ECONOMICS

Too much

Janis Joplin, Jimmy Carter and Giorgio Vasari – names from the long wars of wanting, getting and spending

SAM LEITH

Frank Trentmann
EMPIRE OF THINGS
How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first
800pp. Allen Lane. £30.
978 0 7139 9962 4

David Cloutier
THE VICE OF LUXURY
Economic excess in a consumer age
304pp. Georgetown University Press. £32.95.
978 1 62616 256 5

Noel Thompson
SOCIAL OPULENCE AND PRIVATE RESTRAINT
The consumer in British socialist thought since 1800
243pp. Oxford University Press. £50 (US $74.95).
978 0 19 964601 2

Kenneth Lapatin
LUXUS
The symptomatic arts of Greece and Rome
296pp. Getty Publications. £40 (US $74.95).
978 1 60606 422 1

27.03.2016 Palmyra, Syria

In the ancient city of Palmyra one picturesque propaganda campaign is being replaced by another. The capture of the ruined city by forces of Is was followed by photographs of further destruction, some of them a true representation and others false or threats of vandalism to come. The Easter recapture of the ruins by Syrian government forces backed by massive Russian air support has produced a new wave of images accompanied by news agency captions warning that their accuracy cannot be accounted for. It may be some time before archaeologists can begin informed disputes about what to do next. The Roman emperor Aurelian brightly burnished his reputation from the wreckage of Palmyra in 273; Presidents Assad and Putin now hope to do the same.

garage no longer houses a car but several hundred boxes of stuff. The United Kingdom in 2013 was home to 6 billion items of clothing, roughly a hundred per adult; a quarter of these never leave the wardrobe. And at the other end of the alimentary process, he offers some glazony statistics:

In the world’s oceans today, some 18,000 pieces of plastic are swimming on the surface of every square kilometre of water. On International Coastal Clean-Up Day in 2011, 600,000 volunteers scooped 20,000 miles of coastline for rubbish. By the end of the day, they had collected almost 10 million pounds in weight. Their haul included 250,000 items of clothing, a million pieces of food packaging and several hundred TV sets, mobile phones and bicycles. That year the United States alone produced 219 million tons of municipal waste—enough to fill a conveyer of garbage trucks and circle the equator nine times.

And yet Trentmann also points up the importance and near-invisibility of assembling useful data on the invisible causes (and opportunities) of consumption; the unimaginably complex material and economic exchanges buried in the global supply chain of extraction, manufacture, transport, disposal, recycling, reconsumerisation and so on. He is not just concerned with stuff, and with the sociology and political economy of stuff, but with its crisis-crossing vapour trails and the sociological and political economy of those vapour trails. Also, the story of how much we throw away is not a simple one: New Yorkers in 1939 threw away more than twice as much per capita as they did in 1989 (ash and paper being the bulk of it). “Overall we are left with a paradox,” writes Trentmann. “At the end of the 20th century New Yorkers were eight times richer than at the beginning, but their rubbish weighed slightly less.” I’m not sure I’d call that a paradox, but it’s certainly a fact to play with. Something is going on, something that at least semi-consensually – with this was ONS data released at the end of February, which showed that in 2013 the average Briton used just over 10 tonnes of material per year – only about two-thirds of the figure for 2001. Was this evidence that we had reached “peak stuff”? That a service economy uses less material and energy per unit of growth than a manufacturing economy; of a “decoupling” of “the link between material consumption and economic growth”; or, as I suspect Trentmann would say, a simple headline offering a peephole into a landscape of extreme complexity? Trentmann’s own survey is nothing if not complex and takes us from cotton – “the first truly global mass consumer good” – and tea (which Trentmann calls “drugs-edibles”, though he has, oddly, nothing to say about drugs themselves) to the iPhone and the Fairtrade latte; he discusses urbanisation and domestic space, the economics of imperialism, the rise of consumer associations and consumer protection laws (ombudsmen, we learn, are a Swedish brainwave), the history of religious attitudes to goods, the way in which a shared appetite for consumption eclipsed ideology in the Cold War; and he also pays attention to the many-splendored consumption patterns of different societies from 1660s Amsterdam to 1920s Songjiang to Los Angeles in the 1990s. This is one of those capaciously researched books whose findings are so subtle, so thorough and so diverse that it resists a simple
The Global Transformation of Time

Vanessa Ogle

"Ogle moves confidently through time discussions and debates across Europe in the nineteenth century... The powerful lesson of Ogle's book is how the gradual global transformation of time over the course of the twentieth century came to suit many different parties, all of whom thought they had something to gain from new modes of integration and connectivity."

— Thomas Meeney, Times Literary Supplement £28.95 | 9780674328014

Afghan Modern

The History of a Global Nation
Robert D. Crowe

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Forgets English!

Orientalisms and World Literatures
Aamir R. Mufti

"What makes this work particularly interesting is the author's knowledgeable focus on India... Mufti's historical perspective and insightful analyses of Indian anglophone novel generate constant echoes with the realities of anglophone writings in other cultures... [A] fine study."

— Eve Shan Chou, Times Higher Education £25.56 | 978067432777

The Highest Glass Ceiling

Women's Quest for the American Presidency
Ellen Fitzpatrick

"Ellen Fitzpatrick breaks the second-highest glass ceiling: writing a history of political women that reads like a murder mystery while managing to elevate the office of president despite recent election furore. It's a neat trick that kept me turning pages to find out what happened next. Like the politicians whose audacity, gusto and brainpower she admires, Fitzpatrick is that astute... This book is of the moment."

— Elizabeth Cobbe, Times Higher Education £15.95 | 9780674328053

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When it comes to the old consumption good/consumption bad dichotomy, though, he's much less interested in picking sides in than in historicizing the argument itself, showing how the Hume/Rousseau ding-dong on the subject hasn't much changed over the years. He tips his hat along the way to the radicalism of Bruno Latour, who has argued, in the words of Treumann, for "nothing less than a break with the intellectual foundations of modernity. From Hobbes and Rousseau to Rawls and Habermas in the late twentieth century, political thought has been the victim of a strong object-avoidance tendency, dreaming up assemblies emptied of stuff, where people meet as 'if naked', equipped only with reason."

Treumann has fun, too, with some of the more beetle-browed critiques of consumerism. Of Theodor Adorno's hostility to the "social authoritarianism" of radio, Treumann argues that his "Marxist focus on production, combined with an inherited European elite sensibility" led him to "misunderstand this new medium of consumer culture completely."

To Adorno, everything was serious, especially culture. He did not do fun. True listening meant an all-encompassing critical engagement with music as a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. Anything else was just passive entertainment. More was at stake than poor taste. Light, popular music was part of capitalism's strategy of imposing its commodified spirit on all spheres of life, smothering creativity. It was a short step from mass-produced pot-boilers like "Yes, We Have No Bananas" to Fascism. In problematizing the stark binaries of most discourse around consumption, Treumann does us all a favour. As he writes in his epilogue, he is interested in adding "a dose of historical realism" to the equation: taking the detailed long view makes clear that the boilerplate contemporary critiques of consumption miss all sorts of points. The idea — informed by J. K. Galbraith's The Affluent Society (1958) — that the post-war fertilization of growth is the root of the explosion in consumption is, for example, just wrong: it "amplified and intensified consumption" rather than prompting a "sudden take-off". The conspicuous consumption of the super-rich, in the context of our ever-growing appe- tite for stuff, is a red herring; tiny, compared to the under-water bulk of the iceberg. We do need to consume less, Treumann says; and we'll do so if we understand better what it means to consume (in terms of social semiot- ics and ethics, psychology and economics)
and the hidden costs of same (social and environmental, as well as in terms of that dif-
ficult-to-pin butterfly, happiness).

The bathyspheric deep-dive of Trennmann’s research, incidentally, has brought up some curious fish. Here is the only survey of global consumption in which, at the end of a page-long consideration of the Finnish obsession with tango music, you will learn of “the fusion of hybrid styles [in] post-punk Suomi-reggae, with the inimitable hit: ‘Elan haluaan himuunin’ (‘He wants a Dry Toilet’).” I was glad of dis-
covering that Swedish advertisements of the late 1920s “praised the bananas as the ideal quiet snack during radio hours”. And when Tren-
mann discusses the way in which “the greatest consumers live in those countries that have the strongest tradition of Ombudsman, com-
plaint procedures and trust in the rule of law”, he also drops in that in Helsinki (those Finns again) in 2005 a group of consumers pio-
ned a complaints choir (“Valituskuoro”), in which people literally sang their grievances – in this case that “we always lose to Sweden in hockey and Eurovision”. Complaints choirs have since sprung up in St Petersburg, Mel-
bourne, Singapore and two dozen other cities. In Hamburg they_must about every compli-
cated tax forms; in Budapest they boast that nobody complains like a Hungarian.

There are no Finnish Suomi-reggae artists in Noel Thompson’s narrower Social Opulence and Private Restraint, though the author shares, unex-
spectedly, some of Trennmann’s puckish-
ness. The arc of Thompson’s story is that of socialism, or socialisms, struggling in the con-
sumer era to deal with the evidence of what Thompson calls capitalism’s “unnerving capac-
ity to deliver the goods and to deliver them ever more efficiently and in ever increasing quanti-
ties”. The prose isn’t much – on one page some-
thing “loomed larger ever on the ideological radar screens of social democrats” – and two pages later something else “loomed large on the radar screens of psychologists” – but the argu-
ments are sound and the detail precise and often, in the sheer upside-downness of it, funny.

The “problem” of capitalism is that it has made the poor richer as W. Sombart put it in his essay of 1906, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?”. “On the roofs of roast beef and apple pie socialistic utopias of every society are sent to their doom”. Thompson’s recurring theme, then, is “disappointment with working-class desires” and the attempt to frame a coherent theoretical response to it. By far the most interesting and nuanced of the thinkers he deals with are those who attempted an accommodation with the facts on the ground – such as J.A. Hobson and, later, Tony Crosland – rather than those who deployed the whole thing on principle, such as the ano-
ymous, fun-loving author of Prospectus for the Establishment of a Communist State (1841), who wrote of his ideal citizens: “Their drink will be water and their food vegetables and fruit, and they will eat their food chiefly uncooked by fire”.

A useful distinction that runs through the book, and that is framed in the title, is between collective and individual consumption: a num-
er of the utopian schemes Thompson dis-
cusses had a lot of time for bling, but they confined it to public spaces and activities. He convincingly describes the New Labour accommoda-
tion with “commodifying public provision”, and makes a decent case that there is a moral difference between the provision of public services and the consumption of private goods. Thompson closes his book with the cheery, Keynesian admonition that “given the nature and magnitude of the challenges we con-
front it is important to look beyond our present financial predicament. For if we do not do so in the long run we, and a high proportion of species on this planet, are all dead”. You could point out that in the long run we’re all dead whether or not we look beyond our present financial predicament, but you get his point. An unexpectedly companionable pair with Thompson’s book is David Cloutier’s The

Victory of Luxury, which attacks from a theologi-
cal angle much the same subjects that Social

Opulence and Private Restraint attacks from an angle of socialist political economy. Clout-
ier opens by quoting Jimmy Carter’s “malaise

speech” of 1979: “We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose”. Ronald Reagan (“I find no national malaise”) went on to wipe Carter out, but Cloutier sticks with the earlier President. His book is a schol-

arly but quotidian attempt, within a Catholic

framework, to rejoinet ethics into the issue of consumption – to make luxury, as per his title, once again a vice. “There is a need for catego-
ries of everyday discernment to guide pru-
ce”, Cloutier writes, “a need for a consciousness of how to identify luxury when we see it.” His case – stretching back to Augustine and beyond, though also mixing Thoreau Veblen in with Pope John Paul II’s encyclicals – is a religious shadow of that made by Thompson: its core is a communitarian or social as opposed to individual notions of the good; an ethos of lux-
ury versus an apage of social consumption;

and Aristotle’s distinction between economics and “chrematistics”, “with the latter indicating an unlimited desire for material goods as ends rather than as a means to living well”. Cloutier traces the roots of the idea of luxury:

Even his Englishness was a well-kept secret

K

enneth Lapatin is a bit less categori-

cal. “Truffed”, he writes in the intro-
duction to Luxus, mentioning that the

word goes back to the fifth

century BC, “was not an entirely negative con-
cept.” Sometimes associated with excess and effeminacy, he says, it also “came to embody Homer’s akraele (aristocratic excellence)

Luxus, though, is derived from lux (to sprain or dissociate) rather than lux (light): an implicit critique of excess is embedded in the word itself. The earliest recorded use of the word is in a play by Terence from 160 BC, speaking of “a youth destroyed by luxus”.

Lapatin’s book, I should say, is not primarily a discussion of the concept of luxury: rather, it is a (fine and beautifully illustrated) discussion of the things that the ancient praised; and a fierce argument to restate what are thought of as “minor”, or decorative, arts at the centre of our apprehension of antiquity. Here are tri-
kets in gold and precious metals, intricate jew-
ellery, figurines of gods, carvings and cameos in semi-precious stones and organic materials, plates and vases of glass, the Herodotus’ description of the Phaeakians fleeing their city before an invasion by the Medes: “They loaded onto their ships their children, women, and household property, and above all the images of the gods from sanctuaries and other dedications, everything, in fact, except bronze, stonework and paintings (Lapatin’s

title), and they sailed to Chios”. Certainly it bears noting that stonework and bronzes are heavy and hard to transport in a hurry, but the point is at least half-made: household goods were not easy-come, easy-go.

Thanks, however, to an accident of art history and the prejudice of a previous generation of antiquarism, our understanding is skewed: marbles, bronzes and decorated pots are regarded as the representative arts of ancient Greece and Rome. Lapatin argues that the reasons for this are several: among them that “anachronistic notions of what constitutes ‘art’ have proven detrimental to the study of objects created from sumptuous materials. In the ancient world all art objects had a function”; a backward projection of ideas of austeritity and simplicity onto ancient cultures ("Prevalent interpretations of Greek art, per-
haps derived from Platonic notions of ideal form, allow little tolerance for vibrant colour or rich surface effects"); a whigish emphasis on reading Greek art through the evolution of the naturalistic depiction of the human figure; and the influence of Giorgio Vasari. As Lapat-
in writes: “When Greek art is placed on the precarious bed of the triad of architecture, sculpture and painting, the sumptuous arts suf-
fer”. But objects crafted from gold, silver and precious stones, according to the author, had as great if not a greater importance in the culture. A glorious selection of colour plates helps to make Lapatin’s case and reminds us that the appetite for pretty things goes way, way back. Luxus is one of them. It would sit nicely on a coffee table. Or, with a hint of cheek, in the capita-
cious glove compartment of a Mercedes-Benz.