‘There is no doubt that consumers continue to be active’: An Interview with Professor Frank Trentmann

Visa Heinonen

Introduction

Professor Frank Trentmann has studied at the University of Hamburg, London School of Economics and Harvard University where he received his PhD in 1999. He worked as an Assistant professor at Princeton University before he was nominated as Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London 2006. Professor Trentmann is a very multidisciplinary scholar, which one can easily observe by looking at the themes of his publications. During 2002–2007 Professor Trentmann was the director of the Cultures of Consumption research programme, where 68 experts from different fields of science from law, geography and management to fashion and history formed a research community and which was co-funded by the British research councils, ESRC and AHRC with £5 million. Trentmann has also been a research fellow and a visiting professor of many European and US Universities.

Trentmann’s list of publication is very extensive and includes books, 15 co-edited volumes, journal articles and chapters in edited publications. His studies deal with consumer culture (Brewer & Trentmann 2006), consumer identity (Trentmann 2006), citizens and consumption (Bevir & Trentmann 2007; Soper & Trentmann 2007), materiality and history (Nützenadel & Trentmann 2008), free trade and fair trade (Trentmann 2008) and consumption in everyday life (Shove, Trentmann & Wilk 2009). In the Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption (Trentmann 2012) one finds chapters written by 35 leading experts of consumption. Trentmann’s latest book Empire of Things, which tells the story of consumption from the 16th century to the present, (Trentmann 2016) was widely praised by peer-reviewers and in the public press. It has been chosen four times book of the year and is also appearing in German, Italian, Chinese and Russian language.

Professor Frank Trentmann was called to the University of Helsinki to be a part-time Professor of the History of Morality and Consumption and started in the beginning of 2018.
An Interview with Professor Frank Trentmann

- VH: You studied history at the University of Hamburg and University of London and then at the University of Harvard, where your doctoral dissertation about the erosion of free trade in Britain around the turn of the 19th and 20th century was examined in 1999. How did you become interested in consumption and consumer societies? Why is it important to study consumption?

- FT: It was not my original plan to study consumption. As I was working on free trade and the popularity of free trade in Britain in the years around 1900 I had to somehow explain, how it was that a policy which is now seen mainly as a policy of bankers and corporate interests just over hundred years ago had a mass popular following. What did people see in free trade that made it almost a religion? As I was going through the sources in the archives, I also suddenly noticed that the term ‘consumer’ started to come up. So, both workers and early women’s movement but also people in the Treasury – the Finance Ministry – were suddenly appealing to this person ‘the consumer’ and were saying things: “The consumer is the public interest. We must defend the consumer”. Then as I was doing more research
another term came up: The citizen-consumer.

I thought that was quite interesting after a while. I had not seen references to consumers in historical studies of politics. So, when did it start? Why did people talk of themselves as consumers, as a joint public interest group? And that then led me to ask questions about the origin of consumers in politics. I traced how the identity of the consumer became more prominent in modern history. And then there is a short step to asking: Is it just about people or shouldn’t we also try to have historical understanding of the kinds of consumption that became normal in the modern period. I moved from the citizen-consumer to what people consumed and why their consumption changed.

- VH: *If you look back to your career as a researcher, what have been your main interests and central research themes? Could you, please, explain the transformation of the focus of your research.*

- FT: So, I started fairly much concerned with the political discourses of the consumer. From there I asked myself, what were the actual battlegrounds, in which consumers became active themselves. Then I became interested in what we now call consumer movements. But in the 19th and early 20th century they weren’t national movements. They emerged in particular zones of conflict. I became for instance interested in battles over water and access to water, and that also became connected to questions of gender politics.

Today we tend to think of the early consumer advocates as housewives and women. That is of course important. They were the main shoppers at the time. Parallel there were also middle-class propertied men, who argued that as consumers... They were consumers, because they payed taxes. Thus, they should have entitlement to certain services like running water. So, that was my second interest. And from there I became interested in the combination between infrastructures – that’s what we call materiality – and what people do. Effectively, thinking of consumers not just as people who go to battle over meanings or interests but in fact whose lives and understandings are always connected to material processes. So, in the case of water this became a battleground partly, because cities started having entirely new infrastructures: piped water that now connected households. So, people were networked materially and that helped them also being networked politically.

- VH: *Isn’t that a little bit strange idea that you must pay for water which used to be there for everybody?*

- FT: Well, that was one of the debates in the 19th century. The question was: What is water? Is it a gift of God or is it a commodity with a price? The battleground was over that essential question. But then a second battle in this war over water was about the question, what are basic needs? What is basic? Is it two or three litres of water a day or is it hundred-fifty litres or as much as you want?
And off course that changed as people’s understanding changed of what is normal or should be normal. The minutes bathing and bath water became seen as a normal part of civilized life. The conflict between the water providers and water consumers was inevitable, because the water providers said: “Look, a generation ago people were fine with two litres. That’s basic.”

- VH: Yes, and it’s certainly an urban phenomenon. Because if you live in the countryside, you can go swimming in a lake.

- FT: In defence of the water companies...Their argument was: “Fine. If you don’t want to pay for water, go to the lake. But if you do want water to come into your house and be on tap 24 hours, then you need to understand that it just doesn’t happen naturally. It’s part of investment in pipes, pumping stations, filtering installations and so forth.” And that’s what you pay for. You pay for the service.

But it is a big question, which took me not just to the water but into many other commodities and services. Energy for example where you have early on similar debates: What is electricity? Is it a good? Is it a commodity or is it just there? Can you steal electricity? There were legal and political clashes over this question, can you be fined for taking electricity by hooking up a wire to your house? Is this illegal? Because what are you taking is not a loaf of bread. It is a current. Can this also be consumption? So, the interesting thing is: What is consumption? What is taken as given or moves into a market economy and has a price attached to it. That changes over time. So, for this story it is interesting to try to understand, why is it that something like water or energy can be different things in some different periods of time and different cultures.

- VH: Thank you. Since the 1980s, we have seen a strong rise of interest in multidisciplinary consumption studies. Sociologists, anthropologists, social psychologists, media researchers, historians, scholars representing cultural studies and marketing researchers have shown growing interest in consumption. What do you consider to be the most important methodological approaches in the multidisciplinary field? Do you identify new promising research methods in the area?

- FT: That’s a very good question. I’m sure that different disciplines would probably give slightly different answers. If we step back and look at the enormous explosion of studies of consumption since the late-1970s or early 1980s, many of them and certainly the influential ones can be grouped under the label ‘material culture’. But what that material culture is, has changed significantly. In the early years, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, material culture meant for many people the meaning and representation of things. So, consumption studies were strongly connected to identity: The emergence of women’s politics. The recognition that shopping wasn’t just something frivolous but provided meaning, and that department stores offered representations of objects, places and atmospheres that people were enjoying. There the emphasis was that people use things to change
their own status and sense of being in everyday life.

But the things were always treated as if they were a medium for self-expression. So, the emphasis was very cultural. What we have seen in the last decade is much greater emphasis on the ‘material aspect’ of the material culture. A sense that it really does matter, what things are composed of. That mattered to people for instance that cotton has different properties than wool. You can do, because cotton is different: It can be printed in vibrant colours. It washes differently. It feels different on your skin. Those are not just representations. They are partly about the materiality of the stuff. So, the second movement of material culture – the emphasis on materiality – also meant that people payed attention to objects of consumption that weren’t particularly fancy. Often banal objects that we just took for granted.

I already mentioned water. You know, in the old days water was studied by urban historians, but they asked very different questions. People did not really include it, when talking about consumption or consumer culture. It was something very basic like fresh air. What we’ve seen recently is partly connected to a growing interest to sustainable consumption and worries about climate change... is that people have become much more attentive to the material resources that enable our everyday life. So, everything from water to coal, to gas and to ordinary activities like commuting and other mobility patterns. How houses are designed? Whether that favours or restricts forms of consumption? We have moved away from the very representational form and glossy nature of consumption to the material fabric of lived daily life.

- VH: Yes, thank you very much. Next I would like to ask you about the economists. They used to be interested in consumption, but it seems that general economists are not any more so interested as they used to be. Do you think that the rise of behavioural economics (Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, Richard Thaler) is going to change this and in which way?

- FT: Well, I’m sure it would change it. The question is: Change it for whom? I think that behavioural economics is a step into the right direction. It certainly made economic analysis more complex, somewhat more empirical and also more appreciative of the variety of human action. The problem is that a lot of behavioural economics continues to treat behaviour as an individual category. So, people are put in a certain situation and then ‘Visa’, ‘Frank’ or ‘Mika’ behave in a certain way. To historians and social scientists that’s of course a little bit suspect, because people do not exist as individuals. They are parts of households, communities and nations and so forth. People’s lives both interact with these larger structures. But there are also people’s actions – probably a better word than behaviour – that carry with them the imprint of their society.

Some of the things that we do... Let’s say having breakfast. They are not a part of individual behaviour. They are social customs. These customs aren’t natural or
inevitable. They are different in different cultures and they come and they go. They change. Behavioural economics is right that in very particular situations people make decisions by different kinds of reasons – some of that is deliberative and some just stubborn and routine. In Societies what is seen as areas were individuals can make decisions is not actually individuals.

The problem with the behavioural economics model is: things are seen as individual. The policy remedies... the so-called nudging approach tends to focus on small interventions that will make individuals empty their loft or change their decision about the pension policy or so. That’s nice, but it is a limited repertoire. It ignores that there are also political and social forces or drivers that shape our everyday life. If you want to really make a difference in people’s daily lives, then you need to have much more comprehensive interventions that really try and change social customs and norms. You can’t just deal with individuals.

- VH: It sounds that the problem is that mostly behavioural economics’ ideas take for granted the model of psychology and especially the kind of psychology of the 1950s. Don’t many psychologists still study mostly individuals and skip the social side of human existence? Maybe they should listen more to sociologists and social scientists.

- FT: That is of course an interesting question, why in policy areas that is not the case. One very simple answer would be that behavioural economics is attractive, because it offers policy makers the appeal or illusion of intervention without serious political costs. The advice behavioural economists would give you is: if you want to deal with the problem of obesity, you can change the size of plates. And then individuals may put less food on their plate. That might be a nudging exercise. But sociologists would place obesity in the context of many other factors that impinge on how people eat: eating norms, ideals of beauty, mobility patterns etc. For a policy maker that’s frustrating, because they don’t get a simple and quick policy tool. Sociologists would probably come up with a program of interventions. Half of them would be seen as an intrusion in people’s lifestyles. So, nudging is easy politics.

- VH: And then there are sociologists or political scientists, who say that: let’s abolish capitalism. That’s the solution. Next I would like to discuss with you a little bit about the rising economic power of China. China is breaking all the conventional ‘rules’ of economic development. Can the materialized economic growth and increase of material consumption continue as it has done for almost 30 years already? Do you think that the Chinese can solve the problems caused by economic growth and increased material consumption on the one hand and the growth of social inequality on the other hand?

- FT: Firstly, I am not a sinologist, a China-expert. So, I see China and China’s development very much as a sympathetic critic from the outside. I’m conscious that some China-experts with whom I’ve talked and whose work I appreciate would
say: Well, this idea that China can’t possibly continue its own trajectory just shows a kind of Western provincialism or the assumption that everything will be like the West. I understand that. Nonetheless, I think that there are several serious challenges that China and the world is facing.

I think that the first is, whether growth is sustainable. We have already seen a decline in the growth rate in China in the last year or two. There is the question, whether the economy even now can possibly grow at six, eight or nine per cent in the future. That is quite fast. The problem is: If China grows at less than five per cent, that may not be enough growth to satisfy all the demand and the rise in prosperity and urbanization and so forth that has become accepted or under which it will become a pressure cook-up.

This leads me to the second point. And that’s about the role of consumers. So far, China has developed a very interesting compromise between private individual or social satisfaction in the material zone on the one hand and a willingness of those people to forgo citizen rights in the liberal tradition in the political sphere. So there has been a trade-off. And the trade-off has worked... One of my suggestions would be that it has been possible to do so, because many people in the new consumer class either personally remember the famine and the tremendous suffering of the Cultural Revolution or they know enough from their parents. They are quite happy or not happy but willing for the sake of stability to sacrifice their individual citizen rights. If that is the case, then the stability is very shaky in the long term. Because we are now in the 2018 and the further we move away from the memory of the famine and the Cultural Revolution the less powerful the hold of that fear of crisis will be. I would suspect that in the next ten or twenty year there will in fact be more vocal consumers and people who are prepared to challenge the monopoly of the party. There will be people who will mobilize over scarce resources, inequality or any other issue. There will be politicization of consumption, and it will be more difficult for the party state to control that.

The third is the ecological question. China has been very interesting, because the absence of democracy has enabled the state to force through innovation and sustainable technologies at the speed and comprehensiveness that are just impossible in a liberal democracy. For instance, in energy it is a very interesting contrast between China and India. In a lot of rural China and India households were cooking with heavy smoking cook stoves often charcoal with very poor of no ventilation: I think the second biggest killer in terms of public health in the world. Both countries have tried to introduce clean cook stoves, cleaner technologies and cleaner fuels. The contrast between the two is absolutely stunning. In the case of India NGOs and government initiatives have tried to get rid of these dirty and polluting cook stoves in the countryside for 30 or 40 years. Hundreds of thousands of well-intentioned NGO activists have been to India, and I don’t know how much money has been spent. However, the success has been very, very limited compared to China. In China the state officials at the local level went to people’s homes and they just ripped out the old cook stoves, whether people liked it or not. They were
given clean cook stoves. That’s how it was done.

As a more autocratic state you can really force change at a level that liberal democracies find much more difficult, because they are left then with nudging. One has to say that on the plus side. Thus, in short, I would be worried about the political stability. However, in terms of environment China has actually been pretty progressive.

- VH: I would like to add: What about the United States that still is an important actor in the world economy but as a nation consumes really a lot? What kind of role could Europe have in the strivings towards a more sustainable future?

- FT: Well, the United States has a serious dilemma, because you have both rising inequality except for a few people in and around San Francisco in digital communication and digital technologies and you don’t really have that much growth in sectors that generate a lot of employment. American companies like Google and so forth may be worth billions of dollars but that wealth is increasingly shared in unequal ways. So, in the United States you have a growing problem of potential underconsumption. The concentration of wealth among the rich effectively means less demand in aggregate terms. So, that’s a serious problem. I think that protectionism doesn’t help that but makes it worse. America will continue to move down the ranks of consumer society from where it used to be the vanguard of consumption at being a sort of second division almost.

Talking about Europe: Will Europe even manage to remain a united Europe? Brussels has been both good and bad for consumers and consumption. It has been very good along the regulatory end. A lot of regulation has assisted standards and public health. There is some also on the sustainable front. But, in the last 20 or 25 years consumption has become heavily grouped as a market phenomenon. Consumer policy has come to mean competition policy: Do people get competitive prices? Is there fair competition? That is important. People benefit of course, if they don’t have to pay ridiculous prices when using mobile phone in another European country. That’s good. No doubt about that.

But I think the problem for Europe is that while consumers have benefited at a huge amount, people don’t see Europe really as a champion of consumers. Cheaper prices and lower duties on goods are not connected to a bigger question of collective consumer interests. That’s a problem, because Europe has lost an important ally and friend in the political arena. People just see consumption as a market phenomenon. So, markets do this. There is very little discussion about could consumers as a group play a bigger role be it in ethical consumption questions and sustainable consumption questions. That delegation to the market has in fact weakened a potential political force.

- VH: One example that comes to my mind is smoking. Smoking policy of the European Union is a good example of successful control policy. We know about the
health problems that smoking causes. And now smoking is declining in all of the European countries.

Finally, I would like to discuss with you about, what could be done to guide consumers to enhance responsibility for sustainable future? Are consumers as actors and consumer movements powerful enough to solve the growing problems related to the climate change and environmental destructions? How could consumers as an interest group put pressure on business and legislators?

- FT: There are so many ways. There is no doubt that consumers continue to be active. So, you have fair trade groups, consumers who are campaigning for organic farming and veganism. All sorts of issues. There are consumers against child labour in foreign countries and slow fashion supporters. There is a lot going on and a lot of it is very good. People should be encouraged to fight for their interests. I think that the problem is that consumer politics has become quite fragmented. There are all these different issues, but they don’t join up into one powerful voice. They are kind of ‘one issue movements’. That means unfortunately that consumer interests can be easily marginalized by better organized economic or political actors including corporations.

If you are a big company and if there is a boycott over some particular issue like pollution of the countryside because of some spillage or so. That is bad. Most companies are big and powerful, and they can write this out. It’s like a little thorn in your skin. You just accept that, you pull it out and then you go on. The fragmentation of consumption has meant that the ability for consumers to actually have a long-term impact on the environment or on everyday life is by definition limited. I think that one has to be pragmatic about that. And one has to remember that a lot of changes in consumption haven’t come about, because consumers were active in the streets but because states and governments have intervened in daily life.

If you think about, how we live today: Apartment blocks with central heating, water and leisure facilities et cetera. That has not fallen from the sky. It is not necessarily that Mr and Mrs Smith said: “We want all this. Give it to us.” These were interventions of public health groups, architects, social reformers, organized housewives, finance ministers, etc. They have changed the way how we consume at least as much as markets. I think that’s were the potential for change really is: Consumers should remind the official authorities and city authorities that they actually have shaped the way we consumed in the past. That means, they also have some responsibilities. Our lifestyles which are causing climate change aren’t just our individual problems: They are collective problems.

Cities, national governments and international organizations should step up to the plate and realize that they have been quite interventionist in the past. There is no reason, why they should think that they can’t intervene now. There is this great fear in especially liberal democracies that governments say: "Oh, to intervene... We
can’t do that because then we are trying to dictate, how people live.” They are afraid of being socialistic. You want to say: “Well, that is what governments have done in the past.” So, you should take a realistic approach to lifestyle change. That involves intervention by public authorities.

**Kirjoittajatiedot**

Visa Heinonen on kuluttajaekonomian professori. Helsingin yliopisto.