

Chapter 3: Material consumption before 1800

1. Consumers in England in 1800 had access to goods that were impossibly expensive, or non-existent, for consumers in 1200. Examples are cane sugar, pepper, coffee, tea, cotton clothing, potatoes, tomatoes, eyeglasses, and newspapers. How can we be sure that living standards in England in 1800 had advanced little on those of 1200?
2. What roughly is the minimum wage for physical subsistence, in terms of the amount of wheat the wage can buy per day? What society in 1800 comes closest to this minimum?
3. What are the limitations of using “wheat wages” to compare living standards around 1800?
4. To compare living standards between hunter-gatherer societies and England in 1800 we can measure calorie and protein consumption per day. Why is this measure biased in favor of England?
5. Are modern hunter-gatherers likely to represent the living standards of the Stone Age?
6. What is an Engel curve? What defines each type of good: inferior, normal, necessity, luxury?
7. How can we use Engel curves to compare living standards across societies?
8. Urbanization rates are another measure popularly used to measure living standards. Explain the reasoning behind this.
9. Is urbanization a good measure for pre-industrial living standards?
10. Heights have been used as a measure of living standards in the past. What does human height depend on? Do all major human populations have the same genetic potential for height?
11. Why might measures of material living standards in the Mesolithic and Neolithic from skeletons be biased in favor of earlier populations?
12. Comparing living standards in Europe and Asia before 1800 is difficult because relative prices were very different in both societies: in England bread, beer, meat, and woolen cloth were all relatively cheap; in Asia rice, tea, and cotton clothing were relatively cheap. Using the Allen article on the web page, explain why this is so.