

Frank Trentmann's *Empire of Things* addresses itself to one of the most basic questions in modern history: how over the last half millennium we became a world of consumers. To survey this vast terrain Trentmann, professor of history at Birkbeck and formerly the head of the gigantic 5 million pound research project on Cultures of Consumption, has delivered a monumental book, sweeping from renaissance Europe to the burgeoning middle class of modern day India, by way of nineteenth-century London, Berlin, Paris, Shanghai and pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa. Trentmann's message is subtle and comes in different shades across many chapters. But fundamentally, his aim is to undercut conventional political and cultural critiques of consumer society. Consumption, Trentmann tells us, isn't merely an empty rat race of social climbing, corrosive of the human spirit. Nor is it reducible to the homogenizing Anglobalization of giant mass-producing corporations that John Kenneth Galbraith and Herbert Marcuse warned us against. Holding both crude sociology and simplistic economics at arms length, Trentmann paints a rich picture of the variegated human impulses that have impelled the history of consumption: the search for "domestic comfort, fashion and novelty", the pleasure of shopping, the exotic taste for articles from "faraway lands", "the cult of domestic possessions and hobbies" and the mediatized inducements of the printed word, radio, cinema, TV, video and the digital age. In the 1500s these impulses began to converge and direct economic behavior in new ways around the globe. They found their matrix in an increasingly urbanized civilization. "Buy now pay later" was not an invention of the credit card era. Modern banking originated in Renaissance Italy. Along the way, tracing centuries of debate and controversy around consumption, *Empire of Things* lays out its own canon of Western Civ, in which the heroes are the thinkers of the "material self", the philosophers who understood that "things are an inextricable part of what makes us human". From David Hume and Adam Smith, Trentmann passess by way of William James and Martin Heidegger to the French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour. As those names suggest, mass consumption first fully unleashed its radical potential in 18th-century North Western Europe. But, Trentmann is at pains to stress that there are now and always have been many cultures of consumption across the

globe, most notably in Asia. Ming China easily outdid its European contemporaries in commercial and artisanal refinement. What held China back, according to Trentmann, was not a general aversion to consumption, but an unfortunate shortage of coal and an exaggerated reverence for the cultural precedents of the past. Because for Trentmann consumption is individualistic, creative and cosmopolitan, it is basically within our control. Its history is not that of an anonymous social force. It is, for better and for worse, subject to politics. It was the violent imperialist ambition of 17th and 18th century mercantilism that set the consuming engines of the Dutch and British on their way. In the course of the 19th century, as he moves from the slave trade to Victorian experiments in sewerage and urban gas supply, Trentmann's narrative becomes noticeably more benign. So much so, in fact, that he skips almost without noticing over the rationing, deprivation and outright starvation of World War I and World War II, to arrive at 1945 and the "postwar period". The welfare state, for Trentmann, is both as a backstop to private affluence and a mode of consumption in its own right. Since the 1980s this has been obscured by a public discourse that revolves around a false contrast between public welfare provision and "consumer choice". As Trentmann makes clear consumer politics was originally of the left not the right. In London and Berlin activists campaigned for free trade, cooperatives, and untainted milk. In colonial India and semi-colonial China nationalists led boycotts of Western goods.

The sheer breadth of Trentmann's panorama is impressive and no one can fail to learn from it. But the scale of the narrative cannot hide the fact that it is riven by a fundamental contradiction. After assuring us over hundreds of pages about the complexity and multivalence of consumer culture and politics, Trentmann's conclusion strikes a very different note. As he clearly recognizes, the subject of consumption has an existential urgency, because the historical process of material self-realization that he has so painstakingly reconstructed is crashing against environmental limits. And Trentmann clearly feels called upon to respond. But what kind of history does the environmental problematic demand? As Trentmann himself acknowledges at the end of a fascinating disquisition about recycling, such topics and their history are a tiny drop in the bucket. What we actually need to address is

the history of rampant fossil fuel consumption. That, however, would require precisely the kind of history that Trentmann has spent 862 pages insisting he will not write, a history that shows how consumption and production became tied together in an expanding feedback loop of ever greater economic and material scope, a history of mass production and exponential economic growth. The obstacle here is Trentmann's scarecrow, John Kenneth Galbraith and the *Affluent Society*. Surely we can agree that the history of consumption and growth does not reduce to a narrative starting in 1945, based only in America and giving all agency to corporations and their hirelings in the media. But who ever imagined that we would?

As Trentmann highlights in his conclusion what we most urgently need are histories of the consumption of non-renewable resources, first amongst them carbon-based fossil fuels, starting with coal. But coal is barely mentioned in *Empire of Things*, except with regard to the question of urban gas supplies. What enabled coal to be transported to the farthest corners of the world was steam power and the railway, the driver of market integration on a continental scale, the enabler of far-flung exchange starting with the Sears mail order business in 19th century America and extending down to China's new overland Silk Road today. In *Empire of Things* the railway is allotted one single index entry, referring to a discussion of the impact of contact with the outside world on backwoods Mormon communities and the interest this aroused in fashionable handkerchiefs. After the railway, would follow the entire noisy, exciting and polluting procession – mopeds, motorbikes, cars, air travel. Once upon a time, Fordism was a key concept for thinking about the relationship between mass production and mass consumption. It was, no doubt, a simplistic and self-serving myth. But *Empire of Things* rejects the mass production paradigm to such an extent that Henry Ford is reduced to a cameo appearance as the patron of an anachronistic rural history museum. The Model T, the VW, the products of GM, FIAT and Toyota that shape everyday life all over the world are absent from Trentmann's account, whilst pages are given over to the idiosyncrasies of GDR consumer culture and its ludicrous Trabant.

As Trentmann rightly emphasizes we write the history of consumption today after the moment at which the equation between affluence, “Anglo-Saxon markets and

liberal democracy” can any longer be taken as self-evident. The rise of Chinese state capitalism changes everything. But that begs the question of how Trentmann addresses the deeper history of growth-fixated authoritarian regimes. He does his best to subsume the twentieth-century dictatorships under his capacious history of consumer politics. And it is true, of course, that as in 1930s Britain or New Deal America, one could find cinemas, silk stockings, sweets and new-fangled motor-cars in Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany. Stalin’s experts in mass consumption discovered the attraction of disposable cups on a trip West. But when, on the basis of such ephemera, Trentmann describes Stalin’s regime as a state that “pushed “consumption forward”, as did “New Deal America and Nazi Germany”, the hair-raising lack of context becomes evident. In fact, consumption was brutally suppressed and millions starved to “pay” for one of the most brutal industrialization drives in history.

The history of consumption is urgent. As *Empire of Things* teaches us, its cultures are varied. But we need to go beyond mapping that diversity. We need to link consumption to the chains of production and the mobilization of resources that feeds it. We need to face the painful and highly political trade offs these processes involve. Only then will we have any hope of bringing history to bear on the questions that concern us most, both with regard to the return of Asia to the forefront of the world economy and the future of the environment.