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Retail Trade, Consumption, and the Construction of Markets

A couple of decades ago, it was easy to complain about the lack of historical studies regarding retailing and consumption (Benson & Shaw, 1992; Strasser, McGovern, & Judt, 1998). Today, this is definitely not the case. To produce an overview of the developments in the two fields over the last 20–30 years is an enormous undertaking. However, it should be noted that while consumer and consumption history have matured in recent years to the point where it is relevant and possible to publish major overviews (Trentmann, 2012, 2016), this is less so when it comes to retailing history. One possible reason for this difference is the fact that the organisation of retailing and wholesaling is permeated by national characteristics, not the least institutional differences; meanwhile, the character of consumption and consumer society, at least in the last century and in the Western World, has many common features. One aspect is, of course, the Americanisation of consumption ideals. This is not to say that the general development of the retail sector differs much when viewed over a longer period. All types of retail formats and practices, from specialised stores with lavish shop windows and servile manual service to e-commerce, have at some point in time been adopted and developed in all countries around the world. However, the introduction and relative importance of the different aspects of the retail sector have differed between countries and between urban and rural settings.

The present special issue of *Scandinavian Economic History Review* is based on an open CFP on ‘Retail Trade, Consumption, and the Construction of Markets from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries’. We, the guest editors, are grateful that the editorial team of SEHR has given scholars doing research on these subjects the opportunity to present their results in this way.

We have, in different capacities, been involved in organising workshops on the Evolution of the Retail Trade in the Twentieth Century. One in Paris in 2015 and one in Uppsala in 2016. The main reason for organising these two workshops was a feeling that there was a need for more research on twentieth-century retail history; another motivation was to gather scholars from different countries in order to create a discussion of similarities and differences in the development of retailing and its final destination, consumption. The outcomes of these workshops have been gratifying. A number of papers from the first workshop will feature in a special issue of *Business History* on ‘New perspectives on 20th century European retailing’ in the near future. Some of them are already available online (Bide, 2017; Dewitte, Billows, & Lecocq, 2017; Heyrman, 2017; Jacques, 2018). It could also be noted that *Business History* is rolling out articles from another upcoming special issue, in this case on ‘Changing Secondhand Economies’ and also that couple of other recent articles makes important contributions to our understanding of changes in retailing in the twentieth century (Scott & Walker, 2017; Seppälä, 2017). It could also be noted that a couple of papers from both the first and second workshop mentioned above have recently been published in the journal *History of Retailing and Consumption* (Arnberg & Husz, 2018; Potamianos, 2017; Sandgren, 2017). Thus, the present special issue of SEHR adds to this body of important work.

There are of course other important conduits for the study of retailing and consumption. The Centre for the History of Retailing and Distribution (CHORD) at the University of Wolverhampton has, through its conferences and workshops, been an important locus for interactions in this field for 30 years. Recent anthologies such as Jessen and Langer (2012) and Lundin and Kaiserfeld (2015) have collected several interesting studies. But it is also indicative that it is not until very recently

that an academic journal has been devoted solely to the field of retail and consumption history such as *History of Retailing and Consumption* since 2015.

The Nordic contribution to the field of retailing and consumption history has gained momentum in the last decade and a half, although starting from a very low level. Most of the research is, however, still published on a national level and in the domestic language. This is another reason why this special issue is of importance. In many ways, the three featured articles enrich the historiography of retail and consumption, and they are representative of the overall growth of business history research in Nordic countries (Ekberg & Jes Iversen, 2018; Ojala, Hemminki, & Nevalainen, 2018). Examining three distinct periods of the modern era, they illustrate both the diversity of subjects and the multi-disciplinary nature of retail and consumption history as a subfield. In the first article, Johanna Wassholm and Anna Sundelin examines interactions between Russian pedlars and local populations in Swedish speaking rural Finland, at the turn of the twentieth century. At the crossroads of an economic and cultural history, they documents the evolution of consumption and trading practices in a pre-industrial society. In a remote rural regions the visits of pedlars constitute a vector of socio-economic change. In the second article, Klara Arnberg explores representations of female consumers in Swedish trade journals and advertising handbooks produced during the Interwar period. She shows how the stereotypical depiction of an irrational and impulsive female consumer, 'the shallow flapper', becomes challenged in the 1930s by women's organisations (political and societal), who reposition female consumption as symbolic of a woman's respectability and dedication to the family. Arnberg also pinpoints the American influence on this Swedish debate. Finally, Espen Ekberg and Kristoffer Jensen analyses the creation and the failure of a joint transnational consumer co-operative in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway between 2002 and 2007. After describing the prior context and the merger process itself, they investigates the reasons for the failure, discerning endogenous and exogenous factors. This case study exemplifies one of many unsuccessful retail globalisation attempts between industrialised countries and provides detailed insights on the future of Nordic co-operative retail companies.

Through their diversity in terms of approaches and objects of study, the three articles open up broader reflection on business history's methodology, as well as the place of transnational circulation and gender as important themes of retail and consumption studies.

First, this special issue contributes indirectly to on-going methodological debates in business history (Business History Review, 2017). While none of the papers applies the dominant hypothesis-testing methodology (De Jong, Higgins, & van Driel, 2015), they are nonetheless representative of business history's prized plurality and heterogeneity in terms of conceivable research methods and sources. On the one hand, Wassholm and Sundelin, together with Arnberg's papers rely mostly on socio-ethnographic material – namely professional journals and surveys about itinerant Russian pedlars. Their approach is comparable to the historiographic work of the French *Écoles des annales*, which conducts a history of mentalities and representations (Chartier, 1988; Le Goff & Nora, 1985). On the other hand, Eksberg and Jensen proposes a more classical business history case, as he looks at business practices and the organisational design of firms. However, as he chooses qualitative methods – combining archival research with a dual analysis of literature on retail globalisation and co-operatives – Eksberg and Jensen situates their work within the scope of the new business histories advocated by Decker, Kipping, and Wadhvani (2015).

Second, the question of transnational circulation (Saunier, 2013) is raised in each paper. Evidently, consumption and retail practices often need to be conceptualised beyond national contexts as they may be influenced by foreign examples and international transfers of knowledge and expertise. Yet, the nature of these transfers varies greatly. At the end of the nineteenth century in Eastern Carelia, one of the vectors of consumerism is petty trade operated illegally by Russian pedlars, who stand at the margin of society. Whereas, in Sweden in the 1920s, consumer demand for manufactured goods is stimulated by well-structured advertising agencies using a seemingly elaborate rhetoric imported from the United States. In sum, both American-style propaganda and Russian pedlars contribute, on their own level, to the reinforcement of a market economy and a consumerist society.

However, strong national differences in consumption practices remain, and consumer preferences represent potential obstacles to retail globalisation, notably in the food sector, as shown in Ekberg's and Jensen's article. Using the theoretical concept of embeddedness (Wrigley, Coe, & Currah, 2005), Ekberg and Jensen highlights the heterogeneity of three national food markets, on a cultural, economic, and institutional level. Despite a seeming proximity between Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, a coherent Nordic market, in which the Coop Norden merger can embed itself, does not in fact exist. Ekberg's and Jensen's article is a rare contribution to the history of retail globalisation. Indeed, while retail studies have become 'fundamentally international in nature' (Akehurst & Alexander, 1995) within the field of marketing and management, retail historians have surprisingly neglected globalisation trends. In that respect, Ekberg and Jensen responds to Alexander's (2013) call for greater empirical research in business history in order to shed light on the respective roles of 'company-based and market-based factors in determining the success and sustainability of international retail activity'.

Third, Wassholm's and Sundelin and Arnberg's articles on the social dimensions of consumption demonstrate that a history of consumerism benefits from a gender perspective (De Grazia & Furlough, 1996). A century ago, in Swedish speaking rural Finland, women were the primary customers of pedlars as they stayed at home. This contact cannot be reduced solely to the act of purchasing, as it was also a vector of economic and cultural integration, in which women had a central role. Haggling with pedlars familiarised them with commercial negotiation and monetary economy; it opened a window to the outside urban world. Women would thus practice their consumer skills, and were not the impulsive and irrational 'flapper' portrayed by Swedish advertisers in the 1920s, as shown in Arnberg's article. Imbricating cultural, linguistic, and even emotional aspects to her story, Wassholm's research also raises more general questions on customer–retailer relations. Russian pedlars were more than merchants (Fontaine, 1996). They were messengers, informers, entertainers and therefore created social cohesion. This has a strong resonance today, considering the evolution of retail trade in the past 50 years. New consumer cultures appear (Cochoy, Hagberg, Petersson McIntyre, & Sörum, 2017), while the social dimensions of the purchasing act gradually transform or disappear; shopkeepers have been replaced by cashiers, who are now being substituted by self-checkouts or by e-commerce. As for Arnberg's article, it shows how social and economic actors categorise consumerist behaviours in relation to gender in different ways. Women organisations depict a respectable Swedish housewife, whereas advertisers construct the female consumer as a superficial 'Hollywood type'. None of these categorisations really reflect a tangible reality, and it remains crucial to grasp how the consumer figure is constructed in order to better understand the functioning of the consumer society throughout the twentieth century. In his history of salesmanship, Friedman (2004, pp. 214–222) already shows how, in the 1920s, Chevrolet salesmen use a different discourse to sell cars to men and women, respectively – keeping rational and technical arguments for men, and playing on emotions with women. This fantasised irrationality of female consumers might be partly understood through Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which he observes that upper-class women are the principal proponents of what he calls 'conspicuous consumption'. In the early twentieth century, irrational and excessive consumption practices become signs of distinction for the new industrial bourgeoisie, and while the husband works, the housewife spends 'conspicuously'. Finally, theorising consumption patterns and practices in terms of gender might also signify the inability of advertisers to understand the socio-economic logics of consumption and, subsequently, to elaborate a refined typology of consumers, before the emergence of proper market research.

We end this editorial by again thanking the editorial team of SEHR for devoting this issue to the history of retailing and consumption and, of course, the three authors who submitted their papers and reworked them successfully into very interesting articles in this subfield of economic history. It is our hope that we will gradually move toward increased international collaboration on these issues in order to reach the level where one or several scholars will be able to write a retail history of the world or Europe or, at least, of the Nordic countries.

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