The Long History of Retail Therapy

Edward Rothstein reviews “Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First” by Frank Trentmann.

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN
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‘Empire of Things’—a sweepingly detailed history of humanity’s passion for the possession of objects—is a bit like one of the early 20th-century department stores that Frank Trentmann writes about a few hundred pages into his epic chronicle. Such stores—which were likened at the time to museums, so encyclopedic were their offerings—seemed to put the entire world of objects on display. One store, Tietz in Berlin, emphasized the point with an illuminated globe on its roof. Within these meccas of material goods, it seemed, was all that could be dreamed of and desired.

Mr. Trentmann’s narrative has a similar abundance. Here are 16th-century silver forks gathered by Florentine merchants in Europe’s first urban culture; 18th-century Indian calico, which became so popular that European textile weavers had it banned; 19th-century flush toilets, which were too advanced for the sewage system of Manchester, England; and 21st-century smartphones, which, in 2009, were used for emails by 31% of American owners and just 8% of Italian owners.

EMPIRE OF THINGS
By Frank Trentmann
Harper, 862 pages, $40

Here too are aisles of facts, eccentric and suggestive, ranging over continents, eras, languages. In England in 1500, real wages were three times higher than they had been in 1300, because the Black Death (1348-49) had wiped out more than a third of the working population. In 1750, the king of the African kingdom of Dahomey made £250,000 from selling slaves (an astronomical sum that approximates £45 million in today’s currency). In late 19th-century Europe, food dropped in price, but water became more expensive. In 1954, only 7% to 8% of French households had a refrigerator or a washing machine. In 1966, only 5% of German men changed their underwear daily. At the end of the 20th century, New Yorkers were eight times as rich as they were at the beginning of the century, but their household garbage weighed slightly less (the bulk of personal rubbish used to be ash).

If all this is a little dizzying, that is part of the point. The facts presented in “Empire of Things” touch on the economy of slavery, the growth of Western commerce, the beginning of urban utility networks, the rapid
economic change during postwar decades, and the shifting aspects of consumption and its consequences. Mr. Trentmann, who teaches history at Birkbeck College, University of London, is an authority in “consumer studies” and wants to jolt the accepted wisdom in his field.

Sometimes the sheer range of examples on offer can make the book seem more like an open-air market than a coherent presentation of goods. The first half is a chronological history of consumerism, guided by extended case histories—about 16th-century northern Italy, for example, or 20th-century Asia. The second half is a series of issue-driven chapters examining themes, including the idea of credit, ethical consumerism, purchases made for the home and the effects of capitalism on religion. Mr. Trentmann keeps a feeling of miscellany in play; he seems to deliberately avoid a conceptual system that might explore fundamental principles.

What gives the book coherence, instead, is its spirit of challenge and dissent. Early studies of what is now called “material culture” like Fernand Braudel’s “The Structures of Everyday Life” (1982), intent on a new form of history, paid close attention to household and economic goods but not to major historical and political events. This restricted perspective, Mr. Trentmann argues, became common in the discipline and has led to many generalizations that don’t hold up. In addition, he suggests, the world of the consumer has been too narrowly defined, focusing on private acquisition and thus neglecting areas like public spending, which is now running at a rate of over 20% of GDP in the world’s wealthiest countries—“levels unparalleled in every previous period in human history.”

So a polemical edge accompanies Mr. Trentmann’s array of facts and observations. You think that frenzied acquisition is uniquely characteristic of modernity and Western capitalism? Think again: Mr. Trentmann begins the first chapter citing a 60-year-old chronicler in 1808 bemoaning how rapidly the world around him has changed. Wealthy men parade around displaying fancy pocket watches. Ordinary citizens follow frivolous fashions and keep animals as trendy pets. But this chronicler, Mr. Trentmann tells us, “was not writing from Paris or London but from Yangzhou” in China. In this case, the fancy pets were chickens from Canton and rats from “the West.”

What about, then, the issue of “conspicuous consumption” defined in 1899 by Thorstein Veblen? Isn’t it characteristic of modern consumerism? Not at all, Mr. Trentmann says. One Chinese observer in the 1570s complained about the “young dandies” who thought “silk gauze isn’t good enough and lust for Suzhou embroideries” seeking the “look of the moment.” In 15th-century Florence, the competitive display of luxury goods was so extravagant that the Dominican friar and preacher Girolamo Savonarola reacted with his notorious “bonfire of the vanities,” sending musical instruments, books and tapestries up in flames—thereby illustrating an alternative form of consumption. In Venice during the next century, the senate passed rules against luxurious display: One 1512 law said that no more than six forks and six spoons could be given as wedding presents and banned gilded mirrors; a 1562 law limited the desserts permitted at banquets. In
fact, Mr. Trentmann notes, the imposition of sumptuary laws regulating consumption accompanied the growth of material possibility throughout Europe.

A larger perspective over time shifts our understanding; so too does a vast geographic perspective. Mr. Trentmann surveys the economic impact of the slave trade not just in the West but in Africa. Pre-imperial Africa, he points out, was hardly a “traditional” society untouched by materialism. During the 18th century, imports in West Africa rose 10-fold. Each African region developed particular tastes in fashion and cloth. The end of the slave trade in 1807 led to the expansion of African exports of native products like palm oil and gum. “Africans,” Mr. Trentmann writes, “did not need imperial masters to teach them how to become consumers.”

As Mr. Trentmann chisels away at various claims and misconceptions, it becomes a little more clear what his overall strategy is. Toward the beginning of the book he notes that “today, consumption is at the center of a heated public debate between two rival camps pointing their moral artillery at each other.” On one side are “progressive and social democratic critics who attack the juggernaut of shopping, advertising, branding and easy credit for turning active, virtuous citizens into passive, bored consumers.” On the other are “champions of consumption, first and foremost classical liberals who cherish freedom of choice as the bedrock of democracy and prosperity.” Mr. Trentmann insists that he is not out to “adjudicate a moral debate” or decide whether consumption is good or bad. He is, he says, more interested in tracing the process and evolution of consumption over the past five centuries.

Still, he seems more critically preoccupied with the progressive vision, in part because it has shaped contemporary ideas—and it is fraught with errors. The progressive worldview, he notes, has a long and mixed pedigree. Plato described how luxuries would lead to the moral and physical dissolution of a city. Avarice was “the root of all evil,” according to the Christian apostle Paul. Dante sent usurers to hell’s seventh circle, pushed down into burning sand by the stuffed moneybags they carry.

In the modern period, Mr. Trentmann finds similar ideas in the Romanticism of Rousseau, who believed “the desire for things turned free men into slaves.” A century later, he suggests, Marx and others went much further, arguing that capitalism and modern industry had changed the ways in which people relate to objects; things had become defined solely by their economic value. Other meanings and significance were cloaked by this “modern fetishism.” The result, according to this view, has been “disenchantment, inequality and conflict” and a raging consumer culture caused by the manipulation of material desire.

During the 1950s, Mr. Trentmann suggests, this outlook became part of popular understanding, largely through a series of books: David Riesman’s “The Lonely Crowd” (1950), Vance Packard’s “The Hidden Persuaders” (1957) and, most important, John Kenneth Galbraith’s “The Affluent Society” (1958). Galbraith, Mr. Trentmann says, saw the U.S. as a society “where people were driven to consume ever more
to keep the engine of production running, at the expense of public welfare, the environment and their own happiness.” Galbraith warned of the end of thrift and the imminence of “private opulence and public squalor.”

Mr. Trentmann accepts little of this, certainly not the idea that objects were transformed into fetishistic economic artifacts during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when they in fact became weighted with broader significance: Think only of the labors of collectors and the development of museums. And while Galbraith’s view, which “has informed critics of ‘consumerism’ pretty steadily to this day,” included some acute observations, Mr. Trentmann argues that much of his analysis was simply wrong. Americans were saving more, not less, during the postwar years: In 1957 the personal savings rate was a phenomenal 10%. Moreover, public spending rose with affluence and did not decline the way Galbraith’s model might have suggested.

“Empire of Things” is by no means a systematic rebuttal, but Mr. Trentmann’s approach throughout is to present so much detail that we are convinced, at the least, that a good deal of thinking about consumption requires re-examination. Did consumer culture really encourage passivity and an abandonment of craft and skill? How to explain, then, that men spent roughly twice as much time on domestic chores and repairs in 1945 as 1900? A large amount of spending went toward home craftsmanship and new skills. But isn’t it true that an addiction to credit is a distinctive problem of our time? Only if you ignore that in England in 1700 every second head of a household left behind unpaid debts at death. In 1925, Liverpool had 1,380 registered moneylenders. What about religion? Isn’t growing secularism a direct result of expanding consumption? Not really, Mr. Trentmann says: Eastern and Central Europe today are “not only richer in things than under Communism,” but there are “more Christian believers.” Religion, he writes, “is saturated with things.”

Is capitalism necessarily amoral? Not at all: In Mr. Trentmann’s view it has been long accompanied by efforts “to moralize the economy”—to purchase selectively or set up a boycott to encourage a particular outcome. The most recent manifestation of this impulse is “ethical consumerism,” like the fair-trade movement, its products “assuring consumers that distant producers in the developing world receive a fair deal for their sweat and toil.” But this section may be the vaguest part of the book because we never learn how “fairness” is assessed or what effect the movement has had.

Despite the book’s scale, conclusiveness is not one of its goals. “Empire of Things” is difficult, sometimes elusive, yet almost always illuminating. By the end received wisdom is weakened, though we never become quite sure what to put in its place. But in an academic field—studying consumption—that can seem wary of its own specialty, that turns out to be a refreshing novelty, like window shopping without having to decide on a final purchase.

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