Why our material world is older than you might believe

Far from being a postwar trend, a new study suggests that consumerism spans centuries—and that this history may be key to our future. Matt Elton reports

You might think, as you browse your smartphone or return those last unwanted Christmas gifts, that consumerism—buying and using large amounts of material goods and services—is a uniquely modern phenomenon. Yet new research suggests that it’s part of a much longer trend, and acknowledging this may prove crucial in the coming decades.

This research is notable because it has previously been widely assumed that mass public consumerism was a result of greater affluence in the decades after the Second World War—particularly the 1960s and 70s. Yet Frank Trentmann—whose new book, Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the 15th Century to the 21st, is published by Allen Lane this month—argues that our love of “stuff” goes back much further. “Until recently, the history of consumption has been told as an Anglo-American saga that began in the 18th century and reached a peak after 1945 in the US—which then exported the American way of life to the rest of the world,” he says. “Yet its history is much richer, more interesting and more unsettling than critics of affluence realise.”

Trentmann suggests that, as early as the Renaissance, ‘things’ came to be valued as...
enriching for humanity and civilisation. He points to the growing trade in goods such as carpets and silks in the 12th century and, from 1506, the spread of tea and porcelain from China to Europe.

Focusing on such trade is vital, says Trentmann, because it corrects the western bias of previous takes on consumerism. But he also argues that, even when experts acknowledge the broader picture, they often misunderstand how consumerism has developed.

"The conventional view is one of 'needs' and 'wants,'" he says. "It argues that poor societies focus on basic needs, such as food and housing, while only rich societies develop a taste for things they don't really need: entertainment, fashion and gadgets. 'Consumerism', in this view, is new: the child of affluence and the economic miracle of the 1960s and 70s."

Trentmann — who is professor of history at Birkbeck, University of London — points to case studies that buck this trend. Even in the 17th century, for instance, customers were being advised on the best cotton to buy: "We tend to speak of cotton in the singular, but by the late 17th century it already came in a huge variety of colours and patterns," he says.

"For the entire past year, Heidi wrote, she had 'passionately longed' for the more stylish Lambretta moped"

Even in the 20th century, little more than a decade before the affluence boom, Trentmann cites the example of Heidi Simon, a girl growing up in a West Germany ruined by the destruction of the Second World War. "Heidi entered a 1952 government-run amateur photography contest and won one of the top prizes: a Vespa moped," he says. "But officials may have been surprised by her response. Heidi was very unhappy to have won, she wrote, but without trying to sound 'impertinent', wondered if she could not rather have a Lambretta — as, for the entire past year, she had longed 'passionately' for that more stylish moped. Officials refused and sent her the Vespa."

Such examples may appear one-offs, but Trentmann argues they reveal how people have always desired 'stuff'. "Heidi lived in the midst of rubble — and she did not ask for bricks and mortar but for a more fashionable moped," he says.

So why is this important? Trentmann suggests that understanding consumerism's historical context may help us deal with its negative effects today. "We need to recognise that our lifestyles, which I'd argue are unsustainable, are not a recent innovation we can easily fix by changing the postwar growth pattern, but instead the result of a longer history," he says.

Yet there are ways in which this new approach could help us deal with the challenges of the future. "A longer view of history shows just how changeable people's lifestyles and ideas of comfort and convenience have been," says Trentmann.

Major discoveries have been made in Leicest

Artefacts and remains from the Roman and medieval eras have been found in major archaeological dig in Leicester. Experts describe the discovery of 23 Roman skeletons as "one of the most significant finds made in the city in recent years, while other objects — unearthed in the Newland and Southgates area — include tableware, coins, bone hairpins and a decorated comb.

Experts can't find Poland's Nazi gold tra

There is no evidence that a Secor World War-era train rumoured to be laden with gold and gems has been found in Poland, experts say. Although Piotr Koper and Andrea Richter told local authorities of the supposed location of the train in August 2015, researchers exploring the site say that there may be a tunnel but no train. However, Kop disputed the study's methods, an maintains that the train — which, according to local legend, went missing near the city of Walbrzych in 1945 — could still be found.

...but a ship laden with treasure has been fou

The wreck of a Spanish galleon carrying silver, gold and gems worth at least £66 million in modern terms — one of the most valuable cargoes ever lost at sea. The haul had been collected in St Helena and brought to Britain in 1708 by British forces in the South America to help fund Philip V's war of succession against the British.