

Frank Trentmann

Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first

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When asked what he studies, Birkbeck College history professor Frank Trentmann can honestly answer, 'stuff'. *Empire of Things* is Trentmann's opus, a painstakingly researched and incredibly detailed history of how humans in the industrialised world have come to have so much more stuff than we need. At a time when the scale of consumption threatens planetary ecological sustainability, this book provides insights into the origins of our environmental predicament. Trentmann sheds light on the deep historical roots and complex evolution of what environmental scholars sometimes assume is a recent, direct consequence of fossil-fuelled industrial capitalism: mass consumption. The book not only describes broad social forces but meticulously catalogues what different peoples owned, how they obtained things, and what their things did for them and meant to them in societies around the world over the past five centuries. It is a fascinating and valuable, if at times tedious, read for intellectuals and activists interested in socio-ecological transformation toward a sustainable, desirable human consumption of nature.

Part One presents consumption as a chronological progression. The first chapter explains that, interestingly, some of the first societies capable of creating a high-consumption culture did not. In Ming China, Northern Italy, and several other instances, prevailing socio-cultural institutions prevented mass consumption from materialising. These cultures tended to value hand-me-downs, heirlooms, and antiques as much as novelty. They distrusted impersonal market commerce and attempts to fabricate demand. They esteemed simplicity and looked down on luxury, sometimes instituting laws to thwart it. Consumption decisions were public, not individual choice. Crucially, these societies had rituals for systematically consuming their surpluses. Excess resources were spent on monuments for posterity and profligate, ephemeral communal festivities. In sixteenth-century Florence, well-off people 'not only owned paintings, lutes and domestic furnishings but many also happily piled them up 20 metres high and danced around the flames as they burnt' (p. 36). Trentmann's historical examples corroborate recent theoretical work on degrowth suggesting that societies preclude capital accumulation and the concomitant growth in production and consumption by prioritising unproductive expenditure over productive investment (D'Alisa et al. 2014).

Subsequent chapters describe how societies overcame these forces, creating cultures capable of initiating growth and eventually achieving mass consumption. Capitalism directed society's surplus toward reinvestment in expanding industrial capacity. 'For the nation, what mattered was that consumption was productive, not wasteful' (p. 116). Industry and government not only made sure to continually increase production, but also to convince people that they did in fact want more. British colonisers told Indians that admiring songbirds was 'idle waste' and not proper consumptive leisure (p. 137). Material desires beyond sufficiency went from taboo to being highly regarded in Enlightenment Europe. Leading thinkers came to consider vice, envy, vanity and greed to be bad for the individual but good for society, because they increased commerce. Insatiability was soon after proclaimed human nature, and God's will. David Hume argued that the desire for things was essential to personal development and well-being, and his contemporary Adam Smith wrote that things were pacifying and that owning things replaced owning people. Inculcating material desire would make people industrious, feeding back into

growing production. Other forces amplified both demand and the technical means to fulfil it. Urbanisation diffused tastes, multiplied choices, diminished self-sufficiency, and forced people to communicate social status through consumption in anonymous city environments. New infrastructures delivered goods around the world and water, energy, and information into modern homes. Competing political ideologies all promised a better life. Habits and norms evolved to accommodate affluence. Luxuries became necessities, first in Europe and North America, then in East Asia and now across the Global South.

The chapters in Part Two place current developments and debates in historical context, each focusing on a theme: credit and debt; work and leisure; consumption over the life span; firms' and states' consumption; the fair trade and localisation movements; and waste. Trentmann recites the arguments of both consumption's harshest critics and its fiercest defenders, consistently choosing his own middle path. He claims that depictions of capitalist consumerism's evils – from Marx's alienated society to Galbraith's affluent society, from Weber's protestant work ethic to Veblen's conspicuous consumption – ignore the meaningful and at times liberating roles that acquiring and possessing goods have played in people's lives. Consumer and citizen are not mutually exclusive opposites but in fact a mutually reinforcing unity, Trentmann argues. Yet he also casts scepticism on the ideas of yesteryear's classical liberals and today's neoliberals who worship choice and material wealth as the ultimate means to freedom, or even ends in themselves. He repeatedly juxtaposes pro- and anti-consumption positions and then remarks, 'Both these accounts are too simple' (p. 317), before going on to provide a nuanced and balanced perspective.

Trentmann revels in flipping received wisdom on its head. He refutes numerous taken-for-granted truths – that department stores replaced street vendors, that mass consumption took off with the Industrial Revolution, that it created homogenous hordes of identical urbanites – instead describing much more complicated realities. Time and again, he denies that history breaks sharply; all happenings have precedent or at least historical foreshadowing. Socialist experiments and anti-consumerist movements are seen as minor deviations from the unidirectional march toward liberalisation around the globe. This progress narrative is the one piece of received wisdom that Trentmann does not sufficiently scrutinise. After pointing out that middle-class consumers pursue local food as a way to augment choice, not to eat according to seasonal cycles, he states, 'This is a far cry from the dull and repetitive diet that ruled when food was really local' (p. 588). But, in contrast to the studious support given for nearly every factual claim, he does not cite a source or provide an anecdote to illustrate the dullness of pre-modern diets.

When Trentmann returns to envisage resolving the global environmental crisis caused by today's colossal consumption, he sees two equally unlikely options: ecological austerity or a technological miracle – a dreary backward shift or a risky forward acceleration on the linear path of progress. In the epilogue he describes big barriers to both degrowing voluntarily and decoupling growing consumption from growing environmental damage, despite well-intentioned efforts. Gains from eco-efficient lifestyles and technologies 'overwhelmingly flow back into a society centred on private ownership and pleasure' (p. 688). But chapter one hinted at a third option: to imitate, or create new versions of, the institutions and practices that prevented earlier societies from achieving mass consumption, despite their technical potential. We can re-imbue existing possessions with value, celebrate modest livelihoods, and define the good life in terms of healthy relations with each other and non-humans, not material things. We can reimagine rituals for collectively consuming society's surplus in public feasts, assembling it into monuments, and squandering it as unthinking waste. Trentmann does finish by

acknowledging that we need collective, not individual, changes to everyday rhythms of consumption, and even argues that consumption decisions – and consumption itself – should be less private. Despite dismissing critics of consumerism and ‘zero-growth’ advocates for not offering ‘a compelling historical account’ (p. 677), his book’s first chapter contains historical grounding for degrowth scholarship.

Empire of Things is a thing I am pleased to add to my belongings. I recommend university libraries and academics of many stripes obtain a copy. The tome’s logical organisation and comprehensive index make it a useful reference even for those who choose not to consume it cover-to-cover. Trentmann methodically weaves together histories of seasonal sales, cooperative shops, ethical consumerism, youth counterculture, market segmentation, company towns, amusement parks, mail-order catalogues, and myriad other consumption-related phenomena. He draws comparisons across countries and centuries, often arguing that we are more similar than different across space and time. The vignettes describing household life, social relations, corporate production, and state institutions in specific moments and places make this monograph worth wading through. Examining consumption’s history facilitates imagining its future.

SAM BLISS
University of Vermont

Reference

D’Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds.). 2014. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. London: Routledge.