



“Summary of article by Carole Shammas: Changes in English and Anglo-American Consumption from 1550-1800” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 122-125

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## **“Summary of article by Carole Shammas: Changes in English and Anglo-American Consumption from 1550-1800”**

Economic historians have usually been more interested in studying production than consumption. This "supply-side orthodoxy" has been challenged by historians of the early modern period (the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries), many of whom have focused on the role of consumption. For example, some historians suggest that the desire for newly available types of goods may have motivated early modern households to increase production for the market. However, history can only tell us who consumed what, not why.

There were important changes in household consumption patterns in the early modern period. This article examines two categories of goods: groceries (such as tobacco, sugar, and tea) and consumer durables. It seeks to determine when a mass market arose for these goods, and whether the availability of new products resulted in a structural change in expenditures.

### **CONSUMPTION OF GROCERIES IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA**

"Probably the most striking development in consumer buying during the early modern period was the mass adoption by the English and the colonials of certain non-European groceries." (178) In 1559, groceries accounted for 9% of the imports into England and Wales; at that time pepper was the major mass-consumed grocery, while no tobacco, tea, coffee, or chocolate came into London at all. Two centuries later, tobacco, sugar, and tea were widely consumed; by 1800, groceries comprised 35% of the imports into England and Wales.

Let us say that a grocery item is mass consumed when sales are sufficient for a quarter of the adult population (about one-sixth of the total population) to use it on a daily basis. One pipeful of tobacco daily adds up to about two pounds per year; likewise a daily cup of tea requires two pounds of tea leaves annually. Daily use of sugar to sweeten food or beverages might add up to 24 pounds of unrefined brown sugar annually. So when per capita use reached one-sixth of these levels, the groceries would meet the standard for mass consumption.

Tobacco was the first of the new groceries to reach mass consumption. Large-scale production and shipment of tobacco from the colonies started soon after settlement of the Chesapeake region. Legal imports into England and Wales jumped from 0.02 pounds per capita in 1630-31 to 0.93 pounds per capita in 1669; in addition, smuggling may have been significant, and tobacco was produced in England itself until the end of the seventeenth century. So it is likely that tobacco became a mass consumption item sometime in mid-century. English consumption

reached two pounds per capita before 1700, and did not rise much higher until the introduction of cigarettes, which were marketed to women as well as men, in the twentieth century.

Tobacco consumption data is scarce for the colonies, but is believed to have averaged between two and five pounds per person per year in the eighteenth century.

Sugar sales had a slower start, but continued to grow throughout the eighteenth century. Sugar imports reached four pounds per capita, the threshold for mass consumption, in the 1690s, and rose steadily to 24 pounds per capita a century later. Much of the imported sugar was refined, yielding both white sugar and molasses; the latter could be either directly consumed or turned into rum. The American colonists consumed less sugar, but much more rum and molasses, than the English: in 1770 the colonies imported 1.7 gallons of rum and three gallons of molasses per capita. In that year, England's sugar, molasses, and rum imports totaled 140 calories per capita per day, while the colonies' imports provided 260 calories per capita per day.

Tea imports from China began in the 1660s, but legal imports into England and Wales were still insignificant on a per capita basis at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Mass consumption levels were probably reached in the 1730s; the dates are somewhat in doubt since it appears that at least half of England's tea was smuggled into the country until the 1780s. Tea drinking was slower to spread in the colonies, but may have reached mass consumption levels, again assuming substantial smuggling, by the 1750s or 1760s. Coffee became more accessible to Americans after the break with Britain and the reorientation to trade with the coffee-drinking nations of continental Europe.

As sales expanded, prices dropped rapidly for all of these new groceries. Sugar eventually supplied almost as many calories per penny as meat or beer. So the changes in consumption habits may not have required extensive reallocation of household budgets.

## **CONSUMER DURABLES IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA**

Histories of the early modern period often describe a proliferation of durable consumer goods. However, as with groceries, little change in expenditure patterns was required: increasing quantities of goods were bought, but at declining prices; household expenditures, corrected for inflation, were remarkably constant.

Most of what we know about personal wealth and consumer goods comes from probate inventories, which were recorded until the 1730s in England, and the nineteenth century in America. In eight of the ten available studies of such inventories, spanning the entire early modern period, consumer goods account for one-fifth to one-third of personal wealth; the exceptions occur in the two wealthiest communities. In nine of the ten studies, the mean value of consumer goods in household inventories was between 19 and 35 pounds sterling (using constant English prices of 1660-74), with no clear trend over time. More than half of the consumer goods, in every case, consisted of bedding, linen, apparel, pewter and brass, and plate and jewelry.

If, as is sometimes suggested, household production gave way to paid labor outside the home in the early modern period, then there should be visible changes in the composition of household assets: production goods should decline in importance, and consumer goods should increase. In fact, after the sixteenth century, there is no evidence of such a trend.

In the absence of quantitative trends in ownership, how can we interpret the reports of proliferating ownership of consumer durables? One possibility is that probate inventories, recording only what was owned at the time of death, became increasingly inaccurate evidence of lifetime expenditure. As cloth became cheaper and less durable, for example, clothing and bedding would wear out and be replaced more often during a lifetime. Another possibility, quite compatible with the first, is that roughly constant expenditure nevertheless bought a rapidly increasing quantity of goods, as prices of most durables dropped throughout the early modern period.

### **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSUMERS**

Data from individual probate inventories within the 10 studies cited above can be used for a simple analysis of consumer behavior. A common model of the "traditional" consumer assumes that once basic needs have been met there is no further desire or use for additional consumer goods. "Modern" consumers, in contrast, are assumed to continue accumulating consumer goods as their incomes rise.

Statistical analysis of the ten sets of data on probate inventories shows no support for the traditional model. The wealth-elasticity of early modern consumer goods ownership falls between 0.6 and 0.7 in almost all cases, or between 0.4 and 0.6 if corrected for household size. The latter figures mean that, for every 10% increase in household wealth, there was a 4% to 6% increase in the value of consumer durables found in the inventories. As wealth rose, so did the household's stock of goods, consistent with the image of "modern" consumer behavior.

### **EVALUATING CONSUMER DEMAND IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD**

There were demonstrable changes in consumer demand in the early modern period within the two categories of groceries and consumer durables. Yet there is no evidence of a change in the proportion of income or wealth spent on either of these categories. Rather, declining prices allowed an expansion of quantities and types of goods consumed, within the context of roughly constant expenditures in each category. In this respect the early modern changes in consumption differ from the changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the proportion of household income spent on food declined sharply, and consumer durable spending correspondingly increased.