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Author(s): Woodruff D. Smith

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Woodruff D. Smith

Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism

Among the historical phenomena to which interdisciplinary analysis can be usefully applied, one large class stands out because the *only* way to interpret it successfully at present is through such treatment. The phenomena in this group are complex and at least partly cultural in nature. They involve the concepts of change and causation and require a multivariate analysis addressing elements that are nonquantifiable together with those that are. Most importantly, their commonplace nature has made it acceptable for scholars in standard disciplinary fields to ignore or dismiss them as trivial, thus avoiding the difficulties of analysis altogether. Some of these phenomena are *not* trivial in their implications, and many of them, if explored imaginatively, offer substantial insights into larger historical processes.

A case in point is the origin of the European habit of putting sugar into tea. This custom, which has mistakenly been viewed as insignificant, had important historical effects. Its widespread adoption in Britain and elsewhere in northern Europe in the eighteenth century greatly reinforced demand for both products, thus helping to foster British imperialism in Asia, plantation slavery in the West Indies, and economic growth in Europe and North America. And yet the separate literatures on tea and sugar are not even clear about precisely *when* the custom arose, much less *why* it did so. It was certainly not imported with tea from China. The issue is often passed over with a nonexplanation: Europeans put sugar in their tea because they liked it that way. But why did the Chinese not use sugar in their tea—or, indeed, Europeans when tea was first introduced to them in the seventeenth century? The

Woodruff D. Smith is Professor of History at the University of Texas, San Antonio. He is the author of *Politics and the Science of Culture in Germany, 1840–1920* (New York, 1991); *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York, 1986); and is working on a study of the demand for overseas products in Europe in the early modern period.

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answer given is that Europe had developed a “sweet tooth.” A metaphor is not an explanation.¹

Why should historians be willing to accept such explanations? Part of the reason lies in a traditional assumption that matters of everyday life are not historically important—an assumption that has become unfashionable but has not disappeared. Much more important is a circumstance that arises when a topic touches on *economic* matters, even if only in part. A postulate of economic analysis then comes into play: that most motives for behavior apart from ones that can be resolved into a rational calculus of quantifiable costs and benefits lie outside the scope of explanation.² This postulate is perfectly legitimate within the conventionally defined structure of economics as a discipline, but it tends to give rise to the illegitimate assumption that the limited array of factors significant for economic analysis are *universally* more important than others in constructing any causal explanation whatever. This assumption gives a privileged status to factors such as costs, income, and prices and relegates others, especially nonquantifiable factors, to (at best) secondary status. Most of the motives that lead people to consume two products together, rather than separately, fall into the latter category and thus are trivialized by presumption.

There is no reason, in fact, to assume a priori the primacy of *any* particular set of factors in addressing this class of phenomena. An economic analysis of the falling prices of tea and sugar in the eighteenth century can help to explain why Europeans consumed more of the two commodities, but not why they wanted to combine them in the first place. Modern anthropolog-

1 Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985), 108–119. The standard work on tea, William H. Ukers, *All About Tea* (New York, 1935), I, 23–35, does not attempt an explanation beyond referring to taste and fashion. Mintz suggests some hypotheses, but essentially avoids the issue by stating that “documentation for the custom of adding sugar to these beverages [tea, coffee, and chocolate] during the early period of their use in the United Kingdom is almost non-existent” (109). (To simplify matters, the parallel cases of coffee and chocolate will not be discussed here.) Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), 1–6, criticizes approaches to the history of ingestibles based on nutritional factors or assumptions about universal human preferences for certain tastes.

2 See Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York, 1979), 15–55.

ical theories can help us understand the meaning of the custom, but they are not very useful in explaining change. Many sociological models are applicable, but they tend to presuppose the existence and causal priority of transcendental processes of societal change (such as modernization), which are difficult to connect convincingly to commonplace phenomena like the tea-and-sugar custom.³ For this topic, a means of combining disciplinary analyses is required. It avoids two presumptions: that one particular approach, even economics, is superior by definition, and that if an explanation, however superficial, can be constructed within the discourse of one approach, it is unnecessary to take other factors into account.

The present study focuses on the several *cultural contexts* within which tea and sugar separately, and then tea and sugar together, seem to have had meaning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By “cultural context” is meant an assembly of cultural traits (social structures, customary behaviors, ideas, words, and material objects) that made “sense” to contemporaries as elements of their world, meaningfully linked to one another—an assembly the sense of which can be partly recovered by a modern observer. Within these contexts, interpretive theories that might not explain the whole phenomenon can be applied under more limited circumstances. Thus, an analysis of the elasticity of the tea and sugar supply can explain developments in the single context of the early modern market economy that greatly affected the tea-and-sugar custom, even if they were not its primary cause.⁴ *No primary cause is sought.*

Western Europe during the period in question can be regarded as an aggregation of overlapping cultural contexts, some broader in geographical scope and more significant to contemporaries than others, but none causally prior to others by presupposition. This article shows how changes within particular contexts contributed to the establishment of the tea-and-sugar

3 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 114–191; Douglas and Isherwood, *World of Goods*, 56–129; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York, 1975); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1973), 166–214, 303–343. A prime example of giving priority to transcendental processes is Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern-World-System* (New York, 1974, 1980), 2 v.

4 The idea of a cultural context is suggested by the Boasian notion of arrays of traits composing a cultural complex. See Ralph Linton, *The Tree of Culture* (New York, 1955), 33–48.

custom, and how intersections between contexts helped make the custom a central part of a new context defined by *respectability*.

TEATIME The custom of regularly taking tea with sugar probably originated in the Netherlands and England. It was from those places that the custom spread in the eighteenth century.⁵ The question of the *time* of origin requires some discussion.

Sugar, which had been available in Europe for centuries, was the object of a sustained vogue in northern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tea was a recent import from the Far East, practically unknown in Europe until the mid-seventeenth century and then (taken, as in China, without sugar) a drink of fashion in the 1650s and 1660s.⁶ In France, the fashion faded rather quickly, to be reintroduced from Britain in the eighteenth century. In the Netherlands and England there was a delay between the initial period of fashionability and a major expansion of tea-drinking (this time with sugar) around 1700.

Mintz cites a 1685 book by Chamberlain as evidence that by that time, in England, sugar was being added to coffee, tea, and chocolate. In fact, Chamberlain's book—a compilation of continental sources on those commodities—does not say that. It states that a little sugar was sometimes put into coffee in the Near East for medicinal purposes. The section on tea primarily comes from a treatise published by Tulp, an Amsterdam physician, in 1675. It concentrates on tea's medicinal properties and mentions sugar only when it says that the Chinese, unlike the Japanese, add “a few grains either of Salt, or Sugar” to tea while it is boiling. Thus, although Chamberlain's book does not prove that Europeans were not sugaring their tea in 1685, it also gives no evidence that they were doing so.⁷

5 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 108–115; Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), 14–22. The adding of milk to tea is reported in France around 1680, but that practice was not originally connected with adding sugar. See Ukers, *All About Tea*, I, 35, 49.

6 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 74–150; *Thema Thee: De Geschiedenis van het Theegebruik in Nederland* (Rotterdam, 1978), 13–19; Philippe Sylvestre Dufour, *Traitez Nouveaux & curieux du cafe, du thee et du chocolate* (The Hague, 1685), 193–256; Ukers, *All About Tea*, I, 23–33.

7 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 110; John Chamberlain, *The Manner of Making of Coffee, Tea, and Chocolate* (London, 1685), preface, 50. Nicholas Tulp's original observations on tea (Nicolai Tulpii Amstelredamensis, *Observationes medicae* [Amsterdam, 1652], IV, 400–403) were expanded into a pamphlet, *Uitstekende Eigenschappen, en Heerlyke Werkingen van*

Sugar is not mentioned in connection with tea in the best-known reports of its initial fashionable use in the 1650s and 1660s. Bontekoe, the Dutch “tea-doctor” who was the most notorious advocate of heavy tea-drinking, warned against taking sugar with tea in a pamphlet published in 1678. This may indicate that at least some people were doing it at that time, but the warning is buried at the back of the pamphlet and is made only in passing. It more likely represents a growing medical distrust of heavy sugar use in general. Blankaart, an opponent of excessive use of sugar, wrote in 1683 that putting herbs and spices into tea gave it a good taste. He does not mention adding sugar, and the vigor with which Blankaart condemns the sugaring of other food items makes it almost certain that he would have done so had the practice been common.⁸

Although tea may have been taken with sugar by the gastronomically adventurous in the mid-1680s, this is by no means certain, and there is no sign of a fashion or custom of doing so. By the 1710s, however, the presence of the practice in Britain and the Netherlands is fairly well indicated. By the 1720s and 1730s, not only had the habit of taking tea spread throughout the middle and upper classes in those countries, but the custom almost invariably involved drinking tea with sugar.⁹

The evidence points to the period between 1685 and the first years of the eighteenth century as the time at which the tea-and-sugar custom established itself in Britain and the Netherlands. The period immediately after 1700 also saw an immense increase in the demand for both tea and sugar and in their importation.¹⁰

het kruid Thee . . . (Amsterdam, 1675), which Chamberlain employs. See also *Thema Thee*, 23.

8 Samuel Pepys (eds. Robert Latham and William Matthews), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (Berkeley, 1970–1983), I, 253; VI, 327–328; VIII, 302. Cornelis Bontekoe, *Tractaat Van het Excellenste Kruid Thee, Coffi en Chocolate*, 103–106, appended to Bontekoe, *Alle de Philosophische, Medicinale en Chymische Werken van den Heer Corn. Bontekoe* (Amsterdam, 1689), 2 v.; Steven Blankaart, *De Borgerlyke Tafel: Om lang gezond sonder ziekten te leven* (Amsterdam, 1683), 84–86.

9 *Dispute between the Northern Colonies and the Sugar Islands* (London, 1731) describes how sugar became a concomitant to tea and coffee between about 1700 and 1731, when the broadside was published.

10 Supporting evidence can be found in England, Masters’ Exhibits, English Court of Chancery, Public Record Office (hereafter cited as PRO). PRO C114/182 contains the personal account books for 1697–1704 of a modestly well-off rural spinster. The accounts record, between 1701 and 1704, initial purchases of tea, followed by larger and more

A look at a cultural context in which tea and sugar had meaning—that of fashion and the signification of status—will begin to explain why the custom appeared.

STATUS AND THE FASHION FOR SUGARING In a complex, hierarchical society like that of early modern Europe, the changing set of behavior patterns, attitudes, and material objects that composed the cultural context of fashion had great importance. The ability to pursue fashions was a major indicator of membership in the social elite.¹¹

By the sixteenth century, the use of sugar to enhance the taste of ingestibles and to decorate foods had become a regular, fashionable practice among the elite classes of northwestern Europe. The practice took many forms: the creation of sugar courses at banquets which would be removed before the actual meal began, the sweetening of wine, the consumption of sugar pastries, and so forth. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these practices spread beyond the wealthy classes, presumably through emulation by people anxious to enhance their social standing. There was a geographical spreading as well. For example, Polish noblemen imported sugar and spices in return for their grain so that they could follow Western fashions. The proliferation of cookbooks containing guides to table manners and the organization of genteel banquets suggests that there was demand for information needed to follow elite rituals of food consumption. And in the cookbooks, sugar was everywhere: glazing for roasted or baked meat; sweetening for tarts and meat pies; an ingredient

specific purchases, the acquisition of a tea table, and then purchases of tea and sugar together as a single item. If we allow time for the fashion to have passed to the country, we can place the tea-and-sugar fashion in London in the mid- or late 1690s. Ralph Davis estimates that sugar imports into England increased by about 50% between the 1660s and 1700 and again by about 50% by the 1720s, while legal tea imports increased nearly fifteenfold in the latter period (not counting substantial amounts of smuggled tea). Ralph Davis, "English Foreign Trade, 1660–1700," *Economic History Review*, VII (1954), 164–165; *idem*, "English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774," *Economic History Review*, XV (1962), 300–303. According to Kirti Nayanar Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1978), 387–389, the English East India Company's imports of tea fluctuated greatly in the late seventeenth century, with a high of 13,082 pounds in 1690. Between 1713 and 1720, the company imported an average of about 358,000 pounds of tea per year.

11 On the social role of fashion, see Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, 1988).

in most drinks. The ubiquity of sugar was a much-noted feature of upper-class social life in early modern northern Europe.¹²

But why sugar? What *meanings* might its use have had within a general context of status and emulation? One meaning is fairly obvious. Conspicuous consumption of an expensive commodity in an ostentatious ritual—the banquet-type meal—was a deliberate display of high social status (or of sufficient wealth to claim high status). Such displays, featuring an ability to provide (and waste) an abundance of goods, were common in elite culture.¹³

Another related meaning derived from the tension between the public hedonism represented by the banquet and the strict standards of public moral behavior increasingly legislated by authority. It is likely that the deliberate pursuit of a mildly addictive pleasurable taste (the sweetness in sugar) represented a subtle resistance to such legislation. Calvinist Amsterdam passed an ordinance more than once in the early seventeenth century banning marzipan figures in the shape of humans and other creatures on the grounds that eating them smacked (as it were) of immorality, with perhaps a hint of cannibalism.¹⁴ The fact that the ordinance had to be reissued suggests that it had little practical effect. This use of sugar would have been a behavioral compromise: a form of self-indulgence, asserting the autonomy of individuals against moral regulations that formally disparaged both self-indulgence and ostentation, without much real risk of punishment or even serious disapproval. This meaning probably gave sugar-taking added appeal as it spread outside the elite.

Although the fashion for sugar as a form of elite display lasted a long time, it declined toward the end of the seventeenth century. Sugar continued to be widely used in cooking and confectionary. Its consumption spread ever more broadly throughout

12 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 78–96. Mintz cites fashion and imitation as mechanisms expanding sugar consumption, but his emphasis on the functional analysis of the uses of sugar (as condiment, sweetener, and so forth) may give insufficient scope to the meanings of sugar for contemporaries. For sugar courses, see *The Treasure of Hidden Secrets: Commonly called, the Good-huswife's Closet of provision, for the health of her Household* (London, 1627), chap. 6; see *Grontlycke Tegen-bericht Van de waerachtige remedie Der tegenwoordige dierte in de Granen in Nederlandt* (n.p., 1631); see, among others, [John Murrell], *Murrell's Two Books of Cookery and Carving* (London, 1638, 5th ed.); Meister Sebastian, *Koch und Kellermeisterey* (Frankfurt am Main, 1581, reprint ed., 1964), 12–27.

13 Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, 20–39, 54–61.

14 J. J. Reese, *De Suikerhandel van Amsterdam van het Begin der 17de Eeuw tot 1813* (Haarlem, 1908), 28–29.

society, spurred by falling prices due to the new West Indian production. But it lost its traditional role as a status symbol. Sugar courses ceased to be common. In the eighteenth century, cookbooks showed growing restraint in calling for sugar as an ingredient.¹⁵ The fashion for sugaring wines abated. What had happened?

Simmel's classic theory of fashion sheds some light on this change.¹⁶ According to Simmel, upper-class fashions that distinguish members of the elite from other people tend to be imitated by less prestigious social groups. Because this undermines fashion's delimiting function, the upper classes regularly drop old fashions and adopt new ones. The cycle repeats itself again and again. But the fashion for sugar does not fit this pattern. It took over 100 years for the upper classes to react to widening nonelite use of sugar. Moreover, sugar did not actually disappear among the elite at the end of the seventeenth century. Instead, it began to be used in new ways—particularly in hot liquids, such as tea. Although these new practices may have commenced as elite fashions, they quickly became customary activities of *both* the elite *and* the modestly well-to-do—especially the domestic consumption of tea and sugar. The new practices did not change thereafter, except to spread to ever-widening segments of society. The upper classes did not abandon tea and sugar even when, in the nineteenth century, the practice was adopted by the working classes. Simmel's status-imitation theory is, therefore, insufficient by itself.

Simmel's theory *does* readily explain the initial adoption of tea (without sugar) as an upper-class status symbol in the 1650s and its spread, through the medium of the teahouse, as a fashion in Paris, London, and Amsterdam. There is also evidence of a snobbish revulsion by aristocratic trendsetters in the 1670s against the vulgarizing of tea-taking.¹⁷ Even the *chinoiserie* fad of the 1680s

15 See Mennell on the "civilizing" of appetite, *All Manners of Food*, 20–39. Compare the use of sugar in the cookbooks in n. 12 with the greater restraint shown in Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (London, 1755, 5th ed.); E[dward] Kidder, *Receipts of Pastry and Cookery, For the Use of his Scholars* (n.p., [c. 1740]).

16 Georg Simmel, "Fashion," *International Quarterly*, X (1904), 130–155, discussed in McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, 93–103.

17 Chamberlain, *Manner of Making*, 47–48; *Theme Thee*, 26–27; Blankaart, *Borgerlyke Tafel*, 84; Ukers, *All About Tea*, 33–35. Not only did tea (and heavy sugaring) fall out of favor in France, but the tea-and-sugar custom was slow to arise there. This may have been due to the centrality of wine in French social ritual or to the strength of aristocratic

could not maintain tea as an elite fashion in France, although it remained so in England and the Netherlands.

As with sugar, however, what happened to tea at the end of the seventeenth century was outside the cycle of fashion described by Simmel: its permanent association with sugar and a new intensity of its usage by the Dutch and British upper and middle classes. Thus, a related cultural context that displayed its own autonomous historical dynamic is relevant.

TEA, SUGAR, AND THE CULTURE OF HEALTH In the seventeenth century, popular books and pamphlets on health, medicine, and diet became a staple of the publishing trade in Western Europe. Such books were not new, but the large growth of their market and their adoption of a particular mode of discourse suggest the formation of a broadly-based cultural context of some importance.¹⁸ Health literature was closely related to other popular genres (self-improvement books, cookbooks, and so forth) that dealt with subjects of significance to people of middling, as well as upper, station. Cookbooks, for example, contained not only recipes and instructions on table manners, but also commentaries on the effects of various foods on health. Moreover, elements of traditional pious and moral literature found their way into the health literature, defining a discourse that related physical health to morality and society.

In books touching on health in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, sugar was usually treated as a drug that could alter the balance of the humors of the body by generating choler (the hot humor) or could improve the efficacy of other drugs. As a specific, and as an element of dietary regimens, sugar originally had a very favorable press. In the late seventeenth century, however, much of the popular medical literature turned against sugar—or at least against its overuse. Blankaart included an attack on excessive sugar-taking in his classic *Borgerlyke Tafel*. He referred to medical theory, but his argument was based primarily

culture. See Robert Louis Stein, *The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1988), 93–105, 120.

18 Geneviève Bollème, *La Bibliothèque bleue. La littérature populaire en France du xvii^e au xix^e siècle* (Paris, 1971), 27–45; *idem*, *La Bible bleue. Anthologie d'une littérature "populaire"* (Paris, 1975), 332–364. See also the literature cited in Roy Porter, *Disease, Medicine, and Society in England, 1550–1800* (London, 1987), 23–31.

on empirical observation: diets with large amounts of sugar appeared to be correlated with tooth decay, corpulence, gout, and other health disorders. Other important medical writers turned against excessive sugaring at the same time, and although sugar had its defenders (not least among people with a West Indian interest), the effects of the change can be seen in the greater moderation with which sugaring is recommended in books on health and cooking after about 1700.¹⁹

Medical writings on tea were extensive, and unlike the equivalent material on sugar, they remained mostly favorable into the eighteenth century. They ranged from sober evaluations of the properties of tea by physicians such as Tulp to outright advertising of the medicinal qualities of the new commodity.²⁰ Bontekoe made the most extravagant claims for tea, recommending the constant sluicing of the body by drinking tens or hundreds of cups daily.

The medical literature on the benefits of tea may have been a cynical marketing technique of the Indies companies and big merchants. Tulp was a director of the Dutch East India Company, and Boxer reports a rumor that Bontekoe was in the company's pay (although I have found no support for this suggestion in company records). But for most writers on health, other motives were apparently at work. Alignment in the public mind with a fashionable drug could be the making of a physician's career. Although Bontekoe was widely ridiculed, he became famous and ended up as a professor and the personal physician to the elector of Brandenburg.²¹

Blankaart's book illustrates other significant elements of the mode of discussing health and diet that was forming in the late seventeenth century. Blankaart did not write about the mixing of tea and sugar, but he did lay out a conceptual framework within

19 *The Haven of Health* (London, 1589), 112–113; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 102–108; Blankaart, *Borgerlyke Tafel*, 39–43; John Chamberlayne, *A Family-Herbal, or, the Treasure of Health* (London, 1689), 218–219. See also n. 15.

20 *Thema Thee*, 13–19, 23; Chamberlain, *Manner of Making*, 48–52; Thomas Short *Discourses on Tea, Sugar, Milk, Made-Wines, Spirits, Punch, Tobacco, etc., With Plain and Useful Rules for Gouty People* (London, 1750; orig. ed. 1730), 1–76. Eventually, tea also came under attack in the eighteenth century. See Griffiths, *Indian Tea Industry*, 23–32.

21 Charles R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600–1800* (London, 1965), 177; *Thema Thee*, 24–25; Bontekoe, *Alle de Philosophische*, introduction.

which such a custom would be meaningful. To Blankaart, proper diet was not simply a means of maintaining bodily health, but also a way of demonstrating individual moral worth. A proper diet was a *balanced* diet, one that limited the intake of harmful foods such as sugar and encouraged the consumption of health ones, such as tea. Such a diet replicated the psychic balance that characterized the virtuous individual.²²

Tryon (1634–1703) was a famous English writer of popular “how-to” books in the late seventeenth century. He was best known as the proponent of his own religion that featured the adoption of a “clean” diet—although he also wrote for readers who did not care to adopt his whole program. He strongly opposed liquors, partly because drunkenness was morally repugnant and socially dangerous, but also because “fierce, strong, burning” spirits were bad for physical health. He suggested healthier alternatives, most importantly, drinks made by infusing water with health-giving herbs—thus anticipating the framework within which tea would later be advertised as a healthy herbal infusion and an alternative to liquor. Tryon was especially concerned about sugar. He had visited the West Indies and had been disgusted by plantation slavery. Although he did not explicitly condemn slavery, he believed that its ferocity in the Caribbean was immoral and was due directly to the conditions of sugar production.²³ By implication, then, sugar was a morally-suspect commodity.

On the other hand, Tryon believed that many of sugar’s effects on the body could be beneficial. To Tryon, taste was the most important sense because it gave direct access to the fundamental properties composing matter which could be classified into three categories: salty, bitter, and sweet. Each property had good effects on the human body. The delight people took in sweet foods was a sign of the basically healthy and necessary character of sweetness. Sugar was the most concentrated form in which sweetness could be ingested, and therefore, taken in small quantities, it was a wholly acceptable element of diet.²⁴ But in excess

22 Blankaart, *Borgerlyke Tafel*, 1–3, 84–86.

23 *Dictionary of National Biography*, XIX, 1201–1202; [Thomas Tryon], *A New Art of Brewing* (London, 1690), 52–53; Short, *Discourses*, 32, 43–72; Tryon, *Tryon’s Letters, Domestic and Foreign* (London, 1700), 183–187.

24 *Ibid.*, preface (8–22); *idem*, *New Art*, 52–53.

or in solid foods, when taken together with fatty substances or when turned into spirits, sugar became a danger to life.

Tryon's solution to the problem of obtaining the sweetness of sugar without its dangers was the preparation of nonalcoholic drinks in which a modest amount of sugar was supplemented by naturally sweet fruits and in which herbs were infused. The herbs countered the effects of the sugar through their own (healthy) bitterness, and any excessive bitterness in the herbs would be offset by the sugar.²⁵ Tryon does not specifically refer to tea in this context, but tea drinks with sugar (and a slice of lemon) fill Tryon's prescription almost exactly. Like Blankaart, Tryon thus heavily emphasized *balance* in diet.

The dates of Tryon's most popular works on health—the late 1680s and 1690s—are consistent with the appearance of the tea-and-sugar custom, but the fact that he does not specifically advocate the mixing of tea and sugar makes it unlikely that he created it. Rather, Tryon's and Blankaart's books suggest the formation of a popular conceptual framework that made it reasonable to combine two originally separate practices from the context of status and fashion into a new practice that had meaning within the context of discourse on health—something that might occur to many people at the same time, then be spread by imitation. The physically harmful properties of sugar would be balanced by the properties of tea without requiring people to give up sugar altogether. Some of the moral suspicion of sugar would be offset by taking it with tea, and the status implications of both products would be maintained. The resulting tea-and-sugar practice, however, implied a redefinition of what conveyed status in consuming the two products: individual virtue and self-discipline rather than wealth alone, and moderation and balance rather than fashionable excess.

But why tea in particular? Tea was fashionable and exotic, but so was coffee, which the health literature placed in much the same category as tea. Coffee also came to be taken with sugar—probably for the same reasons as tea. Nevertheless, by the 1720s, tea had become the preferred liquid medium for sugar in north-western Europe.²⁶ The reason lies partly in a context defined by the structure of overseas trade.

25 *Ibid.*, 79–82, 85–86.

26 For contemporary views of coffee, see Bontekoe, *Alle de Philosophische*, 107–121;

THE SUPPLY OF OVERSEAS GOODS There were many economic factors that influenced the consumption of commodities such as sugar, tea, and coffee. One set stands out in the evidence: the varying elasticity and transparency of their supply mechanisms.

After about 1660, *sugar* displayed a high degree of elasticity and transparency. The amount brought into England appears to have increased by about 50 percent between the 1660s and 1700 and by 50 percent again by the early 1720s, with a decline in reexports in the latter period suggesting a substantial increase in domestic consumption. Dutch importation followed a similar pattern, with some variations. During the same period, the growth of West Indian plantation production and the high level of integration between production and distribution meant that sugar was always readily available and that long-term increases in demand could be accommodated efficiently by expanding production. After the 1720s, sugar prices generally fell, stimulating demand. Import duties on sugar varied among importing countries, but they tended to be stable until the mid-eighteenth century.²⁷ The phenomenal growth of sugar demand was met and encouraged by an elastic supply mechanism.

Reliable data on the importation and consumption of *tea* are scarce, mainly because of widespread smuggling in the eighteenth century—especially into Britain. Chaudhuri reports an attempt in 1744 to estimate English tea consumption in terms of the known amount of sugar consumed, based on the premise that most sugar went into tea. However, sufficient evidence can be found to construct an outline of changes over time.

Until after 1700, tea was a minuscule part of Europe's Asian trade. It was only rarely ordered by the directors of the East India companies before the 1680s, although it was sometimes purchased for the companies by their agents without order.²⁸ It was primarily

Chamberlain, *Manner of Making*, 1–33; Dufour, *Traitez Nouveaux*, 14–185. See also Davis, “English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774,” 300–303.

27 Davis, “English Foreign Trade, 1660–1700,” 164–165; *idem*, “English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774,” 300–303; Reese, *Suikerhandel*, 30–76; *On the State of the Case of the Sugar Plantations in America* (London, [1698]; Goldsmiths' Library Broadside Collection), I, 87. The broadsides in IV, 381, in the same collection, contain data on importation and duties in 1743–1744. Sugar prices in the Dutch East India Company's Amsterdam autumn sales between 1710 and 1719 varied only between 0.21 and 0.26 guilders per pound. Calculated from tables in Netherlands National Archives, Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, 2d section, papers of Johannes Hudde, file 18.

28 Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 385–406; Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade 1620–1740* (Copenhagen, 1958), 212–243.

procured by company employees for the private trade that they did on the side to supplement their salaries. These people bought small amounts at varying prices wherever they were in Asia, carried their purchases home in the companies' ships, and then sold the tea either privately or (more properly) through the auctions of the companies. Although private orders could be placed and some information about supply and demand could be transmitted, the seventeenth-century tea trade was a haphazard and fragmented business that had little direct effect on production in China. It was a minor attachment to trading companies the policies of which were governed primarily by concern for textiles, pepper, and spices.

Moreover, the systems of tea production and distribution in Asia were, to Europeans, originally opaque and inelastic. The tea market in China was extensive and well organized, but it was overwhelmingly domestic. Exports took up only a small proportion of total production and were only a sideline. China did not permit regular, direct trade with the European companies before the 1710s although occasional visits to Chinese ports increased steadily before then.

These factors help to explain why European tea prices were unstable and often high in the seventeenth century. London wholesale prices varied between 3.2 and 50 shillings per pound in the 1660s and between about 5 and 20 shillings in the 1690s. Retail prices also varied widely.²⁹ Differences in the type and fashion-

Table 1 Dutch East India Sales of Tea, 1688–1702

YEAR	POUNDS	YEAR	POUNDS
1688	3,178	1693	16,541
1689	0	1694	15,371
1690	c. 3,300	1695	43,320
1691	0	1698	14,405
1692	16,082	1702	47,944

SOURCE Netherlands National Archives, Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, 2d section, papers of Johannes Hudde, file 18.

29 Ethel Bruce Sainsbury, *A Calendar of the Court Minutes of the East India Company 1635–79* (Oxford, 1907–1938), vol. for 1664–67, 70; vol. for 1668–70; 242. For the 1690s, see

ability of the tea being priced undoubtedly affected this situation, but the main reason was haphazard procurement and the inability of the supply mechanism to adjust itself to changes in demand.

The situation had changed fundamentally by the end of the 1710s, despite the continuation of private employee trade and spot purchases of tea outside China. The East India companies, which had been specifically ordering modest quantities of tea since the 1680s, from about 1700 ordered large amounts which nevertheless did not drive up prices in Asia substantially. The companies displayed a more exact knowledge of the types of tea, the nature of the supply mechanism in Asia, and the tastes of consumers than ever before.³⁰ Some of these changes resulted from the companies' perception of a growing demand for tea, but the most important factor—regular, direct trade with China—did not.

Tea was a secondary trade commodity with the English company until Parliament prohibited finished Asian textiles in 1720 and, with the Dutch company, until tea smuggling into Britain became a big business about the same time. Initially, the companies' main interest in China lay in silks and related textiles, and it was in pursuit of these items that they had first attempted to establish direct trade. In other words, the most important of the changes that made tea supply more transparent and elastic at a crucial period during the spread of the tea-and-sugar custom was a fortuitous result of conscious responses to other demands. It happened, however, that increased demand for tea could be met by the same arrangements, which gave European traders almost direct access (through Canton) to Chinese tea production. It was not difficult after about 1720 to adjust such arrangements to a new focus on tea.³¹

The situation with *coffee* was quite different, despite the similar cultural role it played in Europe. Demand for tea and coffee rose greatly in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In-

Records of Deliveries, India Office Library and Records, H/9, (hereafter cited as IOLR); Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 388; retail prices can be traced in the accounts of an apothecary shop contained in PRO C104/130.

³⁰ See the instructions on tea prepared for outgoing agents of the English New East India Company in 1705: Goldsmiths' Library Manuscript Collection, 56, fol. 23–24.

³¹ Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade*, 216–227; Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 389–406. The changing relative importance of textiles and tea in the China trade can be seen by comparing the English East India Company's instructions to supercargos in 1699 and 1710: IOLR E/3/97 (Letter Book 10), 207–219; E/3/97 (Letter Book 14), 31.

creased demand was met by two different mechanisms of supply. Whereas tea supply had become relatively elastic and transparent, coffee was the opposite.³² Until the early eighteenth century, all the world's coffee came from tiny areas in Yemen and Eritrea, places beyond European control and with little local capacity to expand production. Europeans purchased coffee in Yemen and elsewhere in the Near East but could neither predict nor affect production. From the early eighteenth century, Dutch entrepreneurs successfully exported the coffee plant to places abroad, but because of the costs and risks involved and because Europeans continued to prefer Arabian coffee, Dutch production had only a marginal effect on the world market until the nineteenth century. The European coffee supply remained unpredictable, and rising demand resulted in higher prices and speculation rather than increased production. The greater rapidity with which tea, as compared with coffee, attained price stability in European markets is illustrated in Table 2.

Certain consequences of the differences in supply between tea and coffee can be suggested. Presumably, European business people in the early eighteenth century preferred to deal in tea rather than coffee, especially if they believed that the sources of consumer demand for the two products were similar. The elasticity of tea supply and the consequent stability of tea prices

Table 2 Mean Prices of Tea and Coffee at Dutch East India Company Amsterdam Auctions (Guilders per Pound)

SALE YEAR	COFFEE	TEA	SALE YEAR	COFFEE	TEA
1686	1.27	3.1	1695	2.55	4.8
1687	None sold	10.6	1702	1.18	4.0
1688	None sold	8.8	1703	1.15	—
1690	0.86	7.8	1710	1.55	—
1692	0.57	7.5	1711	—	4.1
1693	0.81	4.2	1718	1.18	5.3
1694	1.28	4.8	1719	1.42	4.1

SOURCE Netherlands National Archives, Allgemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, 2d section, papers of Johannes Hudde, file 18; Netherlands East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie), file 6989.

32 Chaudhuri, *Trading World*, 359–384; Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade*, 187–210.

despite rising demand may have been one of the reasons that large specialty houses such as Twinings chose to concentrate on tea. Tea was more suitable than coffee for the networks of wholesalers and of local retailers selling to households that appeared in Britain in the eighteenth century. Tea was more consistently available at an affordable price to household purchasers, which helped to accustom families to taking tea rather than coffee with the sugar that they had no trouble obtaining. Although coffee-drinking in the home gradually caught on, the coffeehouse remained its standard place of consumption. It was tea that made the real breakthrough into domestic ritual, and therefore into the vastly expanding domestic market.³³

The context of supply also helps to explain why the tea-and-sugar custom maintained itself throughout the eighteenth century. Rising demand for sugar and tea could be readily met by increased supply so that sharp price increases did not discourage the custom. Indeed, prices fell. This does not, however, tell us why the tea-and-sugar practice was so attractive to increasingly large numbers of people that demand continued to grow. An understanding of that demand rests in yet another cultural context, one that was being formed in the early eighteenth century.

TEA AND SUGAR AND THE CULTURE OF RESPECTABILITY In Britain especially, but also elsewhere, tea consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to center in large part around a meal, a domestic ritual, in which tea and sugar were served with certain other foods. The ritual involved family groups, a modest division of labor, and restrained good fellowship among people of both sexes and varying ages, all manifested within a regime of correct, but not overelaborate, manners. The ritual of tea-taking had class implications, but it was primarily associated with a cultural phenomenon that eventually transcended class distinctions: respectability.³⁴

Although we cannot fully examine the emergence of respectability here, some of its significant features are revealed when compared with its antecedent, gentility. Respectability was an

33 On Twinings, see Griffiths, *Indian Tea Industry*, 19. The growth of retail networks is described in Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (Kingston, 1989), 160–190; Ukers, *All About Tea*, I, 38–43.

34 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 140–142.

assertion of a person's moral worth *as an individual*, demonstrated primarily by behavior. Family or class background created a presumption of respectability but, in principle, anyone could achieve or lose respectable status by behavior. Gentility, on the other hand, was traditionally tied to gentle birth. Those of gentle birth were supposed to behave in a certain way, but improper behavior did not so much eliminate them from the gentry as bring into question the birth that they claimed.

The essence of gentility was descent, whereas the essence of the newer idea of respectability was behavior—something over which an individual had control. Moreover, the definition of respectable behavior differed somewhat from genteel behavior, emphasizing such things as moderation in spending and dress, domestic order and affection, and individual self-control. Both gentlemen and respectable men were supposed to be honest, but whereas a gentleman might be expected to pay his gambling debts but not necessarily his tailor's bill, a respectable person was supposed to pay the latter and not to incur the former. The implicit function of respectability as an announcement of a person's place in the social hierarchy also differed from that of gentility. Gentility proclaimed membership in the elite stratum of society. Respectability was more flexible. The display of respectable behavior constituted a demand (based in part on demonstrated moral worth) for deference from inferiors, acceptance by social peers, and respect from superiors—at *any* social level. Finally, many rituals of respectability differed from the earlier rituals of gentility. One of these was taking part in the tea-and-sugar custom.³⁵

Why should the consumption of tea and sugar have become so intimately linked to the phenomenon of respectability? Part of the answer is that the tea-and-sugar custom arose from the intersection of some of the same cultural contexts from which respectability itself was constructed in the eighteenth century. From the context of genteel status and fashion came apparel, furnishing, and alimentary practices that could convey status claims. But these items also possessed meanings in other contexts, which modified the implications of the status items along lines that were consistent with respectability.³⁶

35 See Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982), 324–325; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 140–42, 151–186; Short, *Discourses*, 32.

36 The wearing of cotton garments followed a similar pattern: a symbol of high status

In the case of tea and sugar, the intersection of the context of fashion and status with the context of health and virtue created a custom that manifested many aspects of respectability. It connected status with a willingness to engage in a ritualistic, and not inexpensive, form of consumption displaying moral standing. Taking part in the tea-and-sugar custom showed that one had the self-control to consume sugar in a healthy way. Moreover, tea-taking could be represented as a morally sound alternative to drinking alcohol in company. The custom was consistent with respectable behavior: its physical equipment (tea services, china, and so forth) tended toward refinement on a small scale rather than an expensive, conspicuous display; it was a private, not a public, ritual, firmly seated in the home; and its notional justification (derived from the context of health) emphasized balance and moderation. Finally, the tea-and-sugar custom was socially flexible. Its costs prevented most people from engaging in it regularly in the eighteenth century, but they were not so great as to exclude anyone who might have a reasonable claim to deference from inferiors and respect from superiors.³⁷

The formation of respectability therefore helps to explain the continuously growing demand for tea and sugar in the eighteenth century and the fact that the tea-and-sugar custom did not disappear with variations in the fashion cycle. So deeply embedded was the custom in the culture of respectability that it could not go out of fashion, and an increase in the number of people who wanted to think themselves respectable brought an increase in demand for the commodities used in the rituals of respectability.

The reduction of tea duties in Britain in the 1780s made it possible for more people to take part in the tea-and-sugar ritual, but it did not create the desire to do so. Other factors were involved as well. In Britain, tea and sugar consumption was patriotic because it supported the British empire, whereas wine, coffee, and chocolate came from Britain's rivals.³⁸ But the newly

in the seventeenth century, they came, in the eighteenth century, to represent a person's status and moral standing (the latter manifested in cleanliness). See Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York, 1983), 192.

37 See Short, *Discourses*, 32. Much of the criticism of activities like tea-drinking focused on this characteristic, arguing that it undermined the social order. See Erasmus Jones, *Luxury, Pride and Vanity, the Bane of the British Nation* (London, 1736; 2d ed), 33.

38 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 114–115; Short, *Discourses*, 32.

formed culture of respectability was the most important context within which the consumption of tea and sugar expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Seen in this light, an examination of the tea-and-sugar custom is significant not just because of the historical impact of these products in themselves or because the subject requires the employment of novel approaches to interdisciplinary analysis, but also because of what it implies for the study of much larger topics. If, for example, the formation of the culture of respectability had such effects on the demand for tea and sugar, then it probably had similar effects on other products. Most of the material goods of the Industrial Revolution also had meanings within the context of respectability. Respectability itself is too complex a phenomenon to be described just as a secondary consequence of prior economic change or of some ineffable process of modernization. It is essential to find the means to analyze respectability, and similar constructions, as historical developments in their own rights.