

Beware what you buy

An 18th-century market in Germany where strict laws regulated the goods that each social class could buy



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Consumers at this 1830 fair in Leipzig could buy what they liked but, just a few decades earlier, laws had restricted shopping choices

For centuries many German citizens were forbidden to consume a variety of desirable goods, including “very wide trousers”. **Sheilagh Ogilvie**, **Markus Küpker** and **Janine Maegraith** explain how such regulations may have had serious economic consequences

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BY TODAY'S standards, Magdalena Schöttlin hadn't actually done anything wrong. But for a German village in 1708, she was behaving outrageously. The 34-year-old weaver's wife kept wearing an “excessively large neckerchief, above her station in life” in a blatant violation of the government clothing ordinances.

The local ‘censors’, responsible for enforcing the clothing laws, had warned Magdalena about this twice already. Then the village pastor delivered a Sunday sermon castigating sartorial finery, specially targeting Magdalena's neckerchief. Finally, the censors

summoned Magdalena before the whole church court and ordered her to explain herself. When she protested against the prohibition of her cherished accessory, claiming it had been given to her as a present and that other people also wore similar ones, the village censors' patience snapped. Magdalena was told to stop wearing her ostentatious neckerchief once and for all. She was also sentenced to pay a fine of 11 Kreuzer – about four days' earnings for a local spinner.

Magdalena is just one of thousands of ordinary villagers whose consumption practices are being reconstructed by a team of economic historians at the University of

Cambridge. Changes in consumption are interesting not just for their own sake but because they may have much wider effects. Economists still don't know exactly what causes economic growth, but they do know that a lot of the key changes happened in the period

actually pass laws about it. German states passed at least 1,350 laws between 1244 and 1816 regulating how people could dress – and this was only one part of a wider panoply of 'sumptuary' regulations laying down what people could wear, eat, drink and do for fun.

Sumptuary laws defined what people could wear, eat, drink and do for fun



before the first factories. One powerful idea is what has been called the 'consumer revolution'. Between 1650 and 1800 in some European societies, people began buying cheap fashions, ready-to-eat food and exotic stimulants like tea, coffee and chocolate.

Inspired by the possibility of buying cheap and attractive things in the market instead of producing them laboriously within the household, people shifted their time from leisure and household production to income-earning work, in a parallel 'industrious revolution'. This virtuous circle between consumption and 'industriousness' helped the economy grow by motivating people to work more, learn new work skills and invent new things.

Miracle economies

There's a lot of evidence suggesting this happened in the Netherlands and England in the century or so before factory industrialisation started in the 1780s. But the Netherlands and England were the 'miracle economies' of their time. Did the consumer and industrious revolutions lead to economic development everywhere?

To answer this question we need to look at other economies that successfully developed but followed different paths to growth. Germany is a particularly good 'laboratory' to test these theories because it grew much more slowly than England and the Netherlands before 1800, but much faster afterwards. It also has extremely rich archival documents recording what people consumed – and how it was regulated.

Traditional societies often have informal customs about what people (especially women) are allowed to wear. But some go further and

These laws weren't just thought up by governments: they enjoyed wider social support.

The upper social strata supported sumptuary laws to stop upwardly mobile members of the lower social orders from challenging the valued status of the higher strata. Men supported the laws to help resist their wives' and daughters' demands for new fashions: as one legislator declared in 1621: "Laws may rule them though their husbands cannot." Employers supported clothing regulations to stem their servants' demand for higher wages. Guild masters pushed for laws to compel ordinary people to wear domestically produced textiles and furs, protecting themselves against foreign competition. Communities supported sumptuary laws to ban licentious behaviour, which they thought might lead to illegitimacy and burden the welfare system. Churchmen advocated



German peasants – shown here in an 18th-century painting – could be fined heavily for wearing flamboyant clothes

High-status citizens, such as these of the late 1500s, supported clothing regulations that kept the lower orders in their place



laws to restrain worldly adornment and lavish sociability. And bureaucrats and military men favoured sumptuary laws to make ordinary people spend less on themselves so they could pay more in taxes.

So a whole conglomeration of powerful groups in early modern German societies were interested in controlling consumption – at least by other people. The prime targets were women, young people and the lower social strata. Respectable elites thought there would be bad social outcomes if ordinary people were allowed to dress, eat, drink and party as they liked. So the village censors in Ebhausen tried to stop Magdalena Schöttlin, as a poor weaver's wife, from indulging in extravagant accessories.

The censors of nearby Wildberg did the same, in 1684 admonishing Anna Dorothea, wife of the tailor Hans Caspar Cuenz, "to take off the neckerchief she has been wearing, because she is not permitted to wear it". Community censors also targeted young people, fining Hannß Jacob Eytel, a weaver's son, about two weeks' earnings in 1662 "on account of the very wide trousers he has been wearing, which fashion he is not entitled to" and threatening that "if he should again put on such trousers of this fashion, they shall, by virtue of the Princely Command, be confiscated". Sometimes elites even used the clothing



A Prussian edict from 1731 (superimposed onto a shopping bag) banning lower-class women from wearing silk clothes



An 18th-century illustration (again superimposed onto a shopping bag) shows a lady with drinking chocolate, which was part of a revolution in consumer habits

laws to persecute each other. In 1682, for example, the vicar of a small Black Forest town publicly accused the local barber-surgeon and his wife of “wearing prohibited clothing which violates the most recently published regulatory ordinance”, giving rise to a court case, a report to the state authorities and a nine-year feud between the two notable families.

Of course, this didn’t mean that the sumptuary laws were enforced perfectly. Married women like Magdalena Schöttlin bought their large neckerchiefs and young bachelors like Hannß Jacob Eytel bought their wide trousers – even if they found they were then forbidden to wear them. People still staged lavish marriage celebrations, as with the 64 couples from the small Black Forest district of Wildberg who were fined during 1715–16 for inviting more than 12 guests to their weddings. Youths broke the laws against luxurious forms of entertainment, as with the 30 groups of unmarried people fined in the district of Wildberg in 1715–16 for holding dances.

But while sumptuary laws, like any law, were never perfectly enforced, they increased the costs and risks of

consuming new things. Villages, as we have seen, appointed censors to monitor “the excessive sartorial display that has got out of hand”. Local church courts fined ostentatious dressers and threatened to confiscate forbidden garments. Vicars preached sermons or openly admonished offenders, a form of public shaming.

When exhortations, sermons, public reprimands, court summons, fines and threats of confiscation failed, communities resorted to heavier penalties such as denial of welfare support. In 1687, for instance, when the 54-year-old Anna Margretha Zeyher petitioned for poor relief, the Wildberg church court refused on the grounds that “this Zeyher widow’s son and daughter have let themselves be seen in clothing above what is fitting”.

Sometimes sumptuary regulations were enforced even more systematically. For one community near Magdalena Schöttlin’s village, a register survives listing all the clothing fines imposed from February 1713 to February 1714. Over this 12-month period, 110 individuals in a community of only about 1,300 inhabitants were fined for wearing forbidden garments, most of

them small items of silk or calico. Although some of these fines were levied for men’s or children’s clothing, 91 per cent of those penalised in this register were female.

Fines for finery

It might be argued that all these fines simply show that clothing regulations had no effect. But fines, although they did not wholly prevent people from wearing prohibited garments, increased their costs. This register, after all, records the consumption only of people who could afford to pay the fines, on top of the cost of the garments. Even for an adult male, the average clothing fine amounted to nearly two days’ earnings for a weaver, the most important local occupation. For a woman, the average fine weighed more heavily – four days’ earnings for an independent spinner, six days’ wages for a maidservant.

Although dress laws couldn’t prevent people from doing new things, all these penalties increased the costs and risks of participating in a consumer revolution – especially for women, young people and the poor. It may not be a coincidence that in England and the Netherlands, the miracle economies of pre-industrial Europe, dress laws were abandoned around 1600, just before their consumer revolutions started.

In Germany, a consumer revolution among ordinary people seems to have taken off far later – towards the end of the 18th century, when the sumptuary laws finally lapsed. Then even poor weavers’ wives like Magdalena Schöttlin could spend their money on fancy gear, increasing their own well-being and probably also contributing to economic development. ■

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Books

► **A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany** by Sheilagh Ogilvie (OUP, 2003)

On the podcast

Sheilagh Ogilvie discusses the sumptuary laws on our weekly podcast www.historyextra.com/podcast-page