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

By Frank Trentmann
Allen Lane, £30, 880 pages, hardback

With the internet always at our fingertips, being a consumer has become a very different thing to how people lived in the past. It is now ordinary for people in 21st-century Britain to be able to buy seemingly anything and everything in an instant at the touch of a few buttons. But, as Frank Trentmann argues, it's actually extraordinary, and he suggests that we need to examine this consumerism as part of a much broader historical trend. Only by doing so, can we see it as a way of life that can't go on forever. If this sounds like a dry, worthy essay, however, fear not. Studded with surprising examples and illuminating case studies, it's hugely thought-provoking.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Frank Trentmann implores us to take lessons from history so we can make our lives more sustainable and end the 'empire of things'

What first prompted you to write this book?

We consume enormous amounts. So much of our lives and the world is tied up with it: who we are, our busy lifestyles, debt and growth, waste and sustainability. I wanted to look at the long history behind this to better understand why we live the way we do. Too much public debate assumes that 'consumerism' is a recent result of post-1950 growth and affluence. It goes much deeper.

What have been the biggest factors shaping our material world over the centuries?

Empires, states and ideologies played a crucial role. They both radically changed the terms of consumption - by making available new and exotic products and novelties such as cotton, cocoa and coffee - and spread ideas about what a comfortable 'civilised' lifestyle should look like.

To consume, one needs time as well as money. A big shift since the 1950s has been the intensification of leisure, especially among the educated middle classes. Leisure is no longer idle but increasingly busy. It needs to be productive and demonstrate one's status and skills, from going to the gym and dropping off the kids for their tennis lesson to eating out in nice restaurants.

Moreover, consumption is not just some frivolous purchase of luxury items in order to emulate higher classes. It is part of the fabric of modern life, from the hot shower and our use of electronic gadgets to the many changes of clothes. None of this is 'normal'. We - states, social movements and individuals - need to have a more honest conversation about the roots of our unsustainable lifestyles.

What challenges do we face in the coming decades?

We live in an unsustainable 'empire of things' and any evidence I have seen points to the ongoing growth of our material metabolism. If we are to have any chance of changing that, we need to take a leaf out of history and understand how we reached this precarious situation in the first place.

What new impression of consumerism would you like to leave readers with?

Consumption is about more than shopping. It intersects with the big forces in history: cities, states and ideas as well as the economy. We need to connect people's daily lives with those forces more, rather than treating them in isolation.

"We need to have a conversation about our unsustainable lifestyles"