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Frank Trentmann answers ten questions about economic sociology

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1. How did you get involved in studying consumption?

I became interested in consumption in the early 1990s, as a graduate student in history. There were two main routes for me. Looking back now it is curious that these two routes were initially quite separate interests and have only come to converge more recently. First, there was my own doctoral research on Free Trade culture in modern Britain. I was intrigued by the ways in which ideas about consumption, citizenship, and commerce came together in the decades before the First World War. All of this ran counter to the moralistic condemnation or neglect of the consumer as citizen that was still dominant in public discourse in the early 1990s. The second route was via growing attention in cultural history to the significance of consumption in the creation of sensibility, social identity, and taste; I benefited from a graduate seminar with Simon Schama, after his *Embarrassment of Riches* had been published. It is only more recently that these two routes have come to converge – that scholars separated consumption into groups concerned with culture from those concerned with political culture had of course all sorts of institutional and historiographical reasons, but it also blinded us to a whole range of important shared questions and developments.

2. Could you name books or articles that have profoundly influenced your own thinking about the topic?

Simon Schama's, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA.: University of California Press, 1988) remains an unrivalled exploration of the multifaceted ambivalence towards material goods and affluence. It offers a rare combination of being sensitive to material culture in everyday life as well as to public discourses and representation. And it remains a model of weaving together a general argument out of the rich threads of consumption as practiced and understood by the Dutch in the seventeenth century.

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumerism* (London: Routledge, 1996); I continue to use this slim book in the classroom because it remains a very effective and clear presentation of the sociality of consumption, and a powerful antidote to moralistic condemnations of individualist consumerism.

Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Shove has produced a real gem with this book, unravelling the histories, technologies, and shifting practices that create, transform, and terminate the most basic forms of ordinary consumption.

Appadurai, Arjun, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). This wonderful multidisciplinary collection opened up fresh perspectives about the time/space relationship of consumption, challenging an all too easy conventional association of consumption with the "modern" West.

Sidney Mintz's, *Sweetness and Power: The place of sugar in modern history* remains the most creative trendsetter for the whole sleuth of commodity biographies that have followed. Unlike most historians, who have looked at consumption from within a particular national historiography or have focused on a particular city or region, this book offered a demonstration of how to look at consumption across space and time, and how to reconnect consumption to regimes of power, empire, and production.

3. In 1987, Collin Campbell could still write that the reason social scientists had by and large ignored consumption, was that they scorned the topic to some extent. In the last decade or so, however, consumption has turned into one of the more popular research themes in social science. What has made this sudden interest possible?

I think that was an overstatement. Much of the renewed interest in consumption developed out of poststructuralism – with its interest in the signs and symbols of consumer objects – and out of cultural studies – with its interest in subcultures, forms of transgression and resistance. What was different in the 1980s and 1990s was not so much a discovery of consumption – the Frankfurt school had a lot to say about commercial consumer culture, as did American critics in the age of affluence. Rather it was more a liberating move away from the position where consumption was viewed with suspicion in terms of a culture industry or advertisers manipulating consumers or of alienating people from their humanity.

However, we should note, and I want to emphasize this as strongly as I possibly can, that it is dangerous to engage in academic navel gazing and presume that public discourse as a whole naturally follows changing academic fashions. Rather, what we have seen, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, since the 1980s is a divergence: celebrations of consumption in terms of lifestyle and identity and choice on one end, with continuing moral condemnation of ‘consumer capitalism’ or selfish individualists, luxury fever, and over-spending consumers on the other. Academic fragmentation of the topic of consumption has done little to help navigating a more interesting path between these polar opposites. If anything, there is still far too much of a negative moral attitude in media and public progressive discourse about the evils of consumerism.

From a historical perspective, the recent wave of studies on consumption is better viewed as a renaissance than a novel break. Much recent work is about rediscovering forgotten traditions and approaches – and social scientists entering the field now would do well to read more broadly outside the established canon of Veblen and Bourdieu. All too often social scientists presume that what they see in front of their eyes must amount to a novel concern, mentality, or problem – the recent interest in ‘caring at a distance’ and ‘ethical consumerism’ is a good point. But these are not simply a novel movement following on the heels of recent affluence and lifestyle politics,

but have longer traditions that stretch back in time. Significantly, the recent wave of interest in consumption, which coincided with an interest in globalisation and civil society, was preceded by an earlier wave of globalisation c. 1870-1914 where questions of consumption and citizenship and ethics equally came to the fore.

4. What are according to you the main recent developments in the field?

Recent renewed interest in the consumer as citizen; a shift in attention away from conspicuous consumption to ordinary consumption; in theory a concern with things and practices and the actual processes of consuming and using, rather than with status-seeking or distinction; spatial relations.

5. Consumption seems to be a multidisciplinary research theme *par excellence*, with an enormous research output lately in history, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. Is there a danger that the field is and remains fragmented, or do you see convergence in approaches?

Fragmentation is a very serious challenge. In fact, it has tended to hide or obscure parallel developments in different disciplines where there is potential convergence. Multidisciplinary work and dialogue is a wonderful opportunity but it does not come naturally or easily in an academic system where much money and status and training remains anchored within particular disciplinary traditions. Consumption has been, perhaps, one main area in which points of contacts have been re-established between different disciplines that had been lost in the course of professionalisation in the twentieth century – e.g. material culture studies has helped to bring anthropology, design, sociology and some history together. But there remain large areas of consumption where dialogue and collaboration could be strengthened further. Just looking at main literature and references in publications on consumption by authors shows a remarkable and persistent gulf of what authors coming to the subject from different disciplines read in terms of theory and approaches. And much work that is in itself excellent is lost because authors are not aware of potential points of contact with neighbouring disciplines. This is a problem shared by all disciplines (though not by all authors within these disciplines), but it is particularly pronounced in the humanities with its inherited culture of individual research and publication.

6. Do you sense that there is any dialogue with the economics discipline?

This has been one of the more difficult challenges. Of course, we need to distinguish between economics as a home and subject matter, and neo-liberal economics as a particular approach within that. Some economists remain open to institutionalist approaches or political economy or, more recently, psychology. But, it is also perhaps fair to say that in liberal, neo-classical Anglo-Saxon economics, which became the most influential branch of economics in the course of the twentieth century, the type of questions and approaches associated with economics today are far narrower than in the days of Marshall or Edgeworth or Veblen in the late 19th-century. Cultures of consumption are often seen as soft or marginal by economists who look at 'culture' with suspicion – as the Nazi economist Joas said the word 'culture' makes him reach for his revolver. Similarly, many students of consumption in the humanities and other social sciences think economics is a waste of time because it is associated with methodological individualism and rational choice. Both sides contain some stereotypes which reinforce suspicions and make dialogue unnecessarily difficult.

7. You are the programme director of the Cultures of Consumption program. What is this programme exactly about? What made the ESRC and AHRC develop the programme?

The programme looks at changing ideas, practices, and materialities of consumption in a global context. It had a dual impetus. One was broadly academic: the renaissance of consumption studies in the 1980s–90s had produced all sorts of exciting research but it had also neglected important dimensions and questions of the subject. The programme is an attempt to explore those new dimensions, such as consumption and citizenship; the role of the home; relations between knowledge and consumption; and the local, metropolitan, and transnational dynamics of consumption. A second impetus was political – the research programme is funded by tax-payers' money. In the 1990s, public policy shifted attention to a more active demanding consumer across various areas of public policy, from consumerist initiatives in local government to cultural policy and social services. Where this form of consumerism has come from, how it has worked itself out, and with what implications for social identity, practices, and political sensibilities is an important question, especially in the

United Kingdom where reform of public services is a more charged political question than ever.

8. The programme seems to confirm that the UK is especially active in consumption research. Why do you think this is the case?

The public policy preoccupation with consumerism and choice is one explanation but this would be too narrow a view. There is, again, a far longer historical trajectory – it was in Victorian Britain that citizens first came to adopt the language and identity of consumers. Questions of how consumption relates to citizenship have been a well-established intellectual and political domain. And in many ways the last few decades have seen a return to a more commercial society and debates already under way in the 18th century. Of course, there were many social democrats in the mid-twentieth century who were skeptical about commercial consumption in Britain, too, but broadly and comparatively speaking, consumption in Britain never had the extreme phalanx of moral and social enemies it faced in many other European countries. In the academic world, the older trinity of class, production, and state as core subjects was breaking down earlier in Britain than, say, in Germany. This created room for a more serious reengagement with consumption in women's studies, cultural studies, sociology and history.

9. Do you sense there are significant differences between European and American approaches to the topic?

We could have a very long interview. Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Smith Maguire, two American sociologists, recently wrote in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (2004) that 'Until recently, sociologists in the United States have generally ignored the topic of consumption'. Whereas in the UK in particular, consumption has become a sort of master key to the universe, in the United States it continues to have to fight against a Cinderella image. Part of this has to do with the moral politics that continue to surround American debates about consumption – it is about the pathologies of consumption, be it overspending, luxury fever, or the collapse of democratic politics brought about by consumerism. It would be an interesting research question to ask why approaches and research questions which were effectively the same as those asked by critics of consumption in the 1940s–50s have remained so powerful in American academic discourse. This is curious, since in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ameri-

can intellectual debate about consumption was vibrant, diverse and extremely dynamic – think of Patten on affluence, Veblen on conspicuous consumption, and Dewey on choice and a critical, creative self. One must not homogenize Europe – the sociological interest in consumption in Germany is fairly recent and still not especially diverse either. Still, it is interesting to note how the range of questions and theoretical approaches developed by European researchers is different from that still favoured by American researchers. I should stress the exciting work that goes on outside the United Kingdom, be it on technologies in Holland, on routines in Finland, or cross-European networks studying food, water, utilities, etc. If anything, European research initiatives, funding, and collaboration have made European researchers more aware of diversity of the subject of consumption as a serious problem that demands attention and does not suit itself to simple models of Americanisation or core-periphery analysis.

10. Your own contribution to the program is about the genealogy of the consumer and also about consumption of water. Could you elaborate on your current research?

I have become intrigued by the figure of the consumer – who is this person and where does it come from? People tend to agree today that everyone is a consumer, but few have asked about the history behind this identity and category of knowledge and politics. Initially the consumer is not the shopper. In fact, the major expansion of commercial consumption in the transatlantic world and in Asia in the eighteenth century did not make groups talk of themselves or others as consumers. This is, initially, a political process. It is about what I call 'synapses', where particular political traditions such as radicalism and liberalism create a connection with ideas, interests, and anxieties about consumption, especially in areas of food, taxes and water. The broader intellectual contribution of this work is to disentangle 'consumption', 'the consumer', and 'consumer culture' or 'consumer society', which commentators and publics have rather casually together. It takes the diverse and shifting meaning of consumption seriously – using and using up were (and remain) an important tradition. It is also about retrieving the broader political, social and cultural domains in which the consumer arose in the past – such as water wars or battles over taxes and slavery – that easily get lost in celebrations or critiques of the consumer as individual shopper.

The water project is a detailed, closer investigation of these broader questions. Together with Vanessa Taylor I am involved in a research project on the evolution of water users into consumers. This is a historical project, mainly centred on Victorian and Edwardian London, but with some intriguing links to more recent debates about water use, waste, and the behaviour of users/consumers. The Victorian home was the site of a profound transformation as far as water is concerned – the spread of WCs, the bathtub, and also, importantly, the shift from intermittent to constant use (in the 1880s–90s). With these changes came new consumption practices and new ideas about status and entitlement. What interests me is how new uses and domestic technologies became connected to new public demands, especially calls for services to become more accountable to water consumers as citizens. Put differently, the reconfiguration of household technologies and practices occurred within an interesting reconfiguration of political space. It concerns the flow between private and public spheres. It also emphasises the importance of consumption outside a market setting. For water rates were tied not to consumption but to the taxable value of property. Water, in other words, is an eminently restless, liquid medium. And its changing flow into and out of households can help chart new currents between private and public. Too much of an older literature has posed the relationship in antagonistic terms as private versus public sphere – and, not surprisingly, has assigned consumption a negative place resulting in the commodification of rich social relations, a hangover of the Frankfurt School that left its mark on public intellectuals like Habermas. It might be useful to emphasize here that this binary form of thinking also originally tried to map a gender divide onto private and public spheres. Is this still sensible? We may want to note that the domestic users who mobilised as water consumers were initially male heads of households and citizens. Thinking about restless interiors is therefore also a potentially fruitful way of unsettling older binaries and to think instead about connections and disconnections between private and public.