

a history of the world in seven cheap things

A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things

Introduction

The vast tapestry of human civilization, stretching back millennia, is often understood through grand narratives of empires, wars, and groundbreaking inventions. However, a compelling alternative perspective emerges when we examine the history of the world through the lens of what became, and remains, remarkably cheap. This article delves into "a history of the world in seven cheap things," exploring how accessible and mass-produced commodities have fundamentally shaped societies, economies, and even our daily lives. From the humble salt that preserved food and fueled trade, to the ubiquitous cotton that clothed generations, and the transformative power of paper that disseminated knowledge, we will uncover the profound impact of these inexpensive yet essential items. We will trace the economic forces, technological advancements, and societal shifts that made these seven things affordable, and in doing so, illuminate a unique and illuminating history of global interconnectedness and progress. Understanding this history offers a fresh appreciation for the everyday objects that underpin our modern world and the forces that made them universally available.

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The Genesis of Cheap: Early Essentials

Before the industrial age, the concept of "cheap" was relative and often tied to arduous labor or scarce resources. However, even in antiquity, certain commodities possessed inherent qualities that allowed

for wider distribution and affordability compared to rarer luxuries. The story of cheap things begins with the recognition of fundamental human needs that could be met through readily available materials or processes that, over time, became more efficient. Early civilizations understood the value of things that could preserve food, build shelter, facilitate communication, and provide basic sustenance. The drive to make these necessities accessible to a larger population was a nascent force shaping economic development and societal structure, laying the groundwork for the mass availability we associate with "cheap" today.

Seven Pillars of a Cheap World

To truly understand "a history of the world in seven cheap things," we must identify the items that, through various historical periods, achieved a level of widespread affordability and had a transformative impact. These are not merely inexpensive novelties but rather foundational elements that altered the course of human history by becoming accessible to the masses. This selection represents a spectrum of human needs and technological progress, from basic survival to complex industrialization. Each of these cheap things tells a story of innovation, resource management, and the evolving demands of global populations. Their affordability unlocked new possibilities, democratized access, and ultimately reshaped the economic and social landscapes of continents.

Salt: The Ancient Currency and Preserver

Salt, scientifically known as sodium chloride, stands as one of the earliest and most significant "cheap things" to impact human civilization. Its historical importance cannot be overstated, extending far beyond its culinary use. In ancient times, salt was a precious commodity, so vital for preserving food that it was often used as a form of currency, leading to the word "salary" derived from the Latin "salarium." The ability to preserve meat and fish allowed for longer journeys, larger armies, and settled communities, reducing reliance on immediate seasonal harvests. The widespread availability of salt, initially through natural salt pans and later through more efficient extraction and evaporation

techniques, made it affordable for a significant portion of the population. This accessibility fueled trade routes, connecting communities and economies, and played a crucial role in the development of early civilizations. The control and trade of salt significantly influenced political power and economic development for centuries, a testament to its fundamental cheapness and necessity.

The Economic Impact of Accessible Salt

The affordability of salt facilitated its use in a multitude of applications beyond simple seasoning. Its role in food preservation was paramount, allowing for the storage of perishable goods for extended periods. This reduced food spoilage, leading to greater food security and enabling longer-term planning for communities. Economically, salt became a cornerstone of trade, with merchants investing heavily in its transport and sale. The demand for salt stimulated the development of infrastructure, such as roads and ports, and fostered the growth of specialized industries dedicated to its production and distribution. Its accessibility meant that even those with limited means could afford to preserve their food, a significant improvement in living standards.

Salt's Role in Historical Trade Routes

The strategic importance and widespread demand for salt led to the establishment of extensive trade networks across the globe. Major salt-producing regions, such as those in the Mediterranean, the Sahara, and parts of Asia, became centers of commerce. Caravans laden with salt traversed vast distances, connecting distant markets and facilitating the exchange of other goods. These salt routes, often perilous but highly profitable, played a critical role in the economic and cultural development of many regions, influencing the rise and fall of empires and the spread of ideas. The relative cheapness of salt made it a viable commodity for mass transport, solidifying its position as a key driver of ancient and medieval global trade.

Cotton: The Fabric of Revolution

Cotton's journey from a humble plant to a globally dominant textile fiber is a quintessential example of "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Its cultivation, processing, and eventual mass production revolutionized clothing, industry, and even social structures. The inherent advantages of cotton – its breathability, durability, and comfort – made it a highly desirable material. However, it was the technological innovations, particularly during the Industrial Revolution, that truly unlocked its potential for mass affordability. From the cotton gin, which dramatically increased processing efficiency, to the power loom, which accelerated weaving, these advancements made cotton textiles accessible to an unprecedented number of people. This affordability transformed daily life, making comfortable and relatively inexpensive clothing a reality for the working classes, and fundamentally altered the global economy, establishing cotton as a primary global commodity.

The Invention of the Cotton Gin

The invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1793 was a pivotal moment in the history of cotton and its transition to a cheap, mass-produced commodity. Prior to the gin, separating the seeds from cotton fibers was a labor-intensive and time-consuming process, significantly limiting the supply and keeping prices high. Whitney's machine, however, could process cotton at a rate exponentially faster than manual labor. This innovation drastically reduced the cost of raw cotton, making it far more competitive with other fibers like wool and linen. The economic implications were immense, leading to a boom in cotton cultivation, particularly in the Southern United States, and providing the raw material for the burgeoning textile mills of the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution and Textile Mills

The Industrial Revolution in Great Britain provided the perfect environment for cotton to become a cheap and ubiquitous material. Innovations such as the spinning jenny, water frame, and power loom mechanized the spinning and weaving of cotton threads. These new machines, powered by water and

later steam, could produce textiles at speeds and volumes previously unimaginable. Factories, housing these machines, emerged as centers of production, bringing down the cost of finished cotton goods. This mechanization democratized access to clothing, allowing ordinary people to afford a greater quantity and variety of garments, thereby fundamentally changing societal norms around dress and hygiene. The sheer scale of production made cotton fabric a true symbol of industrial progress and affordability.

Paper: The Democratizer of Information

Paper, a seemingly simple material, has been a potent force in democratizing knowledge and facilitating the spread of ideas, making it a crucial element in "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Before the widespread availability of paper, written materials were produced on expensive and labor-intensive mediums like parchment or papyrus. The invention and subsequent refinement of papermaking techniques, originating in ancient China and spreading westward, gradually lowered production costs. This increasing affordability meant that books, documents, and administrative records could be produced and distributed more widely. The advent of the printing press, coupled with cheap paper, ignited intellectual revolutions, facilitated the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, and laid the foundation for modern education and mass communication. The cheapness of paper was instrumental in its role as a vehicle for intellectual progress.

From Parchment to Mass Production

The transition from animal skins (parchment) and plant stalks (papyrus) to wood pulp and rags for papermaking marked a significant shift in affordability. While early paper was still relatively costly, continuous improvements in manufacturing processes, including the development of paper-making machines like the Fourdrinier machine in the early 19th century, dramatically increased production volume and reduced unit costs. These advancements allowed paper to become accessible for a wider range of uses, from personal correspondence and accounting to newspapers and educational materials. The ability to produce vast quantities of paper cheaply was a prerequisite for the explosion

of printed information that characterized the modern era.

The Printing Press and the Dissemination of Knowledge

The Gutenberg printing press, developed in the mid-15th century, is inextricably linked with the affordability of paper in its transformative impact on society. While the press itself was an innovation, its true power was unleashed when it could be supplied with cheap, readily available paper. This combination allowed for the mass production of books and pamphlets at a fraction of the previous cost. Suddenly, knowledge previously confined to monasteries and wealthy elites could reach a much broader audience. Religious texts, scientific treatises, political pamphlets, and literary works became accessible, fostering literacy, critical thinking, and social change. The printing press, powered by cheap paper, effectively democratized access to information, a truly revolutionary development.

Iron and Steel: The Backbone of Industry

The ability to produce iron and, subsequently, steel affordably is a cornerstone of industrial progress and a vital component of "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Iron, with its superior strength and durability compared to bronze, revolutionized toolmaking, agriculture, and warfare. However, early iron smelting was a complex and expensive process. The development of new smelting techniques, such as the blast furnace and later the Bessemer process for steel, dramatically increased efficiency and lowered production costs. This made iron and steel accessible for widespread use in infrastructure, machinery, and consumer goods. The cheapness of these metals enabled the construction of bridges, railways, skyscrapers, and countless industrial machines that powered the Industrial Revolution and continue to shape our built environment today.

The Bessemer Process and Steel Revolution

The invention of the Bessemer process in the 1850s by Sir Henry Bessemer was a groundbreaking

advancement in metallurgy that made the mass production of steel economically viable. Prior to this, steel was a relatively expensive alloy produced in small quantities. The Bessemer process involved blowing air through molten pig iron to remove impurities, significantly reducing the time and cost of producing high-quality steel. This breakthrough made steel readily available for a multitude of applications, including construction (railways, bridges, buildings), shipbuilding, and the manufacturing of durable goods. The widespread availability of affordable steel was a critical factor in the rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Iron and Steel in Infrastructure Development

The affordability of iron and steel directly facilitated unprecedented advancements in infrastructure development worldwide. The construction of railroads, a defining feature of the industrial era, relied heavily on vast quantities of affordable iron and steel for rails, locomotives, and bridges. Similarly, the ability to cast and forge iron and steel in large quantities enabled the creation of stronger and more complex bridges, allowing for easier transportation and trade. Later, the use of steel in skyscrapers transformed urban landscapes. The low cost of these materials meant that public works projects and private enterprises could undertake ambitious construction that would have been impossible with more expensive materials, fundamentally reshaping the physical world.

Coal: The Engine of Modernity

Coal's transformation into a cheap and abundant energy source was instrumental in powering the Industrial Revolution and fundamentally altering "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Before coal, human and animal power, along with water and wind, were the primary energy sources. Coal offered a more concentrated and reliable energy supply. The development of efficient mining techniques and the steam engine, which effectively utilized coal's energy potential, unlocked a new era of industrial production. The widespread availability of coal, particularly in regions with significant deposits, provided the cheap power needed to run factories, operate trains and ships, and heat homes. This accessible energy fueled unprecedented economic growth and urbanization, driving global

transformation.

The Steam Engine and Coal Consumption

The invention and subsequent refinement of the steam engine, particularly by James Watt, created an insatiable demand for coal. The steam engine provided a portable and powerful source of mechanical energy that could be applied to a vast range of industrial processes. Factories no longer needed to be located near rivers for water power; they could be situated near coal mines or transportation hubs. Steam-powered trains and ships revolutionized transportation, further increasing the demand for coal. This symbiotic relationship between the steam engine and coal made coal the primary fuel source for industrial economies, driving its production and making it one of the most significant "cheap things" of the modern era.

Coal Mining and Energy Accessibility

The development of increasingly efficient and large-scale coal mining operations was crucial in ensuring its affordability. Innovations in mining technology, including improved ventilation systems, mechanized extraction methods, and the use of steam engines to pump water out of mines, allowed for greater volumes of coal to be extracted at lower costs. This increased accessibility meant that coal could power not only large industries but also heat individual homes, leading to improvements in living standards for many. The widespread availability of cheap coal fundamentally changed how societies generated power and managed resources, marking a significant turning point in human history.

Rubber: The Flexible Foundation

The story of rubber's journey from a niche natural product to an indispensable industrial material highlights its place in "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Natural rubber, initially discovered by indigenous peoples in the Americas, possessed unique elastic properties. However, its susceptibility

to temperature changes limited its practical applications. The vulcanization process, discovered by Charles Goodyear in the 1830s, revolutionized rubber by making it more durable, stable, and resistant to heat and cold. This innovation, coupled with the increasing demand for tires, hoses, and other flexible components, spurred large-scale cultivation and processing. The resulting affordability of vulcanized rubber enabled advancements in transportation, manufacturing, and countless everyday items, demonstrating the profound impact of making a versatile material widely accessible.

Vulcanization: Enhancing Rubber's Properties

Charles Goodyear's accidental discovery of vulcanization – the process of heating rubber with sulfur – was a game-changer for the material. Unvulcanized rubber was sticky and malleable in heat and brittle in cold, severely limiting its utility. Vulcanization transformed it into a robust, elastic, and weather-resistant substance. This chemical alteration made rubber suitable for a vast array of applications that had previously been impossible or impractical. The ability to produce vulcanized rubber consistently and at a reasonable cost was essential for its widespread adoption and its role as a key "cheap thing" in industrial development.

Rubber in Transportation and Industry

The affordability of vulcanized rubber had a profound impact on the transportation sector, most notably with the invention of the pneumatic tire. The development of the automobile and the bicycle created an immense demand for tires, which provided a smoother and safer ride. Rubber was also essential for manufacturing hoses, seals, belts, and other components used in machinery and industrial equipment. Its flexibility, shock-absorbing qualities, and resilience made it an ideal material for these purposes. The widespread availability of cheap rubber facilitated the mass production of vehicles and machinery, accelerating industrial growth and transforming personal mobility.

Plastic: The Ubiquitous Enabler

Plastic, arguably one of the most pervasive "cheap things" in modern history, has revolutionized manufacturing and consumerism. While early plastics were developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the post-World War II era saw an explosion in their production and application, driven by advancements in petrochemical technology and the demand for new, versatile materials. Plastics offer a unique combination of properties – lightweight, durable, waterproof, and easily molded – that can be produced at a very low cost. Their affordability has led to their integration into almost every aspect of modern life, from packaging and electronics to clothing and construction. The rise of plastic is a testament to how scientific innovation and mass production can transform raw materials into widely accessible and transformative products.

Petrochemicals and the Birth of Synthetic Plastics

The development of synthetic plastics is deeply intertwined with advancements in the petrochemical industry. The ability to derive raw materials from crude oil and natural gas at scale made the production of plastics economically viable for mass markets. Early plastics like Bakelite paved the way, but it was the development of polymers like polyethylene, polypropylene, and PVC that truly cemented plastic's status as a cheap and versatile material. These synthetic polymers could be engineered to possess a wide range of properties, making them adaptable to countless applications and driving their rapid adoption across industries.

Plastic in Packaging and Consumer Goods

The affordability and versatility of plastic have made it the dominant material in packaging and consumer goods. Its ability to be molded into virtually any shape, its lightweight nature, and its protective qualities have made it ideal for everything from food packaging to electronics casings. The low cost of production means that plastic packaging is often cheaper than alternatives, contributing to the widespread availability of a vast array of consumer products. While the environmental impact of

plastic is a significant concern, its economic advantages and widespread utility have made it an indispensable, albeit controversial, "cheap thing" in the modern world.

The Economics of Affordability

The journey of these seven things from relative scarcity to widespread affordability is rooted in fundamental economic principles and historical shifts. The concept of "cheap" is not solely about low price but also about accessibility and widespread availability relative to the value they provide. Factors such as economies of scale in production, technological advancements that reduce labor and resource inputs, and efficient supply chains all contribute to making essential goods affordable. Furthermore, competition among producers and global trade networks play a vital role in driving down prices and ensuring broader access. Understanding the economic forces behind their affordability is key to appreciating their historical significance and their role in shaping global economies.

Economies of Scale and Mass Production

A primary driver behind the affordability of these seven things is the principle of economies of scale. As production volumes increase, the cost per unit typically decreases due to factors such as bulk purchasing of raw materials, more efficient use of machinery, and specialization of labor. For instance, the mass production of cotton textiles in industrial mills, or the large-scale extraction of coal, allowed for significantly lower prices than artisanal or small-scale production methods. This ability to produce vast quantities efficiently is a hallmark of modern manufacturing and a key reason why many once-expensive items became accessible to the masses.

Supply Chains and Global Trade

The development of robust and efficient global supply chains has been instrumental in making these seven things cheap and readily available worldwide. The ability to transport raw materials to

manufacturing centers and finished goods to consumers across continents, often at decreasing costs, has fostered competition and specialization. For example, the global trade in salt, cotton, and later, manufactured goods like steel products and plastics, has ensured that regions with abundant resources or manufacturing capabilities can supply demand elsewhere. This interconnectedness, facilitated by advancements in shipping and logistics, is a critical component of the modern "cheap thing" phenomenon.

Technological Drivers of Cheapness

Technological innovation has been the most significant catalyst in transforming raw materials and laborious processes into the affordable commodities that define "a history of the world in seven cheap things." Each item on our list benefited from specific technological breakthroughs that increased efficiency, reduced waste, and enabled mass production. From the mechanical innovations of the Industrial Revolution to the chemical processes that created synthetic materials, technology has consistently been the engine driving down costs and expanding accessibility. These advancements have not only made life more convenient but have also fundamentally altered the economic and social structures of societies worldwide.

Innovation in Extraction and Processing

Technological advancements in the extraction and processing of raw materials have been crucial for achieving affordability. For salt, this involved improvements in evaporation and mining techniques. For cotton, the cotton gin and mechanized spinning and weaving were revolutionary. Steel production was transformed by the Bessemer process, and coal mining saw innovations in safety and efficiency. Even rubber benefited immensely from the chemical process of vulcanization. These innovations reduced the labor, time, and resources required to produce these goods, directly translating into lower prices for consumers.

Automation and Mechanization

The widespread adoption of automation and mechanization across industries has been a key factor in the low cost of many everyday items. Machines can perform repetitive tasks with greater speed, precision, and consistency than human labor, and they can operate continuously without fatigue. This has been evident in textile mills, steel factories, and plastic manufacturing plants. The ability to automate production lines has allowed for the mass production of goods at a scale that was previously unimaginable, making items that were once considered luxuries accessible to a global population.

Social and Cultural Impacts

The widespread availability of these seven cheap things has had profound social and cultural impacts, fundamentally altering human lifestyles, opportunities, and even our understanding of progress.

Affordability has led to increased access to basic necessities like food preservation (salt), comfortable clothing (cotton), and widespread literacy (paper). It has enabled massive infrastructure projects (iron and steel), powered industrialization and urbanization (coal), and revolutionized transportation and daily life (rubber and plastic). These changes have reshaped social structures, created new economic opportunities, and influenced cultural norms and expectations, often leading to a perceived rise in the standard of living for many.

Democratization of Daily Life

The affordability of these items has democratized many aspects of daily life that were once the exclusive domain of the wealthy. Comfortable and clean clothing made from cotton became accessible to the working classes, improving hygiene and social presentation. The ability to preserve food with salt reduced the constant threat of starvation for many. Widespread access to paper and printed materials facilitated education and the spread of ideas, empowering individuals with knowledge. These cheap things, by becoming universally available, raised the baseline standard of living and opportunity for vast numbers of people across the globe.

Shaping Modern Consumer Culture

The inherent cheapness and versatility of many of these items, particularly plastic, have been instrumental in shaping modern consumer culture. Mass production and low costs have enabled the creation of disposable goods and a culture of frequent replacement. The ease with which plastic can be molded and manufactured has led to an explosion of new products and a proliferation of consumer choices. While this has brought convenience and variety, it has also raised significant questions about sustainability and consumption patterns, highlighting the complex relationship between affordability and societal impact.

Global Trade and Cheap Things

The concept of "a history of the world in seven cheap things" is intrinsically linked to the expansion and evolution of global trade. The demand for these essential commodities, coupled with advancements in transportation and communication, has fostered an increasingly interconnected world economy. Regions with favorable conditions for producing specific items, whether it be the salt pans of the Mediterranean, the cotton fields of the Americas, or the coal mines of Europe, became centers of trade. This global exchange not only facilitated the spread of these cheap things but also spurred economic growth, technological diffusion, and cultural interaction, knitting together diverse economies into a complex, interdependent network.

The Silk Road and Early Trade in Necessities

While often associated with luxury goods, early trade routes like the Silk Road also played a role in the dissemination of essential, albeit initially less cheap, commodities. Over time, as production methods improved and demand grew, items like salt and certain processed goods began to move along these networks. The very existence of these early transcontinental routes laid the groundwork for the more extensive and efficient trade systems that would later make a vast array of goods affordable globally. The desire for even basic necessities fueled the development of these critical arteries of commerce.

Modern Shipping and the Globalization of Affordability

The advent of modern shipping technologies, from steam-powered vessels to containerization, has dramatically reduced the cost and increased the speed of global transportation. This has been a critical factor in making goods like cotton textiles, steel products, and plastics incredibly cheap and accessible worldwide. The ability to move vast quantities of goods efficiently and at low cost has enabled countries to specialize in production and export, leading to greater global availability of a wide range of products. The globalization of affordability is a direct consequence of these advancements in logistics and trade infrastructure.

Challenges and Sustainability

While the concept of "a history of the world in seven cheap things" focuses on the benefits of affordability and accessibility, it is crucial to acknowledge the associated challenges and the growing imperative for sustainability. The mass production and consumption of these items, particularly those derived from fossil fuels or involving intensive resource extraction, have significant environmental consequences. Issues such as pollution, resource depletion, waste generation, and climate change demand a re-evaluation of our relationship with cheap goods. Moving forward, innovation must increasingly focus not just on reducing cost but also on minimizing environmental impact and promoting circular economy principles.

Environmental Impacts of Mass Production

The environmental footprint of producing and consuming these cheap items is substantial. Coal extraction and combustion contribute significantly to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Cotton cultivation often requires vast amounts of water and pesticides. The production of plastics relies heavily on petrochemicals and leads to persistent waste issues. Even the processing of salt can have localized environmental effects. Addressing these impacts requires a shift towards more sustainable sourcing, manufacturing processes, and consumption patterns. The pursuit of cheapness must be

balanced with ecological responsibility.

The Future of Affordable and Sustainable Goods

As the world grapples with environmental challenges, the future of affordability must increasingly incorporate sustainability. Innovations in renewable energy, biodegradable materials, and circular economy models are essential for creating a new generation of "cheap things" that do not come at an unacceptable ecological cost. This involves rethinking product design, prioritizing durability and repairability, and developing more efficient recycling and waste management systems. The challenge is to maintain the benefits of accessibility and affordability while ensuring the long-term health of the planet.

A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: Conclusion

The narrative of "a history of the world in seven cheap things" reveals how accessible and mass-produced commodities have been fundamental drivers of human progress, shaping economies, societies, and daily lives across millennia. From salt and cotton that preserved and clothed, to paper that informed and empowered, through iron, steel, coal, rubber, and plastics that built and powered our modern world, these inexpensive yet essential items have democratized access to necessities and fueled unprecedented development. The economic forces of scale, technological innovation, and global trade have been the engines behind their widespread availability. However, this history also serves as a critical reminder of the environmental challenges and the growing need for sustainable practices. As we look to the future, the quest for affordability must be increasingly intertwined with the imperative of ecological responsibility, ensuring that the "cheap things" that define our lives do not come at an unsustainable cost to our planet.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the 'seven cheap things' that Jan Smuts famously considered essential for a good life, and how do they relate to the modern concept of globalization?

Jan Smuts' 'seven cheap things' were considered basic necessities for a decent existence, likely including things like food, shelter, and perhaps basic education or healthcare. Their modern relevance lies in how globalization has made many of these globally available, often at lower costs due to mass production and international trade. However, it also highlights ongoing debates about accessibility, fair distribution, and the environmental impact of producing these goods cheaply for a global market.

How does the concept of 'cheapness' in Jan Smuts' era differ from its implications in today's world, particularly concerning labor and environmental costs?

In Smuts' time, 'cheapness' might have primarily referred to affordability for consumers. Today, the pursuit of cheapness often involves externalizing labor costs (low wages, poor working conditions) and environmental costs (pollution, resource depletion), leading to ethical and sustainability concerns that were less prominent in the past.

What historical period or context is Jan Smuts referring to when he mentions 'seven cheap things', and what does this tell us about the economic priorities of that time?

Jan Smuts, a prominent South African statesman and philosopher, likely made this observation in the early to mid-20th century. His statement reflects an era where basic material needs were a significant concern for many, and the idea of making these necessities accessible was a key economic and social goal. It suggests a focus on foundational well-being rather than the more complex consumerism of

later decades.

Can the idea of 'seven cheap things' be interpreted as an early precursor to discussions about universal basic income or a social safety net?

Yes, the idea of ensuring access to fundamental 'cheap things' can be seen as an early articulation of the principle behind universal basic income or social safety nets. Both aim to provide a baseline level of material security, ensuring that essential needs are met so individuals can then pursue further opportunities or a better quality of life.

How has the commodification of everyday items, potentially related to Smuts' 'seven cheap things', shaped global inequalities and consumer culture?

The widespread commodification of items, making them 'cheap' through mass production and global supply chains, has fueled consumer culture by making more goods accessible. However, this often comes at the cost of widening global inequalities, with production concentrated in lower-wage regions and a disconnect between the consumer price and the true human and environmental cost of these items.

Additional Resources

Here is a numbered list of 9 book titles related to "a history of the world in seven cheap things," with short descriptions:

1. The Stuff of Life: A Biography of Wood. This book explores the ubiquitous yet often overlooked history of wood, tracing its transformation from ancient forests to the building blocks of civilization, furniture, and paper. It reveals how this readily available resource has shaped human societies, economies, and even our very understanding of the world. From the earliest tools to modern

construction, wood's story is deeply interwoven with human progress.

2. Salt: A World History. This title delves into the profound impact of salt, a seemingly simple commodity, on human history. It chronicles how salt fueled trade routes, preserved food, built empires, and even inspired wars. The book illustrates how access to and control of salt significantly influenced population growth, settlement patterns, and the development of early economies.

3. Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World. This work examines the transformative power of cotton, highlighting its journey from a humble plant to the backbone of global industrialization. It details how cotton cultivation and trade fueled colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and the rise of textile manufacturing. The book underscores how this affordable and versatile material fundamentally altered fashion, labor, and international relations.

4. The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History. While not directly about a cheap thing, this book explores the impact of a widespread, devastating event that disproportionately affected the less privileged. It chronicles the 1918 influenza pandemic, illustrating how its reach and severity were linked to factors like poverty, crowding, and limited access to healthcare. The narrative implicitly highlights how societal structures and economic disparities influenced outcomes during a global crisis.

5. Paper Tigers: The Ascent of China's Economic Power. This book investigates the economic rise of China, focusing on the manufacturing and export of a vast array of affordable goods. It explores how China leveraged its labor force and manufacturing capabilities to become the "world's factory," producing everything from electronics to textiles at low cost. The book examines the implications of this widespread availability of inexpensive products on global markets and consumption patterns.

6. Ubik. Philip K. Dick's classic science fiction novel explores a future where "half-life" is a marketable commodity, offering a twisted take on the commodification of life itself. While fictional, it delves into the concept of readily available, perhaps even disposable, elements that become central to existence. The narrative questions the value we place on things when they become easily manufactured or manipulated.

7. The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller. This title recounts the revolutionary impact of the shipping container on global trade and the accessibility of goods. It explains how standardizing containerization dramatically lowered the cost of transporting products worldwide, making a vast range of items more affordable and accessible than ever before. The book highlights how this seemingly mundane invention reshaped economies and connected distant markets.

8. Bread: A Global History. This work traces the history of bread, a fundamental and often inexpensive food staple, across different cultures and eras. It explores how the cultivation and production of grains have shaped agricultural practices, social hierarchies, and even political stability. The book demonstrates how this basic commodity has been a constant presence in human diets and a key indicator of societal well-being.

9. The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power. This book examines how data, often generated from free services and seemingly inexpensive digital interactions, has become a powerful commodity. It argues that the collection and analysis of personal data have created new forms of economic power and control. The title highlights how "free" or "cheap" digital services come at a significant cost, impacting privacy and societal structures.

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