Colonial Produce and New Modes of Consumption

Éric Schnakenbourg

An essential part of daily life, coffee, chocolate, and tobacco were extremely popular products in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. European consumer demand was the defining element of the Atlantic economy at that time. The consumption of exotic foodstuffs had important sociological and cultural consequences by becoming constituent elements of the consumer's identity.

Even if an individual had never left the town or village in which they were born, the European consumer was one of the key players in the Atlantic interconnection. If the search for a passage to China, the quest for gold, or the desire to evangelize indigenous populations were the initial reasons for colonization in America, very quickly came the desire to produce for the European market. Colonial foodstuffs were not, for the most part, consumed locally but exported to pay for purchases of manufactured goods from mainland Europe. The taste for exoticism had existed in Europe since the Middle Ages, and oriental spices, like pepper, were already the subject of transcontinental trade. They arrived in small quantities and were very expensive, so only a small elite had access to them. However, things changed from the 16th century onwards. A new range of products was circulating in Europe, in large quantities, which, over time, led to a change in consumer habits, even in working class circles. The consumption of colonial produce was not only a question of gastronomic curiosity, but also a sociological and cultural phenomenon.

The taste for exotic products

Exotic drinks began to spread throughout Europe from the early 16th century. Chocolate first arrived in Spain circa 1520, and Chinese tea in the Netherlands in the first decade of the 17th century, preceding Arabian coffee by a few years. The 18th century was the great century of European consumption of these drinks: it increased six-and-a-half fold for chocolate, forty-fold for tea, and sixty-fold for coffee.

While in Mexico chocolate was part of religious rituals, it was a pleasurable drink in Europe. Restricted to Spain for most of the 16th century, it spread to the Netherlands before arriving in France and England in the mid-17th century. It was first used as a curative and in cosmetics. In France, it became popular amongst the aristocracy thanks to Queen Marie-Thérèse, the Spanish wife of Louis XIV. Consumed in solid form from the 1770s onwards, it became a delicacy that

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became increasingly widespread throughout the 19th century thanks to the development of the chocolate industry. The history of coffee is significantly different, as the plant originated in Ethiopia before being transported to Yemen where it was grown. The rapid popularity of this drink prompted the development of coffee plantations in Brazil and the French West Indies in the early 18th century. Apart from England, Europe had begun to drink coffee. By the late 1780s, the average consumption of coffee in Paris was 1.8 kg/inhabitant, far ahead of chocolate, 170 g/inhabitant. The 19th century did not break this momentum and European consumption increased tenfold at this time.

The colonial commodity that had the widest distribution was unquestionably sugar. It was associated with bitter drinks (chocolate, tea, coffee) and was used in baking. In the mid-17th century, it was still a semi-luxury product before spreading widely thanks to the twenty-three-fold increase in European imports between 1670 and 1780. The growth in sugar consumption corresponded to a change in European cuisine with the decline of spicy flavours in favour of sweet flavours for cakes, creams, jams, lemonades, syrups, sorbets, and other confectionery. The development of sugar consumption led to the establishment of sugar refineries. There were some eighty in France in the mid-18th century and practically all European countries had sugar refineries. England was by far the largest European market. On average, four times more sugar was consumed here per inhabitant than on mainland Europe in 1680, and eight times more in 1800. Tobacco was the other highly successful tropical product. While at the beginning of the 16th century, French West Indian tobacco was still a rare product, the rise of Virginian production allowed the price to fall, resulting in its distribution amongst working-class milieus from the 17th century onwards. Advertisements boasted of its beneficial health effects: tobacco enjoyed the flattering reputation of protecting the body from atmospheric infections.

The European consumption of colonial produce was not limited to food, and extended to textile production as here too, there was a strong demand. Pigments from America, such as indigo, cochineal, annatto, and brazilwood, not only made it possible to vary the colours available to consumers, but also to have blue and red dyes of better quality and at cheaper prices. The importation of acacia gum from southern Mauritania and northern Senegal made it possible to properly fix the colours, particularly in dyed cotton fabrics whose chromatic intensity was more resistant to the passage of time.

The consumption of colonial products was not just a matter of individual greed or a simple desire for attractive goods, but also a social phenomenon.

The culture of consumption of colonial products

The distribution of food products from distant lands was a process of acceptance, adaptation, and ultimately, integration. Their arrival on markets may have provoked reluctance from the medical profession because of the dangers they could potentially pose to health or because of moral and economic criticism. For example, the penchant for sugar was associated with sweets and symbolized the transition from subsistence food to pleasurable food, even evoking one of the seven deadly sins: gluttony. In the 17th century, the European aristocracy began to appreciate the new colonial drinks, in particular chocolate, the price of which remained high. Above all, chocolate tasting was a moment of social valorisation, where the consumer could showcase their refinement and good taste.
In the early 1670s, coffee was still reserved for the elites because it had to be imported from the Arabian Peninsula. However, its price fell in the 17th century thanks to the rise of American production, notably in Saint-Domingue. First sold by itinerant merchants dressed in the Turkish style, coffee and exotic drinks were gradually consumed in reputable venues. Cafés first developed in the major cities of Western Europe, like London in 1652, and Amsterdam in 1663. In Paris, the first establishments opened their doors in the 1670s. The Café de la Place du Palais-Royal or Le Procope became upper-class venues, open to women. They served different types of coffee, chocolate, and lemonade. The number of cafés continued to grow: there were 380 in Paris in 1720 and over 600 at the end of the century. The gradual establishment of cafés in medium-sized towns, in small towns and even rural areas, as well as in countries with little involvement in Atlantic trade, like Sweden and Switzerland, attests to this enthusiasm for exotic drinks, especially coffee.

The consumption of such goods was at the origin of important sociological changes. Unlike tobacco, which spread throughout all spheres, they were more than just a matter of individual taste, they were social markers. The initial quality of the product, and the frequency and mode of consumption were distinguished by so many nuances making it possible to identify social differences. Consumers needed to acquire specific utensils such as crockery units, kettles, cups, sugar bowls, chocolate pots, and coffee grinders, items which stimulated certain areas of the manufacturing sector. The imitation of upper-class modes of consumption by people from more modest milieus was facilitated by urbanization, which concentrated markets and demand. For anthropologist Sidney Mintz, sugar, cocoa, tobacco, and coffee were “food-drugs” because of their stimulating and addictive effects. Unlike the hard, durable goods prized by elites, the transition from luxury items in the 16th century to everyday consumption in the 19th century was due to the fact that these commodities could be purchased in small quantities, which regardless of the decline in prices, favoured their distribution. Easily packaged, ultimately, they were within range of a variety of budgets, whether for occasional

or more regular consumption, and the possibility of acquiring them in small quantities encouraged the more modest members of society to work harder to go beyond the subsistence lifestyle and be able to treat themselves to gustatory pleasures. This trend, encouraged by advertising, which insisted on the beneficial effects for health and on the social status of the consumer, is believed to have been one of the factors of the "Industrious Revolution" (Jan de Vries) of the years 1750-1830.

Conclusion

The taste and desire for social distinction were essential elements in terms of consumption dynamics. Consumer culture was a powerful stimulus to the Atlantic economy from the 16th century onwards. The European consumer had an increasingly wide range of accessible products of varying quality and in different quantities. Luxury, or at least an aura of luxury, created a dynamic that affected all European societies, whether or not they were directly involved in Atlantic trade. Unlike the more fashionable Asian products, such as cotton fabrics, it was not possible to imitate or produce American-grown goods in Europe. The rising demand on one side of the Atlantic and rising production on the other were closely connected. In fact, gluttony and the desire for a certain social status generated greater exploitation and more deportations of captives. It was, to use Voltaire's phrase, the price paid so that sugar could be eaten in Europe.

About the author

Eric Schnakenbourg is professor of modern history at Nantes Université and director of the Centre de Recherches en Histoire Internationale et Atlantique (CRHIA). His work focuses on the history of international relations in Europe and the Atlantic world in the 17th and 18th centuries. He is the author of Le Monde Atlantique: un espace en mouvement XVe-XVIIIe siècle (Armand Colin, 2021), and Entre la guerre et la paix: Neutralité et relations internationales, XVII-XVIIIe siècle (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).

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Further reading

Some resources in connection with the exhibition Thé, café ou chocolat ? L'essor des boissons exotiques au XVIIIe siècle may be consulted on the museum's website:
https://www.museecognacqjay.paris.fr/expositions/cafe-ou-chocolat
Commentary of the painting Le déjeuner by François Boucher offered by L'Histoire par l'image website: https://histoire-image.org/etudes/dejeuner

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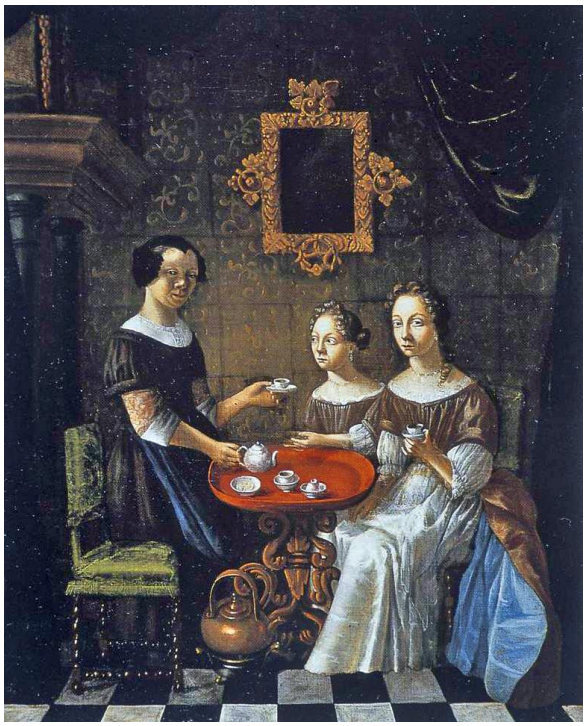
Illustrations



Three young women in a tearoom, Cornelia van Marle, 1689 © Commons Wikimedia.
This painting is considered the oldest painting representing tea and sugar in the Netherlands.

Woman in her bath with a cup of chocolate, anonymous, 17th century © Alamy

Inside a coffee house in London, anonymous, 1668, public domain

Le déjeuner (The Lunch), François Boucher, 1739, oil on canvas © Musée du Louvre. Public domain

Woman drinking coffee, Louis-Marin Bonnet, 18th century © Alamy

Drying and refining of sugar, excerpt from the Encyclopaedia of Diderot and d'Alembert, late 18th century, public domain

Sugar loaf mould, between 1770 and 1774 © Musée de la marine de Loire, Chateauneuf-sur-Loire

Sugar loaf, *Des bords de Loire à l'île de la Tortue* exhibition, an exhibition by Les Anneaux de la Mémoire, 2017

Kaffebeslaget, Martin (Mårten) Rudolf Heland, 1799 © Museum of the City of Stockholm

Agents surprise a group of ladies drinking coffee who rush to hide it. For a few years beginning in 1756, the importation of luxury goods, including coffee, was banned in Sweden. This ban was linked to the government's trade policy based on commercialism. However, coffee had already become a popular drink. The painting shows female coffee drinkers caught in the act.

Die Familie Remy, Janarius Zick, 1776 © German National Museum

Advertisement for Cadbury's Cocoa, 1861 © Alamy

Madame du Barry prenant son café (Madame du Barry taking her coffee), Pierre-Edouard Dagoty, oil on canvas, 19th century © Alamy

Newspaper tobacco advertisement, author unknown, 18th century © The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Encyclopaedia Virginia