Cloth Consumption, Commodity Chains, and Caribbean Colonies: Jamaica and Saint-Domingue in the 18th-Century Global Economy

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Study of the circulation of textiles—commodities central both to international trade and to human physical comfort, self-expression, and group representation—illuminates modes and meanings of global economic integration. Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (Haïti) furnish a unique vantage point for such analysis. Previously marginal backwaters on the Spanish colonial periphery, between the later 17th and later 18th century these islands became not only the richest and most economically important colonies in the British and French empires respectively but also thoroughly integrated into the increasingly globalized economy that was growing impressively in size and complexity. The islands' role in the world economy has not been neglected, of course. Most often, however, the focus has been on exports, those primary commodities—sugar and, to a lesser extent, coffee and other tropical "groceries"—raised predominantly on slave-labor plantations. But considering the development of island consumption highlights different aspects of globalization and proposes other ways of understanding its characteristics and causes.

This paper begins with a brief characterization of the changing textile cultures of the two islands. Then it describes alterations in demand and supply that shaped those patterns of cloth appropriation, before turning to their effects on metropolitan production. It concludes with an analysis of commodity chains, as exemplified in textiles, that seeks both to advance and to complicate our understanding of how economies globalize.

Any specific culture of consumption results from distinctive combinations of what can be termed the "factors of consumption." These are the commodities themselves (their material attributes, price, and availability), individual consumer resources (both those that motivate acquisition—need, taste, and so forth—and those that enable it—income, inheritance, theft, and the like), and geo-cultural imperatives (formal and informal opportunities and constraints,

ranging from, e.g., environment to regulation to fashion). While the first two factors bear some resemblance to supply and demand respectively, they and the third also encompass non-economic determinants of consumption.

Briefly, the island textile cultures that emerged across the 18th century from the interplay of these factors were defined by a rising proportion of cottons and mixed fabrics, even while silks, linens, and even woolens remained more prominent than is often imagined. In many respects, the consumption patterns exhibited in the islands tracked those found in Europe and in the colonies of mainland North America, though some trends emerged precociously in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue: the formation of textile cultures was a matter of dialogue rather than dictate. Varying configurations of factors ensured that patterns of consumption on each island also came to bear a specific imprint. So while participating in the formation of a broader Atlantic material culture, on each island consumption also exhibited inflections that denoted the concomitant emergence of both a characteristic Caribbean and a distinct local cloth culture.

The increasing income and population of the islands heightened demand; in principle, mandated clothing allotments for the overwhelmingly slave majority of the populace should have further raised consumption. Significant restrictions pulled in the opposite direction, however, even beyond those imposed by obvious wealth disparities. At a time when similar regulations had greatly eroded in Europe, sumptuary laws were embedded in slave codes. Still, a gap between precept and practice, predicated at once upon neglectful owners and officials and on eager sellers and buyers, together with resources that slaves derived from a variety of activities, meant that forbidden cloth made its way into slave cabins and onto slave persons. Over time, slaves' acquisition of unsanctioned textiles became intrinsic to colonial consumption.

Between the late 17th and the late 18th century, the types, colors, patterns, finishes, weights, and qualities of European fabrics available to the residents of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue expanded considerably. Cloth long produced for local markets was incorporated into wider commodity networks that brought them to the Caribbean. But from an early date Asian—mainly Indian—textiles played the largest role in enriching island cloth cultures. Most obviously, a growing array of white, printed, and dyed Indian cottons was re-exported from Europe to both Jamaica and Saint-Domingue. In addition, varieties initially destined for Africa, where they were included in the assortments of goods used to purchase slaves, were increasingly sold as well in the Caribbean—though to the free populace rather than to or for slaves. Indian cottons also had a pronounced indirect impact on Antilles consumption by stimulating the development within Europe of woolens, linens, and silks intended to compete with or supplant Asian imports. Initially destined mainly for domestic European markets, over time more and more of these fabrics were exported to the New World.

As throughout the Atlantic (and more widely), commercial changes including improved information flows, cheaper transportation, merchant specialization, proliferating shopkeepers, peddlers, and other retailers facilitated the flow of textiles to the islands. Decreasing knowledge asymmetries, thanks to correspondence, advertising media, constant in- and out-migration, and the like helped metropolitan merchants and producers monitor island demand more closely and accurately. At the same time, the innovations gave island consumers and traders better knowledge about prices, quality, and other relevant features of the commodities they sought.

These quantitative and qualitative supply-side developments occurred earliest in Jamaica, but they were soon apparent in Saint-Domingue. Besides metropolitan influences, both islands benefited from substantial and growing colonies of Jewish merchants and their far-flung

commercial contacts, as well as from relations forged with merchant communities in mainland North American cities. Widespread smuggling and (a matter of some importance in the Caribbean) wartime seizures of ships and their cargoes further broadened island consumers' access to cloth (and other goods).

The patterns of textile consumption that emerged in these colonies affected metropolitan production. For one thing, they promoted the manufacture of specific types of cloth in specific places (e.g., Cholet linen, favored for kerchiefs that became a staple of dress in Saint-Domingue); for another, they encouraged import substitution industries (e.g., osnabrig linens, used widely to clothe slaves, developed in Scotland in order to supplant Central European imports). More dramatically, colonial consumption could support an entire region's development (e.g., a broad range of Provence textile industries that directed exports to the Caribbean grew rapidly in the early 18th century in tandem with Marseille's escalating Antilles trade). Whether the effects of island consumption on production were broadly felt throughout France and England, or whether, as is often claimed, colonial trade had only a limited impact on French industrial development, requires further investigation.

Attending to commodity chains as seen from the Caribbean suggests the need to revise and re-envisage our understanding of the processes underlying global integration. On the one hand, flows of textiles involved a large number of individuals of many sorts, in many locations, who pragmatically communicated, negotiated, and transacted using all manner of arrangements. Despite numerous barriers, information, orders, and goods were often, even usually, able to find alternate routes that permitted them to reach all parties. Though states sought to direct consumption, their ability to do so proved limited. Formal and informal frontiers proved porous to initiatives both legal and illegal. Metropoles and colonies, producers and consumers, supply

and demand, all functioned within a multilateral, multinational, multicontinental system, promoting both broad market integration and specific cultures of consumption.

On the other hand, it is important not to neglect the overall structures within which the commodity chains existed and the disparities of power thereby generated. If not wholly confined by them, consumption patterns were nonetheless molded by institutions, including chartered companies and government regulations, and even more by the unequal power of individual participants. Market-shaping inequalities are obvious in the case of the enslaved majority, but they inhered all along the commodity chain. Moreover, islanders had to fashion their cloth cultures exclusively from imported materials. Even when the expanding world-wide preference for cotton cloth stimulated cultivation of raw cotton in new locations, including the West Indies—to the extent that even before the middle of the 18th century Antilles production had replaced Levant cotton as the raw material for French manufacturers—no manufacturing was established in the islands. Broader consumption choices did not inevitably translate into a new link in the commodity chain.

Thus neither the conceit of a spider web nor the metaphor of center and periphery (or hub-and-spoke) seems adequate to capture the complexities of integration into the global economy revealed by the instances of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue. It seems more accurate to envisage a flexible, adaptable, but clearly stratified network, in which certain participants, positioned at nodes of resources (financial, political, social, cultural) enjoyed more power to set rules, make crucial decisions, and benefit from commodity flows, than other participants. Viewed from the 18th-century Caribbean, the construction of a global economy generated at once increasing homogeneity and increasing diversity, greater equality and greater inequality.