

STUDIES ON LUXURY CONSUMPTION

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CONSUMPTION IN THE PREINDUSTRIAL AND INDUSTRIAL PERIOD: A COMMENT ON RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES¹

We are what we eat, as traditional Indian medicine teaches us. Consumption – not only of food – is central for human life, and on the securing of consumption most of human activity is targeted. The length and the quality of life depends upon calories, proteins, vitamins, and living conditions. Moreover, the standard and style of consumption define an individual's and a family's position in society. Thus, any attempt to understand a society, whether past or present, requires knowledge of standards of living, of ways of securing survival and social reproduction, and of the cultural meanings of consumption. The specific research agenda changes, however, as it is influenced by new theories and methodologies, and also by the changing perceptions of what is important. Our sensitivities today are very much sharpened by the contrasts between the 'developed' and 'developing' worlds, and by the apparent contradictions between mind boggling technological progress and mass poverty. There are various reasons for an interest in the past, but one among them is a desire to understand the origins of the present. If so, it is necessary to analyze the past in terms of *longue durée*, overarching the 'traditional' and the 'modern' periods in a society's history, and to study it in a comparative way. The present remarks touch only a few points that seem important in this respect, starting with issues of a general character and then relating them to the state of knowledge on Polish history.

¹ This is a slightly extended version of an invited intervention at a symposium on 'European towns, market economy (institutions, society, the State)', a part of the 18th Congress of Polish Historians, Olsztyn, 16–19 Sept. 2010.

I

In 1729 Jonathan Swift published that famous satirical essay, *A Modest Proposal*, putting forward the idea that the new-born children which the poor were unable to feed should perhaps be sold for meat. Since these children were going to die of hunger anyway, why should not their death contribute to their families' budgets? Swift was reacting to a famine which Ireland was suffering from, an occurrence frequent at that time. His essay preceded by nearly six decades the famous work of Thomas Robert Malthus, published initially in 1798 and reworked later by the author through many subsequent editions. Malthus argued that the rise of population would always outpace the increase in the amount of food, and as a consequence the size of a given population inevitably would be reduced by famines, wars, and plagues. Nothing can be done about that, and in particular any help for the poor would be useless, as it might only lead to a temporary increase in well-being, inducing the poor to breed, and leading to an increase of population impossible to sustain. Malthus, who held one of the first chairs in political economy, argued against the Enlightenment belief in the idea of progress and in a similar way to his contemporary David Ricardo thought that economic growth (the term, of course, is of a later vintage) would lead to stagnation because of the workings of the law of diminishing returns.

Malthus' interpretation was not particularly popular among economists and historians leaning towards the Marxist paradigm, as they tried to explain the miserable conditions of the less fortunate social groups by class relations, exploitation, and surplus extraction. However, it gained a following in the second half of the twentieth century among at least two currents of thought – the Annales school and the neoclassical oriented economic historians. The authors of the 'third generation' of Annales tended, after Fernand Braudel, to conceptualize their units of analysis as *structures*, remaining basically unchanged in the *longue durée*, but 'respiring' (to quote Braudel words from his famous essay) in the shorter *temps de conjuncture*.² The first such structure that Braudel analyzed was the Mediterranean.

² Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Oxford, 1990); Fernand Braudel, 'Histoire et science sociale: La longue durée', *Annales E.S.C.*, xiii, 4 (1958), 725–53.

Later he embraced the whole *économie-monde*.³ For his more modest followers of the third generation, the units of observation were the large historical regions of France, about which they were writing their lengthy *thèses*. The variables observed in order to pinpoint the 'respiration' were prices, tithes, population statistics, and land tenancy/ownership characteristics. In perhaps the best of these work, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has shown how the rise of population had led to the parcelling out of land and to the rise of prices of food, and how a reversal of these processes worked.⁴ He generalized his interpretation in another famous essay, *L'histoire immobile*. There he put forward the concept of the 'social ecosystem'. The carrying capacity of the ecosystem limits the size of population, and the regulatory mechanism works in a cyclical way.⁵ Thus, in the very long run of the millennium preceding the industrial revolution it is possible to observe a rise in the European population until the fourteenth century, then a dramatic decline, to be followed by the next phase of increase until the seventeenth century, when it reached near stagnation, only to start to increase once again around the mid-eighteenth century.

The Malthusian model has also been developed by economic historians inspired by neoclassical economics. After the birth of new economic history (cliometrics) at the end of the 1950s, economic history migrated from the history to economics departments of American universities, becoming more and more quantitative, and more and more theory inspired. After the demise of the Marxist paradigm, never particularly strong among American economic historians, it was the neoclassical approach which gained the dominant position. Neoclassical economists show that while short-term growth depends upon additional inputs of factors of production (capital and labour), in the long run, as Malthus and Ricardo predicted, stagnation is unavoidable because of diminishing returns. Long-term growth is possible only due to innovations which increase the productivity of labour and/or capital. As long as the rate of innovation is low, any gains

³ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949); *idem*, *Civilisation matérielle, économie, et capitalisme*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1979).

⁴ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966).

⁵ *Idem*, 'L'histoire immobile', *Annales E.S.C.*, xxix, 3 (1974), 673–92.

of productivity are eaten up by the increase of population and society is caught up in the Malthusian trap. Only with industrial revolution does the rate of innovation increase, leading into the phase of 'modern economic growth'. Then the increase of *per capita* income, possible also due to the decrease in the birth rate allows a society to escape poverty.

Thus, according to Gregory Clark, the author of a recent widely discussed book on this topic, until the industrial revolution the average standard of living could not exceed that of the cavemen.⁶ Luxury consumption of the elite did not matter, as the elite was tiny. Neither did the exploitation of the lower classes, stressed so much by the Marxists. Any change in the social distribution of income benefiting the poor would lead to an increase in their numbers and would be followed by a decrease of *per capita* income and a return to abject poverty. The long-term improvement in the standard of living has been possible only with industrialization.

This is true as much within as across societies. Those which are still poor are so not because of exploitation, but because they have not been able to become parts of the modern industrial world. The neoclassical approach thus goes against the logic of analysis characteristic for the Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretation of the evolution of world economy, such as early twentieth-century theories of imperialism, as dependency theories of the 1950s and 1970s, and world-system theories of the 1970s.⁷ According to them, 'core' and 'periphery' are linked by the relation of dependency, working to the benefit of the core and the comprador bourgeoisie in the periphery due to the exploitation of the peripheral working class. Poverty in the periphery is thus explained by the Marxists and their followers in terms of class relations. The contemporary radical critics of globalization argue in a similar vein, for whom it works against the poor everywhere, and in particular in the less developed countries.

The neoclassical economists argue in a different way. According to them, the reason for poverty is not so much exploitation, as the fact that the less developed societies have still not managed to escape

⁶ Gregory Clark, *A Farwell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton, 2007).

⁷ Cf. in particular Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974).

the Malthusian trap. Thus, the first globalization (1870–1914) led to the convergence of real wages in the more affluent USA and poorer Europe.⁸ In the same way, present-day globalization offers more hopes than dangers.

The Malthusian line of interpretation in both of its versions – that of the Annales school and that of the neoclassical economists – predicts that no society before the industrial revolution could have achieved higher standards of living for any longer period. Even if there had been a temporary increase in productivity, sooner or later it would have been eaten up by the increase in population. The universal condition would be that of misery. And indeed, looking into the quantitative and qualitative studies of consumption in agrarian societies which have reached a certain density of population, one finds peasants getting energy mostly from poorly processed cereals and living a precarious life under constant fear of famines. In Braudel's accounts, their main staple is half-cooked gruel, bread being eaten on feasts and meat remaining a luxury.⁹ That having a full stomach and being fat constituted a peasant dream, is shown to us by Peter Breughel in his paintings. Indian peasants weighed about 40 kilograms as late as the interwar period. According to Robert Fogel, in the seventeenth century one-fourth of the European population consumed only as much as was necessary to be able to sustain metabolism, but not enough as to be able to work. Fogel contrasts this picture with America, where food was easy to obtain due to the abundance of fertile land. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the caloric surplus over what was necessary just to sustain life was, in the case of a Frenchman, 429 calories. In the case of an American, it was 2,313 calories.¹⁰

II

The overall pattern of the process of escape from the Malthusian trap is fairly well known, at least for 'the West'. In the second half of the eighteenth century an increase in food production can be noticed,

⁸ Kevin H. O'Rourke and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

⁹ Braudel, *Civilisation*, i.

¹⁰ Robert W. Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago, 2000), 76.

particularly in America, but also in Europe. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the world enters the era characterized by Simon Kuznets as 'modern economic growth', i.e. economic growth based on a systematic application of scientific knowledge to production.¹¹ Conventionally, the year 1820 is treated as the beginning of this epoch, as then the dust settled after the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars. Famines disappear, nutrition standards improve, and together with them the body mass index of the population. This is accompanied by a demographic transition, the decline of birth rates and the extension of life expectancy.

However, the general pattern is one thing, and the precise understanding of causal mechanisms is another. How exactly demography, food production and consumption, and industrialization relate to each other, is by no means crystal clear. Even less so is the question as to why certain countries were leaders in the escape from the Malthusian trap and why some others have barely managed to do this to this day. The detailed chronology of these processes in particular countries and regions is a matter of intensive research and there are debates concerning interdependencies between economy and demography.

For most societies, the process of escape extended for generations. Even when famines disappeared in the Western World about the mid nineteenth century, the life of the mass of people would still appear to us as being miserable. Today's basics – spacious, clean, warm, and well-lit dwellings, fresh water, efficient means of transportation – were luxuries available only to the few. These comforts acquire a mass character only in the twentieth century, first in the United States, and later in Europe. In his famous, although heavily criticized *Stages of Economic Growth* Walt W. Rostow takes mass motorization as an indicator of a society entering the stage of high mass consumption.¹²

The stage of high mass consumption is a product of efficient modern capitalism. However, our understanding of this system is limited. The modern, globalized economy is enormously complex, and despite the research of thousands of economists it still baffles us with such unpleasant surprises as the financial crisis of 2009. From

¹¹ Simon Kuznets, *Modern Economic Growth: Rate, Structure, and Spread* (New Haven, 1966).

¹² Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960).

the point of view of interest in consumption, however, one thing is certain: the modern economy is able to deliver an overabundance of industrial products, but in order to operate smoothly, it needs markets. That makes advertising and marketing indispensable: as technologies allow for the production of new goods, new needs have to be created.

How does it happen that some societies escape the Malthusian trap and achieve the stage of high mass consumption? This is one of the key issues for economic theory and economic history. Marxists have tried to conceptualize it in terms of a transition from feudalism to capitalism. The neoclassical economists and historians think in terms of rising total factor productivity, with one school stressing particularly the institutional change, and another stressing innovations. Despite over one hundred years of debate, there is no consensus; moreover, new developments – like the success of the ‘Asian Tigers’ in the 1970s, or of China today – puzzle the academic community, as these successes often go against earlier predictions.

III

In understanding the past, the qualitative is as important as the quantitative. A historian’s role is similar to that of an anthropologist, who studies a culture that differs from his/her own one. A historian as much as an anthropologist strives at *understanding*, at grasping the *meanings* in all kinds of situations he or she is encountered with in the course of research. Moreover, both the anthropologist’s and the historian’s role is that of explaining the findings to his/her own contemporaries. Thus, history as much as anthropology is both a science and an art. There are various practical skills a historian has to master to be able to immerse himself/herself in the epoch under study, but if he or she stops at that, the outcome of the effort shall be useful, but dull. There is a need for empathy, to a degree possible, a need for an effort to put oneself in the position of those under study, to see the world through their eyes, to share their feelings. But there is also a need for an empathy of another sort, with the contemporary audience, to whom the historian’s work is addressed. The work must be accurate, but it also should be persuasive. Few achieve these ambitious goals, but those who manage leave behind them masterpieces of historical writing.

Consumption in the past is, for our generation, a difficult topic precisely because it is so hard to imagine what it would mean to live in a Malthusian world, in a society constantly threatened by hunger and famine. We live in a postindustrial world of overabundance, symbolized even in central Europe by these new temples of consumption, the shopping malls. The youngest among us can hardly recollect the communist economy of shortages. Only a few remember the real poverty of war and immediate post-war times. Few of us can imagine the everyday life of hunger, cold, darkness, dirt, and cramped living quarters. As Peter Berger observed, it is difficult to think about a world without dentists, in which the experience of toothache, or lack of teeth, is normal.¹³ On the other hand, if we were to be transferred somehow into the past, we would probably perceive these unpleasant conditions as much more painful than the people of the epoch, precisely because it would be difficult for them to imagine a different world.

Many of these tribulations were shared in the past not solely by the large mass of the poor, but also by the rich minority, and this was the case for as long as the middle of the nineteenth century. It is enough to mention the complaints of the Polish aristocrat and poet Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859), a man of considerable wealth, about the numerous inconveniences and sufferings related to travelling.¹⁴ Another good example is the material side of life in the Polish country manors in the mid nineteenth century, where cold and dampness were ever present except for the summer months.¹⁵ Thus, in short it is possible to say that the preindustrial world knew luxury quite well, but hardly knew comfort.

In contrast to the Malthusian world, most of the people in highly developed and middle income countries today live in comfort. I would like to define comfort here as much as possible in a physical sense – as a lack of hunger, as moderate temperature and humidity within the human environment, as an absence of pain, dampness, overcrowding, fear, *etc.* The perception of comfort locates itself on the borderland of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Most probably toothache or the physical

¹³ Peter L. Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions about Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty* (New York, 1986).

¹⁴ Antoni Mączak, *Życie codzienne w podróżach po Europie w XVI i XVII wieku* (Warsaw, 1978), 14–15.

¹⁵ Elżbieta Kowecka, *W salonie i w kuchni. Opowieść o kulturze materialnej pałaców i dworów polskich w XIX w.* (Warsaw, 1984).

sensation of rheumatism is the same for people of different times and cultures, but the overall perception of them might differ, as today people are less fatalistic about such ailments than before the availability of modern medicine and painkillers became prevalent.

Rich people in the past, like for instance the Roman patricians, could secure themselves a considerable degree of comfort. However, it was obtained at a very high price, and at a considerable labour input of domestic service. Thus comfort in the past was a luxury as well, and aside of its pleasant physical aspects its availability was a sign of social prestige. (To a degree, it is a case even today, as very rich persons can evade the overcrowding of air travel and beach resorts due to their private jets and secluded residences.) On the continuum extending between the opposing poles of 'natural' (physical) and 'cultural', comfort is closer to the former, and luxury to the latter. The social function of luxury is symbolical, its aim is to show the special role and character of individuals and groups living in such a way. Luxury remains a luxury only as long as it is accessible for the few, and in this respect not much has changed since the dawn of agrarian civilizations. A Rolls Royce, a beach property, a private jet or a private island are today's equivalents of a palace or a carriage and six. However, in some respects, the rich of the past were in a better situation than those at present. First, the former could legally forbid lower classes to dress or to behave in a way that would blur social distinctions. In the contemporary liberal democracies of equality before the law this is no longer possible. Second, in the contemporary democratic and often populist societies, the display of luxury and ostentatious consumption is received with mixed feelings by the public at large. As long as it is the glamour of movie stars or rock musicians, it is accepted. This is not the case, however, with public officials, and even business tycoons are being questioned for their mindboggling salaries when at the same time the corporations they manage are in the red. The rich of the past might have enjoyed showing off their splendour to the rest of the society. Our rich, living in their secluded residential areas, are condemned on impressing their own kind.

Thus, luxury consumption is a fascinating topic of research because it is about glamour, ambitions, often also the fine arts at their best. It is also fascinating because of the by far not easy interpretation of luxury's precise social function. A standard interpretation, dating from Max Weber counterpoises feudal luxury and an early capitalism

asceticism as allowing for capitalist accumulation. The story of Florentine patrician families shows, however, a possibility of combining a par excellence capitalist activity (long-distance trade and banking) with a conspicuous consumption of a 'feudal' character. The successful bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth century not always lived in a particularly ascetic way – quite the contrary, these people often imitated the aristocracy and attempted to manifest their economic success through conspicuous consumption. During the Gilded Age, American capitalists went to their utmost to overshadow their peers, in the way Scott Fitzgerald has shown in *The Great Gatsby*. Thus, while the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was replacing the aristocracy, it also attempted to follow the latter's style of life. Balzac, in his novel *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau* shows how too much of such ambitions could lead to a bourgeois family's demise.

IV

So what about Polish history within this context? It seems that we know a lot about the consumption patterns of the elite and their cultural meanings. This knowledge increases systematically.¹⁶ There is more of a problem with the general standards of living. The great days of Polish economic history, particularly of the preindustrial period, were from the late 1550s through to the 1670s. Much work had been done on the standards of living by the historians of material culture, together with a large body of research on agrarian relations and on the standards of living in towns. Many of these earlier studies were leaning, however – consciously or unconsciously – towards the Marxist paradigm, according to which explanations were to be found in terms of class-like relations between lords and peasants, and the modernization process in terms of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The decrease in the peasant standard of living was explained mostly

¹⁶ Cf. for instance Urszula Augustyniak (ed.), *Administracja i życie codzienne w dobrach Radziwiłłów XVI–XVIII wieku* (Warsaw, 2009); *eadem*, *Dwór i klientela Krzysztofa Radziwiłła (1585–1640). Mechanizmy patronatu* (Warsaw, 2001); *eadem*, *W służbie hetmana i Rzeczypospolitej. Klientela wojskowa Krzysztofa Radziwiłła (1585–1640)* (Warsaw, 2004); Janusz Kurtyka, *Latyfundium tęczyńskie. Dobra i właściciele (XIV–XVII wiek)* (Cracow, 1999); *idem*, 'Posiadłość, dziedziczność i prestiż. Badania nad późnośredniowieczną i wczesnonowożytną wielką własnością możnowładczą w Polsce XIV–XVII wieku', *Roczniki Historyczne*, lxiv (1999), 161–94.

as a result of the manors' seizure of peasant land to increase estate farms (*folwark*), and rarely as a consequence of demographic pressure. Historical demography had only begun at that time, and it is difficult to point at works that would systematically examine the relations between population increase and the standards of living.¹⁷ Thus, it is difficult to answer the question as to whether Polish economic history fits well into the Malthusian model of preindustrial economic growth. This is a task for the next generation of economic historians. But in order to stand up to this challenge, they would have to avoid one of the pitfalls of Polish economic history writing, which is a tendency for too much period specialization. The typical product is a period-specific monograph, the result being that we are left with a series of snapshots making the analysis of long-term evolution difficult.

A similar problem is with the transition to the modern industrial epoch without famines and to the postindustrial epoch of high mass consumption: we know the overall pattern, but lack the knowledge concerning important details, which makes placing Poland's past into the broader context difficult. In the nineteenth century, the Polish lands followed the modernization process. Although we do not have complete long-term series for agricultural output, we know that it was rising, for there was a population increase. The increase in population within the three areas of partition was almost fourfold during the nineteenth century and there was also a *per capita* increase in consumption. For instance, detailed research by Tadeusz Sobczak shows that the so called minimal nutritional needs were covered in 1810 by less than 50 and in 1910 by over 100 per cent.¹⁸ As nutrition improved, the average height of conscripts had increased, between the 1860s and 1913 by 3 cm.¹⁹ A good micro example of the escape

¹⁷ Neither is it systematically addressed by the otherwise excellent comprehensive treatment of the preindustrial demography of Poland by Cezary Kukło, *Demografia Rzeczypospolitej przedrozbiorowej* (Warsaw, 2009). For a recent research on the relations between epidemics and demography, see Andrzej Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne* (Warsaw, 2000).

¹⁸ Tomasz Sobczak, *Przełom w konsumpcji spożywczej w Królestwie Polskim w XIX wieku* (Wrocław, 1968).

¹⁹ Michał Kopczyński, *Wielka transformacja: badania nad uwarstwieniem społecznym i standardem życia w Królestwie Polskim 1866–1913 w świetle pomiarów antropometrycznych poborowych* (Warsaw, 2006).

from the Malthusian world is a detailed study of one village in south-east Poland, Husów, conducted by Wincenty Styś. On the basis of land registers, maps, and interviews he showed that over about one hundred fifty years the population rose threefold (which led to a dramatic decrease in the average farm), but output rose nine times due to improved technology and cultivation techniques. This had eliminated famines already by the mid nineteenth century and allowed for a considerable improvement in the standard of living, although the village remained very poor through the 1930s, when the research was conducted.²⁰ Poland also underwent an intensive process of industrialization and urbanization, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, also in this respect we lack aggregate estimates of output.

The lack of aggregate quantification of the process of modern economic growth results in our limited ability to answer one of the fundamental questions, related to the long-term process of modernization of the Polish lands: was the relative gap between Poland and the West widening during the nineteenth and twentieth century? The Marxist/imperialist theories predicted that the development of capitalism would petrify the distance between the 'core' and the 'periphery'. The neoclassical interpretation predicts otherwise – as technologies related to modern economic growth spread, various regions of the world converge in terms of GDP *per capita* and real wages. In speaking about the aggregate (or at least the representative) quantitative data, a traditional historian would often say: in the Polish case, we do not have sources on the basis of which such quantifications could be made. Perhaps this is true. But much of the economic history of other countries is based upon estimates, so perhaps following this way is possible, even if the results are tentative.

²⁰ Wincenty Styś, *Drogi postępu gospodarczego wsi. Studium szczegółowe na przykładzie zbiorowości próbnej wsi Husowa* (Wrocław, 1947).