

Abolitionist Material Culture and Ethical Consumption

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Proposal

I would like to explore the significance of abolitionist and anti-slavery material culture for the development of ethical consumption practices. Objects promoting abolition with motifs such as ‘EAST INDIA SUGAR not made by SLAVES gave concrete expression to abstract notions of abolition and freedom’ for supporters of abolition.¹ These objects, alongside boycotting and ‘free produce’ movements, were part of the ‘new techniques of propaganda’ successfully adopted by abolitionists.² These techniques would provide ‘the prototype for modern reforming organizations’.³ Indeed, parallels have been drawn between movements for free produce and modern movements promoting ethical consumption.⁴ My thesis would investigate the position of material culture within the ethical consumption practices of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike free produce or boycotting campaigns, ‘tie-in’ products did not directly leverage the power of the consumer against the transatlantic slave trade. For example, Clarkson describes Wedgwood Slave Medallions that were ‘inlaid in gold on the lid of their snuff boxes’ or worn ‘in an ornamental manner as pins for their hair’.⁵ I am interested in these practices because they do not fit in with eighteenth century notions of moral consumption as easily as practices such as abstention do.⁶ I would like to question the motives and processes behind manufacturing abolitionist ‘tie-ins’, and investigate whether they were a product of innovative marketing or consumer demand. In doing so, I hope to ask who set the standards for ethical consumption in this period: the consumer or the manufacturer? More widely this

¹ M. Katz-Hymen, ‘Doing Good While Doing Well: The Decision to Manufacture Products that Supported the Abolition of the Slave Trade and Slavery in Great Britain’, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 29, no. 2 (2008): p. 220.

² S. Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009): p. 209.

³ C. Hall, ‘Religion and Politics in Modern Britain’, *Historical Journal* 46, no. 2 (2003): p. 463.

⁴ See M. Micheletti, ‘The Moral Force of Consumption and Capitalism: Anti-Slavery and Anti-Sweatshop’, in K. Soper & F. Trentmann (eds.), *Citizenship and Consumption* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁵ Thomas Clarkson’s *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1808) quoted in M. Katz-Hymen, p. 220.

⁶ Here I would be able to draw upon key works of eighteenth century economic thought, such as the writings of Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, but also of Rousseau and other theorists who were more skeptical of conspicuous consumption.

thesis would make a case for treating consumer preferences, such as morality, as endogenous to histories of consumption.

Historians of the consumer revolution have documented the ways in which manufacturers created consumer demand.⁷ My thesis will highlight the role played by innovative businessmen in creating a demand for products advertising ethical practices. By the time of the abolition movement manufacturers had already taken ‘commercial advantage of political controversy’ to create collections of consumer goods.⁸ In examining the decisions made by manufacturers and businessmen to produce abolition ‘tie-ins’, I will turn to a range of evidence. Many of the makers of abolition ceramics are unknown but their origin has been traced to Staffordshire. In order to make estimates of the processes behind producing and selling ‘tie-in’ products I would turn to the Stoke on Trent City Archives and the British Ceramics Confederation in the National Archives. While Wedgwood is not the only manufacturer I will be studying, the archival materials detailing the day-to-day running of his business is unparalleled.⁹ Therefore, this will be critical in constructing a picture of the decisions behind manufacturing abolitionist consumer goods. It is well-known that Wedgwood’s personal commitment to abolition played a significant role in his decision to manufacture the slave medallion.¹⁰ However, in many cases additional motives may have been at play.¹¹ I would highlight these by constructing a picture of the profitability of abolitionist goods. In doing so, I hope to illuminate how ethical consumption was shaped by manufacturers.

It is also important to recognise the role played by the consumer in generating a demand for ‘tie-in’ products that advertised their own ethical consumption practices. Berg has argued that many of the technical innovations shaping the eighteenth century were driven by consumer demand.¹² Lewis and Cullis

⁷ See McKendrick *et al.*, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982).

⁸ M. Katz-Hymen, p. 221.; This is something that has been explored by the British Museum in ‘Pots with Attitude’, which has displayed their collection of ceramics decorated with satirical prints.

⁹ Archives, including personal correspondence, available at the Wedgwood Museum.

¹⁰ It is thought that these medallions were not produced for commercial purposes but rather distributed through the network of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The V&A have suggested that Wedgwood himself fronted the significant cost of their production. See V&A, ‘Medallion, William Hackwood’ (n.d.), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O79580/medallion-hackwood-william/>.

¹¹ A. Lewis and J. Cullis have considered the desire to add an attribute to a good which ‘consequently competitors now lack’ as a motivation in businesses taking on ethical initiatives.

¹² See ‘Products of the Nation: Art and Invention’ in M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2005): pp. 85-110.

have highlighted the importance of recognising the role played by activism and raised consciousness in causing a ‘value shift’, that in turn created a demand for ‘tie-in’ Abolitionist products where it did not before exist.¹³ As such it is important to consider the role played by practices such as sugar boycotting, which created a visual community of ‘virtuous consumers’. Holcomb has estimated that 500,000 Britons ‘abstained from the products of oppression’.¹⁴ Sources such as William Fox’s pamphlet advocating against the use of slave produced sugar will be useful in understanding how ethical consumption practices were advertised.¹⁵ These can be compared to advertisements for ‘East India Sugar Basins’.¹⁶ Here there is also the opportunity to highlight work done by black activists in encouraging popular involvement in abolition. For example, Olaudah Equiano undertook ‘nation-wide lecture tours’ in which he distributed pamphlets instructing against the consumption of slave sugar.¹⁷ I provisionally argue that abolitionism did not just provide a source of ‘commercial inspiration’ for businessmen, but through mobilising popular opinion it shaped the way in which consumers thought about forms of ethical consumption.¹⁸

As an intermediary between the consumer and the manufacturer, the material goods themselves will be at the centre of my thesis. Shaping my thesis around the comparative study of a range of abolitionist ‘tie-in’ products will allow me to utilise Martin’s conceptual framework for histories of consumption which draws together ‘makers, buyers, and users’.¹⁹ Using this framework I can account for the role played by both the manufacturers, capitalising upon the political ‘moment’, and consumers whose participation in petitioning and boycotting movements created demand for ‘tie-in’ products, in refining forms of ethical consumption. Research by Sussman and Holcomb has recentred studies of abolitionist ethical consumption

¹³ A. Lewis & J. Cullis, ‘Ethical Investments: Preferences and Morality’, *The Journal of Behavioural Economics* 19, no. 4 (1990): p. 402.

¹⁴ J. L. Holcomb, ‘Blood-Stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the British Slave-Trade Debates’, *A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* (2014): p. 612.

¹⁵ Available online through the New York Public Library Collection. Other eighteenth century pamphlets relating to the abolition are available through Jordan Special Collections: 18th Century British Political Pamphlets.

¹⁶ Available online through Gale Primary Sources, Slavery & Anti-Slavery, A Transnational Archive, Part I: Debates Over Slavery and Abolition.

¹⁷ S. Drescher: p. 218, 221.; an interesting link to investigate here would be Wedgwood’s personal correspondence with Equiano which are kept in the Wedgwood archives.

¹⁸ M. Katz-Hymen, p. 221.

¹⁹ A. S. Martin, ‘Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework’, *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 2/3 (1993): p. 142.

within the domestic arena.²⁰ I hope that a study of the material culture of the abolition will contribute to this. Using these studies along with sources, such as inventories, will allow me to contextualise the way ‘tie-in’ abolition products would have been used within the home and alongside other practices such as free produce movements.²¹ My thesis would make use of the substantial archival collections of abolitionist and anti-slavery material culture located across Britain. These can be in the British Museum, the Wilberforce House Museum and the V&A (to name a few).²² Written sources, such as the Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (kept in the British Library), will allow me to create a background picture of the Abolition movement.

I have contacted [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] as my preferred supervisors, and they have said they would be willing to co-supervise this topic.

²⁰ See C. Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792’ and J. L. Holcomb, ‘Blood-Stained Sugar’.

²¹ There are a wealth of resources documenting eighteenth century households available. For example, T. Murdoch (ed.), *Noble Households: Eighteenth-Century Inventories of Great English Houses* (John Adamson, 2006). Here I also will be able to draw upon substantial research conducted on the material culture of eighteenth century homes. For example, K. Harvey, ‘Barbarity in a teacup? Punch, domesticity and gender in the eighteenth century’, *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 3 (2008): pp. 205-221 and M. Hellman, ‘Furniture, sociability and the work of leisure in eighteenth-century France’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999): pp. 415-445.

²² Other substantial collections of abolition and anti-slavery material culture I will be able to draw upon are held at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, the Norwich Castle Museum, the Wedgwood Museum, the Museum of London Docklands, the York Castle Museum, the Bristol Museum, the National Maritime Museum, and the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. Many of these collections have been digitised.

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²³ Although this is estimated to have been produced c. 1820-30, Hull Museums Collection has noted having in their collection an anti-slavery sugar bowl estimated to have been produced in the 1790s, however their collection has not been digitalised.

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