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**AMIDST THINGS:  
NEW HISTORIES OF COMMODITIES, CAPITAL AND CONSUMPTION**

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**Abstract:** The article engages with three recently published works, which represent a cross-section of different approaches to studying processes related to the material world. The works consider the emergence of global systems of cotton manufacturing and its relationship to capitalism, the growth of tea consumption in Britain and its social, cultural and economic impacts, and histories of consumption over a broad chronological and geographical span, respectively. Together they demonstrate that histories of production, trade, consumption, and use, are being rethought in light of the new approaches and questions prompted by global history and new histories of capitalism. At the same time, the article argues, the publication of these works suggests that fundamental assumptions about the material world are changing. Under the influence of new materialism, historians are increasingly being driven to tackle questions of agency, materiality and thingness. As a result, rather than studying what objects mean, historians are increasingly asking what things do. The article argues for the need to ensure that such approaches continue to interact with cultural and social concerns in order to form analyses that fully grapple with the complexity of the material world, as it existed in the past.

The material world is all around us. We sit amidst and with it, depending on it in ever-increasing ways. Historians in a range of sub-fields are using the material world as a lens through which to explore varied historic phenomena. They are asking not only how the material world came to be produced, exchanged, and acquired, but also what role it played in shaping everything from identities to conflicts, governmentality to knowledge construction and transfer, as well as the practices of everyday life. Sven Beckert's *Empire of cotton: a new history of global capitalism* (2014); Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger's *Empire of tea: the leaf that conquered the world* (2015), and Frank Trentmann's *Empire of things: how we became a world of consumers from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first* (2016) all analyse key processes connected to the material world.<sup>1</sup> These publications ask very different historical questions and utilize distinct approaches to explore capitalism, production, trade, and consumption. Sven Beckert's *Empire of cotton* takes a global perspective to examine the changing geographies and power structures of cotton cultivation and textile production as they switched between Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Ellis, Coulton, and Mauger's work explores a different commodity - tea. *Empire of tea* examines how Chinese and then Indian tea became essential to British culture from the seventeenth century to the present. Finally, Trentmann's *Empire of things* examines how, between the fifteenth century and the present day, consumption 'has become a defining feature of our lives'. It explores not only consumption's changing history and geographies over time, but also contemporary issues, such as credit, debt, and waste, to understand the longer histories of our present relationship to the material world and its rapid consumption. In many ways then, these books, with their different approaches and questions, do not belong together. They sit more easily within their own sub-fields of cultural and economic history, or within particular

approaches: be they global history, new histories of capitalism, or consumption studies. Yet, despite such differences, these works are connected by their focus on processes critical to the material world, such as cultivation, production, trade, and consumption, and the impacts of such processes in the past. Examining these distinct works together, and exploring their underlying assumptions about things, demonstrates that a shift is taking place within historical scholarship concerned with the material world.

Rather than a ‘world’ of goods, recent work by Beckert, Ellis, Coulton, Mauger, and Trentmann identifies ‘empires’ of goods, a mark of how analyses of the material world are increasingly invested in exploring power.<sup>2</sup> The term denotes an earlier tradition of consumption history, which explored the power that objects held over consumers. It also references more recent insights in political economy that stress the power and violence that existed (and exist) within the systems of governance, production, trade, and consumption that produce and mobilise goods.<sup>3</sup> Finally, ‘empire’ also gestures towards a theoretical shift. It suggests that goods, be they cotton or tea, can be simultaneously understood as ‘things’. It references the latest ‘material turn’, which sees ‘things’ not as inert and passive, but rather as animated, animating, and effective. In this new understanding, ‘things’ are understood as having an existence outside of object/subject relations, as entities that can effect change and thus have power.

Historical scholarship is constantly turning. Yet scholars often only recognize ‘turns’ in hindsight, as a means of making sense of the field.<sup>4</sup> The 1980s are often identified as an important moment, in which history turned towards forms of cultural theory, which built on and utilized the insights of the ‘linguistic turn’.<sup>5</sup> Alongside deconstructing texts to analyse language and meaning, the cultural turn also sought to

unpick the means by which knowledge was constructed and power embedded. The turn to the cultural has also been understood as a moment in which history, amongst other disciplines, turned away from the materialist tradition. Yet, here the language of turns appears divisive. Rather than turning away, some scholars continued to examine the material conditions of life, and came to the material world with new and important questions shaped by cultural history.<sup>6</sup> Instead of a material turn, therefore, it is more productive to examine how our understanding of the material world has broadened and changed over the last thirty years. It is significant that the recent growing interest in the material world has coincided with the development of theoretical interventions by philosophers, political scientists, literary scholars, and anthropologists, which through stressing the animated and effective nature of materiality are challenging underlying assumptions and prompting new questions.<sup>7</sup> Within the current resurgence, historians (particularly political and economic historians) are asking, not just how people utilised the material world, but also, how was the material world built and what did it do? Recognizing a broadening, rather than a turn, allows for continued interactions between what might be perceived as distinct and different areas of study. Such interactions are important in cultivating critical material histories that grapple with the social, cultural, political, and economic work that constructs and confronts the material world.

## I.

Writing histories with a worldwide scope has a long tradition, yet in the last thirty years ‘global history’ has emerged as a particular approach.<sup>8</sup> Global history is connected to but distinct from world history, which might be understood as ‘serious

attempts to treat historical phenomena that arise on a world scale'.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, global history has emerged at once as a mode of analysis that attempts to consider the development of globalization and the increasingly interconnected nature of the planet, and at another, as a form of historical research that attempts to tell 'a story without a center'.<sup>10</sup> Economic historians have been at the forefront of global history, using it as a means to track and highlight connections between economic systems and processes in the early modern and modern period. In the 1990s, members of the 'California School' such as R. Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz used global approaches to analyze larger integrated economic systems and pointedly resisted locating Europe at their centre.<sup>11</sup> Such histories deeply impacted on historical understandings of European economic growth and during the early 2000s, global approaches were crucial in constructing new historical narratives, which explored how connectivity shaped Europe's rapid economic change in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Examining connections and encounters prompted new questions about the movement of people, things, knowledge, and practices between countries and continents. As such historians of migration, science and technology, and material culture have incorporated global approaches within their analysis to better understand systems, but also people, knowledge, and things in the past.<sup>13</sup> Such impacts have been felt not only in early modern and modern European historiography but also elsewhere. Historians of earlier periods have begun to explore the significance of global approaches. Medieval scholars have underlined the importance of studying 'the global' in its own terms within the Middle Ages to drive new research areas.<sup>14</sup>

Within global history, commodities have emerged as an important subject of analysis. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defined commodities as 'objects of economic value' where value is not inherent, but rather 'is a judgment made about

them by subjects'.<sup>15</sup> Exchange is the source of valuation, creating the specific cultural and historical contexts in which values are assigned. Commodification is not permanent: it is a transitional process.<sup>16</sup> In global history, commodities have been assigned important roles as 'context spinners'.<sup>17</sup> Writing histories of connections across time and space through the frame of a single commodity has given focus to ambitious and complex histories. Global historians have revealed the different geographies through which commodities moved and the diverse economic, political, and cultural systems in which they became embedded.<sup>18</sup> As such, global history has tended to establish new geographies, although these are often no less 'centred'.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, following a commodity through diverse connections and processes has highlighted the importance of commodities, leading to better understandings of the process of commodification and how economic, political, social, and cultural values have been assigned and negotiated across space and time.<sup>20</sup>

*Empire of tea* considers the long processes by which a particular commodity came to be universally embraced. Globally-informed in approach, Ellis, Coulton, and Mauger explore trade and connections to examine how tea became influential in Britain, inserting 'itself within Britain's social and economic life' over the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> *Empire of tea* explicitly understands tea as active and animate, as more than 'an inert material commodity in these processes, for it actively transforms those subjected to its influence'.<sup>22</sup> Strikingly the book is written by literary scholars and is the most interdisciplinary of those under discussion. It moves between economic, scientific, cultural, political, social, and literary processes to uncover the multiple ways in which tea became a quintessentially British foodstuff. It was in the eighteenth century that the cultural, social, and economic work of embedding tea happened in earnest. Increasingly

regular trade between Britain and China and the joining of the New and Old East India Companies in England in 1702, meant that Britain relied less on Dutch imports and saw its own supply of tea grow. As it grew, the East India Company (EIC) developed greater infrastructure within London for landing, storing, inspecting, selling, and distributing tea.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, with the development of customs charges and excise duties on tea, smuggling expanded supplies. Utilizing ports and coastlines around the country, smuggling opened up tea consumption nationwide, and price reduction broadened its consumption among different social groups.<sup>24</sup> By the Commutation Act of 1784, the link between tea and metropolitan tastes had been broken and tea had become ordinary outside the capital. Yet other processes were also important in encouraging the growth in tea consumption and the naturalization of tea. Natural philosophers', physicians', and horticulturalists' interest in tea plants and cultivation was important, as was the negotiation and scripting of British understandings of tea by essayists, poets, and satirists.<sup>25</sup> Through such works and tea's prior links to the women of court, tea came to be associated with politeness, women, and conversation. Alongside these positive endorsements, tea was also perceived as troublesome: a substance that encouraged gossip and dependence.<sup>26</sup> Whether positive or negative, such discussions provided the cultural work that allowed tea to be understood, accepted, and desired, as its supply increased. Hence, 'By the late eighteenth century almost everyone in England (and much of the population in other parts of Great Britain and Ireland) drank tea of one kind or another.'<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in the Victorian period, 'tea did not merely remain everybody's drink: it became everybody's drink, all of the time'.<sup>28</sup> Tea became a marker of national character, a status further consolidated by it being increasingly sourced from plantations in the colonial subcontinent, rather than China.<sup>29</sup> *Empire of tea* shows the



long and difficult process of naturalization by examining a range of activities from literary discussions to economic legislation, marketing infrastructure, and scientific knowledge.

While such cross-disciplinary work is rich, it also underlines the difficulties in writing histories of a single commodity. Single commodity histories are problematic in asking particular goods to appear unique rather than as part of a range of goods that worked together to deliver particular social practices and meet desires. Ellis, Coulton, and Markman note how ‘Tea from China, coffee from Arabia and chocolate from Mexico came into public notice in Britain virtually simultaneously in the 1650s.’<sup>30</sup> In its earliest iteration tea entered the market alongside other hot, stimulating beverages obtained from outside Europe. Yet the importance of such confluence is left unexplored. Other commodities could have been included in the analysis to consider how their related introduction (from different geographies and by diverse routes) within particular sites informed one another, allowing the market for hot beverages to grow and prosper in specific ways. As *Empire of tea* briefly notes, the *means* by which tea became naturalized within Britain interacted with those that embedded porcelain.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to single commodity studies, other historians have begun to consider goods together more fully, such as Marcy Norton’s work on tobacco and chocolate in the Atlantic World or Bruno Blondé and Wouter Ryckbosch’s work on the integration of hot drinks into urban cultures in the eighteenth-century Southern Low Countries.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, research on ceramics has explored the ways in which the success of Chinese porcelains traded through Eurasian networks was shaped by the simultaneous popularity of other commodities.<sup>33</sup> Further work, which seeks to examine assemblages of commodities and their appropriation, is needed to reveal the often inter-dependent nature of their popularity. It may also prove significant in

explaining failure: why did certain commodities and practices, such as chewing betel quid, not develop in particular regions?<sup>34</sup>

Alongside the difficulties of writing single commodity histories, recent attempts to broaden the object biographies approach suggests further questions.<sup>35</sup> Igor Kopytoff's early work on object biographies has proved influential, with commodity histories tending to conceive of commodities in terms of the means by which they are produced, traded, and exchanged and then consumed and used, and how during these stages they simultaneously undergo processes of cultural construction which render and re-render them as commodities.<sup>36</sup> Object biographies follow commodities from their 'birth' (cultivation or production) to their 'death' (consumption, use, disuse). However, new materialism (which will be discussed in more detail later) is prompting scholars to reconsider this approach, particularly in terms of how object 'lives' align to human 'lives' and thus fails to 'realize the full potential to trace the conjunction of things over time and space'.<sup>37</sup> Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie argue for the importance of 'itineraries', which trace 'the strings of places where objects come to rest or are active, the routes through which things circulate, and the means by which they are moved'.<sup>38</sup> Such an approach takes into account the excessiveness of things, in that they have modes of being that humans are unable to observe but that can ultimately impact humans.<sup>39</sup> Understanding commodities simultaneously as things, prompts scholars to be mindful of such excessiveness and the ways in which it shaped what commodities were and did for humans. Jennifer Anderson's *Mahogany*, analyses the itinerary of mahogany as a living thing, material, commodity, and good. It explores mahogany as an entity 'prior' to the commodification process, but also reveals the ongoing dialogue between raw materials and commodities. Anderson notes that 'Over time, mahogany depletion and the ensuing search to find new sources

fundamentally reshaped how it was valued, used, and perceived.’<sup>40</sup> Such an approach follows both ‘materials’, as well as the consumed object. Similarly, fully understanding tea as an animate thing that ‘actively transforms those subjected to its influence’ requires greater attention to its cultivation as well as its ongoing material properties in order to recognize a broader range of physical and material impacts.<sup>41</sup>

Single commodity histories continue to provide an important strand of global history, illuminating connections across time and space. Nevertheless, commodities are rarely ‘single’ but rather consistently interconnect with other goods. At the same time, commodification is never complete: it is a constant and ongoing process that shapes material histories. Engaging with the excessiveness of things is important in writing histories that capture the complexity of the material world and the (often fleeting) particularity of human roles within it. Such questions are distinct from those embarked on by earlier global historians. Nevertheless, global approaches will be crucial to exploring the excessiveness of commodities and things as they existed and travelled across boundaries and borders, forming new geographies.

## II.

In *Empire of cotton*, Sven Beckert asserts that ‘only a global viewpoint allows us to understand the great realignment that each of these local stories was part of’.<sup>42</sup> A global approach not only connects local instances of commodity cultivation and manufacture, it also provides the broad lens needed for comprehending and explaining economic systems. Utilizing this approach, Beckert identifies seven broadly chronological stages of development within the global cotton industry of the early modern and modern period. First, India’s domination over cotton production

from around the tenth to the early nineteenth century; second, Europe's incursions in the sub-continent, often by force, between 1600 and 1800; third, Europe's attempts to manufacture cotton yarn and cloth itself from the eighteenth century onwards and its use of protectionist policies to cultivate its burgeoning industry; fourth, Europe, and more particularly England's, project of establishing steady supplies of raw cotton from the Caribbean Islands and Brazil and then the southern states of America, which led to England's emergence as the dominant force in the cotton yarn and cloth industry by 1815; fifth, the continued growth of European cotton manufacturing in the nineteenth century leading to further searches for raw cotton supplies, particularly in India, Egypt, Brazil, Argentina, and China; sixth, the increasing abstraction of the *market* for cotton through trading and eventually, through speculation and finally in the twentieth century, as India rose again as a major producer of raw cotton, cotton production began to turn to the global south and the global countryside.

Understanding the realignments of capital and power that took place makes local circumstances and experiences more meaningful. It provides crucial insights (explored below) and is made possible by research across an astonishing range of archival sources and geographies. Yet seeking to provide the broader frame within which 'local stories' can be connected and understood is problematic: it assumes a parity of knowledge about different 'locals' even though many local stories have yet to be explored fully or researched at all. As Robert DuPlessis's recent *The material atlantic* ably demonstrates, people living in different 'local' sites around the Atlantic Basin responded in remarkably divergent ways to the global trade in textiles and the importation of cotton.<sup>43</sup> DuPlessis's findings underline the need to fully engage with heterogeneity supplied by the 'local', when engaging with broader geographies and connections. Forming broad frameworks, before research examining a more diverse

range of geographies and local contexts have been developed, risks a continued distortion of explanatory frameworks and perpetuating historical understandings of global capitalism (and its impacts) that continue to place Europe and the North America at their centre.

The new history of capitalism is a growing field within American institutions, and is producing innovative and enriching histories.<sup>44</sup> Rather than completely ‘new’, this area of research seeks to distinguish itself from older histories of capitalism through asking different questions. As Seth Rockman asserts, ‘the field’s intervention is to de-naturalize capitalism, to provide the history of a system that the dominant culture depicts as timeless and irresistible, even in the midst of crisis’.<sup>45</sup> New histories of capitalism, like Beckert’s, resist understanding ‘markets’ as natural and instead look to the various processes and systems that produced and reproduced them. Scholars have been drawn to infrastructure and are examining ‘the submerged architecture – material, legal, and ideological – that makes a highway system or telecommunication network plausible in the first place’. They are more likely to ask “‘How does it work?’” than “‘What does it mean?’”<sup>46</sup> Yet, new histories of capitalism also seek to offer critical histories that embrace, rather than resist, the insights of cultural and social history. The most important intervention of new histories of capitalism, however, has been to recognize slavery as crucial to capitalism. As such, new histories of capitalism can be linked to research, which has sought to underline the important role of slavery, and the wealth created through the slave trade, in funding industry and finance in Britain.<sup>47</sup>

Shaped by and significantly shaping the new histories of capitalism scholarship, Beckert’s analysis of the global cotton industry shows the significance of land, labour, violence, capital, intermediaries, and the state.<sup>48</sup> In the cotton industry

land was crucial to the cultivation of raw cotton for manufacture. Expropriating new areas of land for cultivation allowed the cotton manufacturing industry to grow quickly during the nineteenth century. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the southern states of America provided an increasingly elastic supply of cotton, as extra lands to the west were expropriated for cultivation, often by forcibly removing or expelling native inhabitants.<sup>49</sup> Highly labour-intensive to produce both as a raw material and as finished cloth, cotton also required much labour. Achieving the levels of labour necessary to grow cotton relied on violence. The systematic exploitation of enslaved people kept cotton growing in ever-increasing quantities and added to European manufacturers' prosperity.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the effort required to process cotton yarn and cloth often brought women and children into the labour force. Alongside land and labour, the cotton industry relied on the movement of capital. Ready funds were needed to purchase everything from seeds to transportation and machinery. The supply and movement of capital (as well as materials and labour) required intermediaries, such as merchants and banias, to ensure that supply chains kept moving over greater distances. The tentative nature of such movements, and the importance of intermediaries, is made clearest by the moments in which capital failed to move, such as in the Indian countryside in the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

Beckert also explores the state and underlines its significance in providing protectionism, raising revenues, policing borders, establishing property rights and using its military might, but also in mobilizing wage workers, for example through the establishment of contracts and in putting down resistance.<sup>52</sup> As with other new histories of capitalism, political economy is central to the story of the cotton industry.<sup>53</sup> The state was fundamental to the development of cotton and often explains why some areas developed a cotton industry and others did not, as in Egypt's inability

to create a sustainable cotton textile industry in the early nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Beckert argues that, ‘for most of capitalism’s history the process of globalization and the needs of nation-states were not conflicting, as is often believed, but instead mutually reinforced one another’.<sup>55</sup> The state was important not only within nations but across borders, when empire encouraged ‘the ability and willingness to project capital and power across vast oceans’.<sup>56</sup>

Together these different threads – land, labour, violence, capital, intermediaries, and the state – construct a history that undermines ideas of European exceptionalism. Beckert seeks to explode arguments that Europe’s economic growth in the nineteenth century ‘can be explained by Europeans’ more rational religious beliefs, their Enlightenment traditions, the climate in which they live, the continent’s geography, or benign institutions such as the Bank of England or rule of law’.<sup>57</sup> Instead ‘Europeans united the power of capital and the power of the state to forge, often violently, a global production complex, and then used the capital, skills, networks, and institutions of cotton to embark upon the upswing in technology and wealth that defines the modern world’.<sup>58</sup> Beckert’s *Empire of cotton* is deeply important in writing violence back into histories of capitalism. Looking to the links between different economic systems and the changing nature of such interconnections is crucial to revealing the systematic nature of violent incursions within trade. As Lisa Lowe has recently argued, violent histories are forgotten when the ‘imperatives of the state subsumes colonial violence within narratives of modern reason and progress’.<sup>59</sup> *Empire of cotton* re-inscribes the changing nature of violence and power within histories of capitalism, a crucial element that has been absent from earlier histories of global material culture and commodities.

While *Empire of cotton* provides a broader explanatory picture that underlines the violent creation of ‘a global production complex’, the roles people played in its creation and its specific impacts upon people’s lives are often lost. Beckert is writing an economic rather than a social history, but given the importance of social relationships (and the asymmetrical power often at work in such relationships) upon the creation of wealth and capital, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the need to fully ‘people’ histories of global capitalism is pressing.<sup>60</sup> Social relationships remain frustratingly absent from global histories of capitalism, as do the standards of living people experienced and the inequalities they endured.<sup>61</sup> While people are not entirely absent from Beckert’s analysis they tend to feature as introductory motifs rather than as central elements within his analysis.<sup>62</sup> As Natalie Zemon Davis has argued, global history raises questions ‘about whether the sharp edges of social history and gender history are being ignored in the descriptions of large-scale interactions among civilizations, trading empires, and species’.<sup>63</sup> While social relationships and entanglements tend to be missing from global histories of capitalism, such absences, and the silence they produce, only underline the importance of highlighting the local when attempting to explain it.

### III.

T. H. Breen’s *The marketplace of revolution* argued that colonists’ experience as consumers was crucial to American history in both economic *and* political terms. Engaging with the marketplace provided colonists with ‘the cultural resources needed to develop a bold new form of political protest’.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, *Empire of cotton* underscores production and more particularly slavery as central to American history,



and American capitalism. As such *Empire of cotton* mirrors broader changes in economic and social history across the US and Europe, that emphasize renewed interest in production and producers. Energy, materials, capital, and labour are growing again as key areas of investigation, as are the processes and practices that shaped and produced them. In British history, the resurgent interest in production has perhaps most clearly emerged in new debates on the importance of energy in sustaining economic growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup> While it might appear that histories of production and trade are holding all before them again, the publication of Frank Trentmann's ambitious and important volume *Empire of things: how we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first* demonstrates that histories of consumption continue to thrive.<sup>66</sup> The erudition and complexity of *Empire of things* shows that the historiography of consumption is now a well-developed area of research.<sup>67</sup> Drawing together so many different strands of research will prove invaluable in making sense of the field and introducing its complexity to students. At the same time, the volume also points to the ways in which research in consumption studies is changing.

The history of consumption emerged as a key sub-field in the 1980s, particularly among historians of the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world. *The birth of consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England*, led to a hunt for the origins of consumer society with scholars exploring ever earlier periods and different geographies from Renaissance Italy to the seventeenth-century Netherlands.<sup>68</sup> More recently, Martha Howell's intervention in such debates has highlighted the importance of the changes in commerce between 1300 and 1600. However, Howell stresses that while such changes may have 'set the terms for future socio-economic developments, they were not themselves embryonic forms of what we

call capitalism'.<sup>69</sup> Instead the economic culture of the medieval period must be approached 'on its own terms'.<sup>70</sup> While the hunt for origins may have lost its exuberance, over the last thirty-five years early modern and modern scholars have actively interrogated questions of who engaged with consumption practices, how and why.<sup>71</sup> Scholars have been keen to investigate the groups who were involved in broadening the consumer base, looking to question prices, wages, and living standards.<sup>72</sup> They have also examined changes in the places and processes by which consumption took place, exploring how emergent retail spaces and second-hand markets changed the nature of consumption.<sup>73</sup> Historians have looked to issues of social emulation and identity formation to ask why individuals were motivated to consume more.<sup>74</sup> More recently, they have asked where these new, exciting goods came from, underlining the importance of global trade and a variety of connections, and where they went when no longer in use, shaping practices of waste and reuse.<sup>75</sup> Many of these debates and more are outlined in *Empire of things*, which begins by exploring how people became consumers from the fifteenth century to present, before examining contemporary preoccupations with consumption and their historic context, including credit and saving, speed and quality of life and leisure, impact on generations, consuming outside the marketplace, movement of goods and people, impact on religious life, and waste and disposing of goods.

*Empire of things* gives a strong sense of the established scholarship, but also highlights more recent debates and issues concerned with consumption, including a growing interest in what things do rather than what they mean, an interest also apparent, as we have seen, in new histories of capitalism and global history. The growing group of scholars asking 'what do things do?', suggests that the theoretical insights about objects, things and materiality, emerging more coherently in the

humanities as ‘new materialism’ are beginning to significantly impact the questions we ask about, and how we interpret, human relationships to and interactions with the material world. The name *Empire of things*, in itself suggests the importance of tackling the ‘doings’ of the material world.<sup>76</sup> ‘Objects’ (in contrast to ‘things’) are primarily important in their relationship to a subject. As W. J. T. Mitchell asserts ‘Objects are the way things appear to a subject – that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use of function, a history, a science’.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, the term ‘thing’ attempts to understand non-human entities in their broader being, seeking out evidence of their existence beyond their relationship to humans. In including ‘things’ in his title, therefore, Trentmann gestures towards an important analytical shift that sees things not only in relation to humans, but also as broader entities that can effect change in order to fully understand the different aspects of what they ‘do’ and how and why they do it.<sup>78</sup>

Getting beyond an examination of a particular subject-object relationship to the thing has proved difficult and has drawn the attention of philosophers, literature scholars, environmental humanities scholars, political scientists, and historians.<sup>79</sup> Discussions have emerged as to the extent to which such entities can, have the intention to, and do, affect processes. In *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory* (2005), Bruno Latour argued that ‘any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant’.<sup>80</sup> Things may not act with intention but they do effect.<sup>81</sup> The human and material are not separate but porous, continually informing and shaping each other.<sup>82</sup> Such insights have been broadened and enriched by the theoretical models of object-oriented ontologists, who suggest the need for analytical lenses which interrogate different things simultaneously.<sup>83</sup> As we see in Trentmann’s *Empire of things*, these

new forms of social analysis have become important in historical understanding, leading to the emergence of ‘new materialism’ as a particular (but still often partially used) approach.<sup>84</sup> ‘New materialism’ asserts the need to analyse the material world beyond a human-centric standpoint.<sup>85</sup> The binaries of nature/culture, life/matter are perceived as artificial and unproductive. The divisions that have emerged between the two have been asserted by humans and exist as markers of the continued human-centric project. Moving away from human-centric analyses and taking account of other actors from albatrosses to grass and from slime to iron ore is important if we are to fully understand the complexity of the world and its interconnected nature.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, being more aware of the earth and the diversity of matter living within its eco-systems, might enable us to acknowledge the deeply problematic nature of the materially-intensive lifestyles enjoyed by certain sections of the human species.<sup>87</sup> Changing historical analysis in ways that allows for greater ecological complexity is an important task that may well prove to be all encompassing in the decades to come.

While histories of consumption have long been shaped by economics, anthropology, and material culture studies, the impact of environmental, urban, and political history is now being felt, as consumption (particularly nineteenth- and twentieth-century consumption) comes to be increasingly understood in terms of material flows and systems. William Cronon’s *Nature’s metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), has proved important. It explored how the growth of Chicago during the nineteenth century was intimately related to the changes taking place in the Great West. By seeing city and country as bound together Cronon broke down the nature/culture divide and opened the way for work that seeks to challenge such binaries and instead look to flows and systems.<sup>88</sup> More recently, Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (2002) has shown how scholars

examining techno-political systems can draw on the material world (such as the Aswan dam) and non-human actors (such as mosquitos) to explain processes of change and the development of political situations, an approach mirrored more recently in the work of Patrick Joyce and Tony Bennett.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Trentmann's *Empire of things* might be understood as influenced by this broader shift. Trentmann considers flows and systems at various points within *Empire of things*, but particularly when considering cities, homes and waste.<sup>90</sup> For example, in chapter four, Trentmann discusses how the consumption of gas and water in nineteenth-century cities was often unequal, even within small geographical areas.<sup>91</sup> Consumption levels were culturally contingent and significantly dependent on private provision, infrastructure, and governance.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, in his final chapter, when grappling with waste and the difficulties of examining the extent to which contemporary citizens dispose of materials, Trentmann discusses the importance of considering 'material-flow analysis' and how it asks us to consider all the materials that go into making any one item, 'from the petrol used to ship it to the resources needed to get rid of it'.<sup>93</sup> It is important not only to consider objects from their moment of making to that of discarding, but rather to also consider how whether 'recycled, buried or burnt, material particles flow back into eco-systems, be it as sludge or CO2 emissions'.<sup>94</sup> Here Trentmann works to explore much longer itineraries of goods and thus the excessiveness of things. In light of these approaches and his earlier work, Trentmann might be understood as distinctly shaped by and shaping the 'new materialism' paradigm. Trentmann explicitly discusses his need to look at things not just as communicators of meaning but also as entities with material properties that have impacts even after their 'social life' as an object might have ended.<sup>95</sup> He asserts that 'things are not only bearers of meanings or symbols in a universe of communication.

They also have material forms and functions. They can be hard or soft, flexible or stubborn, loud or quiet, manual or fully automatic, and much else.’<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless as historians continue to look to what things do, it is important that the cultural and social modes of analysis are not obscured. One of the major issues of ‘de-centring’ the human within historical analysis is that many humans have yet to be ‘centred’. Such problems are particularly pertinent to cultural and social historians (such as those interested in material culture) who have long been engaged in analyzing forms of material expression to uncover voices and give agency to those who are or have been marginalized.<sup>97</sup> Political theorist Jane Bennett has considered the politics of the object-oriented-ontology and new materialist project. As she notes, critics of these projects state that ‘the *ontological* divide between persons and things must remain lest one have no *moral* grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans)’.<sup>98</sup> Bennett argues, however, that one way of understanding the analytical and social benefits of flatter ontologies is that elevating ‘*the status of the materiality of which we are composed*’ would ‘distribute value more generously’ as a whole.<sup>99</sup> In fact, ‘Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood.’<sup>100</sup> While the elevation of all material might allow a broader range of humans to be understood and valued more fully, the politics and hierarchies of such studies continues to need addressing. As Mel Y. Chen has asserted, examining the ‘animacy’ of things has its own politics, which distinctly privileges and values particular forms of animacy.<sup>101</sup> Thus those tools that have long been used by social

and cultural historians, among others, to focus on historical actors who have been marginalized and reveal the systems and structures that have created and maintained such distance from the centres of power, remain important. At the same time, critical engagement with the ways in which race, class, sexuality and gender shape the theorization of things are critical in creating a fuller understanding of the material world and our ability to ever ‘glimpse’ at things.<sup>102</sup>

Historians need to be careful that any impending shift to systems and flows does not obscure or detract from other forms of material history. Material culture concerns with why and how humans historically have used the material world to express meaning, as well as to perform particular actions and practices, continue to be important and contribute to our understanding of how things have resisted and shaped such projects. Trentmann argues that historians must consider ‘connecting “hard” (but fragile) things and networks to the “soft” world of possessions and the domestic interior’ to create ‘a space for material politics, reconnecting private and public and providing a bridge between histories of politics and material culture’.<sup>103</sup> Finding such bridges and interconnections is crucial, but historians also need to resist perpetuating binaries that divide the material world into ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ and the gendered connotations such terms can denote. How an account book or irrigation system accrues meaning, is as important and analytically rich as how it works and what it does. Similarly the uses and meanings of teacups are intimately tied to the uses and meanings of sewer systems. While these questions might seem to represent distinct epistemological goals, we must question why they have become so distinct and require bridging at all. Rather than finding bridges between different areas of analysis, assemblages of objects, things, humans and nonhumans need to be understood together in different ways to enrich analyses.

#### IV.

Our underlying assumptions about the things that make up the material world are shifting. Rather than inert and passive forms beholden to human subjects, the material world is being re-analysed as active, animated, and animating. Historians are asking what things do, rather than what they mean. In doing so they recognize that things not only exist in relation to humans, but also have their own existence, beyond human recognition and that that can impact on historical processes. There is an excessiveness of things, which must be confronted in historical analyses of the material world. In considering processes of commodification, understanding such excessiveness is important and prompts a reiteration of the insight that commodification is always a process of transition, continually coming into being. The excessiveness of things effects the creation of ‘commodities’ before and during production and even long after the point of exchange. Grappling with such excessiveness and the ways in which things constantly interact with other things underscores the need to understand the interactions between different things, seeing commodities as assemblages that are simultaneously distinguished by humans through particular processes and constantly indistinguishable from other things. The local thus remains important as a site in which to investigate such interactions and their effects on the global. Similarly, more inclusive forms of analysis are required to fully understand consumption: the broad range of material flows that constituted any single good need to be confronted.

While grappling with things and their excessiveness is important, it is also necessary to be attentive to the politics of when and where we acknowledge the animacy of things. Historians need to unpick when and how we ‘see’ animacy in the



past and what such recognition might mean. We also need to reflect on our failures in recognizing the existence of things and must be alert to just how silent and inanimate things might appear to us and to the historical actors we study. Historians need to collaborate in order to understand such silence and remain materially engaged themselves. While it is increasingly necessary and important to include things in our analysis and understand them in relation to other things, not just humans, human engagements cannot be entirely removed but rather need to be significantly factored in. In the first instance this is because they often played important roles within such assemblages, but also because humans used such things to express meaning often significantly shaping what things would go on to do and be. While *Empire of cotton*, *Empire of tea* and *Empire of things* demonstrate the liveliness and richness of current historical scholarship grappling with objects and commodities to understand historical processes, they also underline the continued importance of interactions between political, economic, social, and cultural approaches, in order that the material world might be fully understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of cotton: a new history of global capitalism* (London, 2014); Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of tea: the Asian leaf that conquered the world* (London, 2015); Frank Trentmann, *Empire of things: how we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first* (London, 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> ‘World of goods’ is a reference to anthropological research, which had a major impact on histories of consumption in the late 1980s and 1990s, see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The world of goods: towards an anthropology of consumption* (London, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> The shift to stressing the violence and power relations of global trade is perhaps as a result of shifts in histories of slavery and empire, which have seen a new emphasis on intimate relations and embodied experiences. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context* (New York, NY and London, 1995); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Walter Johnson, *Soul by soul: life inside the antebellum slave market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power, race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Walter Johnson, *River of dark dreams: slavery and empire in the cotton kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The half has never been told* (New York, NY, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> James W. Cook, ‘The kids are all right: on the “turning” of cultural history’, *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), pp. 746-771, at p. 747.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Hunt (ed), *The new cultural history* (Berkeley, CA, 1989); David Chaney, *The cultural turn: scene-setting essays on contemporary cultural history* (London, 1994); Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell, *Beyond the cultural turn: new directions in the study of society and culture* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> For examples of how historians continued to explore the material conditions of life and utilized cultural history approaches to do so, see Craig Muldrew, *The economy of obligation: the culture of credit and social relations in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 1998); Margot Finn, *The character of credit: personal debt in English culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge, 2003). Similarly, cultural history emerged at the same time as material culture studies, which offered a new means of considering the importance of objects and built environments in the past through engagements with insights from archaeology, anthropology and literary studies. See J. Richie Garrison and Ann Smart Martin, *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (Winterthur, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-being: Heidegger and the metaphysics of objects* (Chicago, 2002); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC, and London, 2010); Levi R. Byrant, *The democracy of objects* (London, 2011); Ian Bogost, *Alien phenomenology, or, what it's like*

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to be a thing (Minneapolis, 2012); Timothy Morton, *Realist magic: objects, ontology, causality* (London, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> For more on longer evolution of large scale histories see Jerry H. Bentley, 'A new forum for global history', *Journal of World History*, 1 (1990), pp. iii-v, at p. iii.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Mazlish, 'Comparing global history to world history', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 28 (1998), pp. 385-395, at p. 387.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Crossley, *What is Global History?* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 4. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, 2000), p. 6; A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in world history* (London, 2002); C. A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780-1914: global connections and comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Manning, 'Asia and Europe in the world economy: introduction', *The American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 419-24, at p. 419-420. See R. B. Wong, *China transformed: historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, NK, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> For global approaches to rethinking European economic growth see Maxine Berg, 'From imitation to invention: creating commodities in eighteenth-century Britain', *The Economic History Review*, 55 (2002), pp. 1-30; Maxine Berg, 'Britain, industry and perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, "useful knowledge" and the Macartney embassy to China 1792-94', *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006), pp. 269-288; Maxine Berg, 'Cargoes: the trade in luxuries from Asia to Europe', in David Cannadine, ed., *Empire, the sea and global history: Britain's maritime world c.1763-c.1840* (New York, NY, and Hampshire, 2007), pp. 60-82.

<sup>13</sup> For global movement of things, see Bayly, *The birth of the modern world*; Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz, eds., *Goods from the east, 1600-1800* (Basingstoke, 2015); Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *The global lives of things: the material culture of connections in the early modern world* (Abingdon, 2016). For global movement of people, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster travels: a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds* (New York, NY, 2006). For global movement of knowledge and practices see Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, eds., *The brokered world: go-betweens and global intelligence, 1770-1820* (Sagamore Beach, MA, 2009); Charles H. Parker, *Global interactions in the early modern age, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 2010).

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<sup>14</sup> Naomi Standen and Catherine Holmes, 'Defining the global middle ages', *Medieval Worlds*, 1 (2015), pp. 106-117.

<sup>15</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Sara Pennell, 'Consumption and consumerism in early modern England', *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1995), pp. 549-564, at p. 553.

<sup>17</sup> As defined by Pamela Crossley 'context spinners' can be commodities, materials, devices, behavioural concepts or natural phenomena. See Crossley, *What is global history?*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> For earlier uses of this approach see Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York, NY, 1986); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and chocolate, 1765-1914* (London, 2000); Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: a world history* (London, 2003); Barbara Freese, *Coal: a human history* (Oxford, 2003). More recently it has further come to fore, see David Hancock, *Oceans of wine: madeira and the emergence of American trade and taste* (New Haven, CT, 2009); Kris E. Lane, *Color of paradise: the emerald in the age of gunpowder empires* (New Haven, CT and London, 2010); Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: the fabric that made the modern world* (Cambridge and New York, NY, 2013); Francesca Bray, Peter A. Coclains, Edd L. Fields-Black and Dagmar Schäfer, *Rice: global networks and new histories* (New York, NY, 2015). Also see Sven Beckert's advocacy of commodity histories: Sven Beckert, 'Cotton and the global origins of capitalism', *Journal of World History*, 28 (2017), pp. 107-20, at p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> See for example the importance of Europe in Beckert, *Empire of cotton* and Riello, *Cotton*.

<sup>20</sup> See Robert Finlay, *The pilgrim art: cultures of porcelain in world history* (Berkeley, CA and London, 2010); Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, 'Global China: material culture and connections in world history', *Journal of World History*, 23 (2012), pp. 3-8.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, Coulton, and Mauger, *Empire of tea*, 9. Arguably interest in the importation of Asian commodities to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century has risen as a direct result of global history research by Kenneth Pomeranz, Maxine Berg, Giorgio Riello and Tithanker Roy, alongside a renewed interest in comestibles.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163 and p. 177.

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- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 73.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 90 and pp. 187-91.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 181.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 221.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 223.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 31.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-52. See also Robert Batchelor, 'On the movement of porcelains: rethinking the birth of consumer society as interactions of exchange networks, 1600-1750', in Frank Trentmann and John Brewer, eds., *Consuming cultures, global perspectives: historical trajectories, transnational exchanges* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2006), pp. 95-122; Stacey Pierson, 'The movement of Chinese ceramics: appropriation in global history', *Journal of World History*, 23 (2012), pp. 9-39; David Porter, *The Chinese taste in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 2013).
- <sup>32</sup> Marcy Norton, *Sacred gifts, profane pleasures: a history of tobacco and chocolate in the Atlantic world* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2008); Bruno Blondé and Wouter Ryckbosch, 'Arriving to a set table: the integration of hot drinks in the urban consumer culture of the eighteenth-century in Southern Low Countries', in Berg, Gottmann, Hodacs, and Nierstrasz, eds., *Goods from the east*, pp. 309-330.
- <sup>33</sup> Maxine Berg, *Luxury and pleasure in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2005), p. 43.
- <sup>34</sup> Trentmann, *Empire of things*, p. 168.
- <sup>35</sup> Rosemary Joyce and Susan Gillespie explicitly see their intervention as complementary to Igor Kopytoff's early work. Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, 'Making things out of objects that move', in Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, eds., *Things in motion: object itineraries in anthropological practice* (Sante Fe, NM, 2015), p. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things*, p. 68.
- <sup>37</sup> Joyce and Gillespie, 'Making things out of objects that move', p. 4.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: the costs of luxury in early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), p. 6.
- <sup>41</sup> Ellis, Coulton, and Mauger, *Empire of tea*, p. 9.

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<sup>42</sup> Beckert, *Empire of cotton*, p. xxi.

<sup>43</sup> Robert S. DuPlessis, *The material Atlantic: clothing, commerce, and colonization in the Atlantic world, 1650-1800* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Scott A. Sandage, *Born losers: a history of failure in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Stephen Mihm, *A nation of counterfeiters: capitalists, con men and the making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Seth Rockman, *Scraping by: wage labor, slavery, and survival in early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MA, 2009); Bonnie Martin, 'Slavery's invisible engine: mortgaging human property', *The Journal of Southern History*, 76 (2010), pp. 817-66; Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of fortune: the emerging world of capitalism and risk in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A nation of deadbeats: an uncommon history of America's financial disasters* (New York, NY, 2012); Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism takes command: the social transformation of nineteenth-century America* (Chicago, IL, 2012); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's capitalism: a new history of American economic development* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Seth Rockman, 'What makes the history of capitalism newsworthy?', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 34 (2014), pp. 439-466, at p. 447. See also Sven Beckert, Angus Burgin et al, 'Interchange: the history of American capitalism', *Journal of American History*, 101 (2014), pp. 503-536.

<sup>46</sup> Rockman, 'What makes the history of capitalism newsworthy?', p. 448.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism & slavery* (London, 1964); Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the industrial revolution in England: a study in international trade and economic development* (Cambridge, 2002); Nicholas Draper, *The price of emancipation: slave-ownership, compensation and British society at the end of slavery* (Cambridge, 2010); Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British slave-ownership: colonial slavery and the formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> See also Beckert and Rockman, *Slavery's capitalism*.

<sup>49</sup> Beckert, *Empire of cotton*, p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>51</sup> For the importance of revealing where capital cannot go as well as where it can, see Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? an African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, 100 (2001), pp. 189-213, at p. 189.

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- <sup>52</sup> Beckert, *Empire of cotton*, p. 155. For earlier discussion on importance of state see Mazlish, 'Comparing global history to world history', p. 393.
- <sup>53</sup> Rockman, 'What makes the history of capitalism newsworthy?', p. 449.
- <sup>54</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, p. 169. At the same time, Egypt also suffered the assaults of British merchants.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- <sup>59</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The intimacies of four continents* (Durham, NC, and London, 2015), p. 2.
- <sup>60</sup> The lack of social analysis within new histories of capitalism, has been critiqued elsewhere, see Rockman, 'What makes the history of capitalism newsworthy?', pp. 463-464. For more on the importance of social relations in capital formation see Margot Finn, 'Family formations: Anglo India and the familial proto-state', in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence, eds., *Structures and transformations in modern British history: essays for Gareth Stedman Jones* (Cambridge, 2011); Catherine Hall, 'Gendering property, racing capital', *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), pp. 22-38, at p. 22-3; Hall, Draper, McClelland, Donington, and Lang, *Legacies of British slave-ownership*.
- <sup>61</sup> Histories of living conditions, inequalities and social relationships continue on a regional and national level. See for example, Muldrew, *The economy of obligation*; Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for oneself: worth, status and the social order in early modern England* (Oxford, 2015).
- <sup>62</sup> Beckert, *Empire of cotton*, pp. 175-9.
- <sup>63</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Decentring history: local stories and cultural crossings in a global world', *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), pp. 188-202, at p. 191.
- <sup>64</sup> T. H. Breen, *The marketplace of revolution: how consumer politics shaped American independence* (Oxford, 2004), p. xv; Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 'Introduction. slavery's capitalism', in Beckert and Rockman, eds., *Slavery's capitalism*, p. 3. See also Carole Shammas, *The preindustrial consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990).
- <sup>65</sup> E. A. Wrigley, *Energy and the English industrial revolution* (Cambridge, 2010); Astrid Kander, Paolo Malanima and Paul Warde, *Power to the people: energy in Europe over the last five centuries* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2013);

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<sup>66</sup> Particularly when seen alongside Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford handbook of the history of consumption* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> The well-developed nature of historical studies of consumption should come as no surprise. In the late 1990s, Sara Pennell asserted that ‘historical studies of consumption have proliferated, seemingly unstoppable’. Pennell. ‘Consumption and consumerism’, p. 549.

<sup>68</sup> Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The birth of consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London, 1982); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London and New York, NY, 1988); John Brewer and Roy Porter, *Consumption and the world of goods* (London, 1993). On the hunt for origins, see Richard A Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the demand for art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore, MA, and London, 1993); Evelyn S. Welch, *Art and society in Italy 1350-1500* (Oxford, 1997); Lisa Jardine, *Worldly goods* (London, 1996); Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: an interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1987); Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The first modern economy: success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge, 1997). For more on hunt for origins see Evelyn Welch, ‘Presentism and the Renaissance and early modern historian’, *Past and Present*, 234 (2017), pp. 245-53.

<sup>69</sup> Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Howell, *Commerce before capitalism in Europe*, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> An important milestone in such studies was Brewer and Porter’s 1993 volume, *Consumption and the world of goods*. For a discussion of the impact of *Consumption and the world of goods* see Craig Clunas, ‘Modernity global and local: consumption and the rise of the west’, *The American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 1497-1511, at p. 1500.

<sup>72</sup> Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain*; Jan De Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Beverly Lemire, *Fashion’s favourite: the cotton trade and the consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 1991); Claire Walsh, ‘Shop design and the display of goods in eighteenth-century London’, *Journal of Design History*, 8 (1995), pp. 157-176; Erica Rappaport, *Shopping for pleasure: women and the making of London’s West End* (Princeton, 2000); Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann and Victoria Morgan,



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eds., *Spaces of consumption in the English town, c.1680-1830* (London, 2007); Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the world of goods: early consumers in backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore, MA, 2008);

<sup>74</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The gentleman's daughter: women's lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT and London, 1998); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and luxury: consumer culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester and New York, NY, 1999); Berg, *Luxury and pleasure*; John Styles and Amanda Vickery (eds), *Gender, taste, and material culture in Britain and North America 1700-1800* (London and New Haven, CT, 2006); John Styles, *The dress of the people: everyday fashion in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven, CT and London, 2007); Amanda Vickery, *Behind closed doors: at home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT and London, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> Susan Strasser, *Waste and want: a social history of trash* (New York, NY, 1999); Ariane Fennetaux, Amélie Junqua and Sophie Vasset, eds., *The afterlife of used things: recycling in the long eighteenth century* (New York, NY, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> The name may also reference *The empire of things*, a volume of essays published in 2001, which, amongst other elements, invited a group of anthropologists to consider the how material properties are important in making sense of objects. See Fred R. Myers, ed., *The empire of things: regimes of value and material culture* (Oxford and Santa Fe, NM, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want?: the lives and loves of images* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 156-7.

<sup>78</sup> Trentmann has made the case for this analytical shift elsewhere, see Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the future of history: things, practices and politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), p. 288.

<sup>79</sup> See Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, 3. For the ways in which literary scholars have looked to these questions see Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), pp. 1-22, at p. 4; Bill Brown, 'The Matter of Materialism: Literary Mediations' in Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds., *Material powers: cultural studies, history and the material turn* (London and New York, NY, 2010), p. 67. See also Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass, *Subject and object in Renaissance culture* (Cambridge, 1996); Peter Schwenger, *The tears of things: melancholy and physical objects* (Minneapolis, MN, 2006); Cynthia Wall, *The prose of things: transformations of description in the eighteenth century* (Chicago, IL, 2006); Mark Blackwell, *The secret life of things: animals, objects, and it-narratives in eighteenth-century England* (Lewisburg, PA, 2007); Diana Fuss, *The sense of an interior: four writers and the rooms that shaped them* (New York, NY, 2004); Barbara Johnson, *Persons and things* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Elaine Freedgood, *Ideas in things: fugitive meaning in the*

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*Victorian novel* (Chicago, IL, 2006); John Plotz, *Portable property: Victorian culture on the move* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory* (Oxford, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>81</sup> While Latour has had a huge impact on the humanities, a theoretical debt is also owed to others. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN and London, 1987); Manuel DeLanda, *A new philosophy of society: assemblage theory and social complexity* (New York, NY and London, 2006). For other important work in sociology and Science and Technology Studies see Andrew Pickering, *The mangle of practice: time, agency and science* (Chicago, IL, 1995).

<sup>82</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Armstrong, 'Introducing the new materialisms', in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New materialisms: ontology, agency and politics* (Durham, NC, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Such work has been shaped by further philosophical interventions by scholars of object-oriented-ontology (or the broader field of speculative realism). See for example Harman, *Tool-Being*; Graham Harman, *Guerilla metaphysics: phenomenology and the carpentry of things* (Chicago, IL, 2004); Graham Harman, *Towards speculative realism: essays and lectures* (Alresford, 2010); Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Social* (London, 2014); Graham Harman, 'The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism', *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), pp. 183-203, at p. 187.

<sup>84</sup> It is important to note that the material turn connected with 'new materialism' is sharply distinct from material culture studies and the project that those interested in material culture are embarked on.

<sup>85</sup> Chris Otter, 'Locating matter: the place of materiality in urban history' in Bennett and Joyce, eds., *Material powers*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The shock of the anthropocene: the earth, history and us* (London and New York, NY, 2016), p. 3. The importance of developing more ecologically aware approaches to historical analysis have largely been prompted by the anthropocene. See Paul J. Crutzen, 'Geology of mankind', *Nature*, 415 (2002), pp. 23, at p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> See Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, p. xi; Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The shock of the anthropocene*, p. 33. See also Mark Levene, 'Climate blues: or how awareness of the human end might re-instill ethical purpose to the writing of history', *Environmental Humanities*, 2 (2013), pp. 147-167.

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- <sup>88</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, NY, 1991). For more recent examples of works that include material systems, see Trentmann, *Empire of things*, pp. 174-221.
- <sup>89</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2002). See Patrick Joyce, *The state of freedom: a social history of the British state since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013); Bennett and Joyce, eds., *Material powers*.
- <sup>90</sup> Trentmann, *Empire of things*, pp. 174-221.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 665.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 664.
- <sup>95</sup> Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things*.
- <sup>96</sup> Trentmann, *Empire of things*, p. 17.
- <sup>97</sup> For example, see Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's sisters: a revisionist history of footbinding* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians* (Philadelphia, PA, 2012).
- <sup>98</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, p. 12.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>101</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: biopolitics, racial mattering and queer affect* (Durham, NC and London, 2012), p. 5.
- <sup>102</sup> Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.
- <sup>103</sup> Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History', p. 286.