Consumerism and Environmental Problems in the French and English Caribbean islands in the eighteenth century – a study of the connections between the two trends

The purpose of the proposed research is to study the connection between the emergence of consumerism and environmental problems in the French and English Caribbean islands in the eighteenth century.

The relationship between consumption and the environment has received much attention in today’s debate on environmental problems. The emergence of consumerism in Western Europe can be dated to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Incidentally, this was also a time when the “environmental question” became more prominent in the general debate and environmental problems began to attract attention, partly as a result of experiences in Europe’s tropical island colonies. Although considerable research has been devoted to the history of both these phenomena, there are few studies which in depth investigate the connections between them. The connections, when perceived, are taken for granted without further problematization. The proposed study is motivated by the assumption that it is a complex development which can be observed already in early modern colonial societies.

One of the early indications of consumerism was the growing market for sugar in Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century. During the same period, a significant increase in consumption, both in Europe and in the Caribbean, is concurrent with rapidly deteriorating environments in the Caribbean, particularly the “sugar islands”. Therefore, it may be of interest to examine the relationship between consumption and the “environmental question” in the eighteenth century Caribbean.

The desire to consume was hardly anything new. All human life presupposes some degree of consumption. However, the desire to acquire goods one does not necessarily need was not as widespread (or even existing) in pre-modern societies as it would become in modern times. Firstly, luxury consumption has for the most part of history been the privilege of the elites. Secondly, poverty and the inability to extract and utilize resources prevented the emergence of consumerism. Furthermore, traditional value systems condemning consumption did not provide a fertile ground for consumerism. With increasing prosperity, new technological advancements and more secular value systems a new development began.

Historians who study eighteenth century Europe often point at the desire to emulate the aristocracy and the upper classes. It might be fair to assume that the colonies were similar in this respect. According to Stearns the American colonies participated in the

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development towards a more consumerist culture, but with some delay. However, there are indications that the Caribbean sugar islands may in fact have been pioneers in matters of consumption.

The Caribbean is a highly interesting area for those who study global networks, as well as those interested in the relation between consumerism and the environment. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Caribbean was incorporated into the international trade network, the “world system” the core of which was constituted by the European colonial powers. As a broader range of exotic products such as tobacco and sugar became available, European consumption patterns changed. The growth of markets and buying power in Europe stimulated investments in sugar plantations and created a wealthy class of planters on sugar islands such as Barbados, Jamaica and Saint Domingue.

Lucille Mathurin has observed that, in West Indian Society, “the black woman produced, the brown woman served and the white woman consumed”. Richard Dunn has shown that the wealthy planter class developed a luxurious lifestyle and relied on a variety of imported goods including wines, furniture, and fashionable clothing. However, most people – tradesmen, servants, slaves, indigenous people – led very different lives with different consumption patterns.

While the wealthy planters might be expected to be great consumers, the new attitudes towards luxury consumption by the end of the seventeenth century also encouraged luxury consumption among the lower classes. For instance Thomas Tryon, a hatter who was based in Barbados in the late seventeenth century, was convinced that the free circulation of trade, better wages for laborers, tradesmen and workers, and a higher level of consumption was the best way to increase wealth and stimulate the economy. A topical question to ask is whether these ideas were put into practice. In addition, a study into the consumption patterns of the different groups or classes would be interesting to combine with research into how they contributed to the various activities in sugar cane agriculture which transformed the natural environment. Finally, there is the question of slaves as consumers.

Apart from working long days on the sugar plantations, the slaves had a life of their own, not always known to the planters. Some plantations provided the slaves with small provision grounds where they could grow food in their free time. They worked in their gardens, kept animals and sold or exchanged their produce at public Sunday markets. Indeed, there was an extensive economic system of which the authorities had little

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6 The Caribbean includes all of the islands which extend through the Caribbean Sea from the tip of the Florida Peninsula to the northern coast of South America. The present study concentrates on English, French and Danish sugar islands. The English islands were Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, Nevis, Montserrat, St. Christophers, and St Vincent, owned by both Britain and France. The French islands were Grenada, Guadaloupe, Martinique, St. Barthelemy, Saint Domingue (formally 1697), and St. Lucia. The Danish islands were St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John.
7 Lucille Mathurin, The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies During Slavery (Kingston, 1975)
8 Richard S. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves: The rise of the planter class in the English West Indies 1624-1713 (London, 1973)
10 Thomas Tryon, England’s Grandeur and Way to get Wealth: Or Promotion of Trade Made easy, and Lands advanced (1699).
knowledge of. Thus, not only tradesmen, artisans and freed slaves, but also the slaves had the means to obtain goods either by paying for them or through exchange.

What did early modern consumers in the Caribbean “sugar islands” buy? How much were they influenced by European fashion in clothing, food and drink? Did the consumption patterns of the planter class spill over to the other groups? How did the tropical climate shape the development of Caribbean material culture? These questions will be investigated by studying travel accounts, diaries, plantation records and newspapers.

The colonies were subject to hard exploitation which was felt particularly on islands, limited areas where changes in the environment quickly became visible. As a result of colonisation, the Caribbean islands were, by the eighteenth century, no longer the same islands that for centuries had been inhabited first by the Arawaks and the Caribs. This change had been brought about by the activities of the European colonial powers which used the islands to produce tobacco, cotton, ginger, indigo and, above all, sugar. The rapid transformation of the Caribbean islands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is one dimension of a development towards a new global consumer oriented culture. Not only did it affect people and power relations, but it also transformed ecosystems and landscapes.

With growing economic interests and regular traffic, visiting the Caribbean colonies became a customary voyage to a known place on the map, different from Europe but part of the same world. Not only material products but also ideas, fashions and cultural expressions traveled through the various networks that were created in early modern times. Examining the different levels of these networks could result in new knowledge about early modern material culture and the history of ideas.

The research will result in two articles which explore different aspects of the relationship between humans and nature in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century Caribbean “sugar islands”. In addition, there will be two articles focusing on the emergence of consumerism in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century Caribbean. These two trends are combined in a fifth article which studies the interrelations between them. The five articles will then be reworked into a book manuscript in 2010.