



Book Review

Journal of Consumer Culture
2022, Vol. 22(1) 283–290
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1469540520942666
journals.sagepub.com/home/joc



Frank Trentmann, *Empire of things: How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first*. UK: Allen Lane, 2016; 862 pp. ISBN: 9780713999624, £30 (hbk), £17 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Jan Pedersen, *University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

Frank Trentmann's *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first* (2016) is an excellent overview of the history of consumption. It combines conventional historical representation with innovative features. The first major part covers Renaissance, Enlightenment, 19th Century, Interwar period, and Post-1945. However, instead of a continuous chain of events narrated under the same perspective, each chapter is dedicated to new themes, reflecting the fact that features ingrained in the socioeconomic structure of later times often display their most interesting and dynamic characteristics while novel and in a phase of diffusion. One can deal with stimulants like coffee and tea in one chapter early on, and later with, say, public utilities without feeling obliged to follow up on them in subsequent chapters. Geographical coverage differs too; while the book is centred on Western Europe and North America, also Eastern Europe, major Asian nations and colonial Africa are treated in depth at junctures when their relationship with the West makes it an obvious choice.

The following section is cast in a different mould. Trentmann discusses themes and issues on the current politico-cultural agenda in the light of history, taking part in the quest for “more sustainable lifestyles” (p. 18). He is clearly engaged in questions of a moral or political nature in assessing the multifarious instances of the phenomenon of consumption.

Trentmann is aware of the dilemma involved: any committed appropriation of the past may lapse into anachronistic moralism. To prevent this Trentmann makes a point of showing the context – economic, social, institutional, political – that shaped incentives and agency in the past. The long run-up to our present-day situation should be comprehensible in the form of knowledge, not as pretext of one opinion or another.

Nevertheless, historical representation is inseparable from the formation of political opinion and existential attitude. Trentmann seeks to strike a reasonable balance by dividing the book into its two separate parts. First, he emphasizes

context and contingency, achieving a high measure of neutrality – accompanied by a modicum of relativism. Things are understood the way they presented themselves at the time. Secondly, he responds to a series of challenges faced by society today regarding consumer credit, leisure, intergenerational relations, non-monetized alternatives to the market, social responsibility of consumers, religious attitudes to consumption, resource exhaustion and waste disposal.

Trentmann identifies salient viewpoints in politics and media and scrutinizes them in the light of history. He seeks to clarify to which extent problems are new and urgent or perhaps mere repetitions of older notions. Myths are dismantled and facets added; however, at the end of the day Trentmann acknowledges that the raised level of consumption puts an unsustainable pressure on resources and our capacity for clean-up and recycling. No grand solution is offered; the most concrete suggestion to that effect is to ensure “that the carbon and water embedded in goods and services are properly priced” – an important and sensible guideline, but one to which economics – not history – can claim paternity. However, history demonstrates, “. . . that we are wrong to take our current standards as given or to assume that our lifestyles will and ought to continue into the future” (p. 689).

The efforts to combine scholarly impartiality with bold commitment play out well in many ways. However, the balancing of the two sides by visibly setting them apart leads to the question whether there is, after all, any bias or blind spots in the exposition considered as a whole. I venture into discussing, first, Trentmann’s representation of voices airing reservations regarding the benevolent, straightforward nature of what I shall – anachronistically perhaps – refer to as ‘consumer society’; secondly, the role of taste.

One theme recurs: the opposition between supporters and critics of consumption viewed as a social phenomenon. In a series of ongoing “luxury wars”, as Trentmann jestingly says (p. 616), two camps are pitted against each other. One side advocates moderate luxury, sees consumer objects as meaningful, emphasizes their real utility, and considers consumption an important aspect of civility. Representative figures are Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733), David Hume (1711–1776), William Stanley Jevons (1835–1882), Henry James (1843–1916), his brother William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952), John A. Hobson (1858–1940), all being of a more or less empiricist or pragmatic bent. The common feature of the opposite side was a radical and critical mind-set: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), Georg Simmel (1858–1918), Bruno Taut (1880–1938), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and John Kenneth Galbraith (1908–2006). For them consumption involved alienation, ostentation, false needs, and intellectual poverty in material hedonism.

Trentmann’s sympathies lie in the former camp. He justifies his position by showing consumer society for what it (also) is: a progressive, benign institution that shaped technological development and economic growth into fulfilment of needs and desires and enhanced opportunities for most people. He forcefully argues against Galbraith’s notion that big business masterminded the supply

side in a way detrimental to consumers' and citizens' needs (pp. 273, 302, 304f, 539).

Yet there are other sides of the relationship between production and consumption, notably the citizen's double role as producer and consumer and the structural nexus between the two. Trentmann does not ignore the importance of uneven income distribution, and he vividly describes norms and preferences within economically and culturally segregated groups. He seems less firmly footed when it comes to why spending patterns differ systematically across those lines. Why do wealthy people spend excessive amounts of money, time, and effort on culturally educative or character-building activities (as satirized by Mark Twain in the whitewashing-the-fence episode (chapter II) of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876))? And why did miserably poor English workers spend a fair share of their householding money on sugar and white bread instead of wholesome food (as indignantly discussed by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937))? Might the two scenarios represent, respectively, investment in symbolic capital and compensation for hardships pertaining to the productive role? These two spheres of human life are inextricably linked, the one making requests at and at the same time serving the other. The interchange between production and consumption is embodied in the actual individuals who perform various roles and functions in the economic system. Hence, differences in production-consumption interchange mirror, represent and signify social relations. Individuals belong to social classes that precondition and complement each other. Focus on this aspect may disturb the prevailing image in the book of liberal consumer society as a dissolver of social hegemony.

Trentmann finds that Karl Marx was blind to the importance of the consumer for the economy (p. 115f). However, he was not alone: The entire school of classical economics were in error when "they assumed that the value of goods was determined by their cost". With the marginal revolution "Jevons turned the matter inside out. Value was created by the consumer, not the producer" (p. 151). This recapitulation may have been penned too hastily, seeing that the theory of supply and demand does not deal with "value" but with price. The concept of utility is certainly important, yet that of "cost" is not irrelevant either. In his eagerness for linking neo-classical theory with the rise of the consumer, Trentmann skips the fact that price equilibrium is achieved by symmetrical interplay between consumers (who must consider utility and opportunity cost) and suppliers (who must have an eye to input prices).

The exaggeration of one side does not alter the fact that generations of classical economists had an incomplete understanding. Only Marx is left with most of the blame. Trentmann is strikingly fond of pointing out that Marx himself was addicted to consumption. He and his family frequently pawned their belongings – at the time, a common, if burdensome, tactic for dealing with lack of funds (pp. 34, 406). However, when cash was available Marx was inclined to live above his means, blind to the needs of his family. For Trentmann, this lends a great irony to the fact that Marx only saw the exploitation that took place in the process of

production. He relied on a future of misery for the proletariat, determined by wages that – being the exchange value of labour – could not on average exceed the basic cost of (re-)producing the same labour (pp. 113–115, 375). Workers' household expenses, for Marx, were a link in the continuous chain of exchanges that drove the process of accumulation.

The colourful picture of Marx as a tragi-comical specimen of *homo consumens* comes at the cost of attention to what he said about consumption in his capacity of political economist. It was not a great deal; yet it was sensible and preceded more elaborate future reasoning on the subject. In *Capital*, Marx did not claim that the working class was bound to live in extreme poverty. He stated that the standard of living provided by labourers' wages depends on what is generally accepted as sufficient, based on the broader cultural norm-set of any given society. Moreover, Marx realized that a worker must not only be fed and lodged, but also born, bred, and taught (Marx, 1887: 119–121, 403–405). In other words, Marx saw the levels of consumption as a *changeable* function of the economically determined social distribution of the value of marketed output; and he acknowledged the role of the family institution in the provision of human capital.

Later, others argued in a similar vein. Among them was neo-classical economist-cum-sociologist Gary Becker (1930–2014). Trentmann (pp. 427) cites Becker for “the extension of economic theory to marriage, divorce and childrearing” at a time when “the treatment of households as units of production and consumption” was one part of a broader shift towards treating consumers as “miniature businessmen” (p. 427). The sarcastic tone suggests a – negative – bias. The suspicion is nurtured by the fact that Becker's both famous and controversial work on human capital and the family is not being explored further.

Becker analysed households as producers and facilitators of welfare services. Objects provided by household expenses either are consumed immediately or serve as input in non-market, household production of such services. Presumably, the expenses and the ensuing acts of consumption yield satisfaction for the family members that enjoy them; however, they also serve as outlay for preserving and augmenting human capital. By decisions based on rational choice (including taste), families shape their cost profile to create the best possible match between on the one hand the monetary and personal resources (including time) they possess, on the other hand a mix of immediate gratification and future-proofing in the form of housing loans, insurance, savings, tuition fees etc. (Becker, 1965: 495f; Michael and Becker, 1973: 381, 385, 388, 390). Thus, the reciprocal relationship outlined by Marx between production and consumption is confirmed. It lies implicit even in Becker's analysis that consumption patterns are not just the result of social difference, but also contribute to its making.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) was a strong critic of consumer society in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Trentmann he viewed consumption as “a total system of signs” that put people under a “magical spell”, which induced them eagerly to pursue consumer objects regardless of their practical utility (p. 324). This sounds rather like the inverse image of Marx. But Baudrillard did not simply

substitute consumption for production as the locus and source of alienation. He returned, in his early work, to Marx's essential point: the integration between the roles of worker and consumer within a complete system. The free, conscious subject is a postulate, he held (Baudrillard, 1998: 69). The system of production has generated a "system of needs" where the urge to play along (manifest as conformism, status anxiety, fear of missing out etc.) dominates. "Needs . . . are produced as *system elements*, not as *a relationship of an individual to an object* (Baudrillard, 1998: 75, bold and italics in original). Consumption and needs are haunted; they are of a "compulsive, unlimited character"; all of which "is clear if we accept that needs and consumption are in fact an *organized extension of the productive forces*" (Baudrillard, 1998: 76, italics in original).

So Baudrillard did not view the sign system of marketing and consumption behaviour as "magic" but, following Marx, as part and parcel of a society whose members are, to a greater or lesser extent, alienated from the self-determination under equal conditions that liberal institutions are supposed to provide. A persuasive representation of the lived reality that lends substance to this theoretical vision is Jean-Luc Godard's contemporaneous film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967).

Dismissal of Baudrillard's criticism as a fanciful allegory of 'spellcasting' is one problem. Another is the brief and detached form applied when dealing with interpretations that contradict Trentmann's own worldview. He first evaded the basic argument provided by Marx. Later he ignored contributions by Becker and Baudrillard that were in congruence with the former, not in terms of method or ideology, but by their common emphasis on the strong integration between the spheres of production and consumption. That endows Trentmann's historical assessment with a bias. He appreciates, for valid reasons, the material welfare that accompanies economic growth, but implicitly denies the existence of systemic features that produce widely shared feelings of estrangement and frustration due to perceived relative poverty and class-based cultural segregation.

On this point, Trentmann is the optimist. Consumer society is culturally democratic insofar as people with modest resources not only enjoyed increasing material comfort, but also came to exert their own influence on mainstream taste. It is indeed ingrained in the dynamics and aptitude for self-renewal of modern western society, that cultural currents flow bottom-up as well as top-down (p. 346). Discussing details of that process, Trentmann shows a praiseworthy resentment against elite members who arrogantly scorned popular taste (pp. 270, 431).

Taste is an important concept when discussing consumption. It depends on the one hand on the economic, social, and technological context, and, on the other hand, on individual and collective preferences, the depths of which can be difficult to fathom. Trentmann employs the term on a great number of occasions; however, he seems locked in by the dichotomy of pros and cons regarding the overall value, positive or negative, with which his object of study, consumer society, is charged.

It remains in the dark whether an aesthetically and morally founded distinction between good and bad taste is relevant at all. Therefore, the question about the

role of taste as a vehicle of social structuring remains unsettled. Trentmann introduces Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) appreciatively and in good faith. “Distinction”, he emphasizes, for Bourdieu was “the centre of the social universe . . . around which classes orbited. The gravitational force was taste” (p. 344). The metaphor is dodgy, nevertheless it conveys the idea that taste is the psychological and mental cement which both binds the components of society together and upholds the distance between them. Trentmann does acknowledge Bourdieu’s contribution as “a giant step forward” (p. 345). Yet he soon ends up with characterizing his analysis as “a snapshot of France in the 1960s” that can hardly “be blown up to fit a wider frame” (p. 345). Here the issue is abandoned. Douglas Holt’s powerful efforts to show the contrary to be the case (Holt, 1998), is not cited. A casual remark that “personal taste remains socially structured” (p. 605) is the final word.

After the light-hearted dismissal of Bourdieu’s interpretation, one would still welcome any attempt to understand whether taste is simply the manifestation of subjective preference under shifting social circumstances, or can be apprehended on its own terms, more systematically. Trentmann leaves a few cues but does not follow through on them.

The book opens with a lengthy quote from the poem *Ode to Things*, in which Pablo Neruda’s lyrical ‘I’ mentions a series of trivial artefacts, evoking the existential satisfaction they convey by their familiarity and tangible beauty. The quote aligns with Trentmann’s remark at the very end of the book: “There has to be a more general appreciation of the pleasures from a deeper and longer-lasting connection to fewer things” (p. 689). Correspondingly, Trentmann mentions William James’ “interest in the emotional flow between people and things” (p. 233) and cites Martin Heidegger’s idea of *Dasein* (‘being-in-the-world’). Human existence is “grounded in a world of everyday objects . . . *Dasein* involved our caring for things, . . .” (p. 235). Next, Trentmann himself reveals a sympathy for the aesthetics of simplicity: surrounding oneself with nice and useful things and taking note of their presence adds to the quality of life. However, he indicates no clear boundary between his apparent ideal and other forms of consuming. Earlier in the book it is noted that “a range of taste registers developed, catering for different ranks, wallets and social horizons” (p. 109), suggesting pluralism in matters of taste.

The book’s best suggestion for a set of criteria on which to assess taste is a citation from a 1785 essay by Frances Reynolds (1729–1807), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty, etc.*: “The three grand co-existing principles of taste, virtue, honour, and ornament, run through all its perceptions.” (Reynolds, 1951[1785]: 25). However, the idea is shot down curtly: Reynolds’ conceptual trinity “was of little practical use to a lady standing in a showroom having to decide between teacups with various classical and Chinese motifs” (p. 109).

Actually, Reynolds’ wording in the quote is most striking and suggestive. She insists “that taste and beauty are moral attributes, not purely aesthetic concepts” (James L. Clifford in Reynolds, 1951[1785]: 7). In other words, taste as element in social discourse is not arbitrary, neither is it fixed once and for all, but is embedded in values that go beyond both the sensuous dimension and that of social prestige.

Let this critique conclude, then, in a brief attempt to operationalize Reynolds' notion. One may distinguish between three ideal type consumer profiles: the Hedonist, the Aesthete, and the Political. All of them may or may not live up to the three requirements.

The Hedonist behavioural pattern is *maximizing*, and gratification is *sensual*. Both are virtuous and honourable as the pleasurable, socializing fulfilment of needs and desires within family and community. The ornamental aspect of any consumer item or arrangement may be successful or not; however, latitude is required for personal taste. Beauty, style, coziness and tradition are not commensurable concepts though they all may be relevant for making good choices. The dark side of hedonism, which can be taken as expression of bad taste, is gluttony, excessive conspicuousness in consumption, or the two combined.

The consumer Aesthete is *optimizing*, and the gratification achieved is *appreciative*. The demand for virtue and honour is met in this case too. Careful and deliberate handling of valuable resources constitutes admirable behaviour. Objects of elevated quality may instil joy and satisfaction even in other people than the immediate owner-consumer. As before, allowance must be made for personal taste and specific context. When the line of bad taste is crossed, aestheticism reveals itself as *fetishism*. It happens when objects are manically collected or presumptuously displayed. The same applies when careful assemblage of high-quality, "simple but genuine" objects turns into *mannerism*.

The Political consumer's behavioural pattern is *moralizing*, and the gratification *emotional*. To live according to one's learning, framing acts of purchase as a political choice and part of democratic collective mobilization is a form of civic commitment that many are willing to acknowledge as virtuous and honourable. The dubious side of consumer activism is *self-conceit*. If activism is sectarian, hypocritical, or kindling the nice inner glow rather than seeking political change, it turns embarrassing, somehow akin to bad taste.

Summing up, one criticism against Trentmann's otherwise admirable interpretation is the biased treatment of differing views on consumer society. Furthermore, the concept of taste occurs repeatedly but never settles into a meaningful distinction between which part is arbitrary or context-dependent and what other part may be put in general terms. Discussion of the way social stratification, contingent on class position, manifests itself in purchasing power and patterns of preference, possibly feeding back on class division, is incomplete. In terms of method, the multiplicity and diversity of events and agents enjoy top priority. This is a common feature of modern cultural history. Thus, *Empire of Things* falls neatly within the broader range of history of consumption studies as they have unfolded over recent decades.

References

- Baudrillard J (1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* [La société de consommation, ses mythes, ses structures, (1970)]. London: Sage.

- Becker GS (1965) A theory of the allocation of time. *The Economic Journal* 75(299): 493–517.
- Holt DB (1998) Does cultural capital structure American consumption? *Journal of Consumer Research* 25(1): 1–25.
- Marx K (1887) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, English translation (1887) [*Das Kapital*, 1867]. Available at: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf (accessed 1 June 2020).
- Michael RT and Becker GS (1973) On the new theory of consumer behavior. *The Swedish Journal of Economics* 75(4): 378–396.
- Reynolds F (1951[1785]) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty, etc.* Los Angeles. Available at: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13485 (accessed 1 June 2020).
- Trentmann F (2016) *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First.* London: Harper.