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**A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW  
OF THE STUDY OF CONSUMPTION WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION  
TO THE SOUTH-EASTERN BALTIC SEA REGION**

“There was a consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England. More men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. [...] Objects which were once acquired as the result of inheritance at best came to be the legitimate pursuit of a whole new class of consumers.”<sup>1</sup>

Without discussing this provocative statement that initiated many fruitful contributions to the study of Early Modern consumption<sup>2</sup> or terminological shortcomings<sup>3</sup>, we should take note of one fundamental notion. Starting with this statement by Neil McKendrick, scholars began to see that customers demanding goods had to be taken into consideration even before the Industrial Revolution occurred. Primarily in England and the United States but also elsewhere, as historians could demonstrate in the 1980s and 1990s, people started to acquire certain goods in the

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<sup>1</sup> N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, J. H. Plumb (eds.): *Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington 1982, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fundamental critique to McKendrick's line of argument, which rest on the notion of social emulation, has been outlined by, for example, C. Campbell: *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Oxford 1987.

<sup>3</sup> One point of critique emphasizes that no coherent terminology for certain crucial, some would say exclusively modern terms, such as “consumer revolution”, “consumer society”, “mass consumption” or “consumerism” has been defined. For a detailed critique see: J. Styles: *Manufacturing, Consumption and Design in Eighteenth-Century England*, in: J. Brewer, R. Porter (eds.): *Consumption and the World of Goods*, London 1993, pp. 527–554.

latter part of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries which had not been purchased before.<sup>4</sup>

While it is impossible to outline the entire scope of this blossoming field of research<sup>5</sup>, we will read about some important studies and approaches of the study of consumption; in a brief interlude we will discover why German scholarship was reserved at first to engage in this field of research. Then we will see what scholars of the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region have contributed to understanding of Early Modern consumption. Eventually a short suggestion will be made about how further research could be conducted.

As already written above, scholars of the Early Modern period began to understand that a transformation of purchasing and spending habits had been possible prior to the Industrial Revolution. Machines that would produce loads of goods at a low price were not, as earlier historians wanted us to believe, a precondition to shape a society with more than just elite consumption. Famous *Annales* historians such as Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, among others, may serve as an example for an earlier work. To the *Annales* of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, transitions were principally of economic origin influencing social conditions thereafter. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the *Annales* for a quarter of a century after World War II, observed historical change as very slow and embedded in deep social structures. History was perceived as *immobile*<sup>6</sup> and *concentrated on the idea of the longue durée*<sup>7</sup>, which suggested that consumption did not transform much since the economy did not change either. *Annales* scholars did not neglect the study of consumption but, as the terms *immobile* and *longue durée* implicitly argue, it did not decisively change throughout the Early Modern period.

Opposing these deep-rooted structures and intending to prove a demand-driven interpretation of history, historians, such as Daniel Roche, Lorena S. Walsh

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<sup>4</sup> P. Earle: *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1989 and C. Shammas: *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*, Oxford 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Just consult the two following volumes for the research performed in the 1980s and 90s: J. Brewer, R. Porter (eds.): *Consumption and the World of Goods*, London–New York 1993 and C. Carson, R. Hoffman, P. Albert (eds.): *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, Charlottesville 1994.

<sup>6</sup> E. Le Roy Ladurie: *Les Paysans de Languedoc*, Paris 1966.

<sup>7</sup> F. Braudel: *Histoire e sciences sociales: la longue durée*, “*Annales ESC*”, 13, 1958, pp. 725–53.

and Lorna Weatherill<sup>8</sup>, applied quantitative research methods by using estate inventories. They demonstrated a steadily rising consumption of certain household goods before the Industrial Revolution. These goods could be tea cups or pieces of furniture or clothing and were often connected with changing lifestyles. An obvious example would be tea drinking in England for which certain utensils – tea cup and saucers, tea pots etc. – were needed.

It soon became clear that a relatively large population segment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries purchased decisively more than earlier generations. In order to be able to explain this development, historians, influenced by sociology and anthropology<sup>9</sup>, started to see objects as signs. And these signs could communicate messages that inspired people of moderate wealth to purchase these objects. Historians could also show that people started to think differently about luxury objects. They were no longer perceived as ostentatious, arrogant and pretentious toys of the wealthy few. Now luxury objects that would no longer cost a ruinous fortune communicated gentility, hospitality, sociality and refinement. Drinking a cup of tea or coffee no longer meant consuming a hot, disgusting and exotic beverage no one else could afford but a family-constituting appointment during the day or a social event of like-minded epicures.<sup>10</sup>

German scholars started contributing seriously to the study of consumption not until well into the 1990s, while studies on the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region began even later. But this has, as far as the author can tell, nothing to do with the opening of archives or having the freedom to ask and answer questions without paying attention to a determined writing of history.<sup>11</sup>

Probably it did not start earlier because the results of consumption studies are often based on what we could call “soft” facts and methods. How could one prove why and how eighteenth-century consumers suddenly started to control the market by demanding goods? It is difficult to reveal the psyche and the intentions

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<sup>8</sup> Here are some important examples: D. Roche: *La culture des apparences. Essai sur l'Histoire du vêtement aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris 1989; L. G. Carr, L. S. Walsh: *Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake*, in: C. Carson, R. Hoffman, P. Albert (eds.): op. cit., pp. 59–166 and L. Weatherill: *Consumer Behaviour & Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760*, London 1996.

<sup>9</sup> M. Douglas, B. Isherwood: *The World of Goods*, New York 1979 and P. Bourdieu: *La distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement*, Paris 1979.

<sup>10</sup> W. D. Smith: *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800*, New York–London 2002.

<sup>11</sup> This line of argument would not make much sense because not only East-Germany historians ignored this topic. Also West-German scholars made no attempt to contribute to the study of Early Modern consumption.

of those people who lived 300 years ago without applying anthropological and sociological theories. These theories, however, are at times hard to translate into a certain period of the past and sources are often relatively limited. It is probably this not relying on “hard” facts and methods that kept traditional German scholarship away until the 1990s.

We should have a look at what has been done for the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region, although it needs to be said how this region could be defined around 1700. While it would not make sense to rigidly construct an area, it does help to define an area for research purposes. In this paper the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region is defined by the cities in the immediate area of the Baltic Sea starting with Stralsund, Greifswald, Szczecin, continuing with Gdansk and Riga and ending with contemporary Tallinn.

One of the initial contributions was an essay collection by Michael North and Martin Krieger called *Land und Meer*.<sup>12</sup> Therein we can find many fruitful papers to the cultural exchange between Western Europe and the Baltic Sea Region. One focus, for example, is architecture and art. Here Michał Warczyński, Anna Oleńska, Edmund Kizik and Maciej Maksymowicz, among others<sup>13</sup>, presented the close connection between Western Europe – here especially the Netherlands – and the Southern Baltic Sea Region. They underline the importance of Gdansk and its role as an agent of Western European art and architecture by using a variety of sources such as auction and collection catalogues, pattern books and newspaper advertisements. If we wanted to rephrase this finding within the study of consumption, we could say that there existed a demand for a variety of objects in the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region which could be met by trading with economically advanced territories.

In the same volume, Jörg Driesner and Robert Riemer applied quantitative research methods on the basis of estate inventories from the Estonian city of Tallinn. More precisely, they used some 80 inventories of Tallinn merchants to illustrate the existing demand and consumption of mirrors and paintings. They succeeded in demonstrating that these merchants owned these goods throughout

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<sup>12</sup> M. Krieger, M. North (Hgg.): *Land und Meer. Kultureller Austausch zwischen Westeuropa und dem Ostseeraum in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2004.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–128.

the eighteenth century. Moreover, they could conclude that German and Dutch material culture was transferred to Estonia.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of cultural transfer loomed large in the study of consumption in the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region. In a comparative research project, again, Jörg Driesner looked at consumption and transfer patterns in Copenhagen, Stralsund and Riga during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among a variety of valuable results, he could reveal that at first Italian and French objects were purchased while later Dutch and English material objects were commonly to be found in all three towns. That finding allowed him to maintain that the Southern Baltic Sea Region was a relatively homogenous cultural region. A point of particular interest is that the consumption of material objects was rising throughout the end of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Another study that proved the statement that the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region was well-connected to Western European countries is Corina Heß's work on Gdansk in which she analyzed the standard of living in private homes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the basis of estate inventories. She could show that the number of rooms was rising and that the rooms were getting increasingly better furnished. She could, moreover, portray Gdansk as a place of lively cross-cultural contact where nonetheless a similar material culture prevailed.<sup>16</sup>

We could see that the consumer studies of the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region used quantitative analyses of estate inventories, auction catalogues, pattern books, newspaper articles especially in the context of cultural contact and transfer. This is probably the case because of the relatively recent economic and political European developments. In a Europe where travelling is easy and economic exchange and trade is flourishing the knowledge about cultural contact in a pre-national context is pivotal.

Very generally, we can say that Baltic Sea trade, which directly or indirectly included many ethnic groups, was a booming field of the global economy in the eighteenth century. Goods that were in heavy demand could be imported relatively easily from the Netherlands, England or elsewhere. Thus it makes sense to

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<sup>14</sup> R. Riemer, J. Driesner: *Spiegel und Bilder in den Nachlaßinventaren deutscher Kaufleute in Reval im 18. Jahrhundert*, in: M. Krieger, M. North (Hgg.): op. cit., pp. 165–198.

<sup>15</sup> J. Driesner: *Frühmoderne Alltagswelten im Ostseeraum: Materielle Kultur im Stralsund, Kopenhagen und Riga. Drei Regionen im Vergleich*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2011.

<sup>16</sup> C. Heß: *Danziger Wohnkultur in der Frühen Neuzeit: Untersuchungen zu Nachlassinventaren des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2007.

study the consumer behaviour of moderately wealthy people in a region that has often been said to be rather pre-modern than modern.

However, although some work has been done over the last decade, especially in portraying the Baltic Sea Region as an economic and cultural unit<sup>17</sup>, more research is needed. We do not yet know how consumers perceived material objects and how they identified themselves with them.<sup>18</sup> Very fruitful sources are individual documents, such as diaries, travel accounts etc., as well as newspaper advertisements. With the help of these sources, one could analyze how consumers located themselves and others within society because of their consumer behaviour. Research on the consumption on the basis of the sources mentioned could shed light on the three following hypotheses:

*First Hypothesis:* People of the South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region could consume on a relatively high level. They wanted to consume more because they could and did not face social or moral prejudices. People's social environment fostered individual purchasing decisions.

*Second Hypothesis:* In newspapers more and more differentiated consumer goods were advertised in a more sophisticated way by the end of the eighteenth century than in the middle of this century. Judgements about consumer goods or behaviours will be detectable and thus it is possible to see how certain goods were perceived in the eighteenth century.

*Third Hypothesis:* The social behaviour of the wealthy people observed in individual documents is described in a way that active willingness and awareness of acquiring novelties existed. The social behaviour throughout the region tends to be the similar with only regional or cultural differences.

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<sup>17</sup> M. North: *Geschichte der Ostsee: Handel und Kultur(en)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2011.

<sup>18</sup> One of few examples of how to approach this topic would be: idem: *Nationale und kulturelle Selbstverortung in der Diaspora: Die Deutschen in den russischen Ostseeprovinzen des 18. Jahrhunderts*, in: G. Schmidt (Hg.): *Die deutsche Nation im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, München 2010, pp. 83–96.

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**PRZEGLĄD HISTORIOGRAFICZNY BADAŃ NAD KONSUMPCJĄ  
ZE SZCZEGÓLNYM UWZGLĘDNIENIEM  
POŁUDNIOWO-WSCHODNIEGO REJONU MORZA BAŁTYCKIEGO**

**Streszczenie**

Badania nad konsumpcją na podstawie źródeł wymienionych w artykule mogą rzucić światło na trzy poniższe hipotezy:

Hipoteza pierwsza. Konsumpcja ludności południowo-wschodniego rejonu Morza Bałtyckiego była na stosunkowo wysokim poziomie. Ludzie chcieli konsumować więcej, ponieważ było ich na to stać, nie widzieli też ku temu społecznych czy moralnych przeciwwskazań. Środowisko społeczne sprzyjało podejmowaniu indywidualnych decyzji o zakupach.

Hipoteza druga. Pod koniec XVIII wieku gazety reklamowały w bardziej wyszukany sposób liczniejsze i bardziej zróżnicowane dobra konsumenckie niż w połowie tego stulecia. Możliwe jest wyśledzenie oceny dóbr i zachowań konsumenckich, co sprawia, że możemy zobaczyć, jak pewne produkty były postrzegane w XVIII wieku.

Hipoteza trzecia. Zachowania społeczne zamożnych obywateli, widoczne w poszczególnych dokumentach, wskazują na istnienie świadomości i chęci posiadania nowości. Zachowania społeczne w całym regionie były do siebie zbliżone, występowały jedynie lokalne i kulturowe różnice.