

HISTORICAL AGENCY IN A WORLD OF CONSUMERS: SIMON SCHAMA AND THE HAMBURGER OF HISTORY

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In 1965 Simon Schama, the author of several important books, the star of Britain's recent renaissance of television history, and the person who, more than anyone else epitomises the successful achievement of the aspirations of a generation of Western historians on both sides of the Atlantic, discovered food.¹

He had grown up in a Kosher household and during his first years at University, his mother lovingly dispatched parcels of roast chicken, strudel and fish cakes to his college rooms. His undergraduate tutor, the incredibly rude and acerbic Jack Plumb, elaborately accommodated his dietary requirements, serving him rubbery omelettes, while Plumb himself tucked in to partridge and grouse, and the exotic servings of the high table tradition of Cambridge University.

In response, and under the second hand tutelage of movie stars, and through the assiduous study of the works of Julia Child, Jane Grigson and Elizabeth David (the writers who more than any others introduced an English reading audience to the delights of world food), Schama developed a passion and a facility for cooking. He made ratatouille, sole meuniere and gazpacho, to the applause of his Cambridge contemporaries.

At first he cooked within the boundaries of Kosher cuisine. But, at the end of the day, tempted beyond endurance by Plumb, encouraged by his ever hungry fellow students, and discouraged by the seemingly humble and parochial offerings of his own family and background, Schama gave in. He turned his back on the lovingly prepared weekly packages of roast chicken, strudel and fish balls sent by his doting mother, he turned his back on a central element of his own upbringing.

¹ Besides his recent starring role in the BBC's *History of Britain* series, Simon Schama's major publications include (in reverse chronological order): *A History of Britain*, vol. 3, *The Fate of the Empire*, Talk Miramax Books, 2002; *Rembrandt's Eyes*, Knopf, 2001; *A History of Britain*, vol. 2, *The British Wars*, Talk Miramax Books, 2001; *A History of Britain*, vol. 1, *The Edge of the World 3500 B.C.–1603 A.D.*, Talk Miramax Books, 2000; *Landscape and Memory*, Vintage Books, 1996; *Dead Certainties*, Vintage Books, 1992; *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Vintage Books, 1990; *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Vintage Books, 1997 (first published 1987); *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel* (Alfred Knopf, 1978); *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780-1813*, Vintage Books, 1992 (first published 1977).

What is important for us today, is not his abandonment of a millennial old culinary tradition, but the direction of the journey he took from this most European of backgrounds. Guilt ridden, but determined, he did not look for a small French bistro, or a bit of cheese and pate, or even a chicken masala. Instead he walked directly to the nearest Wimpy Bar.

For those unfamiliar with the British Wimpy Bar, they are studies in American cultural hegemony. They serve up a pallid British simulacrum of the fattiest and most disgusting of American fast food. The meal that Schama chose to mark his transition from smart Jewish boy to international scholar was a hamburger – something called, in a beautifully ironic twist, a “real McCoy”.²

In a very direct way, Schama's journey and choice, years ago in Cambridge, from a well defined community with a well defined cuisine, to American fast-food, reflects the journey of his generation of historians, of writers like John Brewer, Linda Colley, David Cannadine and Roy Porter. This is a group of historians, whose work has centred on eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, who were trained by J.H. Plumb, and who have crafted a powerful tradition in their own right, that shares a peculiar, if largely unexamined, ideology. The purpose of this paper is to explore the work of this generation of historians, their contributions to history, and the extent to which, underpinning it all, is a model of social change and development of which we need to be explicitly aware. At the same time it is an attempt to reflect on the very peculiar place in which we as historians now find ourselves. To reflect on how we can write history that is relevant, political and engaging, that helps to explain the past and informs the present, without recourse to the ideological constructs associated with Marxism, a construct that no longer has the political and intellectual purchase it possessed for most of the last hundred and fifty years. In other words, this paper is an attempt to critique one major strand of Western history and to suggest other ways of writing the past.

In terms of Simon Schama and his hamburger, it is an attempt to suggest that European historians have been seduced by the joys of American intellectual life. They have seen the well appointed libraries of Harvard and Yale, spent time at the Huntington and at Princeton, and in the process have abandoned many aspects of their national historical and intellectual traditions, in favour of an ill-thought out and essentially unfulfilling intellectual perspective. They have eaten fully of the empty intellectual calories of American academic life, and are now purveying that junk food to an European audience.

Sir Jack Plumb was the supervisor of all these historians. He was also a very unpleasant man. He has the reputation for having been the rudest man ever to occupy a professorial chair in Cambridge, and to have quite unnecessarily trod on the feelings of other scholars in his headlong dash to advance his own career. He was also an inspirational teacher and intellectually powerful figure in

² Simon Schama, *Michael Caine inspired me to cook (and not a lot of people know that)*, “The Guardian”, 19 September 2002, “Food”, p. 10-11.

the Cambridge history department of the 1950s and 60s. Indeed, his was the closest thing that Cambridge possessed to the personification of a liberal historical tradition. From an undistinguished class background, and with socialist leanings for much of his life (until his volte face and adoption of extreme right wing views in the 1970s), he was the only research student ever trained by the single most important British social historian of inter-war Britain, G.M. Trevelyan, and could arguably lay claim to the liberal middle ground of social historical thought. Plumb recognised earlier than his less gifted colleagues, such as Geoffrey Elton, that social history would replace its constitutional competitors in the hearts of a wider readership, and in the job descriptions scanned by ambitious young historians.³

Through his students, much more than through his own work, Plumb has given focus to the recent historiography of eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, and because of British history's central role as the first industrial society in a Marxist paradigm, created a model that many scholars around the world have followed.

The distinctive characteristic of this historiography is its apparently liberal but not ideological nature. It eschews supply-side economic models of either social division or agency, and combines a history of consumption with a Habermasian analysis of the development of political culture and civil society. In other words, this tradition gives authority to the individual in part through studying what they choose to buy (whether the products of the industrial revolution, or Britain's growing empire), and secondly through what upper and middle class people, said and read.

To simply review some of the more important works of this school of history gives a sense of the proclivities these authors share. The best starting point in this literature is the jointly authored *Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England*, first published in 1983.⁴ In this volume, J.H. Plumb, John Brewer and Neil McKendrick laid out a stark, and largely new vision of eighteenth-century Britain, of its industrial revolution and political landscape. In a series of essays on John Wilkes and the commercialisation of radicalism, on leisure, shaving and fashion, the authors embedded a new idea in to British history, the notion of a "consumer revolution". They argued that the transformations associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be most readily understood by exploring what people wanted to buy, and why. In many respects this new pre-occupation was a simple reflection of the changing nature of 1970s British society, with its own new emphasis on the joys and cultures of consumption.

³ For a sympathetic account of Plumb's career by his one time student and collaborator, Neil McKendrick, see Sir Jack Plumb, "The Guardian", October 22, 2001, p. 20; for a more critical assessment see Jeremy Black, *A plumb with an acerbic aftertaste*, "The Times Higher", August 16, 2002, p. 18-19.

⁴ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and Sir John Harold Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Indiana University Press, 1982.

A few years later Simon Schama brought out his most substantial volume, *The Embarrassment of Riches*.⁵ This book provides a history of the Dutch Republic during its seventeenth-century golden age. In it, Schama pits the incredible new wealth of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, against its puritanical religious culture, to provide an explanation of change that places consumption centre stage. In this volume class conflict is replaced by an internal psychological battle between religion and desire, between an essentially medieval notion of physical restraint, and what Schama depicts as an essentially modern desire for luxury and excess.

These volumes, along with a raft of further studies, essentially reconfigured British history away from economic explanations of the development of industrial society based in supply side economics, to versions of history in which marketing and desire were central.⁶

In many respects this new intellectual turn towards consumption was a simple reflection of the broader social change both Western Europe and pre-eminently North America underwent in the post war era. As mass psychology, advertising, and the creation of new kinds of desire through the manipulation of public fantasies (both in film and television) took hold of whole populations, older histories that sought to explain change through either industrial innovation or even class conflict, seemed increasingly irrelevant. For the generation of historians like John Brewer and Simon Schama, who grew up in a Britain still wedded to rationing, and whose early adulthood was marked by the discovery of American over indulgence, the idea that desire could be manipulated and was itself a powerful historical force, was self-evident.

The success of this move from supply-side analysis to demand side, is reflected in the woeful decline of economic history in Britain. There was once, just twenty years ago, a flourishing group of economic history departments in Universities up and down the country – all busily employing people to map the development of Britain's industrial infrastructure, and to salve that peculiarly British sense of anxiety over its gradual economic decline. Today, only one separate economic history department remains, and even here, among the shards and fragments of a once dominant tradition, you will be hard pressed to find a supply-side economic historian.⁷

⁵ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Vintage Books, 1997 (first published 1987).

⁶ A brief sample of this larger literature might include Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783*, Oxford University Press, 1992; Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures*, second edition, Routledge, 1994; Linda Colley, *Britons*, Yale University Press, 1992, in particular chapter 2; L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760*, Routledge, 1988; Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class*, Methuen, 1989; Robin Reilly, *Josiah Wedgwood 1730-1795*, Macmillan, 1992; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: the Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain 1660-1800*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁷ The only free standing department that has not been combined with either a department of economics or department of social history is at the London School of Economics.

The culmination of this transition came in a series of books edited by John Brewer with Roy Porter, Susan Staves and Ann Bermingham.⁸ These volumes charted the history of consumption in Britain during that long eighteenth century between the Civil Wars of the 1640s and 50s, and the triumph of industrial society in the mid-nineteenth century. And were crafted from a three-year series of seminars run by John Brewer at the Huntington Library in Southern California. In books entitled *Consumption and the World of Goods*, *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, and *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800*, the whole of British and British colonial history was constructed around the centrality of the act of buying and consuming. Scholars from around the world, sat in the sunny capital of consumption, and imposed an essentially late twentieth-century notion on a powerful national history. They reconfigured British history to make it fit more easily in to an essentially American worldview.

The important element of this development is not simply the elimination of older forms of economic explanation (however important these might have been). Instead, it is the extent to which this new, essentially economic model has been tied directly to a political story. John Brewer, Simon Schama, Linda Colley and David Cannadine were all initially labourers in political history. Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Colley's *In Defiance of Oligarchy* and Cannadine's numerous works on the history of the Aristocracy in the nineteenth century, were contributions to the history of the British state.⁹ In some respects they partook of the characteristics of a social history of politics, but their *raison d'être* was describing the exercise of institutional power.

What allowed these historians, again all students of, or deeply influenced by, J.H. Plumb, to integrate a history of consumption (that essentially American idea and ideal) within their own more European pre-occupation with the politics of power was the work of the German philosopher/historian, Jurgen Habermas. By combining Habermas' *Authentic Public Sphere* to their own growing interest in consumption and desire they created a more powerful historical tool, than either Habermas's ideas or the history of consumption on its own.

Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was originally written in the early 1960s, but was only translated in to English in 1989, and as

⁸ John Brewer, ed., *Consumption and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Bibliography*, UCLA Center for 17th and 18th Century Studies/Clark Library, 1991; John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds, *Consumption and the World of Goods in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Routledge, 1993; John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds, *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, Routledge, 1995; Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds, *The Consumption of Culture: Word, Image, and Object in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Routledge, 1995. John Brewer himself went on to cap this series with a substantial monograph, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Harper Collins, 1997.

⁹ See for example John Brewer's, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, Cambridge University Press, 1976; Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780-1813*, Vintage Books, 1992 (first published 1977); Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy. The Tory Party 1714-60*, Cambridge University Press, 1982; David Cannadine, *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, Yale University Press, 1990.

I am informed, was translated in to Romanian in 1998. Habermas suggested in this work that the origins of modern politics could be found in the coffeehouses of eighteenth-century London. That it was among the literate and urbane inhabitants of London that the first politically aware public could be found. Under the rubric “the authentic public sphere” middle class urbanites who in previous centuries were supposedly politically powerless, became, in the historian’s eyes at least, suddenly powerful. The emergence of this “public” with its opinions, in Habermas’ view, radically reshaped the nature of the modern state, and laid the basis for the creation of democratic politics in the next century.¹⁰

When this theory of the transformation of the “public sphere” was combined with consumption, what was created was a subtle and powerful idea that has swept most dissenting voices from the stage, and encouraged a new generation of historians to follow in its broad wake. Quite suddenly and dramatically, an economic story of the creation of desire could be melded with the story of the rise of the nation state, to create what appears to be a coherent narrative that helps to explain “modernity”. The very same generations of well-to-do English men and women could be depicted as the originators of industrial power, colonial expansion *and* political stability.¹¹ These developments could now be explained by appeal to the self-serving desires of an urban elite. These were the products of a set of new desires that encouraged the industrialists to set up factories and merchants to set up colonies, and politicians to be ever wary about a newly fickle and hungry public opinion. In effect, what was created was a story that explained both democracy and the creation of the wealth of the West, as the result of rich people doing precisely what they wanted. The parallels between this analysis, and the self-serving justifications for the orgy of consumption that has characterised British and American cultural politics in the 1980s and 90s is self-evident.

This was a heady and powerful intellectual mix that has gone on to inform the work of many other historians. Feminist historians such as Amanda Vickery have used both consumption-led models of historical change, along with a Habermasian emphasis on conversation, to reshape a traditionally Marxist women’s history. She has created a story in which elite women’s ability to both consume the new goods of the industrial revolution, and to participate in the political debates of the salon, are used to locate women’s experience and authority in general.¹²

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence MIT Press, 1989.

¹¹ For example see Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

¹² See Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, Yale University Press, 1998.

The coincidence of the rise of this new and markedly non-Marxist analysis with the collapse of the Soviet Empire was, of course, not a coincidence. In a very real way the events of the late 1980s and 90s forced historians to look for new, and decidedly non-Marxist ways of analysing the past. “Public Sphere Consumption Theory” if you will excuse me coining a particularly lumpen phrase, was simply the most readily available explanatory narrative, and the narrative that most fully encompassed the positive joys of consumption of the sort that a reconfigured, post-Soviet world seemed to offer.

As should be apparent however, there is a slight problem with this approach. And that problem lies in the notion of agency that seems to lie at its heart. Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual or group of individuals to self-consciously effect the course of historical change. Agency is the linking concept that melds our personal, modern behaviour, with our explanations of the past.

But more than this, it is a perennial problem for historians. Indeed, one could argue that most of the historical models we have created in the last two hundred years have lacked any substantial notion of individual agency. Within the British Marxist tradition, the heroic plebeian politics of Edward Thompson’s class warriors attributed point and power to at least a politicised sub-section of the poor; while the work of Marxist historians of crime has seen agency in the acts of a range of apparently socially disenfranchised smugglers and poachers. But, even within this most humane of Marxist traditions, the ability to impact on the course of history has been largely restricted to the tiniest minority of working people – a minority largely defined by their intelligence, their desperation and their male gender.¹³

Other historiographical traditions have given even less authority to the individual, and none to working people. Michel Foucault and his followers essentially abandoned any attempt to provide a model of historical agency, and depicted everyone as equal victims of discourse – unable to think outside the languages they knew. In this tradition the inequalities of power and agency cease to be questioned, and the historian’s task becomes little more than the subtle describing of gradually changing discursive constructions. For Foucault, the gaoler and his prisoner, the capitalist and her employee, the rapist and his victim, are all sides of a single coin minted from the specie that is language.¹⁴

Similarly, the historical tradition associated with the Annales school, Braudel, et al, restricted individual agency to the narrowest of elites, and hedged about even that limited agency with geography and weather.¹⁵ More recent

¹³ For some recent discussion of this historiographical tradition see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, Polity Press, 1984, and Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, Verso, 1994.

¹⁴ For some recent literature on Michel Foucault and his work see Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology*, Routledge, 1994, and Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, MIT Press, 1994.

¹⁵ See Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89*, Polity Press and Stanford University Press, 1990.

history, informed by anthropology, has abandoned agency in the same breadth as it abandons the explanations of change. In the works of historians such as Keith Thomas and Natalie Zemon Davis, anthropological models provide a wonderful and powerful means of unpacking complex relationships and texts, but no way of actually explaining them.¹⁶

“Public Sphere Consumption Theory”, the works of John Brewer, Simon Schama, David Cannadine and Linda Colley, et al, does have a notion of agency, but one that is peculiarly restricted. What it does is to sneak into the equation notions of agency and explanation that have their own dire political effects. In other words, the rich become important, their agency being located precisely in what they choose to buy, while the poor, workers and non-metropolitan populations, become so much historical dead wood. In the feminist historiography, buying a frock or a dining room table, becomes a political act, while every new painting commissioned by a member of the gentry, every new built country estate, every novel read and new dish eaten, becomes a building block in the creation of the modern state and of modernity itself. At the same time, every hard won, but unbought, item on a cottager’s shelf becomes literally meaningless.¹⁷

This state of affairs is deeply depressing, and more importantly neither correct nor necessary. We can be more ambitious than this. We can have a model of historical change that is more inclusive and more democratic. We can have a history that gives full credence to the importance of gender, without limiting women’s role to what kind of dress they buy. We can have political histories that re-insert the beliefs and actions of the poor, and we can have histories, freed from the restrictions of the language of Marxism, that still recognise the significance of conflict along divisions of class, gender and race.

Having made these points, it is incumbent upon me to give an example of the kind of analysis I would substitute for consumption theory. And perhaps the easiest way for me to do so, is to spend the rest of this paper describing what I can only think of as the *agency* of just a few paupers – the contemporaries of the elite men and women, who Simon Schama, and John Brewer, David Cannadine and Linda Colley place so much emphasis upon.

When Mary Brown, a seventeen-year old London prostitute and orphan went into labour, she asked the advice of her landlady and bawd, Mrs Davies. A long discussion ensued in the house in Jackson’s Alley, off Bow Street, where Mary had entertained men for several years. The question on everyone’s lips

¹⁶ See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Anthropology and History in the 1980s: the possibilities of the past*, “Journal of Interdisciplinary History”, 12 (1981), 267-275.

¹⁷ An instructive attempt to integrate the consumption patterns of the poor in to a broader understanding economic development is Peter King, *Pauper inventories and the material lives of the poor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries*, in Tim Hitchcock, Pamela Sharpe and Peter King, eds, *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840*, Macmillan, 1997.

was “which is the casualty parish?”, or in other words, where is the best casualty department in town? One young woman suggested St Martin in the Fields, but was answered, “No, no, St Clement is the best casualty parish – send her there!” Mary was hustled into a coach, and presented herself at the door of the workhouse. And while the workhouse mistress vainly attempted to restrict her access by insisting that the overseer be summoned before she would be admitted, the demands of nature ensured that Mary soon found herself in the well-appointed lying in ward, giving birth to a healthy boy. She was later examined as to her legal right to have relief from the parish, giving a well-crafted but probably spurious, story. She claimed to have been born on shipboard between Ireland and England, and hence completely outside the system of settlement. As a result both Mary and her little boy stayed put and St Clement Danes reinforced its reputation as the best “casualty parish” in London.¹⁸

The point about this story is that it exemplifies the way in which individual paupers could make decisions, and could, in the process help to shape the nature of the bureaucratic systems provided for their relief. In this instance, Mary Brown’s claim, based on the undeniable evidence of an infant eager to be born, and her perhaps truthful, but certainly opportune, response to the questions posed by the Overseers, resulted in the parish providing a set of resources it did not want to provide, to a person it did not want to relieve. As a result, in a small way, Mary Brown self-consciously contributed to the evolution of the comprehensive system of poor relief gradually developed in eighteenth century London. By demanding relief in circumstances in which she could not be refused, she forced the parish to extend its care beyond the limits demanded by the law. To this extent she possessed an historical agency that has been largely denied to women and men of her class by historians.¹⁹

Paul Patrick Kearney was a uniquely verbose, pedantic and literate London beggar. He had been a householder in Fenchurch Street, part of the parish of St Dionis Backchurch in the 1740s, and by the late 1760s was in dire straits, in danger of perishing on the winter streets. He was ragged and begging, and on applying to the churchwardens he was eventually relieved with a shilling. During 1766 and 67, he received a course of balsamic tincture and balsamic lohock for his ills. He was also given a cap, a hat, shoes, hose, breeches, a waistcoat and a great coat. On medicines and clothing for Kearney, the parish spent £4.16s.1d in one year alone. It also arranged, at his request, for treatment as an outpatient by Westminster Hospital and for him to be taken in to the hospital at the first opportunity. On his release from Westminster he was placed in a contract workhouse in Rose Lane in Spitalfields run by Richard

¹⁸ Westminster Archives Centre, *St Clements Settlement & Bastardy Examinations Book*, MS B1187, p. 147-150.

¹⁹ For an example of similar material used to create a genuinely democratic history see Catherina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Disordered Lives: Eighteenth-Century Families and their Unruly Relatives*, Polity Press, 1996.

Birch. Kearney was disgusted by the conditions and the idea that he would be required to work regularly at jobs he considered demeaning and within seven weeks he was once again outside the workhouse, under the treatment of an “eminent physician”. From here he was sent, again at his own request, and at parochial expense, to Guy’s Hospital, where he continued for a couple of months, before finally falling into dispute about the quality of his “body linen” and the hospital’s charges for cleaning it.

Having been discharged from Guy’s he was lodged at the Ipswich Arms in Cullum Street for several weeks and the parish paid to allow him to advertise for a position. He later tried to take employment as a secretary to a Captain Scott. At this point, after years of frustration and grumbling on the part of the parish officers, they finally concluded that he was mentally ill – a conclusion shared by the house doctor at Guys among others – and he was placed in a private mad house in Hoxton.²⁰

The point is that Kearney moved several times through a range of London institutions. He was able to force his parish, over the frustrated whinging of generations of parish officers, to give him the care he desired. Certainly, that care was not always in the form he wanted, and certainly the final outcome, confinement in a madhouse at Hoxton, was not what Kearney had intended. But, throughout the process, Kearney’s ability to browbeat and manipulate the parish officers is abundantly clear.

If you begin to piece together the lives of London’s paupers, what immediately strikes you is the extent to which the various institutions of the capital were forced to inter-relate with each other as a result of the requests of the poor themselves. There is a constant stream of letters and notes from the administrators of parish workhouses and charitable institutions organising the transfer of paupers and the repayment of fees. Women went from the lying in hospitals to the workhouses to the infirmaries and back. Their children (at their mother’s request) were delivered to the Foundling and the marine society. The elderly were constantly moving from workhouses to almshouses, or on to their relatives.²¹

In the process, what had been created as a disparate set of institutions founded upon a set of unrealistic stereotypes, became an increasingly integrated system of social services. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century there were 86 parochial workhouses in London, and innumerable private charities and

²⁰ Guildhall Library, *St Dyonis Backchurch, papers relating to a poor law appeal form Paul Patrick Kearney, 1771*, Ms. 11280C.

²¹ On the workhouses of London and the patterns of behaviour among inmates see Tim Hitchcock, *Paupers and Preachers: The SPCK and the English Workhouse Movement*, in L. Davison, et al, eds, *Stilling the Grumbling Hive: The Regulation of Social and Economic Problems in England, 1689-1750*, Allen Sutton Press, 1992, and Tim Hitchcock, “Unlawfully begotten on her body”: Illegitimacy and the Parish Poor in St Luke’s Chelsea, in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe, eds, *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840*, Macmillan, 1997.

hospitals, alms houses and mad houses, not to mention prisons, bridewells, compters, and watch-houses. For the poor, access to this system was available through the parochial workhouses for those who could claim a settlement, and through the complex prison system for those who could not. And the point I want to make here is that this integration was not created by design, or as a result of the opinions or behaviour of the middling sort, but rather by the demands of the poor themselves.

What looks like a rigid and well-demarcated set of institutions, governed by expressed prejudice and legal precept when viewed from the printed books collection of the British Library, looks very different through the eyes of Mary Brown or Patrick Kearney. For them, what emerged in the flurry of foundations was a system of relief that for all of its failings still seemed to promise the resources and care they needed. And having apparently made the promise, the governmental and non-governmental agencies involved were held to it – not by the middling sort, but by the poor.

The way paupers used workhouses, for instance, had only the slightest connection to how the designers thought they should be used. Workhouse populations were dominated by women, children and the ill (as were the British poor as a whole). The vast majority of the population of the workhouse of St Luke's Chelsea, for instance, was made up of people seeking some kind of medical treatment. As a result the medical provisions available in London's workhouses rapidly increased in both importance and cost. In an excellent recent dissertation on the care of venereal disease in the capital, Kevin Sienna notes that within three years of the establishment of almost all the major parochial workhouses of Westminster, substantial infirmaries had been created from the spaces originally intended to house and set on work the able and the idle.²²

More than this, it is clear that these same institutions soon took on a range of further roles for which they had never been designed. They became crèches for working mothers, lying in hospitals and geriatric wards. They quickly became short stay hostels for domestic servants out of work, and one facet of a more complex urban economy of makeshift that included hawking, and selling, service and casual labour. Even the apparently insuperable issue of settlement did not allow institutions to filter out those who failed to fit the stereotype. One little observed aspect of the workings of the system of vagrancy in eighteenth-century London is the extent to which substantive medical care became a growing component of the process of removal. In effect Bridewell and Clerkenwell, the London Workhouse, the Poultry Compter and Woodstreet, the crowded prisons of London, were drawn into an increasingly close relationship with hospitals and workhouses, that effectively gave vagrants (those without a legal settlement) a new route of access to the well funded and extensive medical care of the capital. While an aspect of the development of the nightly watch that again

²² Kevin Patrick Sienna, *Poverty and the Pox: Venereal Disease in London Hospitals, 1600-1800* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2001).

garners little historical comment, is the extent to which these night-time institutions served as a first port of call for many ill and desperate paupers. While watchmen frequently arrested and confined people it did not want on the streets, they were also frequently confronted by paupers clamouring for admission, seeking a referral to the local workhouse, or prison and then hospital.²³

A clear measure of this process can be found in the accounts of the City of London. Year by year, the amounts spent on capturing and processing vagrants was recorded. Money was spent to keep them alive during their prison sentences, and to pay for their whipping and their removal. But money was also paid to support them through illness. Every death in Bridewell was subject to a mandatory Coroner's inquest – and the first questions asked were always about the food, clothing and medical care provided the prisoner. Gradually over the course of the second half of the eighteenth-century, the City of London was forced to refer a higher and higher proportion of its vagrants to hospital for medical care. By the 1790s, the cost of these referrals had risen to an average of £756. 14s. 1d per year for vagrants clothed and supported in St Bartholomew's Hospital, and up to £1057. 9s 3d. for those referred to St Thomas'.²⁴ Getting on for £2000 per year was being spent giving vagrants and beggars the best hospital care available in the Capital. But from our perspective, what is important here is that the individual vagrants involved were able to use even the apparently unlikely pathway of arrest and imprisonment to gain access to a comprehensive medical service. And given that City vagrants as a group look substantially different than the broader category of London beggars, I think our assumption must be that the vagrants involved quite self-consciously sought arrest as a way of accessing resources. In the process the nature of the hospital care involved, and the penal approach to vagrancy pursued by the City, were necessarily transformed.

And this process of integration and expansion does not work simply in terms of by-lateral relationships between paired institutions. The recent work of Lisa Cody's and Tanya Evan's on lying in hospitals and the Foundling, has made clear that the whole range of London's foundations gradually developed strong relationships with a wide range of alternative sites of care.²⁵

One can tell essentially the same story for any number of foundations.

The Foundling Hospital, for instance, soon became an integral part of parochial provision, as the parishes of the South East England looked to it as a

²³ For a recent account of the development of the Night Watch see Elaine A. Reynolds, *Before the Bobbies: The Night Watch and Police Reform in Metropolitan London, 1720–1830*, Stanford University Press, 1998.

²⁴ See Corporation of London Record Office, *City's Cash Accounts, 1791–99*, MS. 2/61, fols 130–131, 294–295; MS. 2/62, p. 303–305, 358–361; MS. 2/64, p. 353–356; MS. 2/65, p. 365–368; MS. 2/66, p. 344–347; MS. 3/67, p. 352–355; MS. 3/68, p. 263–266.

²⁵ See Tanya Evans, *Unmarried Motherhood in Eighteenth-Century London* (University of London, PhD thesis, 2001), and Lisa Forman Cody, *The Politics of Body Contact: Disciplines of Reproduction in Britain, 1688–1834* (University of California at Berkeley, PhD thesis, 1993).

haven for the babies of anxious pauper parents. While the Magdalene Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes quickly realised that none of the prostitutes of London were particularly interested in its brand of reformation, forcing it instead to concentrate on the children of the ne'er-do-well middling sort.²⁶ These changes were the result of hard pressed administrators and parochial officers finding that the demands of the poor contradicted the rules of their institutions. In every vestry room, at the door of every workhouse and hospital, individuals were faced with a constant stream of demands from the clearly needy. And while the poor quickly learned the type of story they needed to tell in order to gain admission, the gatekeepers of charity were forced to re-assign resources to meet real needs. In the process, and this is the really impressive element, the poor wove these disparate institutions into a single system, largely accessible, and inter-related, that actually worked. They also, in the process ensured that more and more money was spent on their needs.

Peter Mandler has recently pointed out that the poor need to understand how social policy and the niceties of social interaction work much more thoroughly than do their richer neighbours. For the poor knowledge of these systems is a necessary key to survival.²⁷ In eighteenth-century London paupers knew how the system worked, and it was through their individual actions, the collective force of their individual demands and behaviours, that an incoherent system was forced to evolve into one that could cope with their difficult and disparate needs. And if this was true in the inchoate and ridiculously complex world of London social policy, it was by extension, equally, if not more true in the thousands of smaller towns and cities about the country and beyond.

The poor could do this, could shape this system to their needs, precisely because they did have a currency to spend. It may not have been the pounds, shillings and pence beloved of the historians of consumption, but it was nevertheless a tradable commodity – it was the language of right and charity, the notion of hospitality, and the substance of Christianity. Ironically, given Foucault's denial of individual agency, attention to the languages of poverty suggests early modern "discourses" gave the poor the heavy coin of social authority.

The implications of this story of pauper agency for Western history seem to me substantial. The institutions discussed above were at the heart of the creation of both an effective modern state, and the construction of a post-Enlightenment personality. Prisons and workhouses became the most common

²⁶ For a recent analysis of the origin of foundlings see Alys Levene, *Health and Survival Chances at the London Foundling Hospital and the Spedale Degli Innocenti of Florence, 1741-99* (University of Cambridge, PhD thesis, 2002); and for the Magdalen Hospital see Sarah Lloyd, "Pleasure's golden bait": prostitution, poverty and the Magdalen Hospital in 18th century London, "History Workshop Journal", 41 (1996), 50-70; S.D. Nash, *Prostitution and charity: the Magdalen Hospital, a case study*, "Journal of Social History", 17 (1984), 617-628.

²⁷ Peter Mandler, ed., *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-Century Metropolis*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, p. 1, 15-16.

and powerful expression of state authority. And the ideas that underpinned them, were those most clearly derived from the new rationalist systems of thought, which were themselves constructed in the context of the new economic ideology of the age: capitalism. If the poor, if the weak and ill, are effectively shaping this important fragment of the wider phenomenon of modernity, we must assume that their contemporaries were having an equally profound impact on other aspects of this broad transition. In other words, to understand the evolution of the modern world, we need to re-insert the actions and agency of the poor, of working people, of the demotic masses, who are almost universally excluded by the kinds of history associated with consumption.

But to conclude with Simon Schama's hamburger. The valorisation of consumption, informed by individual desire is simply not enough to explain Western History. A generation of historians has been seduced by the easy answers. Answers that fit happily with modern American ideologies, that don't threaten the well-springs of global capitalism, or the peculiarly inhumane beliefs prominent in North America about the role of the state and social policy. I believe Western historians need to rediscover the wealth of ideas, the legitimate traditions that we have inherited, that give full credence to the real power and authority of the individual. We cannot allow ourselves to be satisfied with the intellectual equivalent of some faux fry-up served on pre-pressed plastic.