RETAILERS AND CONSUMER CHANGES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Retail dynamics of a city in crisis: the mercer guild in pre-industrial Antwerp (ca. 1648-ca. 1748)

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Introduction – Over almost two decades now, consumption has become a critical issue in historical writing on the medieval and early-modern period. Recent literature has been apt in claiming – even in awkwardly polemic terms – the rise of so could 'modern' consumerism, of a consumer society, and even a consumer revolution. Intensive probate inventory research has dug deep into the worlds of goods' people possessed. However, ample information about the daily practices of buying and selling is much scarcer. Fore sure enough, people not only needed the possibility (the budget) and the propensity (the 'culture' or the 'mentality') to consume the gradual growing produce. The advent of a consumer society was grounded on the development of commercial infrastructures, organisations and practices that made the targeting (the distribution, marketing and selling) of the output possible. How, for instance, were consumers provided with the rising number of new commodities? How were they affected by the quickening fashion-cycles from the late 17the century onwards? And how were they induced to buy what they bought? These questions concern the wheeling and dealing of the local tradesmen – the retailers – that are the focal point of this paper.

In studying the commercial middlemen of a local economy, Antwerp in the so could 'age of crisis' (1648-1748) has attracted our attention. Although Antwerp no longer was the commercial metropolis of before, the city and its surrounding hinterland remained in the 17th and 18th centuries a highly urbanized, populated and commercialized area. At the beginning of the 18th century the city still harbored more than 70.000 inhabitants. Yet, the first signs of a grave economic crisis were already being felt in the second half of the 17th century. From a comparative perspective this decline could even be called spectacular: for the first time Brussels demographically overpowered Antwerp's rapid growth since the end of the 15th century. Enduring wartime, mercantilist orientation of international trade, and weak government intervention, all led to the detriment of one economic sector or another (agriculture, commerce and industry). Especially the export industries – once famous and in the first half of the 17th century sought after in the whole of Europe – went into a steep decline, soon followed by a rapid de-urbanization. Around 1748 the city was left with nothing more than 48.600 inhabitants.

At the same time – and strangely enough conflicting with the pessimistic description above – Antwerp experienced many of the changes one usually contributes to the 'birth of a consumer society' in this period. With real wages growing (although unemployment widening too), many social groups increasingly capable of consuming perceived the formerly tasteful luxury goods of Antwerp as 'old-fashioned'. New and fashionable goods were sought after and imported from the neighboring countries (especially France), causing great disturbance and commentary in the political and moral corners of society. Although one never reached the affluent materialism of many modern households, a wider, colorful and more diverse material

culture was taking shape in the 17th and 18th centuries. Newness and novelty was introduced in a quickening pace and known commodities came in ever-larger quantities and variations (in quality, shape and material). These altering consumer preferences and product innovations were reshaping the material culture itself. No longer did consumers necessarily prefer high quality products with a long lasting lifecycle. Instead, the consuming patterns focused on more replaceable and so cheaper, lighter and less durable products. New production techniques and the substitution of expensive raw materials by cheaper ones enhanced a decline in prices that further stimulated this process.

These are just some of the findings of recent probate inventory research that places Antwerp alongside Amsterdam, Paris, London and other important early-modern consumer cities. But whereas in London, for instance, the dawn of a consumer society in this period was matched by an equally important growth in – among others – population, trade, industry and commercial infrastructure, Antwerp experienced a quickening of the consumer pace in a period of decline and crisis. Thus in understanding this transition one almost instantly wonders how consumers were provided. Who was distributing the new and increasingly varied goods, perhaps even promoting them in such active ways? The Antwerp economy was certainly not 'traditionalized' by the severe economic crisis in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Earlier researchers already noticed the enduring dynamism and entrepreneurial activity of the middling and corporate organized layers of society in the Southern Netherlands. In what follows we will try to answer these questions by pointing at the importance of the retail-sector in Antwerp. Antwerp retailers not only perished under the ravages and changes of time, but also played a strategic role in the introduction of new commodities and the 'creation' of novel consumer preferences.

Methodological and analytical premises – In tackling such a vast, multi-layered and challenging subject as retailing in late 17th and early 18th century Antwerp, some kind of division of scientific labor was needed. Of course every such isolation is artificial, since in fact many commercial retail-circuits were acting together or conflicting and certainly overlapping one another, without clear boundaries to be drawn. Yet Laura and I have tried to splice the pie by studying distinct angels of the retail sector, coinciding with different methodological and analytical starting-points. By so doing we hope simultaneously to strengthen our individual researches and to gain a more global insight in the complex world of retailing.

Thus, Laura has begun studying the retailers providing the Antwerp customers with the so could daily-essential non-durables (food, groceries, etc.). Ilja has focussed so far on the retailers of more shopping-oriented goods: the so could consumer durables, that extend beyond the necessities of food, basic clothing, fuel and shelter ('luxuries', household goods, garment accessories, etc.). From a methodological viewpoint Laura will be more concerned with gathering statistical data for a more quantitative social and gender structured study. Her analytical framework will look at retailing mainly through the lens of survival strategies. On the other hand, Ilja' s research will relay heavily on sociological and historical literature on consumption. It has therefore a more qualitative stench, relaying more on descriptive and normative sources. Whereas Laura is more concerned with 'who', 'where' and 'how many' retailers were to be found in Antwerp, Ilja will be more looking at how buying and selling was mediated in this period. His research has been developing alongside questions as: how were consumer goods distributed in the city and through which institutions (shops, markets, etc.)? How were the local tradesmen capable of playing

an active role in the changing preferences of customers? And how were they simultaneously influenced by and shaping the recurrent fashion shifts? In all this we hope to highlight the crucial role the retailers played in the acceptance (or failure) of a blossoming consumer society.

In this paper we want to present some results of our ongoing research about the retail dynamics in the 'crisis'-ridden Antwerp. Thus, we hope to demonstrate the benefits of simultaneously studying the retail-sector from two different angles. For this exercise we have analyzed the mercer guild, the most important corporate organized group of retailers that was particularly active in distributing and promoting the new consumer goods in this period.

The mercers of Antwerp – The mercer guild included everybody who sold goods using weights or measures and who was not under restriction of another guild. Thus, this retailers-guild grouped more than only mercers: also grocers, textile sellers, sellers of greasy goods, stall-holders, sellers of small utilities or certain foods and even a few manufacturing trades (such as: glove maker, hatters, pin makers, wax makers, soap producers, producers of lead and pewter, etc.). In the meantime a few more professions adhered: silk merchants, sugar and soap producers, apothecaries, etc. It was the largest guild of the city, and even when the city population dwindled – as in the 'age of crisis' – the guild continued to grow. This enduring dynamism of the retailers-guild already caught the attention of earlier researchers. It is our opinion that is was closely linked to the blossoming of a consumer society in Antwerp. We will return to this later.

By using quantitative sources (the surviving lists of income and membership fee to the mercer guild) we were successful in determining some interesting social characteristics of this particular group of Antwerp retailers. Thus we have gathered information about the gender ratio inside the guild and within a certain occupation; the growth or decline of the guild; the appearance of new and the disappearance of old occupations; and the relative weight of a distinct occupation inside the guild. We have even developed localization patterns within the city of Antwerp for certain random sampled years. The combination of these statistics with other social sources (namely house rents and tax registers) gives us information about the economic situation of the retailers, but also about their mobility: how many of them moved within the city and where to?

Thus, by using these sources we find that during our research period (1648-1748) there were never less than 1500 and never more than 2500 members of the mercer guild. In 1700, the different manufacturing occupations represented 20% of the guild. The textile sellers were the largest group: 1/3 of all mercers were merchants in linen, silk, wool, lace, haberdashery, cotton, etc. The sellers of greasy goods – the largest in number in the16th century – were only the second largest group of retailers (17%) in 1700. The in the 16th century immensely popular occupation of stall-holder, disappeared almost completely in this period.

Independent working women in the 16th century turned mostly to the mercer guild. In the 17th and 18th century this tendency even increased. Whereas in 1515-1585 there were only 7% new female members, in 1648-1748 this figure was already 16% and at the end of the 18th century almost 25%. Those numbers are minimums, since widows of masters did not have to enlist. In 1700 25% of the mercers were female (widows included). Which factors were responsible for this clear-cut feminization of the mercer guild? Was it the result of some kind of survival strategy of income pooling in answer to the harsher economic climate? Or was it a creative

response to the changing consumer preferences? To answer these questions we have to look at the occupations women had. Women were seldom or never active in the manufacturing trades (except the widows of masters). We find them almost exclusively in retailing, especially in the textile trade (30% female linen sellers, more than 25% female cotton sellers, etc.), in food production and food retailing, as stall-holders (24%), grocers and sellers of greasy goods (both 16%). It is striking to notice women dominating those sectors that had a majority of female customers.

In 1700 the mercers were completely dispersed over the city. Almost in each and every street at least one retailer lived, worked and sold his or her goods. Around 1773, for instance, there was a retail-ratio of about 16 persons per shopkeeper in Antwerp. This enormous density of retailers even surpassed the London ratio where in 1759 there was an average of 30 persons per shop. These figures are even more impressive if one realizes that non-corporate retailers, second-hand dealers, pedlars and the like are not even taken into account. In Antwerp, even the poorest of society relied upon commercial mechanisms for the supply of consumer goods. The wide variety of retail outlets in the city probably also mediated such consumer problems as shopping time and especially exchange and liquidity (credit). There was absolutely no concentration around marketplaces, but a slight clustering around the city center – much more pronounced for some specific trades – does occur.

The dawn of a consumer society – The changes in consumer behavior around this period induced the birth of new retail-specialists within the guild: merchants in 'confection'-clothes, wigmakers, 'boutiquiers' (probably a new kind of grocer), fashion shops, tobacco-sellers, coffee and teahouses, etc. The absorption of many of the new products explains for a great deal the enduring dynamism of the mercer guild in the 18th century. For now, we will only consider the 'boutiquiers', fashion shops and the sellers of new stimulants like tobacco, chocolate, coffee and tea.

Boutiquiers, sellers of greasy goods and grocers – Firstly we have a problem of vocabulary: 'boutiquier' means nothing more than 'shopkeeper', thus giving no indication of the kinds of goods they sold. However, according to probate inventories we know that they sold – among other things – greasy goods. The 'boutiquiers' appear from 1720 onwards, the exact time we find the number of new 'sellers of greasy goods' in decline. 'Boutiquiers' sold other stuff too, goods that in earlier times had been sold by stall-holders on the marketplace. After our research period, the grocers began to enlarge their offer of goods.

Fashion shops – Shops named 'à la mode de Paris', appear for the first time in the 1660's. A quick saturation was reached around 1700, with more or less 60 shops active at the same time. In those shops were sold prêt-à-porter, half-finished clothing (to be finished by size), but also accessories and haberdashery. Cotton was the new fashion cloth, since it was easy to print, and thus easy to adjust to the changing fashion-cycles. Women surprisingly often held 'A la mode' -shops; almost 40% were enlisted under a woman's name. This is a minimum, since all the women who helped or succeeded to their spouses are not included. Women (25%) also often sold cotton. Here we can see the importance that was attributed to women to sell fashion to other women, to advise them of what was fashionable. The localization patterns also seems to indicate a certain form of customer relation. In 1700 the 61 fashion shops were located clearly in the city center. This did not change for the period 1714-1729. If we compare this localization patterns to the house rents in 1704, we notice that the fashion shops were established in relatively expensive houses in expensive streets. Thus, the shopkeepers settled down near to their clients, not near to each other.

New stimulants: tobacco, chocolate, coffee, tea – Teahouses knew a late take-off, but became immensely popular during the first half of the 18th century. Chocolate disappeared as a specialization, after an early success. It was still sold after 1720 but we suppose in coffee- and teahouses and by grocers. Specialized shopkeepers sold tobacco earlier on and on a much larger scale. At the end of the research period snuff becomes much more popular. The localization patterns of tobacco sellers and coffeehouses were very different. Tobacco vulgarized much earlier. The tobacconists often lived in the poorer neighborhoods or near the city gates or the access roads. It seems to have been a poor man's luxury, an easy consumption product bought before leaving town. Only 5% of the tobacco sellers were female. The coffeehouses were concentrated around the exchange, as were the 'chocolatiers'; there were no teahouses yet. Chocolate and coffee, just like tobacco, seems to have been masculine products, centered on a predominant male bastion, the exchange. The holders of such establishments were also predominant masculine. After 1720 the 'chocolatiers' disappeared as a specialization, but the teahouses had started their unstoppable advance. These establishments were already from the start more dispersed around the city than the coffeehouses (not only in the city center, but also in shopping streets outside the center). Tea was also more often sold by women than coffee (23.5% compared to 7%). This coincides neatly with the 18th century literature that considers tea a female and coffee a male beverage.