How we are living in a material world

A historian tracks our endless pursuit of 'things' and finds consumerism is the bedrock of democracy, he tells Daniel Wittenberg

The undertones of waste in the term "consumption" are particularly pertinent as Trentmann condemns the futile ways in which materialism is threatening the planet, blaming negligent city management for the growth in unsustainable habits.

"Lifestyles are a result of many different things coming together and individuals don't necessarily have control over them," he says. "We need to develop better habits. If you think of transport, we could emulate how Dutch cities have redesigned their mobility patterns to promote bicycles. Now, people have a habit of cycling for short trips."

Trentmann combines his realism about the preoccupying perils of consumption with optimism about the capacity for improvement. "If I weren't moderately optimistic, I wouldn't have spent years researching and writing this book," he says. "History is full of interesting examples of change and how what looked normal suddenly becomes abnormal."

Whatever our view of consumption in 2016, Trentmann concludes that society will live and die by what and how people consume in 2050.

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A German electricity fail in 1953, and inset, Frank Trentmann

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The production of these drinks caused a massive shift of people and plants on a global scale. And you only have to look at Hampstead High Street to see how tea and coffee are still influential types of consumption in our society," he laughs.

The second half, meanwhile, considers contemporary debates about consumption within their historical context. As far as the positive power of purchasing is concerned, the arguments read like a John Lewis catalogue: never knowingly undersold.

Trentmann believes that consumption is the bedrock of democracy, capitalism and contemporary culture. The big dilemma is that, from a purely social, economic and cultural point of view, it has, not exclusively but many positive attributes.

"Most people would feel that they would lose some of their identity if they couldn't have certain possessions, pursue certain hobbies, and have some choice over how they dress, what music they listen to and where they go on holiday."

Yet, he warns that we have allowed upon a "hyperactive" kind of consumption which is just not sustainable. "The leisure lives of middle-class, educated people lead of never sitting still is a fleeting and damaging experience of pleasure."