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Review: “Empire of Things: How we Became a World of Consumers from the Fifteenth Century to the Present” by Frank Trentmann

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

By Frank Trentmann, London: Allen Lane, 2016. Pp. 862,
Hardback £30.00, ISBN: 978-0-713-99962-4

REVIEWED BY BENEDICT OLDFIELD

Benedict Oldfield completed a BA in German and History at University College London in 2014 and is currently pursuing the MA in Global History at the Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Amongst other things, his research interests include the history of colonialism, empires and economic history.

Good histories of consumerism should invoke various perspectives to explain and evaluate patterns of consumption, be it economic, cultural, social or intellectual. Frank Trentmann's new book, *Empire of Things*, provides a comprehensive and authoritative account of the rise of consumer societies precisely through such an engagement with various approaches to consumerism. This ambitious work deconstructs dominant paradigms cultivated by the Cold War which view consumerism as an American innovation, and its global spread as 'Americanization'. To achieve this, Trentmann, Professor of History at Birkbeck University, London, employs a *longue dureé* approach to trace the emergence of the consumer from the early modern period. In this, he shows how institutions and ideas shaped consumption over time, just as consumption, in turn, transformed the value systems, power hierarchies and social relations of societies around the world. (p.6) *Empire of Things* is also a global history, stressing the multi-directional diffusion of ideas and practices of consumption as well as goods across regions and nation-states, all of which shaped and reshaped identities and perceptions of the self and others.

The volume is divided into two parts, the first traces the rise of consumerism in chronological fashion from Renaissance Italy and late Ming China to the present day. The second part, organized thematically, critiques and problematizes various common assumptions and topics associated with mass consumption and consumerism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including secularization as an inevitable phenomenon of mass consumption, inter-generational dynamics, leisure, and the idea that consumer society is more wasteful. While the second part of the volume does tend to repeat arguments offered in the first, Trentmann's appeal for an historical perspective to relativize contemporary condemnations of consumerism and mass consumption are largely successful. Indeed, he cogently shows that moralistic arguments about conspicuous consumption have always been a feature of human society's interaction with things. It is this *longue dureé* approach, which treats the rise of the consumer as a political and economic actor over the course

of the last three hundred years as a gradual and complicated phenomenon, that deserves the most attention and praise.

Whilst Trentmann offers numerous arguments for the rise in the volume and variety of things we consume, at the core of his thesis is the idea that the rise in consumption required more than socioeconomic factors such as urbanization, increases in wealth and productivity, and the rise of the middle class. Instead, he contends that the prerequisite for the rise in private consumption necessitated a “historic shift in humans” relations to ‘things’. (p.1) In other words, what occurred in the early modern period was a gradual cultural, moral, and institutional transformation in man’s relation towards things and their role in society. Sumptuary laws and a moral straitjacket had constrained conspicuous consumption, even in relatively affluent societies, because of the perception of private pleasure as pernicious to the common good. This changed, first in the Netherlands and Great Britain, as consumption became seen as positive, leading to self-improvement as well as to greater state wealth. Trentmann refers to Adam Smith’s well-known assertion of consumption as the sole end and purpose of production (p.3) to illustrate the sea-change in man’s perception to having and desiring ‘more’. To be sure, critics of excessive consumption and materialism remained a powerful voice throughout the modern period, be it Rousseau, Marx, or Veblen and Taut. Yet for Trentmann, a general cultural and institutional climate favourable to the consumption and production of consumer goods prevailed. It is these cultural changes, rather than the increase in abundance *per se*, that explain the trajectory towards consumer societies which first began in Northwest Europe before spreading to the rest of the world. In his own way, Trentmann thereby implicitly contributes to the debate on the Great Divergence by locating the roots of consumerism in Britain and the Netherlands.

Trentmann makes numerous compelling arguments to illustrate the global rise of consumerism over the last centuries. Above all, the role of empire and colonialism is shown to have led to this expansion of consumption. This argument is not new. Indeed, Trentmann builds on his previous publication relating to free trade imperialism to show the doctrine’s centrality to the global spread of consumption in the nineteenth century. Describing the British empire as the first “consumer-friendly empire” because of the cheaper goods and lower taxes created by free-trade doctrines (p.120), Trentmann brings together several strands of historiography of what he describes as ‘commodity biographies’, such as sugar, cotton, and cocoa, to show that the explosion of trade in goods procured from colonies shaped taste and consumer spending. Thankfully, Trentmann shows that it was not only the colonial metropole which exploited such goods, rather, they enjoyed a global demand. In this, Trentmann manages to convey the role of empire and colonialism without contending that consumerism was an export of Anglo-Saxon material civilization.

Empire of Things also addresses the lack of a global, homogenous consumer culture through the prism of colonialism and imperialism. By focusing on pre-colonial Africa, Trentmann illustrates the existence of consumerism in African societies with specific tastes and desires. In contrast to narratives of consumer society as a democratic process involving the advance from elite to bourgeois and then to mass consumption (p.136), Trentmann problematizes this thesis within the colonial context: Western colonial projects gradually led to the disappearance of the African consumer since this category became irreconcilable with European racial doctrines, despite the role of consumption in imperialist civilizational narratives. Racial conceptions also shaped taste, and marketing and advertising of exotic goods were increasingly nationalised to eliminate the colonial heritage of the material goods, something Trentmann describes as the “spatial reordering of goods” (p.173). To this day, the origin of goods plays an important role in marketing products to suit consumer tastes: just as local elites in colonized societies demanded goods from Paris and London as a sign of quality, British tastes in tea were shaped by geopolitical circumstances and the role of the imperial empire in branding (Indian tea was preferred to Chinese tea). Post-colonial nation-states came to perceive of mass consumption as a Western export, and thus displayed an ambivalence towards consumerism as a colonial legacy, in the initial years of independence at least. In this regard, Trentmann shows that, even in the early nineteenth century, taste and fashion was manufactured based on appeals to symbols and constructed associations of goods and practices of consumption. Trentmann’s focus on consumption patterns for goods of colonial origins along with the diffusion of ideas of consumption serves as a resourceful perspective for analysing the contradictions of European colonialism as well as the reconstruction of power hierarchies through material civilization in the colonized societies themselves.

Throughout the volume, Trentmann prefers to speak of consumerisms rather than a single, monolithic material culture: even at the end of the twentieth century, Trentmann sees consumerist dynamics as an interaction between the global and the local. Thus, while all societies have embraced consumerist impulses to a certain extent, there is still significant divergence, even within conceptually analogous regions, such as Europe. Trentmann’s analysis of the Asian experience of consumerism is particularly useful in this regard. Whilst Trentmann takes the questionable decision to compress the Japanese and Chinese experiences into a single chapter, distorting the significant differences between the two in the post-1945 world, he does show that significantly different paths to a consumer society may be taken. To further refute the Americanization thesis, Trentmann contends that early seeds of consumerism existed in pre-colonial China and India. In fact, he treats Maoism and Nehru’s reign in India, a time of declining private consumption, as “deviations from a longer path of commercial development” (p.357). In this regard, consumerism in East and South Asia had just as many endogenous causes as exogenous influences.

The role of things in identity-construction is emphasised throughout, reflecting the most recent historiographical trends recognizing the role of objects as symbols and as a means of social communication. This informs Trentmann's analysis of the spread of consumption to all social classes and therefore the role of consumption in politics. By the end of the nineteenth century, the consumer is seen to have emerged as a political category. This had implications for twentieth century ideologies of mass society, be it fascism, capitalism, or socialism, since they were all predicated on promises of a better standard of living. The politicization of consumption meant that twentieth-century societies were either legitimized or delegitimized by the state's ability to facilitate consumption for its citizens. Within individual societies consumers, as opposed to citizens, are recognised as political actors with agency to influence through their purchasing power. The result, according to Trentmann, was raised expectations and the transformation of the social system by consumption: now, one could speak of consumer society as an entire social system, a way of life. (p.302) This dynamic reached its zenith in the Cold War and continues to inform present-day society. What is under-emphasized in Trentmann's examination is the fact that 'standard of living' has become the key category for regional and international comparison and the ideational ordering of the world. It is now the extent of mass consumption which distinguishes the 'developed' world from the 'developing' world. Trentmann further excels in incorporating non-market actors and institutions in the story of consumerism. Principally it is the state which, in his view, catalysed mass consumption. Migration also had a significant role to play, although this is under-explored in his analysis. Despite this, Trentmann rejects presentist accounts of consumerism as the triumph of neo-liberal individualism as the sole engine of the rise of consumerism by assigning a key role to the state.

Despite the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of Trentmann's arguments, there are certainly a few shortcomings with the text. In terms of style, the relentless paragraphs of statistics to show upward trends in consumption around the world is sometimes overwhelming, and sometimes superfluous, since it interrupts the flow of his argument without contributing much new to it. In terms of his thesis, while Trentmann engages with a thorough intellectual history related to consumerism, it is not always clear how intellectual thought explains the rise of mass consumption. While the influence of Marx and Adam Smith on ideologies of government needs no explanation, in other regards intellectual discourse appears symptomatic rather than integral to the story of the ascendancy of consumerism. More generally, while Trentmann investigates the evolution of the meaning of consumption, the meaning of consumerism is never made explicit, nor is it particularly problematized.

In spite of these few points of contention, it is clear that this is a masterful work. Trentmann engages with things as markers of identity as well as with their influence on individual and group behaviour. He relativizes contemporary critiques of

consumerism by subjecting them to extensive historical investigation. The principal success of this book lies in the contention that the rise of consumerism is a global phenomenon, rather than a product of post-war American world hegemony. Through this, Trentmann argues against globalization as a homogenizing force by showing the persistence of differences in material culture despite the increasingly standardized set of things which occupy our world.