

REVIEW ESSAY

Too Much of a Good Thing? Consumption, Consumerism, and Consumer Cooperation in Modern History

CARL J. STRIKWERDA

*Professor of History and President, Elizabethtown College, 1 Alpha
Drive, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, USA*

E-mail: strikwerdac@etown.edu

TRENTMANN, FRANK. *Empire of Things. How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first*. Penguin Books, London [etc.] 2016. xviii, 862 pp. Ill. £30.00; \$63.95.

A Global History of Consumer Cooperation since 1850. Movements and Businesses. Ed. by Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger & Greg Patmore. [Studies in Global Social History, vol. 28.]. Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2017. Xxix, 847 pp. ill.

Denounced by evangelical Christians, the Frankfurt School of neo-Marxists, new age cultists, and conservative and liberal moralists alike, consumerism has had a strange history as a subject of scholarship. Economics as a discipline has always assumed that demand played a central role in determining prosperity or poverty. Yet, only in the last thirty years has consumption, the purchase and use of goods and services by individuals, become a subject of systematic inquiry by historians and social scientists. Frank Trentmann, professor at Birkbeck College, University of London, is the world's foremost scholar on the history of what we buy. The "Cultures of Consumption" research program, which he led at the University of London from 2002 to 2007, generated an impressive set of scholarly studies that have defined the field.¹ His magnum opus, *Empire of*

1. Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power, and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2006); John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford, 2006); Frank

Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First is now not only the standard work on consumption in all of its aspects, historical and modern, but is also one of the most impressive pieces of historical scholarship in our generation.²

The ubiquity of commercialized, capitalist-controlled consumption inevitably raises the question of whether we could have developed a different model of consumption, one less controlled by private, profit-seeking interests and more attuned to public welfare. Consumer cooperatives, stores owned by consumers themselves, have long been the major alternative to capitalist retail. Along with labor unions and the women's movement, consumer cooperation has played an important role in spawning modern consumer movements.³ Although consumer cooperation is a global phenomenon, it has typically been studied in individual countries.⁴ Mary Hilson, professor of history at Aarhus University in Denmark, one of the leading scholars on consumer cooperation, and her collaborators, labor historians Silke Neunsinger of Uppsala University, Sweden, and Greg Patmore of the University of Sydney, Australia, have now produced what is the standard account of the consumer cooperative movement as a truly international phenomenon, *A Global History of Consumer Cooperation Since 1850: Movements and Businesses*, with an impressive thirty-seven contributors. Together, the works of Trentmann and Hilson and her collaborators offer us the opportunity to assess the recent wave of scholarship on consumption and suggest what may lie ahead, as well as to ponder what our obsession with buying means for us as citizens.

CONSUMERISM BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Mainstream scholarship traditionally treated consumption as a passive, private act. Producers, traders, or financiers had economic interests, not consumers.

Trentmann and Fleming Just (eds), *Food and Conflict in the Age of Two World Wars* (Basingstoke, 2006); Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Citizenship and Consumption* (Basingstoke, 2007); Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Governance, Consumers, and Citizens: Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Politics* (Basingstoke, 2007); Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford, 2012).

2. Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York, 2016).

3. Matthew Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization* (Ithaca, NY, 2009).

4. Previous global treatments are Johan Brazda and Robert Shediwy (eds), *Consumer Cooperatives in a Changing World*, 2 vols (Geneva, 1989); Johnston Birchall, *The International Cooperative Movement* (Manchester, 1997); Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (eds), *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan* (Lanham, MD, 1999). None are as extensive as Mary Hilson et al. (eds), *A Global History of Global Consumer Cooperation Since 1850: Movements and Businesses* (Leiden, 2017).

As James Madison put it in the *Federalist Papers* in 1787: “A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes.”⁵ Neo-classical economics treated consumption as a set of maximizing choices that had changed little over time. Social historians focused on workers, middle classes, or farmers, but almost never on consumers.

As traditional working class movements waned, women’s history highlighted the crucial role of women as consumers, and the effects of the post-World War II boom became clear, consumption began to receive its due. Beginning in the 1980s, new scholarship, including the seminal work of Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb and that of Robin Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, spawned a still-rising tide of historical scholarship.⁶ Economists such as Gary Becker studying human capital and the family as an economic unit also recast consumption as the intersection between macroeconomic trends and individual action.⁷

Five major contributions made by Trentmann in his massive work deserve to be highlighted: the origins of modern consumerism, the role of the state in shaping consumption, a new definition of consumption as both private and public, a skewering of the Western critique of consumption, and insightful comparisons between consumption in the industrialized West and industrialized East. While recent scholars have argued that Ming China or Renaissance Italy created consumer societies, Trentmann makes a strong case that they did not. In these societies, antiquity was still prized above

5. James Madison, *Federalist*, 10, pp. 265–266.

6. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982); Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds), *The Culture of Consumption* (New York, 1983); Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London, 1993); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); Hannes Siegrist, Hartmut Kaeble, and Jürgen Kocka (eds), *Europäische Konsumgeschichte. Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. Bis 20. Jahrhundert)* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (eds), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998); Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003); Sheldon Garon, *Beyond Our Means: Why American Spends While the World Saves* (Princeton, NJ, 2012); Gabrielle Beyer, *Europäische Konsumgeschichte (18.-20. Jh.). Produktkommunikation* (Leipzig, 2013).

7. Gary Becker, “A Theory of the Allocation of Time”, *Economic Journal*, 75:299 (September, 1965), pp. 493–517; Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Washington, DC, 1964). Historians have also rediscovered the rich tradition of family budgets collected by an earlier generation of economists: Paul T. Homan and Jacob Marschak, “Consumption”, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1930), vol. 4, pp. 293–301.

fashion, and purchased goods were as important as assets as they were as commodities to be used. Most of all, “Like Renaissance Italy, late Ming China failed to generate a sense that consumption might make a positive contribution to state, society, and economy.”⁸ By contrast, in seventeenth-century the Netherlands, and still more in Britain in the eighteenth, “fashion was institutionalized into an industry, with its own spaces, calendar, and media.”⁹

As Trentmann shows throughout his work, the state powerfully shapes consumption. When Western European governments fostered trade on a global scale for the first time – and, tragically, massive enslavement of Africans – sugar, rum, tea, coffee, chocolate, and cotton stimulated demand. Industrialization, too, did not simply expand the goods available to consumers. Public services, provided by or regulated by the state – water supply, electricity, telephones, transportation – transformed daily lives. These were services that were consumed, but that also stimulated more consumption. Department stores, appliances, easily washable clothes, and automobiles depended on public services. Industrial societies in the twentieth century also vastly expanded parks, swimming pools, and public spaces. Trentmann thus expands the definition of consumption from private to public goods in ways that many scholars will have to debate and explore. While the Depression set back consumption, confronting the Depression finally moved consumption onto center stage. Building on work by Victoria de Grazia and Amy Randall, Trentmann argues that regimes as diverse as the New Deal, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Conservative Britain sought to convince consumers that the state could best meet their needs through a specific mix of regulation and private initiative.¹⁰ The recent boom in consumption during globalization, too, argues Trentmann, has depended heavily on governments that lowered interest rates, cut taxes, and reduced regulation. Contemporary tourism would be unthinkable without airline deregulation and massive state investment in airports. Governments also expanded consumption in the broadest sense, he says, through welfare. “In the twentieth century, the advance of consumption was as profound outside the marketplace as within it.”¹¹ Our obsession with choice, advertising, and shopping distracts us, says Trentmann, from understanding the full impact of modern consumption. Many industrial societies choose to provide services through government or government-supported or

8. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 51.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

10. Victoria de Grazia, “Changing Consumption Regimes in Europe, 1930–1970”, in Strasser, *Getting and Spending*, pp. 59–83; Amy F. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s* (London, 2008), pp. 158–179; Shelley Baranowski, *Strength Through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 40–71.

11. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 523.

subsidized means. “As countries get richer, private consumption makes up less of GDP.”¹² In the nineteenth century, no country spent even three per cent of GDP on social welfare. By the late twentieth century, twenty per cent was typical.¹³ Between 1954 and 1974, non-wage incentives in American firms, largely sheltered from taxation by government action, went from twenty per cent of payroll to thirty-seven per cent.¹⁴

Similarly, despair over crazed consumers buying themselves into bankruptcy says more about the moralists than the consumers, and ignores the role of the state. “The idea of a more sober, restrained past is the stuff of myth, not history.”¹⁵ “In England in 1700, every second head of a household left behind unpaid debts at death.”¹⁶ Trentmann rejects the profligate, debt-ridden consumer as the driver of consumption. It was governments that loosened up credit through deregulation of banks, interest rates, and social welfare. “For many Americans in the 1990s and 2000s – a period of stagnant wages and rising inequality – the credit card acted as a private substitute for a missing welfare state.”¹⁷ Trentmann argues the consumers have often wisely used credit when times were good and then cut back. At its peak in 2009, when the full force of the recession hit, household debt in the US rose to eighty-seven per cent of the level of the nation’s economic output; by 2017, it had still only reached sixty-six per cent, despite almost eight years of recovery.¹⁸

Trentmann also sketches a new intellectual history of consumption. Early modern Britain and the Netherlands created “a favorable climate of ideas and institutions that encouraged men and, especially, women, to join the ranks of wage earners and consumers”.¹⁹ One of the joys of Trentmann’s scholarship is his interweaving of ideas and material culture. Swift’s quip that “the souls of fashionable folk are to be found in their garments” captures the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century along with Smith’s definition of consumption as the “sole end of production” and Mandeville’s fable of the bees pursuing obsessive gain and creating the common good. Trentmann trenchantly points out that the focus on production by Marx, classical economists, and reformers during industrialization obscured the ongoing expansion of consumption for all classes during the nineteenth century. Indeed, the stubborn hold of this tradition helps explain why social scientists and historians in the twentieth century

12. *Ibid.*, p. 540.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 530.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 432.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

18. Ben Luebsdorf, “Household Debt Hits a New High”, *Wall Street Journal*, 17 November 2017, p. A2. The source is the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

19. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 76.

long neglected consumption. What Fabian and Christian moralist R.H. Tawney decried as the “Acquisitive Society” in 1920 was a society dedicated to ownership and protection of property, not to buying and acquiring goods.²⁰

One of the delights of Trentmann’s marriage of theory and practice is the revelation of how the same tired themes have reoccurred as critiques of consumerism and how rarely these critiques have been tested. “Complaints about conspicuous consumption by the rich and by others who spend beyond their means in an attempt to imitate them are as old as human civilization.”²¹ Rousseau, Veblen, Adorno, and Galbraith have been recycled endlessly, including by more recent authors such as Benjamin Barber and Neal Lawson.²² Trentmann makes short shrift of these jeremiahs. Rousseau failed to see how oppressed the poor were by lack of access to markets. Conspicuous consumption was worse among pre-industrial elites, *contra* Veblen, than in the ranks of the twentieth-century rich. Adorno knew almost nothing about the consumer culture he denounced. Radio, he argued, was destroying classical music. In contrast to Galbraith’s “private wealth, public squalor”, almost all societies have spent more on public consumption as they have grown richer. Nor was Galbraith right about consumption deadening the intellect and driving inequality. Spending on books boomed in the 1950s. Inequality lessens consumption; consumption does not increase inequality. Just as important, there is “a curious mismatch between real trends in spending and the ink most theorists have devoted to the consumer as a shopper buying yet another branded handbag”.²³ Total consumption has changed little. Housing, clothes, and personal goods now take the place of food. In the 1950s, many Europeans spent forty-five per cent of their income on food; by 2007, it was ten.

Bourdieu is one theorist Trentmann finds useful: the freeing up of income has allowed Western consumers to experiment with choice, what Bourdieu called the search for distinction.²⁴ Trentmann draws on the insights of anthropologists in recognizing that people invest goods, even those purchased for everyday use, with a variety of social meanings, involving status, security, community.²⁵ “The empire of things expanded in part because possessions became increasingly important carriers of identity,

20. R.H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (London, 1920).

21. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 677.

22. Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York, 2007); Neal Lawson, *All Consuming: How Shopping Got Us Into this Mess and How We Can Find Our Way Out* (London, 2009).

23. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 339.

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

25. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986).

memory, and emotions.”²⁶ As even one of the angriest critics of consumption admits, “For shopping to have such a grip on our lives, it has to connect to some of the prime drivers of what it means to be human.”²⁷ Trentmann denies that modernity has become distinctly attached to goods; we have changed our attachments, not our needs: “All societies, rich and poor, have emotional relationships with goods.”²⁸

Finally, Trentmann outlines a new comparative, global history of consumption. Free trade and British hegemony spread markets, new goods, and habits worldwide, although Europeans exaggerated their own uniqueness.²⁹ “The contrast between ‘traditional’ tribal Africa, where *homo economicus* had not yet set foot, and a ‘modern’ Western world of goods, inequality and individualism was a convenient figment of the imperial imagination.”³⁰ While the modern history of African and Middle Eastern consumption is still being written, Trentmann argues that East and South Asia may have evolved their own distinctive path as consumer societies. In the West, societies urbanized, created regimes based on citizenship, and only then felt the full force of commercialized consumption. Asians have become “modern before they were urban”. And, unlike the West, political rights have lagged behind social ones. In Asia, “Citizenship meant duties, not rights.”³¹

As a result, Asian consumerism has helped create modernization. Indian families in the countryside that got electricity “saved more than their neighbors, invested more in the education of the children, and bought more consumer goods”.³² Americanization as the ideal type of consumerism should be discarded as Japanese, Chinese, and perhaps even Middle Eastern models of consumer society prove more relevant for global trends. Trentmann suggests that, as the history of consumer societies lengthen in Asia, we may need to re-write the Western history of consumption. Asian societies appear to accept consumption with less moralism and to check its excesses with more equanimity. Most sermons and bestsellers decrying “consumerism” hail from the United States and Europe, not Japan, India, and China. India has one of the most vigorous consumer NGOs in the world: the Consumer Unity and Trust Society, founded in 1983. By creating a state-sponsored consumer movement to check its own state-owned and

26. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 686.

27. Lawson, p. 61.

28. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 321.

29. Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of Empire* (New York, 2017); Brewer and Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures*.

30. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 135.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 356. See also Karl Gerth, *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Changing Everything* (New York, 2010).

32. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 367.

subsidized enterprises, “Communist China rules with consumers, not against them.”³³ Trentmann has less to say about the Middle East, but even here, his insights are instructive: “The Islamic revival has been not so much anti-consumerist as about creating a distinctive style of consuming with its own range of products”, not just halal meat, but halal films, cosmetics, and hotels, for example.³⁴

CONSUMPTION BETWEEN COOPERATION AND INDIVIDUALISM

One of the most profound ways that societies have differed in their consumption is in the success of consumer cooperation. As the essays in *A Global History* demonstrate, consumer cooperation in some form has emerged in almost every country. Worldwide, an estimated one billion people are members of a cooperative economic organization, but the two most popular kinds of cooperatives are agricultural cooperatives and credit cooperatives, also known as credit unions. Consumer cooperatives are the third most common kind of cooperative, with producer or worker-owned cooperatives and service cooperatives much less common still.³⁵

Two major contributions of the immense volume edited by Hilson and her collaborators are its global perspective on consumer cooperation and a re-thinking of the factors making for consumer cooperation’s success or failure. Consumer cooperation arose and flourished during the first era of globalization, when a liberal world economy emerged during the nineteenth century. Its growth slowed during the mid-twentieth century as welfare states and monopoly capitalism strengthened. The individualist consumerism of the second era of globalization in the late twentieth century brought the collapse of once strong consumer cooperative movements in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany, and severely weakened those in Britain and Canada.³⁶

One key to the early forms of consumer cooperation in almost every country was the dividend given to cooperative members based on their purchases. The dividend concept originated with the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in northern England, founded in 1846, and popularized by G.J. Holyoake’s *Self-Help By the People*, published in 1858 and widely translated or summarized.³⁷ Dividends put money or credit into

33. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 397.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 618.

35. Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger, and Greg Patmore, “A Global History of Consumer Cooperation since 1850: An Introduction”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 3–16, 3.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

37. Mary Hilson, “Rochdale and Beyond: Consumer Cooperation in Britain Before 1945”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 59–77, 62–63.

consumers' pockets and symbolized that consumers owned the cooperative. Liberal, socialist, and Christian missionaries alike spread the gospel of cooperation. Catholic priests from Canada and the United States promoted cooperatives in Central America and the Caribbean, with particular inspiration coming from the Antigonish movement in Quebec.³⁸ Adding to the indigenous African-American tradition of self-help through mutual insurance in the United States were influences as diverse as the visit of Japanese Christian cooperative leader Toyohiko Kagawa to the US in 1935 and study tours by African-American activists to Antigonish in Quebec and Mondragon in Spain.³⁹ Antigonish even influenced Korean cooperation where, as in Japan, Christians had a significant influence in developing cooperatives.⁴⁰

Consumer cooperation always differed from agricultural cooperation and credit unions because it had to wrestle with whether or not to identify with socialist or working-class parties. This difference helps to explain why consumer cooperation has not succeeded as well as other kinds of cooperation. Two broad paths emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: cooperatives could be aligned with Socialist or working-class movements, or they could be neutral and apolitical, at least not associated with a political party. *Vooruit* (Forward) in Ghent, in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, is the most famous example of the former path and influenced Socialist and working-class parties all over the world.⁴¹ By contrast, British and Scandinavian cooperatives officially maintained political neutrality, as did a strong group of French cooperatives influenced by the economist Charles Gide.⁴² This separation from partisan politics occurred, at least officially, even though a large proportion of these cooperative movements' members were working class and most political observers aligned the cooperatives with social democratic parties. Although the Belgian path was eventually rejected by the international cooperative movement, even an apolitical stance did not prevent many consumers from

38. Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens and Catherine C. LeGrand, "Canadian and US Catholic Promotion of Cooperatives in Central America and Their Political Implications", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 145–175.

39. Jessica Gordon Nembhard, "African American Consumer Cooperation: History and Global Connections", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 176–200.

40. Kim Hyungmi, "The Experience of the Consumer Cooperative Movement in Korea: Its Break off and Rebirth, 1919–2010", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 353–378, 364; Akira Kurimoto, "Building Consumer Democracy: The Trajectory of Consumer Cooperation in Japan", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 668–697.

41. Geert Van Goethem, "The Belgian Cooperative Model: Elements of Success and Failure", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 78–98, 82–92.

42. Mary Hilson, "Consumer Cooperation in the Nordic Countries, c.1860–1939", in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 121–144, 131–136; Charles Gide, *Consumers' Cooperative Societies* (New York, 1922), Transl. from French.

seeing consumer cooperatives as fundamentally working class. One of the virtues of *A Global History* is to show that those European consumer cooperative movements that collapsed or declined – Austrian, Belgian, British, French, and German – never convinced consumers in the late twentieth century that cooperatives transcended their working-class origins.⁴³

Politically neutral or not, genuine consumer-controlled cooperatives have always fostered political education, which is why dictatorships feared them. Dulce Freire and Joana Dias Pereis show that many Portuguese consumer cooperatives survived under the authoritarian Estado Novo from 1926 to 1974 by leveraging their apolitical status.⁴⁴ Even apolitical cooperatives served as sites for political education and civic participation under dictatorships and colonial regimes, as seen in Portugal, Spain, and Korea.⁴⁵ Communist dictatorships rarely allowed cooperatives independence, despite rhetorical support. After initially relying on consumer cooperatives and even flirting with direct product exchange in a moneyless economy, the Soviets recreated a retail system with a range of stores in the 1930s. Cooperatives went from 59.2 per cent of retail turnover in 1932 to twenty per cent in 1937 and succeeded only in rural areas.⁴⁶ The Chinese Communists eliminated cooperatives, although their rural collectives under government control were sometimes, inaccurately, described as cooperatives.⁴⁷ When cooperation declined in democratic countries, it still laid the foundation for consumer movements. As Simon Lambersens and his colleagues put it in the case of France, “Educating people to cooperate was replaced by simply informing the consumer.”⁴⁸

By illuminating the divergent histories of consumer cooperative movements in industrialized countries in Europe, North America, and Asia, *A Global History* makes an important contribution to scholarship. The standard arguments for the failure of consumer cooperatives have been that they lacked capital, were slow to innovate, and did not exploit

43. The best synthesis is Espen Ekberg, “Confronting Three Revolutions: Western European Cooperatives and Their Divergent Development”, *Business History*, 54:6 (2012), pp. 1004–1021.

44. Dulce Freire and Joana Dias Pereira, “Consumer Cooperatives in Portugal: Debates and Experiences from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Centuries”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 297–325.

45. Hyungmi, “The Experience”, pp. 352–373.

46. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World*, p. 28.

47. Mary Ip and Kay-Wah Chan, “Consumer Cooperatives in the People’s Republic of China: A Development Path Shaped by Its Economic and Political History”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 379–406, 389–394.

48. Simon Lambersens, Amelie Artis, Daniele Demoustier, and Alain Melo, “History of Consumer Cooperatives in France: From the Conquest of Consumption by the Masses to the Challenge of Mass Consumption”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 99–120, 119.

economies of scale as did major commercial chains. None of these arguments hold up conclusively.⁴⁹ English, Scottish, and Scandinavian cooperators were far in advance of most of their commercial competitors in creating vertically integrated, highly capitalized wholesaling operations. As Hilson shows in her essay on the early history of British cooperatives, they pioneered in integrating wholesale and retail, introducing advertising, emphasizing quality as well as price, and introducing self-service supermarkets.⁵⁰ The English Cooperative Wholesale Society was astonishing in its global reach already in the late nineteenth century.⁵¹ The multinational Nordisk Andelsforbund, founded in 1918, supplied Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish cooperatives.⁵²

So, why have some consumer cooperative movements thrived while others, including some of the largest and once most innovative, failed? The once powerful British consumer cooperative movement never exploited its economies of scale. When it finally merged local cooperatives in the 1970s, “most of the mergers did not happen from positions of strength, but were carried out only as a last resort and sometimes resulted in complete or partial failure”.⁵³ Nor did the British shed their focus on the working class. By contrast, Italian, Japanese, and Scandinavian consumer cooperation succeeded by judicious innovation. Scandinavian consumer cooperatives not only pursued larger scale, but pioneered in advertising, educating consumers, and emphasizing quality. In 1939, a quarter of all Norwegians lived in a household that belonged to a cooperative. The Swedish cooperative federation, Kooperativa Forbundet (KF), had over a third of the retail food sector during the 1930s and 40s. In 1934, the two large Finnish wholesale cooperatives accounted for forty per cent of retail sales in Finland.⁵⁴ Too often, Scandinavian consumer cooperative success has been attributed to unique characteristics of the region’s civic-minded or homogenous populations or its pragmatic social democratic traditions, even though the cooperatives resolutely sought political neutrality. In fact, as Espen Ekberg explains, in one of

49. Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, “Economics, Consumer Culture, and Gender: An Introduction to the Politics of Consumer Cooperation”, in Ellen Fulough and Carl Strikwerda (eds), *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840–1990* (Lanham, MD, 1999), pp. 29–37.

50. Hilson, “Rochdale and Beyond”, p. 76.

51. Anthon Webster, John F. Wilson, and Rachel Vorberg-Rugh, “Going Global: The Rise of CWS as an International Commercial and Political Actor, 1863–1950: Scoping an Agenda for Further Research”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 559–584.

52. Mary Hilson, “Consumer Cooperation in the Nordic Countries, c.1860–1939”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 121–144, 129–130.

53. Corrado Secchi, “Affluence and Decline: Consumer Cooperatives in Postwar Britain”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 527–547, 537.

54. Hilson, “Consumer Cooperation in the Nordic Countries”, p. 138.

the most analytical essays in *A Global History*: “The Nordic cooperatives simply found efficient ways of re-aligning modern retailing practices with the more traditional virtues of the cooperative model.”⁵⁵ Swedish coops invested already in 1925 in one of their country’s largest advertising agencies.⁵⁶ By contrast, French consumer cooperatives in the 1970s “were not quick to become computerized or start advertising”.⁵⁷

Italian consumer cooperatives are the best example of success in Europe outside of Scandinavia. *Coop consumatori* is the market leader in mass retailing with 7.9 million members. It is true that, because much of Italian retailing remained small scale longer than elsewhere, the cooperative movement was “the pioneer of modernization”, creating supermarkets, offering self-service, and creating larger stores. Yet, in the end, Italian cooperatives faced the same challenges – mass advertising, brand consciousness, the decline of working class communities – as other cooperative movements.⁵⁸ As Hilson explains Patrizia Battilani’s argument on the Italians’ success:

What was really key to the Italian cooperatives’ success was their ability to re-define their social role. Cooperation shed its working class image to become a supermarket for all social groups, but one that was highly sensitive to the needs of its customers and in particular emphasized consumer health and environmental protection.⁵⁹

Swiss and Spanish consumer cooperatives flourish in strikingly similar ways: breadth beyond one class, an emphasis on quality not just price, and quality embracing health, environmentalism, and consumer protection.⁶⁰ The two largest consumer cooperatives in Spain in 2010 accounted for thirteen per cent of the retail food market among the eleven largest entities in the sector, with the cooperative Grupo Eroski as the third largest retailer in the country.⁶¹

55. Espen Ekberg, “Against the Tide: Understanding the Commercial Success of Nordic Consumer Cooperatives, 1950–2010”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 698–726, 726.

56. Pernilla Jonsson, “From Commercial Trickery to Social Responsibility: Marketing in the Swedish Cooperative Movement in the Early Twentieth Century”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 642–667, 651.

57. Lambersens *et al.*, “History of Consumer Cooperatives in France”, p. 114.

58. Patrizia Battilani, “Consumer Cooperation in Italy: A Network of Cooperatives with a Multi-class Constituency”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 584–613.

59. Mary Hilson, “Consolidation: Introduction to Section 4”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 551–558, 553.

60. Bernard Degen, “Consumer Societies in Switzerland: From Local Self-help Organizations to a Single National Cooperative”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 614–641.

61. Francisco J. Medina-Albaladejo, “Consumer Cooperatives in Spain, 1860–2010”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 326–352, 351.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION

What new directions do these impressive volumes by Trentmann and Hilson and her collaborators suggest? First, we need to integrate the history of consumption and consumer cooperation into economic and business history, and bring insights from the latter fields into the study of consumption and cooperation. Except for England's Cooperative Wholesale Society, consumer cooperatives have almost always depended on capitalist sources of production.⁶² But far too much of the history of both consumption and cooperation does relatively little with the history of retailing or with economic analysis. Similarly, mainstream economists and business historians typically ignore cooperation. Greg Patmore and Nikola Balnave note that the *Business History Review*, published at Harvard University, has never published research articles dealing specifically with consumer cooperatives.⁶³

How have consumers shopped in the past and how has shopping changed over time? Despite impressive membership numbers of cooperators, many cooperators apparently did only a small share of their shopping at the cooperatives. In Belgium 1938, for example, 416,000 families in a population of about 6.5 million belonged to consumer cooperatives, which may have represented around twenty per cent of households. But cooperatives accounted for only 3.15 per cent of total sales.⁶⁴ We need to know more about consumer behavior over time in order to understand why individualist consumption or cooperation takes the form that it does. Trentmann's research suggests that by focusing on food and clothing, cooperatives missed the twentieth-century revolution in homemaking. Women had previously only done what was necessary to cook and wash. Men did barely that. Appliances, more spacious dwellings, and the eight-hour day created homemaking. Women could now shop for variety and quality. Men spent roughly twice as much time on domestic chores and repairs in 1945 as in 1900. The home became the "energy cell of consumer culture".⁶⁵

Why do consumer cooperatives arise at all? The standard argument is that consumer cooperation arose during the late nineteenth century, when working-class families felt oppressed by high prices. Cooperation declined with the fall of food prices and the growth of commercial retail in the post-1945 era.⁶⁶ What was true for Australia and New Zealand

62. Hilson, "Cooperative History: Movements and Businesses", p. 32.

63. Greg Patmore and Nikola Balnave, "Managing Consumer Cooperatives: A Historical Perspective", Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 413–430, 414.

64. Carl Strikwerda, "Alternative Visions' and Working Class Culture: The Political Economy of Consumer Cooperation in Belgium, 1860–1980", Furlough and Strikwerda, *Consumers Against Capitalism?*, pp. 67–91, 80.

65. Trentmann, *Empire*, p. 375.

66. Full disclosure requires saying that my collaborator and I advance this view: Furlough and Strikwerda, "Economics, Consumer Culture, and Gender".

supposedly holds elsewhere: “consumer cooperatives tended to be established at the back-end of an economic slump, or when prices and the cost of living were increasing”.⁶⁷ Yet, the late nineteenth century was a time of falling food prices in terms of real wages. Cooperatives did grow during World War I’s scarcity.⁶⁸ But when food prices fell over the late twentieth century, Italian, Japanese, Scandinavian, Spanish, and Swiss consumer cooperative movements all flourished, while those in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany all collapsed, along with those in Argentina, Australia, and South Korea. Trentmann’s work suggests that, not scarcity, but quality and choice were always much more important factors behind consumer behavior, including for cooperators. Cooperatives that grasped this succeeded.

Neither Trentmann, nor Hilson and her collaborators study brands. Yet, brands are crucial assets – and feared icons. Children recognize major brand logos by age three. To Naomi Klein, brands bewitch the innocent into mindless consumption.⁶⁹ Thanksgiving, the oddly American holiday, was created entirely by marketers, going back to Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* [sic] in 1846, who wanted a secular national holiday that could help unify an increasingly diverse country. The subsequent evolution of Thanksgiving is the product literally of advertising by commercial companies promoting their brands – Swift’s Premium Turkey, Eatmor Cranberry Company, Diamond walnuts (for turkey dressing), and Borden’s pumpkin pie filling.⁷⁰ Buying a product connects people, or, as Adam Arvidsson puts it, “People may ‘bowl alone’, but they socialize around brands.”⁷¹ Hartmut Kaelble argues that a European identity has begun forming through the popularity of Europe-wide brands.⁷² During China’s reform era, its leaders realized that Western and Japanese brands attracted consumers everywhere, not simply in China, whereas almost no Chinese brands had much esteem. Through diligent improvement and concentrated marketing, Chinese firms have improved their position. In 2011, the China Market Research Group found that eighty-five per cent of Chinese consumers preferred foreign brands. By 2016, only forty per cent did. Similar trends appear to be at work elsewhere in Asia, with local firms

67. Nikola Balnave and Greg Patmore, “Rochdale Consumer Cooperatives in Australia and New Zealand”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 456–480, 479.

68. Silke Neunsinger, “Challenges to Democracy – State Intervention: Introduction to Section 2”, in Hilson, *A Global History*, pp. 229–242, 233.

69. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London, 2000).

70. This draws on the research of Samantha Cross. See Samantha N.N. Cross and Cecilia Ruvalcaba, *Consumer Culture Theory: Research in Consumer Behavior* (forthcoming, 2018).

71. Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London, 2006), p. 5.

72. Quoted in Rainer Gries, “Cultures of Products and Political Cultures: Looking for Transfer Performances”, in Kerstin Bruckweh (ed.), *The Voice of the Citizen Consumer: A History of Market Research, Consumer Movements, and the Political Public Sphere*, pp. 243–269, 253.

learning to compete with L’Oreal, Nestle’s, and the host of brands owned by Unilever.⁷³ A true history of consumption and cooperation’s success or failure would draw on why people buy the brands they do, drawing insights from market research and consumer psychology.⁷⁴

Finally, we need to write a new political history of consumption and citizenship. Traditional political philosophy believed that consumers could not exercise effective power as citizens. Activists on both left and right have feared consumption as inimical to political community. As Eric Hobsbawm lamented, “Participation in the market replaces participation in politics; the consumer takes the place of the citizen.”⁷⁵ The growth of consumer activism across the industrialized world challenges this pessimism.⁷⁶ Just as importantly, perhaps many political struggles in the past could be reinterpreted as battles over consumption, not simply production, as Alan Milward argued already in 1981 in an insightful essay, “Tariffs as Constitutions”.⁷⁷ Market riots over high prices began a history that continued with attacks on agricultural tariffs as “bread taxes” and led to demonstrations against housing shortages and inflation. The growth of consumerism, combined with the social welfare state, led some observers to hope that a more consumer-oriented society would be more equal and less dominated by the wealthy.⁷⁸ The pioneering market researcher and Labour activist Mark Abrams prophesied during World War II that “we have moved and are moving towards a much more egalitarian state by means of transferring purchasing power from the rich to the poor, and from those who live on property to those who live by manual labour”.⁷⁹

Contra Hobsbawm, do consumers have identifiable rights that they can expect to be honored and around which they can organize? On 15 March 1962, US President John F. Kennedy listed the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard as

73. Corinne Gretler, “Foreign Brands Losing Ground in Asia”, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 27 November 2017, pp. 15–16.

74. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, 2011) provides an introduction to a rapidly growing field that includes what could be described as behavioral economics, or the intersection of economics and psychology.

75. Eric Hobsbawm, *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* (London, 2007), ch. 6, “The Prospects of Democracy”, p. 104.

76. Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003); Matthew Hilton, “The Consumer Movement and Civil Society in Malaysia,” *International Review of Social History*, 52:3 (2007), pp. 373–406.

77. Alan S. Milward, “Tariffs as Constitutions”, in Susan Strange and Roger Tooze (eds), *The International Politics of Surplus Capacity: Competition for Market Shares in the World Recession* (Boston, MA, 1981), pp. 57–66.

78. Jytte Klausen, *War and Welfare: Europe and the United States, 1945 to the Present* (New York, 1998).

79. Quoted in Charles Madge, “Public Opinion and Paying for the War”, *Economic Journal*, 51 (1941), pp. 36–46, 38.

basic consumer rights. In various, slightly altered forms, these rights have shaped movements around the world, particularly those in the International Organisation of Consumer Unions, and form the basis of both European Union guidelines and the *United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection*.⁸⁰ The ubiquity of consumption should not lead us to assume passivity on the part of consumers. As Trentmann suggests, consumers can exercise more choice and autonomy than the tidal wave of mind-numbing advertising might suggest. Citizens can participate in a robust consumer culture and still keep their political consciousness – ill-informed or biased as it may be – relatively separate. When the Labour government tried to treat citizens only as consumers, it had relatively little success. In Britain, few people who use public services see themselves narrowly as “consumers”, but rather as patients, members of the public, or service users.⁸¹ Cooperation, in new political forms that we have still to evolve, may emerge as a path by which consumption develops. In any case, we can expect a new political history of consumption to emerge as historians re-examine old conflicts in a new light. As they do, these two milestone works by Trentmann and Hilson and her collaborators will remain widely read for decades.

80. Matthew Hilton, “Consumer Activism: Rights or Duties?”, in Brückweh, *The Voice of the Citizen Consumer*, pp. 99–116, 105.

81. John Clarke, “Citizen-Consumers: Hyphenation, Identification, Depoliticization?”, in Brückweh, *The Voice of the Citizen Consumer*, pp. 225–242, 235.