself, not as an inefficient anachronism of the ancien régime but as a precursor of industrial capitalist production. Even in the late eighteenth century, despite Adam Smith’s denunciation of the inefficiency of bonded workers, other free-trade economists, such as Turgot, recognized the rationality of slave plantations under southern New World conditions (Davis 1975: 132–33).

Viewed from a cultural perspective, the very overvaluation of colonial trade by mercantilist theorists can be understood to have had a positive impact on the development of capitalist culture, whatever it may have done for or against the attainment of maximal monetary returns on available eighteenth-century capital. As students of political culture in eighteenth-century France and of contemporary U.S. election campaigns have noted, the outcome of any public debate may depend less on which side wins specific points than on which set of terms becomes the basis for subsequent discourse. Colonial commodities and their consumers, because of their visibility, gave rise to a debate about economics which, though temporarily won by the mercantilists, assured the eventual triumph of a position fully based upon a world of commodities and consumers. Mukerji (1983), with her emphasis upon media of communication and intraclass demonstration effects, addresses aspects of early-modern culture necessary for full communication of market information and propaganda. But more critical to the substance of modernism in this era is contemplation of the market itself as the central object and model of discourse for both economics and broader social issues.

CONSUMERISM, UNDERDEVELOPMENT,
AND A ZERO-SUM UNIVERSE

Not the least appealing element of the Williams thesis was the connection it made between the anguish of slavery and what is regarded in both Marxist and liberal terms as the core of capitalist development. Slaves and proletarians may be victims of capitalism, but if industrialization is essentially based upon the material fruits of their labor, they remain part of its consciousness and may ultimately, as Marx promises, become its heirs. The present consumerist argument implies an alienation for third world primary producers far more cruel than what Marx ascribes to industrial workers. If the capitalism "constructed" from their efforts is essentially a cultural entity, its reality exists only for those who participate in the central arena. It is only the commodities and those who consume and exchange them, not the primary producers (despite the new construction of blacks in Africa and the New World by the abolitionist movement), who are visible and can visualize.

Within the mercantilist version of protoindustrial capitalism, Africans and West Indian slaves were valued as consumers of goods manufactured in Europe. However, as Eric Williams painfully noted, the triumph of liberalism brought a decline in concern for markets which lacked the dynamism of the Europeans' own world. Nonetheless, in absolute terms, Africa and the West Indies received far larger quantities of consumer goods from Europe and North America in the nineteenth century and afterwards than they had during their era of mercantilist prominence. Initially, these goods were mainly textiles, but eventually sugar/beverage consumption ("coca-colanization") played its role in this process.

The result of this kind of consumerism has not, however, been the replication of European industrialization processes in the tropics. Instead, economists have pointed to a negative demonstration effect in which a few import-substitution industries fail to close the gap between heightened consumption expectations and limited local productivity (Felix 1974).²¹ Moreover, the experience of integration into the world market has not only failed to transplant "modernization" into third world culture but (at least in Africa) directly encouraged an economy of patron-client practices and witchcraft beliefs, based upon zero-sum visions of the material and social world (Berry 1985; Austen 1986).

The orthodox response to this problem among development economists is to recommend that third world countries place more emphasis on production and in particular adjust food pricing and other policies so as to stop favoring urban consumers over rural producers (World Bank 1981). However, it has been argued recently, on the basis of successful industrialization in Asia, that the formula for economic development in the Third World should include the encouragement, or at least endorsement, of mass consumerism, with all its emphasis on urbanization, nonessential commodities, and advertisement (McGee 1985).²² The relevance of earlier European experience for contemporary issues thus remains ambiguous.

Clearly, a study of consumerism in the pre-nineteenth-century connections between Africa, Europe, and the slave plantations of the New World cannot claim to resolve twentieth-century debates over worldwide development and underdevelopment. However, in revising our models for the international dimensions of the first industrial revolution, we can at least expand the intellectual, moral, and practical vision with which we contemplate the dilemmas of the present.

NOTES

- 1 The theoretical basis for this evaluation among dependency theorists such as Wallerstein is Sraffa 1960; however, similar arguments can be found in liberal economic literature following the less pretentious “linkage” arguments of Hirschmann (1958). In more empirical terms, this kind of argument does establish important links between *Asian* “luxury” trade and industrialization, since European tastes for both Chinese pottery and, more importantly, Indian cottons eventually led to the development of innovative import-substitution industries. However, this is not true for sugar, which inspired (at least within protoindustrial Europe) only the proliferation of small-scale food-processing enterprises. The affinity between the New World sugar plantation and the European industrial factory has often been remarked upon, but without any demonstration of an influence of the former upon the emergence of the latter; the influence suggested here came through the marketing and cultural assimilation of mass-produced consumption goods.
- 2 The major exceptions to this statement are Mintz (primarily an anthropologist rather than a historian) and the excellent, although essentially descriptive, chapter on British sugar and tea consumption in Sheridan 1973: 18–35.
- 3 This is the central argument of the very valuable chapter on consumption in De Vries 1976: 176–209; see also Eversley 1967. A more autonomous role for consumption is postulated by Jones (1973).

- 4 See Ewen 1976, Fraser 1981, and Zaretsky 1976; for a useful discussion of recent historiography on preindustrial consumerism, see McCracken 1988: 1–30.
- 5 This point holds even if we accept the maximum consumption figure of four pounds per capita given in Stein 1988b: 164.
- 6 For a review of studies closing the “development gap” between Britain and France see Cameron and Freedeman 1983.
- 7 For an indication of the kind of public discourse on sugar consumption which arose from these events and might form the basis of a fuller investigation of the French case, see Mathiez 1927: 29ff.
- 8 Mintz (1985: 188ff.) is thus unjustified in his self-righteous lipsmacking over the relative absence of sugar in the superior cuisine of France and China, as opposed to that of the drugged victims of industrialism and imperialism in Britain and the Third World.
- 9 Sugar, though retailed through the same channels as other colonial goods, appears to have been either omitted from marketing campaigns or incorporated into them as a “loss leader” (McKendrick et al. 1982: 93–94); however, there is one example of a folded and illustrated German handbill advertising sugar during the first half of the eighteenth century (see Baxa and Bruhns 1967: 48–49). Normally, however, sugar appears in British handbills as an element of trade policy under debate, as in the 1698 publication “On the State of the Sugar Plantations in America” (Goldsmith’s Library 1698).
- 10 Ongoing research by Smith indicates that the British domestic fashion of drinking tea with sugar probably took hold widely between 1695 and 1700.
- 11 Unlike sugar, tea and coffee were regularly advertised in Britain in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (McKendrick et al. 1982: 146ff.; Cranfield 1962: 211: “The ordinary necessities of life were rarely advertized in these newspapers. . . . The only goods advertized with any frequency were luxury goods such as millinery from London, tea, coffee and chocolate, and wines and spirits”). See also the career of John Houghton, “Father of Publication Advertising” and seller of “coffee, tea, chocolate and other commodities” in late-seventeenth-century England (Presbrey 1929: 56ff.).
- 12 This possibility and the dating of the process to the end of the seventeenth century are based upon Smith’s ongoing research in contemporary British literature and family account books.
- 13 On coffeehouses and teahouses see Ukkers 1935, 1: 38–43. The importance of domestic consumption of tea with sugar is emphasized in Short 1750: 32, 40.
- 14 See McKendrick et al. 1982: 99–145 on Josiah Wedgwood.
- 15 McCracken (1988: 11–16, 93–103) pushes the fashion changes back to Elizabethan England and refines the “trickle-down” theory of fashion changes.
- 16 For an indication of the complex relationships which might have existed between social identity and consumption in early-modern Europe, see Schama 1987: 130–220.
- 17 This apparently happened in France during the late seventeenth century,

- when the coffee and tea fashion was simply displaced (Dufour 1685: 27–40).
- 18 “Then consider the many sober Companies it [tea drinking] assembles both in Coffee-houses (which in London are only about six hundred) and private Houses. Observe we further the Business, Conversation and Intelligence it promotes, the Expence and Debauchery it prevents. Nor is its consumption of Sugar, which is a great Encouragement to our American Colonies to be forgot” (Short 1750: 32).
- 19 Baxa and Bruhns (1967: 44–46) cite treatises from as early as 1693 indicating potential damage to the teeth from sugar; the earliest such statement known to us is Blankaart 1683: 39–43.
- 20 The above argument has been developed most strongly by Appleby (1978); for a critique of Appleby’s entire opus (which does not, in our opinion, diminish its value for the present argument), see Winch 1985.
- 21 For a Marxist version of this view, with special attention paid to the negative effects of mass-marketing culture, see Langdon 1981.
- 22 McGee not only counters the austerity doctrines of development economists but also suggests a productive role for “informal sectors,” as opposed to the views of Berry (1985).

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