A history of global consumption

Terry Newholm asks whether a new book, which observes consumers from the 15th to the 21st centuries, is up to the mark in its evaluation of ethical consumption.

Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First.
Frank Trentmann, Allen Lane, 2016.

In Empire of Things, Professor Frank Trentmann’s history of rising consumption is wider in scope geographically, historically and socially than anything preceding it. His examples of consumption’s origins range across the world from African fashions to medieval Burgundy. His actors are complex commentators, producers and consumers rather than mere ‘economic maximisers’, the economists’ term for consumers.

In most previous history books, political consumption has not been prominent and ‘ethical consumption’ simply absent. In the Empire of Things ‘boycotts and buycotts’ make their first appearance in the second paragraph. For Trentmann their successes and failures are an integral part in understanding the story of consumption. He takes us generation by generation from anti-slavery to anti-sweatshop campaigns, sometimes literally from mother to daughter. It is, I think, as important that he also traces theoretical ideas about frugality and conscientious consumption, and so we get to meet economists like Alfred Marshall, and philosophers like John Dewey.

Although consumer activists appear in Trentmann’s story – among them “Joseph Sturge [in his] ethically unpolluted underwear”– he deals primarily in political actions and movements. It is inevitable, given his ambitious scope, that detail is lost but there is a cost, I think, to the conclusions we draw from history as even political consumers have an individual perspective.

So, Trentmann is undoubtedly right to reject the idea of fair trade as a modern phenomenon. “While fair trade today speaks a distinctive language of choice, it taps into a moral geography of care that has taken shape over the last two centuries.”

We know, however, from anthropological studies, that some traditional cultures paid more than asked when buying from other less affluent tribes. This suggests a rather longer history of care than two centuries.

Ethical consumerism was born, Trentmann tells us, with the first great boycott of slave-produced sugar in late 18th century Britain. We know, however, that small numbers of people in America were boycotting slave-produced sugar some 30 years earlier, although such practices were unlikely to have been formally organised.

Compassionate diets hardly surface in the Empire of Things and yet ethical vegetarian and veganism have long consumption histories. Debates on compassion for all sentient beings within Jainism, Buddhism and Greek philosophy comfortably take us 2,500 years into the past.

Trentmann asserts that “One major framing force [of consumption] has been morality, and it remains so today [...] echoes of a much longer historical battle”. This position is unmistakably better than most accounts that treat ‘ethical consumption’ as modern phenomenon.

As Trentmann notes, historians are concerned to trace origins. In the case of consumption ethics, however, I am doubtful that any ‘beginnings’ can be found. I favour the concept presented by the philosopher Mary Midgley that “human moral capacities are just what could be expected to evolve when a highly social creature becomes intelligent enough to become aware of profound conflicts among its motives”.

Perhaps then Trentmann is right to trace the beginnings of organised boycotts, buycotts and frugalities, but I think it is useful to note that the individual and informal social practices of ‘ethical consumption’ have always been present. We then, for example, can refute more effectively the challenge that the ‘new’ politics of ethical consumption is a distraction from the ‘old’, traditional politics of party activism and representation.

Ultimately, the epilogue to this story of consumption is salutary: history is essential to our understanding of the continuing rise in material consumption far beyond a sustainable level. Whilst Trentmann documents and evaluates those downshifting movements that might be seen as hopeful signs of restraint, these are, he notes, not on a scale that might address unsustainable lifestyles. “There has to be a more general appreciation of the pleasures from a deeper and longer lasting connection to fewer things.”

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