The historian Frank Trentmann has written the first total history of consumption. *Empire of Things* is an original, ambitious account that begins in the fifteenth century, spans the globe, and examines a wide range of regimes, from liberal democracies to fascist dictatorships. The book could hardly be more relevant: since the Great Recession began in 2007, the world has been mired in a global economic crisis with the consumer at its core. As inequality soared in the years leading up to the crash, middle-class consumers, in the absence of rising incomes, relied on credit to sustain their standards of living. Sensing an opportunity, banks and other financial firms began selling mortgages to people who could not afford them. When the debt bubble burst, millions lost their homes, pensions, and hopes for a more prosperous future. European welfare states introduced harsh austerity measures, Asian domestic demand slowed, and the global economy faltered for years.

This sequence of events revealed the inadequacy of the two prevailing narratives about consumption. For classical liberals, the accumulation of material wealth reflects freedom of choice, “the bedrock of democracy and prosperity,” Trentmann writes. According to this narrative, the United States’ victory in the Cold War represented a triumph of economic liberty and individual choice; so successful was the spread of consumer capitalism that it inspired rising middle classes across the globe to stand up to authoritarian regimes. Social democrats and progressives tell a different story. For them, capitalism has fed false desires, turning “active, virtuous citizens into passive, bored consumers.” In this view, Trentmann writes, “private, self-centered hedonism has killed the public spirit.”

Trentmann rejects this dichotomy, arguing that “consuming is too diverse and its history too rich to fit either extreme model: complacent mass consumption or individual freedom.” Instead, he wants to “take a step back” and offer readers not judgment but a historical exploration of the birth and evolution of consumption. Such an approach offers helpful background for evaluating contemporary phenomena: the globalization of manufacturing, the rise and spread of technology, and the hollowing out of the global middle class.

*Empire of Things* is divided into two sections. The first is broadly chronological, tracing consumer culture from the fifteenth century to the present day and examining various factors that have transformed it. The second places current trends in historical context—investigating, for example, how consumption has...
transformed religion, ethics, and generational identities. Trentmann manages to convey both the everyday impact that consumption has on people’s lives and the sweeping changes it has undergone over several centuries. He argues that consumption should not be mistaken for consumerism, where “consumerism” is an ideological term often used to characterize the accumulation of material goods as wasteful or immoral. On the contrary, consumption is a normal part of human behavior, and consumer cultures have developed across the globe.

Trentmann wants his readers to understand the full history of consumption: not only what people were consuming but also how states and social policies interacted with consumers and shaped their choices. His approach allows readers to explore bigger questions about how consumer culture has shaped public attitudes toward life and death, freedom, equality, and the well-being of future generations.

**POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS**

Three main takeaways emerge from Trentmann’s detailed narrative. First, contrary to the popular view, modern consumer culture did not originate in the United States. “Many commentators speak of ‘consumer society’ in the singular,” Trentmann writes, “a tendency that harks back to the early twentieth century, when the concept was associated with the United States and the American way of life, with its then unrivalled level of material comfort and consumer spending.”

In fact, what Trentmann calls “material life” emerged as far back as the fifteenth century, first in Renaissance-era Italy and late-Ming-era China and later in the Dutch Republic and England. Global trade, he argues, begot consumer society. Although international commerce had flourished ever since the advent of the Silk Road in 200 BC, the 1400s brought the opening of the Americas and an uptick in trade, which paved the way for the first consumer societies. In Italy, China, the Netherlands, and England, “people acquired more things than they had had before,” Trentmann writes. “The spread of markets and the division of labor that came with it enabled growing numbers to buy items they had not made themselves.”

The United States was instrumental in promoting consumption in the twentieth century, especially during the Cold War, when the figure of the consumer-citizen came to occupy the center of American culture—in stark contrast to the goods-poor comrade-worker of the Soviet Union. But as Trentmann shows, the United States was never the only successful consumer society. Some countries, such as Finland, Germany, and Japan, have encouraged saving, rather than credit, to become “high-consumption societies,” whereas others, such as Denmark, France, and Sweden, have allowed state expenditures in the form of pensions, health care, public education, and infrastructure to boost consumer spending.

Second, Trentmann argues that material culture is not unique to liberal democracies. This position once again undermines the accepted wisdom, which holds that the consumer is a fundamentally Western figure. Observers often portray the emergence of conspicuous consumption among China’s new wealthy and middle classes as a novelty, somehow foreign to Chinese society (despite the fact that eighteenth-century Chinese
such as Marks and Spencer; today, it is a major player in the international market for luxury goods. After the Iranian and Saudi Arabian governments banned the sale of American Barbie dolls, entrepreneurs began selling the Fulla doll, adorned in traditional dress and a headscarf (but still equipped with a closetful of party dresses). From socialist governments to fascist ones, all modern regimes have found ways—often creative ones—to meet consumer demand.

“HELP FROM THE PUBLIC HAND”
Finally, Trentmann argues that consumption is a political phenomenon as much as an economic one, owing equally to changes in public policy and to markets. In the early modern period, governments

entrepreneurs boasted of their fancy watches, bejeweled tobacco holders, and elaborate windscreens). As far back as 1776, in The Wealth of Nations, the economist Adam Smith portrayed the residents of Canton as beset by scarcity. “The subsistence which they find there is so scanty that they are eager to fish up the nastiest garbage thrown overboard from any European ship,” he wrote. Had he actually visited Canton, Smith might have seen it for the bustling center of global trade that it was.

Similar misconceptions have shaped Western beliefs about other societies as well, including the Soviet Union during the Cold War and Islamic countries today. In the 1980s, Trentmann notes, the Gulf region welcomed high-end Western shops
tended to restrict consumption to preserve the social order, as in fourteenth-century Europe, where many countries began passing so-called sumptuary laws, which dictated the kinds of items people could buy. In Nuremberg, for example, Trentmann notes that only “aristocrats, princes of the church,” and those in “respected professions” were allowed to dress themselves in silk, furs, and pearls, and only knights and doctors of law could wear gold threads. By the early twentieth century, however, governments had become instrumental in creating consumer societies, by subsidizing goods, building infrastructure, and lowering trade barriers.

Trentmann argues that consumer societies would be much weaker without “help from the public hand.” States subsidize consumption in a number of ways, including through social programs and urban infrastructure for transportation and electricity. No surprise, then, that the western European consumer boom of the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a massive expansion in government-funded housing, education, and health care. Such services “increase the propensity to consume,” Trentmann writes, “by reducing the need to save for a rainy day.”

Put simply, consumers are better understood as social beings than individual ones. Their spending habits owe not only to their disposable income but also to the pressures of class and culture. And governments have a vested interest in how consumers behave. In most nations before World War I, leaders were oblivious to the impact of consumer demand on the national economy. In the wake of the Great Depression, however, as governments recognized the importance of spurring consumption to restoring national prosperity, consumers became more and more the objects of public policy and legal protections.

THE FUTURE OF CONSUMPTION

Much of Empire of Things deals with history, but Trentmann discusses a particularly contemporary subject in his epilogue: the relationship between consumption and equality. The conventional wisdom says that inequality stimulates competitive spending—the “keeping up with the Joneses” phenomenon. But Trentmann points out that consumer societies have generally thrived during times of greater equality. He argues that after World War II, for example, the development of welfare states “propelled mass consumption.”

Whatever the precise causal link between consumption and equality, the growth of consumer societies has certainly gone hand in hand with the erosion of class distinctions. In the seventeenth century, for example, global commerce brought exotic goods such as coffee, tea, porcelain, and precious cloth within reach of the Western bourgeoisie, which allowed them to challenge the power of the aristocracy as arbiters of taste. In the twentieth century, the arrival of transformative goods such as the automobile, radio, and television did something similar, as companies began to market them not only to the propertied few but also to ordinary people.

Today, Trentmann writes, “inequality is a brake on growth in the West and East, and so, too, on consumption.” Across the globe, low wages have caused
demand to stay low, aggravating trade imbalances and frightening investors. In the West, states have been largely unable to stave off declining incomes, high youth unemployment, and economic stagnation.

As the world enters a prolonged period of slow growth, Trentmann's history offers important lessons. The most important is that the wealth of nations depends on the wealth of their consumers. It has taken terrible economic crises and political upheavals to convince governments to place consumers at the heart of their economic systems—a lesson that today's leaders appear to have forgotten. Trentmann also argues that societies have constantly struggled to define what is a luxury and what is a necessity and have had to adapt as the former becomes the latter. As cars transformed from an indulgence to a necessity, for example, governments stepped in to build roads and guarantee cheap fuel. The Internet is undergoing a similar transition now, and states will have to figure out how to ensure equal access to it.

Trentmann's book reveals that consumer societies have been surprisingly mutable over time, as people's tastes and opinions have evolved. This lesson offers hope for the future. Although current levels of consumption have wasted natural resources and spurred climate change, there may yet be a future for sustainable growth. At the very least, societies will likely begin to build environmental calculations into public policy—for example, by adjusting the prices of goods to reflect the carbon embedded in them. Such policies will allow people to "gain a sense of the consequences of their lifestyles for the planet," Trentmann writes. Ultimately, consumer societies must recognize that their actions affect not only people in other societies but also other species and the nonmaterial world at large. That recognition should be no more revolutionary than the one that placed the consumer at the heart of the global economic system.