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# Of Revolutions and the Problem of Choice

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The story that opens this article is, by now, familiar in its broad outlines. It concerns the rise of commercial activity and, especially, new consumption patterns that began in the century leading up to the Age of Revolutions. Who now disputes that the appearance on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean of all kinds of desirable new goods for purchase, from tea sets to ribbons, constituted one of the major social and economic developments of this period? The purpose of this article is, however, less to draw attention to all these enticing new commodities or the uses to which they were put than it is to recast the narrative: as a tale about the relationship between economic and political choice.

One path for this line of inquiry has already been laid out in good part by the eminent historians Colin Jones and Timothy Breen, writing respectively about the French and American Revolutions. Both have, in the last twenty years, constructed enticing models of revolutionary action and ambition out of what they have identified as the increasingly commonplace eighteenth-century experience of *choosing* among a plethora of consumer options.[1] But do they get the story right? Is this a model with

1. See Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (Feb. 1996): 13–40; and Timothy Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Detailed overviews of the arguments of both texts can be found later in this essay. On the current appeal among historians of linking the realms of consumption and citizenship, see Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann, eds., *Citizenship and Consumption* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann, "Civic Choices: Retrieving Perspectives on Rationality, Consumption, and Citizenship," 19–33.



the explanatory power to replace or even hold its own against the rise of the bourgeoisie, the expansion of the public sphere, the realization of Enlightenment notions of liberty and equality, or any of the other grand narratives long offered to account for the novelty of the political forms that came into being in North America and France at the end of the eighteenth century?

My own argument starts from the premise that Jones and Breen are, in different ways, certainly on to something important about the links between *mentalité* and social practice among consumers in the eighteenth-century Northern Atlantic world. Indeed, their claims about choice, and particularly about the symbiotic relationship between new forms of behavior and an emergent ideology centered on the positive function of these behaviors, have not been fleshed out or scrutinized to the degree they should. That is one of the goals of the present essay—which is why I begin with an extensive account of the emergence of choice-making as both an action increasingly required of ordinary people in their role as consumers and a growing value unto itself.

However, as the second half of this essay seeks to demonstrate, when eighteenth-century conceptualizations of all this perusing and selecting of merchandise are explored in detail and then against the backdrop of nascent forms of democratic choice, it becomes apparent that the direct political ramifications imagined by these two leading historians do not hold up. Little real continuity between the commercial and political spheres is evident either at the level of social practice or psychology. The path to our current faith in and superabundance of choice across the many domains of human existence was, in fact, immensely less straightforward or initially totalizing than either Breen or Jones suggests. It also had much less to do with the so-called Age of Revolutions than one might instinctively

think. Ultimately, though, these negative claims have positive implications not only for our understanding of the inner workings of revolutionary political culture; they also have real consequences for how we think about the relationship among markets, democracy, and choice in the present and, potentially, the way any ideology takes form.

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Let us start, then, by reviewing the standard consumption story itself, or at least a subplot that has had particular significance in the historical imagination as of late. This narrative begins with the fact that during the latter half of the seventeenth century, a novel product arrived in substantial quantities in the main cities of northwestern Europe. Eventually it found its way deep into the countryside and down the social scale as well. That commodity was cottons from the Indian subcontinent, which were often known by the generic term calicoes or *indiennes*. Partly the appeal of this good was its price point, especially when compared with silk. Mainly its allure stemmed from the fact that it allowed ordinary people to clothe their homes and their bodies alike in bright colors and elaborate, quasi-exotic patterns, many of them customized by Indian manufacturers specifically for European buyers. That, and the fact that the colors of these new fabrics also held fast in the wash.[2]

The so-called "calico-craze"—the rising demand in the late seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries for cottons adorned with stripes, checks, or flowers that was aggressively promoted by East Indian trading companies—soon spawned protectionist opposition almost everywhere it had made itself felt. Between the 1680s and the 1720s, state-mandated bans on the importation, sale, purchase, even wearing of Indian cotton were imposed in much of Europe, including France and England, though

2. On cotton and textile history in a global framework: K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); G. Riello and P. Parthasarathi, eds., *The Spinning World. A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Sven Beckert, *The Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014).



significantly not in their North American colonies to which it was exported. Moral arguments against the widespread adoption of these gaudy cottons abounded. So did economic arguments about the nefarious effects of the consumption of these foreign goods, the way they threatened local livelihoods in practical terms. And yet, even these bans did not really stem demand, and by the second half of the eighteenth century, the bans themselves were mainly abandoned. In the meantime, domestic European manufacturers of textiles, often working in materials other than cotton or in cotton-linen blends, produced cloth with new patterns, not to mention new kinds of decorative accessories, at an accelerated rate, replacing Indian goods with similar products for a wide range of customers on both coasts of the Atlantic.[3]

This is not to say that cotton or imitations of cotton displaced in popularity all other kinds of cloth in the pre-revolutionary era; that development belongs to a much more modern moment that we associate with industrialization and full-blown imperialism.[4] But printed, decorated fabrics (more than the specific styles of goods or clothes made out of them) became the centerpiece of "fashion" in the eighteenth-century French and Anglo-American worlds especially.[5] Consumers

3. On the politics of cotton regulation in eighteenth-century Europe, with an emphasis on England, see Natalie Rothstein, "The Calico Campaign of 1719–1721," *East London Papers* 7 (1964): 3–21; and the works of Beverly Lemire: *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); "Fashioning Cottons: Asian Trade, Domestic Industry and Consumer Demand, 1660–1780," in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 493–512; and ed., *The British Cotton Trade*, vols. 1–4 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).

4. On this point, see especially the revisionist account of Jon Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

5. On the idea of fashion, see Beverly Lemire, ed., *The Force of Fashion in Politics and Society: Global Perspectives from Early Modern to Contemporary Times* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafes, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); Michael Kwass, "Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France," *American Historical Review* (June 2006): 631–59; and William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Empire

prized a particular dress or quilt primarily for the quality and design of the fabric out of which it was constructed. As such, calicoes joined a growing array of other durable commodities that satisfied no essential need but were similarly valued above all for their aesthetic or decorative potential. That category included porcelain, patterned carpets, lacquered cabinets, and elaborate clocks, some imported ready to sell, some "finished" in Europe, and some out and out domestic imitations. All of these goods helped extend the category of "luxury" to ever more Western European and colonial families' lives, at least in an aspirational way.[6] What interests us here, especially, is the outsized effect these goods, and especially calico and its imitators, had on commerce—and more specifically, consumption—the way they stood at the center of what Michael Kwass has recently called "a buying spree of historic proportions" with psychological as well as more obvious socioeconomic consequences for all involved.[7]

of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 206, no. 1 (2010): 81–120.

6. On the expanding market for "luxury" goods, as well as intellectual responses to it, see Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, ed., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (London: Routledge, 2003); Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper, 2016). On the social consequences of the pursuit of luxury, see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1993), which takes the story into the nineteenth century; Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1997]) and *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime*, trans. Jean Birnell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 [1989]); and Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800* (London: Routledge, 2002).

7. Michael Kwass, *Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.



Consider first the case for the supply side in this transformation of mental habits and eventually values. As is well-known, the new fabrics, as they arrived in Europe, formed the linchpin—initially in the biggest cities of England,[8] France,[9] and the Low[10] Countries, and gradually in

8. On English retailing history, see: H. Mui and L. H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989); Nicholas Alexander and Gary Ahehurst, eds., *The Emergence of Modern Retailing, 1750–1950* (London: Routledge, 1998); Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing, 1550–1820* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2000); John Benson and Laura Ugolini, eds., *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of Retailing in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Helen Berry, "Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, 12 (2002): 375–94; Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Andrew Hann and Jon Stobart, "Sites of Consumption: The Display of Goods in Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-Century England," *Cultural and Social History* 2 (2005): 165–88; and "Shopping Streets as Social Space: Consumerism, Improvement and Leisure in an Eighteenth-Century Town," *Urban History* 25 (1998): 3–21; Nancy Cox and Karin Danneil, *Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007); Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann, and Victoria Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c. 1680–1830* (London: Routledge, 2007); Ian Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700 to 1850: Narratives of Consumption* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); and Jon Stobart, ed. *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

9. On French retailing history: Carolyn Sangentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996); Robert Fox and Anthony John Turner, eds., *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris. Studies in the History of the Skilled Workforce* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1998); Natasha Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle. Luxe et demi-luxe* (Paris: Editions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2011) and ed., *La Boutique et la ville: commerces, commerçants, espaces et clientèles, XVIe–XXe siècle* (Tours: Centre d'histoire de la ville moderne et contemporaine, 2000); and Françoise Bayard, "De Quelques boutiques de marchands de tissus à Lyon et en Beaujolais aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," *De la fibre à la fripe. Le textile dans la France méridionale et l'Europe méditerranéenne (XVIIe–XXe s.)*, ed. Geneviève Gauignaud-Fontaine et al. (Montpellier: Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3, 1998), 429–58; Jennifer Jones, *Sexing 'la Mode': Gender, Fashion and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (London: Berg, 2004); and Joan DeJean, *How Paris Became Paris: The Invention of the Modern City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 144–69.

10. On Dutch retailing history, see Danielle van den Heuvel and Sheilagh Ogilvie, "Retail Development in the Consumer Revolution: the Netherlands, c. 1670–c. 1815," *Explorations in Economic History* 50, no. 1 (2013): 69–87; van den Heuvel, "New Products, New Sellers? Changes in the Dutch Textile Trades, c. 1650–1750," in *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century: Comparative Perspectives from Western Europe*, eds. Jon Stobart and Bruno Blondé (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 118–37; and Clé Lesger, "Urban Planning, Urban Improvement and the Retail Landscape in Amsterdam, 1600–1850," in *The Landscape of Consumption: Shopping Streets and Cultures in Western Europe, 1600–1900*, eds. Jan Hein Furnée and C. Lesger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 104–24.

smaller ones[11]—of a new system of marketing and distribution. This system was coterminous with the establishment of fixed location shops, often clustered in arcades, galleries, or special shopping streets, designed purely for the business of selling, rain or shine. Such shops matter to our story because, in these interior spaces, mercers, drapers, and other dealers in textiles developed the art not only of closing the deal but, first, of displaying the options and of creating, stoking and, finally, shaping and organizing shoppers' desires.[12] In better stores, these options were increasingly arranged to dramatic, sensory effect to lure both serious customers and passersby. Fabric was hung from hooks inside shops or on the sides of entranceways in enticing folds that stretched down to the floor. It was also presented in bolts on shelves or open presses, where it could be reflected in mirrors and illuminated by candles, lamps, and sconces. It was eventually featured in the panes of glazed glass store windows, an innovation of the later eighteenth century that resulted in something like a visual menu of options from which the shopper could pick, at the same time as it encouraged more generalized acquisitiveness.[13] As Daniel Defoe already put it in 1726 in his *The Complete English Tradesman*, "It is true, that a fine show of goods will bring customers . . . but that a fine shew of shelves and glass windows should bring customers, that was never made a rule in trade 'til now."[14] Windows too continued to improve in

11. On Europe as a whole, see the volumes edited by Bruno Blondé with an international team of scholars: *Buyers and Sellers: Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006); *Retailers and Consumer Changes in Early Modern Europe. England, France, Italy and the Low Countries* (Paris: PUFR, 2005); and *Fashioning Old and New: Changing Consumer Patterns in Western Europe, 1650–1900* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), among others.

12. On drapers as precursors to department stores in this regard, see Claire Walsh, "Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of Design History* 8, no. 3 (1995): 157–76; and "Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth Century," in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850–1939*, eds. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jauman (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999), 46–71.

13. Hentie Louw, "Window-Glass Making in Britain, c. 1660–c. 1860 and its Architectural Impact," *Construction History* 7 (1991): 47–68.

14. Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman, in Familiar Letters; Directing him in all the several Parts and Progressions of Trade* (London, 1726), 312–13. Even earlier, the importance of display in shops was emphasized by Jacques Savary in *Le Parfait négociant ou instruction générale pour ce qui regard le commerce des marchandises de France et des pays étrangers* (Paris, 1675); see Claire Haru Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex: Economies of Regard in Old Regime France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 187–88.



size and luminosity and thus potential for display. And in the latter half of the eighteenth century, in larger stores in both Paris and London, fixed prices on goods sometimes appeared, ensuring yet more opportunity for consumers to make comparisons, whether between different products for sale in one space or between similar products in different shops.[15] Retail drapery warehouses in England experimented with cash sales to similar effect, making financial transactions less rooted in personal exchange or reputation than when dependent entirely on credit.[16] In such places, workshops were often situated just next door, close by but out of sight, so that, once purchased, finished goods could be taken away immediately but without in any way enmeshing the consumer in the system of production. Choosing increasingly became but one step in the process that led from manufacturing to acquisition and, finally, consumption, a distinctive action unto itself.

Even in the considerably less populous North American colonies—which were, after all, initially established in a good number of cases as commercial enterprises—the same pattern held. In the early 1700s, according to Sarah Kemble Knight's colonial travel diary, shops were beginning to dot the landscape, but rural customers especially had to "take what they [the merchants] bring [out to the counter] without Liberty to choose for themselves."[17] By the end of the century, shops had (at least in the case of Virginia) become the most common non-domestic, single-function buildings, from urban centers all the way to the backcountry

15. On this practice, see Olivier Dautresme, "Une Boutique de luxe dans un centre commercial à la mode: l'exemple du 'magasin d'effets précieux à prix fixe' au Palais-Royal à la fin du XVIIIe siècle," in *La Boutique et la ville*, 239–47.

16. Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 171–73.

17. See the travel diary of Sarah Kemble Knight (1704), cited in Ann Martin Smart, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 156.

frontier. Merchants, in competition with each other, had also increasingly developed specialized inventories and focused on their display, setting goods out in windows and on shelves behind the ubiquitous counter, and adding heat and light to their interiors precisely so as to give consumers' eyes and hands access to all the options available to them for keeps should they agree to pay the requisite price.[18]

What is more, for those who could not witness it all up close, the shop and its ethos could, in a sense, come to them. Sample books and cards displaying small examples of the available options in fabric and other commodities could be and were sent by post to retailers and shoppers alike (though such books were banned in the mid-1760s in France, where they led, it was thought, to the plagiarizing of patterns).[19] So too regional newspapers in France and in North America regularly ran paid announcements with long lists of exotic-sounding goods rife for imagining in all their bounty. And trade cards of the mid-eighteenth century frequently featured images of goods spilling out of the frame or the charms of a particular store interior. The purpose, clearly, was seduction of the customer, but also aiding that same customer in the business of choosing. For in effect, retailers became advertisers in ways that proprietors of market

18. On the growth of shops and shopping in North America, see, in addition to Smart, *Buying into the World of Goods*: Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 139–46; Ann Martin, "Frontier Boys and Country Cousins: The Context for Choice in 18th-Century Consumerism," in *Historical Anthropology and the Study of American Culture*, eds. LuAnn DeCunzo and Bernard Herman (Winterthur, DE: Winterthur Museum, 1996), 71–102; and Christina J. Hodge, *Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). There is also a well-developed literature on shopkeepers as social types, including Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

19. On sample books, see Mark Elizabeth Burbridge, "The Bower Textile Sample Book," *Textile History* 14, no. 2 (1983): 213–21; Natalie Rothstein, ed., *A Lady of Fashion: Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashions and Fabrics* (New York: Norton, 1987); and Rothstein, *Silk Designs of the Eighteenth Century* (Boston: Bulfinch, 1990). See also Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets*, 105–7, on national efforts to control the ownership of fabric designs and avoid knock-offs, including the banning of sample books.



stalls had never been. What up-to-date shopkeepers tended to emphasize was range and variety and novelty, the many possibilities of *toutes sortes* available at every price point, for the benefit of the customer and his or her taste.[20] As one eighteenth-century merchant in the Connecticut Valley bragged rather typically, his shop contained "the most universal assortment of goods, that can be found in any store in the Commonwealth."[21] The French fashion press, starting with the *Mercure galante* in 1672, similarly stoked interest in competition among designs and goods, especially once illustrations were added later in the same decade. Needless to say, no one was expected to buy it all. Eighteenth-century shopkeepers, in effect, took on a new function as agents of consumer choice.[22]

It is important to note, however, that the variety which sellers offered was frequently presented in "better" venues as of the curated sort, not as an unlimited number of options. As such, choice might be described as itself having happened in two stages. In both France and England, mercers and other kinds of high-end shopkeepers took pains to suggest that they had available a wide array of "choice" textiles or objects *choisi* or *du plus beau choix* in the sense of preselected for their quality and taste in an era before brands. It was from this already-chosen set of possibilities that customers would then be able to make their own further selections. From the beginning, those in charge of selling took on

20. On trade cards and newspaper advertising; see Maxime Berg and Helen Clifford, "Selling Consumption in the Eighteenth Century: Advertising and the Trade Card in Britain and France," *Cultural and Social History* 4 (2007): 145–70; and "Commerce and the Commodity: Graphic Display and Selling New Consumer Goods in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Art Markets in Europe, 1400–1800*, eds. Michael North and David Ormrod (Farnham: Ashgate, 1998), 187–200, esp. 197–99; Jon Stobart, "Selling (through) Politeness: Advertising Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-Century England," *Cultural and Social History* 5 (2008): 309–28; Clemons Wischermann and Elliott Shore, *Advertising and the European City. Historical Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2000); Chloe Wigston Smith, "Clothes Without Bodies: Objects, Humans and the Marketplace in the 18th Century: It Narratives and Trade Cards," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23, no. 2 (2010-11): 347–80; and for examples, Theodore Crom, *Trade Catalogues, 1542-1842* (Melrose, FL: T. R. Crom, 1976); and Ambroise Heal, *London Tradesmen's Cards of the XVIII Century: An Account of their Origin and Use* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1968).

21. Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," 245.

22. Cox, *The Complete Tradesman*, 28.

the additional job of aiding in choice-making by creating and supplying a quality menu of options and then directing taste within it. (Today we might call this process marketing or, more technically, the building of "choice architecture.")

The practice may have begun with commercial auction houses, though historians have not, in general, accorded them much attention.[23] We have a good if now largely forgotten example in the London-based auctioneer Christopher Cock, who, in the first few decades of the eighteenth century, was among a small handful of men who were in the process of turning sales of secondhand goods into marketplaces for luxury items and a fashionable form of entertainment. From his many and generally free or low-cost printed catalogues of objects to be sold, as well as his recurring advertisements in the London press, we can learn much about Cock's sales techniques, not to mention the nature of his offerings. Auctions took place at set times, over a few days, in central urban locations, from Mr. Cock's own home in the Great Piazza in Covent Garden to the former Mrs. Savage's "India warehouse" over the New Exchange in the Strand. Interested parties were invited to viewing days, when the merchandise could be perused and appetites whetted well in advance of the actual business of bidding and buying. Cock was especially skilled at creating opportunities for potential consumers to see all the things that they could eventually decide to purchase. And at every stage, he made full use of the idea of choice at two levels.

Cock insisted first upon the importance of his own function in the area of preselection. Starting in the 1720s, he routinely promised that

23. The literature on the early history of auctions includes: Robin Myers, "Sale by Auction: the Rise of Auctioneering Exemplified in the Firm of Christopher Cock, the Langfords, and Henry, John and George Robins (c. 1720–1847)," in *The Sale and Distribution of Books from 1700*, eds. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1982), 126–63; Brian Learmount, *A History of the Auction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 23–28; Cynthia Wall, "The English Auction: Narratives of Dismantlings," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31, no. 1 (1997): 1–25, and *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), chap. 6; and Jeremy Warren and Adriana Turpin, eds. *Auctions, Agents and Dealers: The Mechanisms of the Art Market, 1660–1830* (London: Wallace Collection, 2008).



what he would have on offer to his undefined public was not only "choice books" or a "choice library" or even "the Choiceness and Scarceness of the Editions"—all designations that can already be found in book auction catalogues from the previous century, as well as at the head of publishers' compendiums like *Choice Songs and Ayres* (1673), and that Cock found ingenious ways to reuse. Our high-end London auctioneer additionally announced that he would be displaying, variously, "choice pictures," "choice and noble pieces of antiquities," "a choice collection of medals in gold and silver," and, more generally, "choice effects."[24] Other things for sale he described as "exquisite" and "valuable," but also "curious," "rare," "scarce," "matchless," or "uncommon." What gave his objects these powers is that they had already been selected based on the superior determinations or curatorial acumen of previous, eminent owners (now deceased or, sometimes, merely bankrupt). Left-behind goods became not old or used or out-of-style, but "choice" in the sense of chosen or selected by someone, like Mr. Cock himself, with knowledge, standing, taste, and skill.

But then spectators ("the curious") and serious purchasers alike were offered a second opportunity should they show up for the actual events or even just chance upon one of Cock's detailed catalogues for perusal. That was to use their *own* powers of discernment to decide among this variety of obscure or rarely seen offerings. When Cock announced the sale in 1744 of "Part of the Valuable Spanish Silks and other Effects of the St. Joachim Prize, taken by His Majesty's Ship the Monmouth, Capt. Charles Wyndham," attendees found themselves presented with a "Great Choice

24. See, for example, the following catalogues associated with sales held by Mr. Cock: *Collection of Mr. Geminiani's Choice Pictures* (London, 1725), *Rich Household Furniture: Fine Side-Boards of Plate and Other Choice Effects* (London, 1733), *A Catalogue of Signor Sterbini's Curious Collection lately brought from Rome, consisting of the greatest variety of choice and noble pieces of antiquities* (London, c. 1733), *A Catalogue of Mons. Beauvais's Collection . . . [including] a choice collection of medals in gold and silver . . . and other curious effects* (London, 1739), *A Catalogue of the particulars of the dwelling house, coach-house, and stable . . . of Sir Joesph Eyles, Deceas'd. Likewise, all the household and other furniture; consisting of . . . great Choice of the old fine Japan China . . .* (London, 1740); *A Catalogue of the Entire Library of Mrs. Katherine Bridgeman: (of Cavendish Square) deceas'd: consisting of a choice collection of books* (n.l., 1743), and *A Catalogue of the Entire and Choice Library of Thomas Pelha junior, Esq.* (London, 1744).

of the richest Gold and Silver Brocades," as well as a "great Variety of Gold and Silver Lace for Petticoats and Robings, of the most beautiful Patterns" and a number of other fabrics (i.e., "taffety," "colour'd Genoa velvet"), including those described, quite honestly, as "mildew'd," from which to pick.[25] The same went on another occasion for a "great Choice of the old fine Japan China."[26] It was obviously a sales pitch that worked. From book and art auctions in Paris, to dockside sales generated by British ships pulling into the Boston harbor, to Forster's Linen Warehouse in central London, customers were repeatedly told by mid-century that they would confront situations in which plentiful "choices" or "a great Choice" would be available, but also required of them.[27]

Of course, not all choice-related activity came about in the eighteenth century as a result of customers capitulating to business owners' directives. On the contrary, faced with this new array of organized goods, consumers on both sides of the Atlantic, it appears, developed their own set of behaviors and expectations. On the demand side, urban and, eventually, many rural customers learned in practice in the course of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not only what to do with novelties like new forms of fabric, or how to consume them, but also how to decide among them in the first place. One of the great English neologisms of the second half of the eighteenth century was the verb "to shop" or "to go a shopping," meaning not just to buy but first to engage in the act of perusing

25. *A Catalogue of Part of the Valuable Spanish Silks and Other Effects of the St. Joachim Prize, taken by His Majesty's Ship the Monmouth, Capt. Charles Wyndam . . . which will be sold by Auction, by Mr. Cock* (London, 1744), 1, 3.

26. *A Catalogue of the particulars of the dwelling house, coach-house, and stable . . . of Sir Joesph Eyles, Deceas'd. Likewise, all the household and other furniture; consisting of . . . great Choice of the old fine Japan China . . .* (London, 1740).

27. For these examples, see respectively *Vente d'un choix de . . .tableaux et dessins (Paris, Dec. 29, 1777)* or *Notice d'un choix de livres* (Hotel de Bullion, Nov. 12, 1784); *The Cream of All Sorts of the Best Winter Goods, just imported in the last ship from London by Albert Dennie . . . He imports the choice of goods, and has fresh supplies in every ship . . . His warehouse is upon Dyer's Wharf [Boston] . . .* (Boston, c. 1745); and the advertisement for Forster's Linen Warehouse, promising "a great Choice of ready-made Shirts of all Prices," in *The Public Advertiser* (Feb. 14, 1764), cited by Lemaire, *Fashion's Favorite*, 192. In each case, choice functions something like a synonym for the variety from which the customer can pick.



and choosing among all those choice goods.[28] Tourists' accounts of visits to London, Bath, Paris, Philadelphia, and other leading commercial cities on both sides of the Atlantic regularly dwelled on the extraordinary range of goods available for sale, with decorative textiles high on the list, and, even more, on the physical and mental activity of selecting among them.[29] So did novels, themselves a relatively new consumer product of the eighteenth century in which consumer behavior was often mined for its social and psychological effects.[30] (Jane Austen, at the tail end of this period, retrospectively provides us with a window onto the ways the semi-public activity of walking along shopping streets and putting down money for desired objects became a new arena for sociability and entertainment centered on choice-making.[31]) All of this was made possible not just by the decline in

28. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the 1760s as the moment of the first appearance of this term in print. However, Samuel Johnson included the verb "to shop" in the 1756 edition of his dictionary: "To frequent shops: as, they are shopping"; see Cox and Daniel, *Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England*, 145. Online databases suggest a surge in the employment of both "to go a shopping" and "shopping" in novels and travel writing in the 1780s and '90s. The English term "shopping" can be found in French texts, too, starting in the mid-19th century, though other, older terms for visiting stores continue to be used in French as well, including "courir des magasins."

29. On German and other European tourists' responses to commerce, see Heidrun Homburg, "German Landscapes of Consumption, 1750–1850: Perspectives of German and Foreign Travelers," in *The Landscape of Consumption*, 104–24; and James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). On the relationship between consumer society and the growth of cities, see Glennie and Thrift, "Modernism, Urbanism, and Modern Consumption," *Environmental Planning D: Society and Space* 10, no. 4 (1992): 423–43.

30. Among works on consumption and the British novel, most of which also concentrate on the gendered dimension of the experience, see Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and "Counter Publics: Shopping and Women's Sociability," in *Romantic Sociability. Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770–1840*, eds. G. Russell and C. Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and E. J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in 18th-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

31. For two different approaches to choice as a theme for Austen, see Richard Handler and Daniel Segal, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), chap. 4 ("Hierarchies of Choice"); and Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Jane Austen, Game Theorist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). Specifically on Austen's use of shops as spaces for characters to reveal their moral character as they make judgments, see Barbara Benedict,

prices for what would have been real luxury goods in earlier centuries, itself fueled in part by low-paid and enslaved labor outside of Europe. It was also—according to economic historian Jan de Vries—spurred by greater household effort within Europe going to market labor; European families became more industrious precisely so as to be able to consume more and in new ways.[32] Women also took on the added responsibility of making many of the key purchases for those households,[33] whether in fashionable shops for the better-off or among peddlers and hawkers of secondhand goods for the less affluent.[34] This activity was made acceptable by its close linkage to women's traditional roles as caretakers for their family, keepers of home and hearth. But it held at least some promise in the century before the Age of Revolution of a new form of freedom or, more specifically, independence: to make decisions and to act upon them in the public sphere. By the end of the eighteenth century, shopping for consumer goods was firmly established as more than merely a form of provisioning. It had potentially become a means to display one's family's taste and status (or hoped-for status) to the exterior world; a social activity that connected one to others in new kinds of networks and forms of exchange; and an arena for asserting one's own knowledge and preferences. It had to be done right.

"The Trouble with Things: Objects and the Commodification of Sociability," in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, eds. Claudia Johnson and Ciara Tuite (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 343–54.

32. See Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

33. On shopping and gender, see, in addition to the works on the novel cited above, Jennifer Jones, "Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 25–53; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); and Claire Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in England and North America, 1700-1830*, eds. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 151–77.

34. See Laurence Fontaine, ed. *Alternative Exchanges: Second-Hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); and Jon Stobart and Ilja Van Damme, eds. *Modernity and the Second-Hand Trade. European Consumption Cultures and Practices, 1700–1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), as well as Roche, *The Culture of Clothing*, 344–63.



As such, an industry soon arose, beyond mere advertising, whose purpose it was to help one navigate the world of choice, controlling and optimizing within the range of available options. As early as the second half of the seventeenth century, guidebooks to textiles for sale in England, such as *The Merchant's Warehouse laid open: or the Plain Dealing Linnen-Draper shewing how to Buy all sorts of Linnen and Indian Goods . . . for all sorts of Persons*, started to appear.[35] What they detail is how to pick well given one's needs and station, yes, but also how not to be deceived by faulty goods or faulty prices; how not to be seduced by luxury; how, in short, to avoid picking badly according to the social conventions of the moment. A formal set of behaviors and practices, along with new information and protocols for navigating these pathways, emerged in tandem to establish choice-making in the consumer world as an increasingly ordinary responsibility associated with economic but also personal autonomy.

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That, at least, is an enhanced version of a now quite standard story that we regularly tell ourselves about our past. What has just been described is a phenomenon that has, for the last thirty-five years or so, been known as the "consumer revolution" and sometimes, more specifically, as the "retail revolution." The precise timing of this revolution, its geographical contours, the extent of its social foundations or reach across classes: these all have been subject to wide debate in more recent years. The result has been some scaling back of the original claims of the historians Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and others about the extent of a recognizable "modern" consumer culture, motivated by the emulation of one's social betters as well as a growing sense of individual autonomy, emerging prior to the Industrial Revolution.[36] Surely, the revisionists are right that many

35. J. F., *The Merchant's Ware-House Laid Open* (London, 1696), reproduced in *The British Cotton Trade, 1660–1815*, vol. 1, 209–234.

36. On the idea of a consumer revolution, see Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior and*

older consumption practices, from gift giving to frequenting fairs, endured through the eighteenth century and into the next one; that emulation was only one motivation among many; and that "revolution" is something of a misnomer for what happened in the world of buying and selling in the era of the Enlightenment.[37] We might also note that the role of both formal laws and social norms, including those derived from manners, in constantly restraining the abundance of choice and creating tight parameters over who got to choose, what got chosen, and how those choices were made, has generally been underemphasized in accounts of the eighteenth century (though I have tried to draw attention to them in the preceding narrative). The larger point is that, with the passage of time since the publication in 1982 of the pathbreaking volume *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, claims about the invention of consumerism have largely become more sober.

Yet over the last two decades, the significance of this consumption-focused paradigm has also been expanded insofar as scholars have asked us to consider the relationship between the "consumer revolution(s)" and the "political revolutions" that seem to have followed in the same part of the world in fairly rapid succession. One mode has been to try to re-establish the political-economic foundations of the Age of Revolutions,

*Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London: Routledge, 1988); John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods: Consumption and Society in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1993); John Brewer and Ann Bermingham, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995), as well as Daniel Roche's pioneering *The Culture of Clothing* and *A History of Everyday Things*. To historicize this turn in the scholarly literature, see Frank Trentmann, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Peter N. Stearns, "Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (Mar. 1997): 102–17. For a recent challenge to this narrative by one of its founders, see John Brewer, "The Error of our Ways: Historians and the Birth of Consumer Society," Cultures of Consumption Working Paper no. 12, June 2004.

37. Another alternative is François Crouzet's multiple revolutions: a first in the seventeenth century centered on selling luxury and semi-luxury goods to the upper and middle classes in the Low Countries, then England, then France; a second in the eighteenth century centered on English mass-produced goods; and finally a third in the United States in the twentieth century; see "Some Remarks on the *métiers d'art*," in *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris*, 263–86.



taking seriously, for example, debates about free trade or sovereign debt inside an increasingly competitive imperial world as central to the advent of revolutionary politics. Such moves might be seen as part and parcel of an effort to return economic causes and consequences to our discussions of the coming of the French and American Revolutions without resorting to the old Marxist account of the advent of capitalism and the making of a frustrated but ultimately triumphant middle class.[38] Another, less prominent refrain, though, has been that what links the two kinds of revolution—and indeed makes one a stimulus for the other—is precisely a shared emphasis on personalized, individual choice as a form of behavior, on the one hand, and as a cultural value or disposition toward the external world, on the other.

In a now quite canonical article of 1996 entitled "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," Colin Jones begins by proposing the following characterization of France's population on the eve of the Revolution: "By 1789, moreover, the nation—which had, as we have seen, been fashioned from the accumulation of civically minded customers within a commercial society—was used to making choices." Two sentences later, he goes on to suggest that a structurally similar development was to occur shortly thereafter in the political sphere, requiring analogous skills: "In the revolution, we might hypothesize, citizen-voters were

38. See, as examples, in the recent literature on the French Revolution: Kwass, *Louis Flandrin and the Global Underground*, but also Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization in the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Rebecca Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Guillaume Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIIIe siècle* (Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011); and William Sewell, "Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France" and "Connecting Capitalism to the French Revolution: The Parisian Promenade and the Origins of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France," *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 5–46. See too the newest histories of the Age of Democratic or Atlantic Revolutions, which also tend to emphasize political economic factors: David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and Willliam Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Joseph C. Miller, *The Princeton Companion to Atlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), esp. my own article on the French Revolution.

presented with a series of political consumer choices and were called on to evaluate the quality and the utility of the political commodities offered." In other words, citizens were ready, even predisposed, before 1789, thanks to growing commercialism, to do what the French Revolution was to ask of them. Studying the *Affiches*, the advertising and news sheets that proliferated across France in the second half of the eighteenth century, Jones argues, "allow[s] us to grasp something of the processes by which the post-1789 citizen had [already] been fashioned in the marketplace constructed by the prerevolutionary world of print."[39]

This claim is not directly repeated in Jones's more recent book on the era of the French Revolution, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon*, of 2002. But in it the *Affiches* again function as a key node in a relatively new network, a community of buyers and sellers that, at odds with traditional culture, was committed to exchange on a relatively egalitarian footing. And as Jones suggests, drawing partly on the pioneering work of Daniel Roche on the rise of a commodity culture of "everyday things" during the late Old Regime, this experience prepared ordinary people, in terms of habits and outlook alike, to become actors in the French Revolutionary drama in which the political sphere would increasingly come to resemble this new economic one in terms of both its ideal form and what it asked of its members.[40]

Taking this argument for the late eighteenth-century emergence of the citizen-consumer even further, Timothy Breen has made a related case for the American Revolution. In his 2008 book entitled *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, he emphasizes the way pre-revolutionary consumption not only helped colonists to develop the habits of mind needed for citizenship in a republic—namely, choice-making centered around taste—but also made possible the politics of boycotts, or choosing to refrain from consumer choosing, that amounted to a key form of mobilization and political

39. Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying," 39.

40. Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon* (London: Penguin, 2002), esp. 182–84, 366–67.



community-building across the North American colonies in the prelude to the war. As he puts it: "What gave the American Revolution distinctive shape was an earlier transformation of the Anglo-American consumer marketplace . . . Suddenly, buyers voiced concerns about color and texture, about fashion and etiquette, and about making the right choices from among an expanding number of possibilities." He then goes on to explain that, paradoxically, the "invitation to make choices from among competing brands, colors and textures—decisions of great significance to the individual—held within itself the potential for a new kind of collective politics." In the buildup to the declaration of national independence, "the concept of freedom of choice was elevated into a right," which also meant a basis for community resistance, so that a private act (consumption) became a public, political one with lasting consequences.[41]

For both Jones and Breen, then, the novel experience of choosing among nonessential goods on offer in the new, increasingly impersonal and horizontally networked marketplace and world of advertising had the unintended and unforeseen, but ultimately salubrious consequence of producing a transformation in the mental lives of ordinary people. That was a new enthusiasm for making selections among preselected options based on personal, interior preferences, and a new sense of self as autonomous choice-maker to go with it that was ripe for an extension into new terrain well beyond cottons, furniture, or even books. In this version of events, consumption does not *cause* political revolution in any direct way. But consumption in the form of choice-making becomes nothing less than a path to individual empowerment under the banner of citizenship and then a prelude to (and for Breen, aid in) collective sacrifice and emancipation. In other words, it helps make possible and effective the set of political practices that we still associate with democracy.

But these claims also bring us back around to our original question as to whether Jones and Breen and others are right about this synergy or, at least, link. We are perhaps primed at present to be sympathetic to

41. Breen, *The Marketplace Revolution*, xv, xvii, and 190.

these arguments because of the faith, so prevalent in the United States and across much of the globe today, in both expanded opportunities for choice-making and expanded "choice menus" as paths to freedom. Choice is where our economic and our political values now seem to coincide, mutually reinforcing one another. Yet, as a few astute commentators have recently started to warn us, the well-established scholarly trend of envisioning the eighteenth century as the birthplace of global mobility, entrepreneurship, and even the heroic, activist consumer has too easily allowed us to draw teleological connections to, and even potentially to justify, the way we live and think now.[42] This remains the case even as we become more aware of the links between the rise of new forms of consumption, on the one hand, and the expansion of enslaved labor, economic dislocation, and environmental degradation, on the other.

Here it is hard not to see a similar pattern. In a valuable effort to turn choice-making into a historical variable—a learned rather than natural practice with historical consequences—our esteemed historians of choice have, it seems, actually helped de-historicize and further naturalize our current way of imagining, talking about, and even acting in relation to this contemporary value. They have done so by assuming that choosing happens in a similar fashion, with similar meaning attached, across different realms of decision making *and* that, as a shared ideal, choice must necessarily have been built into the culture of consumerism and the culture of democratic politics alike from the get-go. In this telling, the archetypical eighteenth-century consumer-citizen, born of the Atlantic retail revolution, can only have approached the market and political life, or calicoes and candidates for office, with an essentially unified sense of self

42. See Francois Furstenberg, "Atlantic History in the Neoliberal Age" (unpublished talk, 2015), and David Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought," *Journal of American History* (Sept. 2006): 385–403, on shifts in recent decades in writing on consumer culture. There is a parallel literature aimed at de-naturalizing the idea of markets that underlies free trade ideology; see Douglas A. Irwin, *Against Trade: An Intellectual History of Free Trade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Mark Bevir and Frank Trentman, eds., *Markets in Historical Contexts: Ideas and Politics in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).



as independent decision maker. Or, to put this a bit differently, Breen and Jones have ended up giving a strawman, a being much like the rational-choice actor so familiar to us as the centerpiece of the social scientific imaginary of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an eighteenth-century birth.

In the final part of this essay, I would like to propose that we put the business of choosing back under the microscope and throw out our prior assumptions about periodization and, indeed, both eighteenth-century consumption and eighteenth-century democracy along the way. For when we examine both consumer choice and political choice together, especially in the latter part of the century, we see that not only were they non-homologous in the ways that they operated; they also evolved in surprisingly divergent ways. That holds true whether we look to the Anglo-American world or the French one, to the buildup to revolutionary upheaval or well into the nineteenth century. What is more, neither the economic nor the political sphere produced someone who, in the eighteenth-century imagination, resembles the human model so central to contemporary social scientific practice: the rational consumer-citizen, intent upon maximizing his utility and expressing his freedom through his stable, personal preference determinations in a variety of kinds of markets. The better question might actually be how and why these two initially quite disparate domains—the world of commercial choice and the world of political choice—ever come to resemble one another to such a degree that consumer behavior in economic terms could, by the mid-twentieth century, be thought of a potential model for studying political behavior. But that is a question for another day. My task is first to dispel the view of the trans-Atlantic Age of Revolutions, as most capably and eloquently advanced by Jones and Breen, as portending any kind of synergy around choice as we understand it now.

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To make this case, let us finally look afresh at both sides of this equation—and not just at behavior that we think should translate into a recognizable mindset, a liberal sense of self-as-independent-chooser *avant la lettre*.

Instead, we need to turn our attention to how that behavior was understood in its own moment.

First, consumer choice: one reason it caused so much handwringing in eighteenth-century print culture is certainly that it seemed to upset the existing social hierarchy, allowing status potentially to be decoupled from appearance.[43] There were, after all, many variants of the "what if servants find a way to purchase fine clothes" lament, all rooted in the assumption that any suggestion of imitation of one's social betters would result in sexual and social disorder, the very kind of egalitarianism that revolution would only exacerbate. This was not an idle anxiety either; new retail conditions seemed to make this a kind of confusion a real possibility. As one French guidebook of 1715 explained to visitors, in a Parisian shop selling pre-made clothes, "there are clothes for all sexes, all sizes, and all sorts of ranks (*conditions*), and one has only to choose (*choisir*)."[44]

But the other primary reason for all the reproaches is because "shopping" came increasingly to be perceived as rooted in what contemporary observers called whim or fancy and we might call fleeting desire. The anonymous author of the previously mentioned *The Merchant's Ware-House* of 1696 assumed that more information—about quality, price, and use value—would necessarily lead to objectively better decisions on the part of drapers, seamstresses, and consumers alike. This is just what most classical economists still take for granted. However, the rise of patterned calicoes, along with advertising playing on their allure, moved much purchasing in the eighteenth century in what contemporaries believed to be the other direction. That is toward decisions made on the basis of subjective and unstable criteria (since the difference between the different options was usually largely aesthetic rather than practical) and toward what has fashionably been called self-fashioning. The latter term is used to mean an effort to fit in loosely with broad cultural trends but

43. As this applied especially to calico, see Chloe Wigston Smith, "'Calico Madams': Servants, Consumption and the Calico Crisis," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 31, no. 2 (2007): 29–53.

44. Sieur Louis Liger, *Le Voyageur fidèle, ou le guide des étrangers dans la ville de Paris* (Paris, 1715), 364.



also to make oneself, through consumption, a distinctive representative of one's distinctive personality, aspirations, and values, themselves often fluid depending on circumstances.[45] The *Mercure Galante* was already reporting more than a hundred years before the outbreak of the French Revolution that "there are no more general fashions, because there are too many particular ones . . . everyone dresses according to his [or her] fantasy."[46]

Moreover, we know both men and women in the middling and even to some extent the lower classes in urban areas went "a shopping" in the eighteenth century. The consumer choices of men of various backgrounds are heavily documented in day books and records, including purchases of cloth for wives and daughters to consume, and even enslaved peoples of both sexes frequented stores in rural North America. But the act of shopping was increasingly coded as feminine and leisured (a "fashionable female amusement" in the words of William Alexander, M.D., in his grandly titled *The History of Women, from the earliest antiquity, to the present time*[47]). That designation placed it a world away from male rationality, including that of most shopkeepers—to the detriment of both women and consumer culture. This, indeed, is what many eighteenth-century novels make clear, as even those written by women authors, for women readers, typically depict their heroine-consumers as indecisive, easily seduced by novelty or folly, or in need of social guidance as to how to choose properly. Eighteenth-century businesses quickly learned to cater to and, indeed, build upon this gendered epistemology. To be successful, pattern drawers and printers, according to a 1747 English guidebook, needed to have "a fruitful Fancy, to invent new Whims to

45. It is important to note that Stephen Greenblatt himself gives "self-fashioning" a more restrictive meaning in his classic book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

46. *Le Mercure galante* (July 1677), cited in Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex*, 115.

47. William Alexander, M.D., *The History of Women, from the earliest antiquity, to the present time* (Philadelphia, 1796 [Dublin, 1779]), vol. 1, 108.

please the changeable Foible of the Ladies . . . [and] a wild kind of Imagination, to adorn their work with a regular Confusion, fit to attract the Eye but not to please the Judgment."[48] Shopkeepers found themselves ostensibly competing with each other for women's fickle affections too. By the start of the eighteenth century, it was already a commonplace to claim, as Bernard Mandeville did, that "In the choice of things we are more often directed by the Caprice of Fashions, and the Custom of the Age, than we are by solid Reason, or our own Understanding," but also "the reasons some of the Fair Sex have for their choice [of shop] are often very Whimsical and kept as a great Secret."[49]

That tension between choice as an opportunity for rational judgment and liberation, on the one hand, and choice as driven by unfounded desire and, consequently, a source of psychic strain, on the other, was to color most eighteenth-century accounts of the experience of shopping itself. In the same year (1786) that Immanuel Kant insisted in his *Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History* that the initial discovery of choice both opened up the freedom for people to craft their own futures and introduced unending anxiety into human history,[50] the German writer Sophie von La Roche wrote breathlessly but nervously of window shopping in London. As she put it, "Behind great glass windows absolutely everything one can think of is neatly, attractively displayed and in such abundance of choice as almost to make one greedy."[51] Fanny Burney's fictional Evelina says much the same thing: when she's taken out "a *shopping*," mercers show her

48. R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747), 115, cited in Lemaire, *Fashion's Favorite*, 83. On the modification of products to suit taste, including whim, see too John Styles, "Product Innovation in Early Modern London," *Past and Present* 168 (2000): 124–69.

49. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees; Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits. Part II*, (London, 1729), 286, and *The Fable of the Bees; Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits. Part I*, 3rd ed. (London, 1724), 406.

50. Immanuel Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History" [1786], in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221–34, esp. 224.

51. *Sophie in London, 1786, being the Diary of Sophie von La Roche*, trans. Claire Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), 87.



so much stuff that she is "almost ashamed" not to be able to buy it all.[52] Earlier in the century, the Dutch travel writer Joachim Chrisoph Nemeitz, describing all the fashionable boutiques lining the arcades in the Palais de Justice in Paris and all the inducements to visit them, noted that what was most difficult was "to choose in which boutique one wants to make one's purchases."[53] Choosing is here a pleasure but also a burden, an occasion for a battle within oneself over greed, guilt, self-expression, compassion, and self-discipline, in addition to being a ritual that must be properly performed.

Moreover, as early as the first decades of the eighteenth century, Mandeville and Defoe both identified the fact that the battle was not entirely internal either; the actual business of buying and selling involved a complex psychological power struggle between polite but determined adversaries. One repeat motif of novels and travel accounts of the second half of the century was the merchant taking advantage of the dazzled female consumer and robbing her, via his or sometimes her presentation of seductive goods, of more money than she had. But the other is the rise of the frequenting of shops as a social activity that involved groups of women throwing their weight around as consumers and finding pleasure by actually rejecting the game of choice, that is, endlessly looking, conversing, and browsing (as we now label it) without buying, and thereby constantly thwarting the ambitions of middlemen eager to close the deal. "Shopping, as it is called" according to our English expert on the history of women, who was at pains to distinguish this new activity from mere buying, is a process whereby "two, three, or sometimes more ladies, accompanied by their gallants, set out to make a tour through the most fashionable shops, and to look at all the most fashionable goods, without any intention of laying out one single sixpence. After a whole forenoon spent in plaguing mercers and milliners, they return home, either thoughtless of their folly,

52. Fanny Burney, *Evelina: or, A Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, 3rd ed. (Dublin, 1784 [orig. 1778]), 24, 25.

53. Joachim Christoph Nemeitz, *Séjour de Paris, c'est-à-dire, Instructions fidèles, pour les voiageurs de condition* (Leiden, 1727), 595.

or which, perhaps, is worse, exalting at the thoughts of the trouble and disturbance they have given."[54] Similarly, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, in his great *Tableau de Paris*, noted that when one is visiting shops in Paris, "often times one leaves the store after a long discussion without having bought anything," though he blamed this effect on the customer having been made "dizzy from the merchant's babble."[55] What comes through in both accounts is that choosing was best thought of as a game requiring some measure of cunning on both sides of the counter. In popular discourse, eighteenth-century shoppers seem to oscillate among gluttony or lack of restraint in choosing everything; choosing poorly by "overvalu[ing] her own Judgment as well as the Commodity she would purchase," in Mandeville's terms;[56] and a failure to choose at all (though we know from probate inventories that an awful lot of stuff did end up in people's homes). The larger point is that the appearance of something like an expanded menu of options and the cultivation of consumer choice, especially in the world of silks, cottons, and other textiles, does not seem to have produced anything like an ideal liberal consumer consciousness in this moment. And even if we were able to locate one archetypical consumer of the eighteenth-century variety (a dangerous assumption, albeit one common to the scholarship on consumption), it would still seem quite hard to find enough examples to conclude that we would end up with a confident, utility-maximizing shopper who was primed to enter the new marketplace of politics in the last quarter of the eighteenth century with this kind of hyper-rational mindset.

Turning to politics in the last years of the eighteenth century does not, however, get us closer to finding that idealized autonomous choice-maker. Arguably, when the idea of "choice" entered the political culture of revolutionary North America or France in the last decades of the eighteenth century attached to consent and then representation, it built even less on the

54. Alexander, *The History of Women*, vol. 1, 108.

55. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Parallèle de Paris et de Londres: un inédit*, ed. Claude Bruneteau and Bernard Cottret (Didier érudition, 1982), cited in Jones, *Sexing la Mode*, 167.

56. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees . . . Part I*, 405.



kind of individuated choosing behavior or the conceptualization of choice with which classical economists have made us familiar. Certainly the historian fails to discover a rational political actor calculating what matches his or her internal preferences or judgments and acting on that basis, as imagined by social and public choice theorists since the second half of the twentieth century. But we also do not get someone whose conception of choice seems in any way borrowed from or even parallel to the late seventeenth- or eighteenth-century purchaser of calicoes, paralyzed by the plethora of options or eager to have everything he or she fancies at once. Rather, we find a marked, and indeed self-conscious, divergence.

Of course, what constitutes political choice-making and the significance accorded to that choice in the Age of Revolutions can, as both Jones and Breen rightly suggest, be considered in multiple ways. Political choice can, in practice, refer to the many informal decisions made by ordinary people, used to thinking of themselves previously as subjects, about whether or not to place themselves in new civic roles by joining a political club, participating in a boycott, or otherwise taking matters into their own hands and then whether to do so in support of one side or the other in a very public struggle. Breen calls these decisions, when made in support of revolution, "choices for political freedom," which might be another way of saying, choices in favor of the expansion of opportunities for choice-making in the future.[57] We are, however, destined to come up foiled if we hope to find something in terms of either behavior or ideology resembling contemporaneous consumer choice here in this informal political realm even when the big issues at hand belong to the realm we now call political economy. The late eighteenth-century choice to identify as a Jacobin or Patriot, for example, or to take up arms, or to wear a revolutionary cap, or to forgo tea, is better understood as belonging to the more traditional register of Hercules's choice: to do the right and moral thing, as defined by community values, or not.[58] In this binary decision making world, the only

57. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 151.

58. Hercules's Choice (between the paths of virtue and vice) was one of the most common allegories to be employed in eighteenth-century poetry, painting, and opera. For one influential

good option is to take the just rather than the unjust or depraved path, and virtue is what is really at stake. Certainly that was how contemporaries painted such choices in both pro-revolutionary and counterrevolutionary camps. Neither weighing the varied options nor actualizing one's personal taste in a bid for greater personal independence or distinction describes what revolutionary politics required French or British North American revolutionary actors to do in "choosing" to enter the collective fray either in support of or against a cause or course of action.

Perhaps we stand on stronger ground, though, if we look at formal choice-making in the case of elections, as Jones hints we should by his use of the term "citizen-voters" in reference to revolutionary France. Tellingly, neither Jones nor Breen draws this parallel too closely. But the result of considering this pairing is nevertheless revealing. Comparison underlines just how differently in the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world the nascent realm of political choice—which, in theory, stayed rooted in notions of the general will or common good, and in practice, remained largely communal—was understood from the equally burgeoning realm of consumer choice.

Consider casting a vote, the key procedure by which formal political choice-making was conceptualized and institutionalized in the Age of Revolutions in a bid to make tangible the notion of the rights of citizens to self-determination and the sovereignty of the people. The significance of "choice" (typically, of one's representatives rather than of specific laws or policies) does appear from time to time in the discussion of the purpose of elections in both revolutionary France and revolutionary America, though the terms duty and obligation appear more frequently.[59] But more to the point, and what is more surprising, is actually how little attention was initially accorded in either context to precisely *how* this essential act in the

rendition of the story, see *The Tattler* no. 97 (Nov. 22, 1709): http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=33786.

59. See, for example, *Considérations sur l'importance du choix des représentants de la Nation* (1789); Louis-Claude de Cresy, *Aux électeurs. Lettre sur l'attention qu'ils doivent apporter dans leur choix* (1790); or A.-A.-C. Mossy, *Adresse au people français, sur l'importance du choix des électeurs et des députés de la Convention* (1792).



demonstration of newly claimed popular sovereignty was to be instituted. The business of suffrage is almost absent from Tom Paine's *Common Sense* of 1776. Ditto for the Abbé Sieyès' 1789 *What is the Third Estate?*, apart from the critical discussion of the voting procedure to be used in the Estates-General; the question of how the French National Assembly, once constructed, will represent the nation's will is ignored. Perhaps because the idea of elections required attention to the persistence of divisiveness and disagreement and thus the fracturing of the revolutionary body politic, the manner in which future popular elections were to be held did not emerge as a key theme in the early literature of either great revolution.

And in practice, in both new national contexts, radical heterogeneity remained the norm, just as it had been before the revolutionary era, with multiple kinds of voting, encompassing various approaches to secrecy and publicity, individualism and collectivism, continuing unabated and often unremarked upon in different locations on both sides of the Atlantic. That included forms of balloting, but also voting by acclamation, voting *à haute voix*, and voting with a show of hands or by moving to one side of the room or the other.[60] Indeed, even once elections became a fact of revolutionary culture, it is hard to find much structural similarity between any of these late eighteenth-century forms of voting for political representatives and new practices of shopping, aside from the designation in both cases of

60. On the varied methods of voting employed in the era of the French Revolution, see Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Philippe Tanchoux, *Les Procédures électorales en France de la fin de l'Ancien Régime à la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: CTHS, 2004); Yves Déloye and Olivier Ihl, *L'Acte de vote* (Paris: Presse de Sciences Po, 2008); and Olivier Christin, *Vox Populi. Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2014), which stresses continuity with older practices across the revolutionary divide. On voting methods in the revolutionary era in North America, see Richard Dinkin, *Voting in Provincial America: A Study of Elections in the Thirteen Colonies, 1689-1776* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1977); Robert Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America: A Study of Elections in the Original Thirteen States, 1776–1789* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1982); and Alec C. Ewald, *The Way We Vote: The Local Dimension of American Suffrage* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009). See too Malcolm Crook and Tom Crook, "The Advent of the Secret Ballot in Britain and France, 1789-1914: From Public Assembly to Private Compartment," *History* xcii (2007): 199–237 and "Reforming Voting Practices in a Global Age: The Making and the Remaking of the Modern Secret Ballot in Britain, France and the U.S., c. 1600–c. 1950," *Past and Present* 212, no. 1 (2011): 199–237, which stress the late and difficult introduction of the secret ballot on both sides of the Atlantic.

special, bounded spaces in which these respective ritualized activities were to occur. The one was to take place only on special, infrequent occasions strictly regulated by formal law, the other almost incessantly (in considerable contrast to an older world of marketplaces and fairs) according to evolving, largely informal social norms. The nature and display of the options, as well as the recording (or not) of the results, were equally different in form. Moreover, the social composition of those invited to participate in the two rituals diverged markedly from one another along both gendered and class axes, distinctions that were increasingly reinforced by rules of state. In sum, nowhere did voting seem to build upon models derived from the world of commerce either theoretically or structurally despite the assumption of Jones, Breen, and others that changes in consumption (if not production) habits had to have predated and undergirded any profound political change.

It is worth considering some of the particulars as voting was institutionalized as the standard means of determining citizens' representatives to new, national political assemblies. In revolutionary France, even when voters were explicitly instructed to make a "choice," as in elections for deputies to the National Assembly, those same voters were given no formal menu of options or slate of candidates from which to pick or even any guidelines as to the criteria on which their decision should be based. Instructions to voters hung in electoral assembly halls in May of 1790 asked them to swear to name "only those whom you have chosen (*choisis*) in your soul and conscience as the most worthy of public confidence, without it having been determined by gifts, promises, solicitations or threats," but also without giving any further suggestions about who those people might be, or where they could be found, or how they could distinguished from their peers.[61] Furthermore, while certainly ephemeral

61. On the lack of a slate of candidates in revolutionary France, see *Archives parlementaires* XV, 704, cited in Malcolm Crook, "Le Candidat imaginaire, ou l'offre et le choix dans les élections de la Révolution française," *Annales historiques de la révolution française*, no. 321 (2000): 91–110. Apart from a brief experiment in 1797, declared candidates were only formally required in French elections starting in 1889; see Christophe Voilliot, *Le Candidature officielle: une pratique d'état de la Restauration à la Troisième République* (Rennes: Presse universitaire de Rennes, 2005). On the significance of this policy, see too Patrice Gueniffey, *Le Nombre et la raison: la Révolution française et les élections* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1993). A theme that appears in literature like Louis-Alexandre Epilly's *Avis aux citoyens François, sur le choix des officiers municipaux, des assemblées de districts et de départements* (1790 or 1791) is how not to be deceived in picking, which, in a sense, underlines the difficult task with which revolutionary citizens were presented.



printed propaganda, including newspapers and pamphlets, played a role akin to print-based advertising when it came to trying to persuade citizens about the value of a particular course of action, the appeal was always to citizens' commitment to the general good or the good of the nation, not choices reflective of personal, interior preferences or tastes or interests. Individuals were largely absent from the process, both as candidates and as voters. Moreover, even as women continued to participate in informal ways in the culture of politics, the realm of electoral politics was, in the late eighteenth century, growing more definitively coded male in both practice and theory, that is, attached to a notion of the independent self (in the Anglo-American as well as the French world) very much at odds with the contemporary image of the feminine, whimsical, or aestheticized consumer.[62]

One might say, of course, that when we are speaking of revolutionary France, we are referring to the land of Rousseau, one of history's great opponents of formal elections as a means of crafting political outcomes. How could we rightly expect anything but the (collective, male) general will to have been the imagined epistemological and psychological foundation for political decision making? In the distinctive Rousseauian ideology of the French Revolution, even the idea of voting depending on the aggregation of multiple individual and potentially conflicting decisions about a future course of action constituted a potential threat to the unity of the nation. We should not be surprised, then, that suffrage in the 1790s was generally framed as a means

62. Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), suggests that the possibility of extending political rights to women was so fraught from the beginning partly because the unique individual had long been understood to be coded male in contradistinction to a female 'other.' But for the era of the French Revolution, her focus is on the epistemology of the imagination, not choice-making or consumer behavior.

to reflect rational public opinion[63] and to reaffirm community values—as it had long been the case in electoral scenarios in monarchical France.

But interestingly, the new American state constitution writers worried in the 1770s and '80s about much the same thing (even as some of them proposed "experiments" with secret balloting designed, as in France just a decade or two later, to limit social pressure at the polling station from above or below). No consensus emerged in the wake of American independence about whether it was communities or aggregates of individuals whose sentiments were being measured by the franchise, much less about the proper form in which voting should take place. The Federalists who did so much to shape the form of the Constitution in 1787 also tried to place sovereignty simultaneously in individuals and communities, including states and regions, and deliberately avoided prescribing any single, national suffrage regime.[64] And the English, whose suffrage traditions were initially widely emulated in the new United States, were even more resistant, well into the nineteenth century, to any form of the nascent psychology of market choice or the emergence of personal preference being appropriated to political ends. This was despite the fact that money flowed in multiple directions during eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British parliamentary elections; polling literally took place in marketplaces across the land; and consumer culture was perhaps most developed in England's many towns and cities. Not only was the voting for representatives, or members of parliament, that did occur in late eighteenth-century Britain largely ceremonial, fully public (and to a greater degree than in France or the new United States), and consistently communal in nature, rooted in the idea of a trust being bestowed on some—a limited body of electors—to determine the needs of all. It was also, even after important

63. On public opinion as rational in the French revolutionary political imaginary, see the essay by Antoine Lilti in this volume, as well as the classic essay by Keith Baker, "Public Opinion as Political Invention," in his *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

64. On therejection of national voting standards in the United States, see Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), as well as the works on voting in the early republic cited in note 60.



changes in the law in the early part of the century, infrequent, and it was only rarely employed in the service of real contestation or the creation of a choice between defined options until the second half of the nineteenth century. If voting in post-1789 France featured so much choice as to render the idea of choice-making irrelevant, voting in England featured so little as to have the same effect.[65]

Discourse, meanwhile, ran in the same direction as practice. In the early 1860s, John Stuart Mill was only reinforcing what still constituted the dominant wisdom of the day (with the exception of Australia) when he argued that the introduction of the secret ballot at the national level constituted a threat precisely because it would make individual whim and taste—the dangerous kinds of motivations long associated with market-based behavior, he implied—the foundation of political choice. As Mill explained it, the great risk of secret, individuated voting was that a man would henceforth to able to "use a public function for his own interest, pleasure or caprice" and bestow his vote "simply as he feels inclined."[66] Political choice, on other words, would be reduced to something like private desire or aesthetic preference rather than manly, objective judgment about the collective good. But even for advocates of ballots, individuation, and secrecy in elections, whose ranks grew on both sides of the Atlantic in the second half of the nineteenth century, drawing parallels between the commercial and the political spheres remained largely anathema. It might even be argued that fear of contamination—of the mindset of the (whimsical, indecisive, self-interested, easy swayed, feminine) shopper rubbing

65. Frank O'Gorman, "Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780–1860," *Past and Present*, no. 135 (1992): 79–115, see 80. On the tradition of open voting in British parliamentary elections and its meaning from the eighteenth century onward, see too Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); John A. Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters, and Straights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

66. See J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* [1861], in *Utilitarianism* ed. Geraint Williams (London: Dent, 1993), 325–32, for the heart of his argument against the secret ballot.

off on or determining that of the voter—is one reason both a compulsory secret ballot and female suffrage were such late developments across the Atlantic world. Only with the rise of political parties able to play the role of middlemen or "choice architects" long occupied by persuasive merchants did voting access and practice begin to change across much of the Western world to reflect a growing sense that individual citizens needed protection, on a person-by-person basis, for the honest expression of their distinctive (and frequently selfish) interior preferences.[67] In other words, it might be more accurate to think of democratic revolution happening in two stages, with the institutionalization of the idea of individual choice in politics occurring a good hundred years after the introduction of popular sovereignty, that is, only from the 1870s onward. And it would still be another seventy-five years, until the mid-twentieth century, for the citizen-consumer, under the aegis of a new kind of thinking about choice both in popular discourse and in the social sciences, to be imagined as a single psychological entity.

Today, as we contemplate the possibility of mail-in and Internet voting conducted at the kitchen table as the primary act of citizenship, an activity demanding many of the same mental skills and habits as ordering goods online, political and consumer culture do seem indelibly linked. This association is reinforced in advertising of all sorts, where choice is a key value and term. It is also reinforced by human rights discourse in which the right to choice in consumer goods and the right to political choice, not to mention choice in profession, place of residence, marriage partner, religion, and many other arenas, are inscribed in twinned, even mutually constitutive, ways even as we accord substantially greater moral weight to some of these decisions than others. What this article has aimed

67. On the joint rise of the secret ballot and mass voting in nineteenth-century England, France, and elsewhere, see Christophe Jaffrelot, "L'Invention du vote secret en Angleterre," *Polix* 22 (1993): 43–68; Alain Garrigou, *Histoire sociale du suffrage universel en France (1848–2000)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), esp. 197–210; Richard Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet and Peter Pels, eds., *Cultures of Voting: The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot* (London: Hurst, 2007), as well as the articles of Crook and Crook cited in note 60.



to illustrate is that we cannot read this ideology backward onto the eighteenth century without introducing a kind of anachronism into the historical record. That also means rejecting the assumption that our current discourse stressing the maximization of both choice-making and choices as a path to freedom indicates a natural mental synergy between these two realms and thus an inevitable cause, or even direct consequence, of the age of twin consumer and political revolutions. In the present era of behavioral economics—which seems, oddly, to have had a very limited impact on the writing of history, at least so far—we should think again before we choose to see all choice-making as rooted in the same psychological instincts; one of its key empirical findings is that the performance of choosing, as well as the nature of the choices made, is variable and always extremely context-dependent.[68] We might think again too before we choose to see choice, as conceptualized in a modern market setting, as the source of the experience of citizenship in a democratic polity rather than one of its more recent products.

Finally, perhaps we can also use this brief effort to restore historicity to choice as a chance to reconsider the relation of social practices to the formation of ideology more generally. Intellectual historians should indeed be encouraged not to overlook new behavioral modes as a key source for new ideas, especially ones that will become close to hegemonic. In this case, it is hard to imagine the *value* of choice becoming so doxic (to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu) in the modern West without the *experience* of choosing becoming so widespread but also so unexceptional, even habitual over time. From catalogues to ballots, the technologies of

68. On the minimal impact of behavioral economics on history writing, and especially the limited role of "irrationality" in accounts of the decisions or choices made by historical actors, see Naomi Lamoreaux, "Reframing the Past: Thoughts about Business Leadership and Decision Making Under Uncertainty," *Enterprise and Society* 2 (2001): 632–59. On lack of attention to context in traditional economic approaches to choice, see Richard Harper, Dave Randall, and Wes Sharrock, *Choice, The Sciences of Reason in the 21st Century: A Critical Assessment* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016). For a rare example of a historical study that draws on cognitive work in economics, albeit for a different historical period, see Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Social-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

choice, the number and kinds of options, the opportunities for making selections, and the types of people routinely engaged in one of these forms of choosing all grew exponentially between the end of the seventeenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries. But that said, it is also clear that all choosing activities should not be thought of as the same or even analogous practices. For social practices are themselves always inscribed already in ideational frameworks and beliefs about meaning, as well as social frameworks; that is true even when those practices appear to be new. In this case, the explanatory mechanisms that emerged around the advent of new forms of consumption and the advent of new forms of political life were quite different from the start even as the behaviors they supported appear, in retrospect, to have had something in common structurally. That likely made the experience of, say, voting in a revolutionary assembly in France feel very different both from the experience of shopping in an eighteenth-century boutique *and* from the experience of voting today—despite the similar mental task and the common recourse to the linguistic-conceptual category of choice required across all of these realms. What Jones and Breen have rightly done for us is to draw our attention to the kinds of mundane behaviors and activities—from reading the want ads in a local paper to examining options in ribbons in a provincial store—that lie at the root of popular ideas and make them resonate. However, in the case of revolutions and choice, these examples also inadvertently warn us against any kind of determinism. There is no evidence, to put it more directly, that perusing the *Affiches* in Nantes in the early 1780s or buying accessories in Charleston in the early 1770s predisposed a person to make particular choices, or indeed any kind of choices, in the political realm or even to support a politics in which choice was celebrated as an ideal for human flourishing. All we can conclude is that the historian who really wants to understand intellectual shifts must stay alert to the constant but indirect interplay among changing social practices and behavior, changing emotional and psychological experience, *and* changing ways of conceptualizing and talking about both. The full story of the growing power in modern life of the idea of choice—aesthetic, affective, intellectual, and indeed political—has yet to be written.

# Rethinking the Age of Revolutions

## *France and the Birth of the Modern World*

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AND

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