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978-0-521-89502-6 - The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present

Jan de Vries

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## THE INDUSTRIOUS REVOLUTION

In the long eighteenth century, new consumer aspirations combined with a new industrious behavior to alter fundamentally the material cultures of northwestern Europe and North America. This “industrious revolution” is the context in which the economic acceleration associated with the Industrial Revolution took shape. This study explores the intellectual understanding of the new importance of consumer goods as well as the actual consumer behavior of households of all income levels.

Jan de Vries examines how the activation and evolution of consumer demand shaped the course of economic development, situating consumer behavior in the context of the household economy. He considers the changing consumption goals of households from the seventeenth century to the present and analyzes how household decisions have mediated between macro-level economic growth and actual human betterment. Ultimately, de Vries’s research reveals key strengths and weaknesses of existing consumer theory, suggesting revisions that add historical realism to economic abstractions.

Jan de Vries has been a professor of history and economics at the University of California at Berkeley since 1973. At Berkeley he holds the Sidney Hellman Ehrman endowed chair in European history. De Vries has also served as chair of the History Department, dean of Social Sciences, and vice provost for Academic Affairs. He has written five books, 65 published articles and book chapters, and 45 book reviews. In addition, he is co-editor of three books. He is the recipient of the Woodrow Wilson and Guggenheim fellowships, among others; has held grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health; and has held visiting fellowships to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, and All Souls College, Oxford. He has been elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. He is the 2000 recipient of the A. H. Heineken Prize in History.

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Het Thee en Koffy-Gereedschap. Jan Luiken, *Het leerzaam huisraad* (Amsterdam, 1711)

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# The Industrious Revolution

*Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy,  
1650 to the Present*

JAN DE VRIES

*University of California at Berkeley*



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*For my wife, Jeannie, and my children, Nicholas and Saskia*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1 The Transformation of Consumer Desire in the Long Eighteenth Century	i
2 The Origins of the Industrious Revolution	40
3 The Industrious Revolution: The Supply of Labor	73
4 The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Demand	122
5 The Breadwinner–Homemaker Household	186
6 A Second Industrious Revolution?	238
<i>Bibliography</i>	275
<i>Index</i>	315

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89502-6 - The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present

Jan de Vries

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Figures

1.1a,b,c.	Three models of the relationship between household economy and consumer choice	<i>page 35</i>
3.1.	The Boserup model of agricultural production and population growth	75
3.2.	Shares of European population in four categories, 1500–1800	95
5.1.	Lifecycle variation in the value of time for women	200
5.2.	Household income in the United States and Europe, 1889–90	221
5.3a,b.	Industrial household income by source, 1889–90	222
5.4a,b,c.	Income pooling: Industrious households, patriarchal households, breadwinner–homemaker households	228
6.1.	U.S. labor force participation rates by sex and marital status, 1880–2000	248
6.2.	U.S. women’s labor force participation by birth cohorts, since 1901	249
6.3.	Female labor force participation: United States	251
6.4.	Female labor force participation: Netherlands	252
6.5.	British trends in female labor force participation, by age groups	254

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89502-6 - The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present

Jan de Vries

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Preface and Acknowledgments

This study of long-term economic development differs from most that have gone before by addressing consumer aspirations rather than productive activities, and by focusing on the household unit rather than the individual. It examines a period in Western history that experienced the Industrial Revolution, but this revolution stands in the background here in order to give due consideration to the initiatives of households as their consumption goals as well as their strategies to achieve them change. This complex of household behaviors – an industrious revolution – formed the broader context in which the productive initiatives we know as the Industrial Revolution could unfold.

In the economists' world of supply and demand, an emphasis on demand as the agent of change in long-term development is uncommon; indeed, it is usually viewed as a sign of heterodoxy. Yet, in the social sciences more broadly considered, the central importance of consumption in contemporary society is treated as a commonplace. It simultaneously fuels the anxieties of solemn critics of late capitalism and excites the imaginations of postmodern self-fashioners. Between those who set consumption aside as too difficult to model and those who regard it as too self-evident to warrant further scrutiny, a large terrain has been left underexamined and undertheorized. This study seeks to contribute to a sounder understanding of an historical phenomenon that too many social scientists have neglected – purposefully neglected, one could say.

This is a study in economic history. It offers a history of the household considered as an economic unit that seeks to contribute to a new economic framework for the study of long-term consumer behavior. That is, I argue in this book that consumer aspirations have a history; they are not simply the second-order consequences of other, more fundamental forces, nor are they autonomous acts of creative individuality. To this end, I develop



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Jan de Vries

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

an economic framework in which to interpret household decision making that has usually been interpreted primarily in social, cultural, and ideological terms. I have gathered the elements of this framework under the conceptual term *industrious revolution*. In a specific historical period in a specific geographical zone, a new form of household economic behavior became increasingly influential, increasing simultaneously the supply of market-oriented production and the demand for a broad but not indiscriminate range of consumer goods.

The industrious revolution unfolded in the course of the long eighteenth century. This capacious “century” stretches across the period 1650–1850, spanning the British Industrial Revolution and the French and American political revolutions. This unconventional periodization challenges – is, indeed, intended to question – longstanding assumptions about the origins of modern industrial society in Western history. While I do not wish to substitute one simple story for another, I do hope this study will help place the familiar “revolutionary” events in the broader context of early modern markets, households, and material culture.

While the industrious revolution as developed here is largely a spent force by the mid-nineteenth century, this study does not end there but continues to trace the consumer behavior of the household economy up to the present time. The book’s last two chapters have a dual purpose. The first is to sharpen our understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the “industrious household” by contrasting it with the very different household economy that took its place in the century after 1850: the breadwinner–homemaker household. The second is to understand better the present and the future. Our beliefs about our future options and prospects are shaped to a large extent by where we think we have been and how we think we got to where we are now. This study argues that the common understandings on these matters, as they pertain to the household economy and modern consumer society, are incorrect. It is this book’s final task, therefore, to suggest alternative ways to think about our present and our possible futures.

This is not a study of a single country’s experience, nor does it claim to offer an historical framework applicable to all of Europe or the world. The industrious revolution and the household organization linked to it had their chief impact in a restricted zone of indefinite boundaries. It is best observed in northwestern Europe: England, the Low Countries, and parts of France and Germany. The North American colonies share in these characteristics, even though the economic environment differed in important respects. Elsewhere, the larger cities exhibit some of its features, but neither eastern Europe nor the Mediterranean zones participate fully

Cambridge University Press

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Jan de Vries

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface and Acknowledgments*

xi

in its main developments. Consequently, this study moves from country to country, assembling historical evidence. It is not a comparative study but a composite history of the common experience of a zone that is not defined primarily by political boundaries.

I have been thinking about the theme of this book, off and on, for quite a while. Indeed, some of the ideas I develop here first came to me as I was preparing my doctoral dissertation in 1968–9. After a few early articles, I set aside my interest in households and consumer behavior for many years, returning to it only in 1990, when the British historian John Brewer invited me to participate in one of a series of seminars he organized around the theme of material culture and consumption. I might not have accepted his invitation had it not been for a brief discussion I had had in 1986 with the Japanese demographic historian Akira Hayami. His argument that Japanese economic development took the form of an “industrious revolution” – a highly labor-intensive form of economic growth – had set me to thinking anew about pre-industrial development in the West. Brewer’s invitation led to my first articles introducing a Western “industrious revolution.”

Other commitments led me, once again, to set this interest aside for several years, until a sabbatical year as a visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, in 1997–8 allowed me to read more broadly and deeply in the economics of consumption and the political economy of consumer behavior. I discovered that the stories told about Oxford and the even richer stories told about All Souls College are all true. If the reasons for all their practices are not apparent at first, or even after long reflection, their net effect is highly successful in stimulating the intellect and broadening one’s academic perspectives. Looking back, there are years in which I have worked harder, but probably none in which I learned more or took greater pleasure in the daily pursuit of the academic life. The many British economists and historians who assisted me form a very long list, but I must acknowledge here the late Charles Feinstein, Paul David, Avner Offer, Jane Humphries, Maxine Berg, John Robertson, and the late Rees Davies.

My year at Oxford allowed me to develop the industrious revolution concept more fully, and to extend the argument to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thanks once again to the generosity of British colleagues, I had the opportunity to present my findings at the McArthur Lectures at Cambridge University in 2000. The invitation to give these lectures was extended by Sir Tony Wrigley, whose work has set a standard I have striven to attain throughout my career. Exposure to a learned and critical audience is a great gift, and I left Cambridge with a clearer idea of how to transform the lectures into the book that is now before you.

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Jan de Vries

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

*Preface and Acknowledgments*

For this I wish to thank especially Martin Daunton, Richard Smith, John Hatcher, Alan Macfarlane, Paul and Margaret Spufford, Emma Rothschild, and Sheilagh Ogilvie.

Events then intervened that slowed my development of the four McArthur Lectures into the six chapters of this book. Fortunately, I was rescued from the tasks of academic administration that have occupied most of my time since presenting the McArthur Lectures by an opportunity to spend a sabbatical semester in the fall of 2005 at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS). This was not my first stay at NIAS; indeed, it was my fourth. NIAS has been instrumental in bringing to completion nearly every major academic project in which I have been engaged, for which I will forever be in its debt. The hospitality of its rector, Wim Blockmans, the efficient support of its staff, and the stimulation of the international gathering of visiting Fellows gathered there combined to create at once a welcoming sanctuary, a focused research environment, and a forum for fruitful academic exchange. Wassenaar, the town in which NIAS is located, also deserves mention here, for its subtle pleasures are, I think, best appreciated by those deeply immersed in their work. It was serendipitous that my NIAS stay overlapped with those of Eric Jones, Tony Atkinson, Barbara Hanawalt, and Ruth Mohrmann, and it was an added benefit that I was able to meet with many Dutch colleagues, including Peer Vries, Henk Wesseling, Ad van der Woude, Jan Luiten van Zanden, and, in Belgium, Bruno Blondé, Erik Thoen, Walter Prevenier, and Herman van der Wee.

The transformation of a set of ideas and questions into the present book was the product of a series of opportunities made available to me and of suggestions and questions from many people in several countries. I am grateful to them all and absolve them, with the customary disclaimer, of any responsibility for the errors and shortcomings of this book.

I am grateful in a different way, but one not less important for this study, to my family. I developed my ideas over a span of years in which my children left home and formed their own households. Observing this at close range has been instructive and gratifying. It has made it impossible for me to be pessimistic about the future of the family, my natural pessimism notwithstanding.

Berkeley and Wassenaar