

The role of peddling in consumption in modern Europe

Le rôle du colportage dans les consommations de l'Europe moderne

El papel de la venta a domicilio en el consumo de la Europa moderna

Laurence Fontaine



Publisher
Institut Veolia Environnement

Electronic version

URL: <http://factsreports.revues.org/3638>

ISSN: 1867-8521

Electronic reference

Laurence Fontaine, « The role of peddling in consumption in modern Europe », *Field Actions Science Reports* [Online], Special Issue 12 | 2014, Online since 21 October 2014, connection on 02 October 2016. URL : <http://factsreports.revues.org/3638>

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.

Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License

The role of peddling in consumption in modern Europe

Laurence Fontaine

Historian, CNRS research director
laurence.fontaine@ehess.fr

Abstract. After stressing the importance of the market in the survival strategies of European populations, the article highlights the role, nature and structure of the networks of peddlers in pre-industrial Europe. Far from being limited to the distribution of new goods, these networks of peddlers were also agents of change through the circulation of new ideas.

Keywords. peddler, survival strategies, informal trade, informal networks

The image most of us have of peddling are the prints and engravings showing common folk, midway between vagrant and beggar, small-scale vendors offering their wares in a wicker basket, going down the roads with a box on their back; or showing to their audience, on an improvised stage, a stick or bow in hand, reproductions of the scenes they describe. These sketches are reinforced by sources denouncing the competition they represent for settled traders, counting them or monitoring the circulation of ideas with them through the printed and spoken word and in song.

However, looking at the home villages of these ambulant merchants gives you a completely different image than that of the small-scale marginal trade exercised by an underclass that urban eyes see: it takes you into vast networks of migrants who have been one of the most important vectors in the dissemination of new forms of consumption¹. In fact, next to the small street vendors - men and women who are trying to escape from poverty by selling, or reselling, small items and foodstuffs - are many street hawkers belonging to structured organizations of migrants from the more remote areas of Europe, mainly the mountains but also isolated seashores such as peninsulas. A map of the origins of the first migrant merchants shows, for western Europe, three main centers: the entire stretch of the Alps (and mainly all high-altitude villages, from Savoy to Tyrol), the Pyrenees and Scotland. The importance of peddling in these mountains is rooted in the Middle Ages, in the complementary nature of life between high and lowlands, which brings its denizens, with their meat and wood, into the

circuits of European trade, which often values a geographical location that is on major commercial routes.

These organizations of migrant merchants operate on two levels: a first is formed by a few families who have managed, with the help of their relatives and allies, to open city warehouses and shops in vast geographical groupings. A second level is a distribution system through peddling based on temporary migration.

These networks of relatives organize themselves into very flexible family businesses, that merge and separate as dictated by the necessities of trade, death, and the growing or decreasing wealth of its members. They are supported by a family funding system in which dowries and assets are invested, and protected by endogamous marriages that further tie the families to the business network and preserve the underlying funding system. The exceptions to this rule are the result of the adjustments that migrants must make to penetrate the market of the countries in which they settle, as in Germanic areas, for example, where the cities refuse to accept newcomers. To circumvent the law, the migrants marry the widows of native merchants, while nevertheless continuing to marry their offspring into families from their homeland. The prohibition to marry into the lowlands also makes it possible to move men easily to match business needs and to monitor them through the family remaining in the village.

To develop their trade, these merchants rely on village migration. Within this group, a hierarchy emerges. At the summit are those peddlers who do not have a shop and who are among the more wealthy inhabitants of their home villages. Their absence or presence is marked by the seasons. Official documents dating

¹ L. Fontaine, *Histoire du colportage en Europe*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993.

from the end of the seventeenth century concerning these peddlers shows the importance of their role between town-based merchants and the villagers: in the lowlands, they are part of the network woven by the traders who have set up shop and acquire their goods from these traders; at the mountain village, they are the intermediaries providing access to winter trading. These peddlers in turn hire servants and apprentices. However, their employees are not allowed to make money: they are prohibited from trading for themselves and from lending money (the other path to honest wealth).

These networks of small traders all practice non-specialization of business: merchants and peddlers trade in everything in line with existing needs and opportunities, even if each family also has a relative specialty, within the general specialization of the source areas, e.g. south Tyrol in carpets, lake Como in citrus fruit, or Haut-Dauphiné in gloves. Three factors drive the diversification of goods on offer: the desire to appeal to a broader clientele by supplying the most diverse range of items, the payment systems which are largely barter-based, and the search for new or banned products which ensure the biggest profits. In addition, itinerant merchants always trade in money. Sedentary merchants obviously complain about this credit which ties the peasant clientele to the peddlers and allows them to claim their dues at the best price either from the crops, or in the fall when the peasants have just sold them. With the money trade, migrant merchants step out of the context of kinship and the small people to slowly become banker-traders who have a clientele where craftsmen rub shoulders with the upper classes and the small bourgeoisie.

A final characteristic, running through every aspect of the trade organization: men and goods work and circulate at the edge of the law. Goods are moved through their own circuits to avoid duties and tolls, when not directly obtained through smuggling. As soon as a new market opens, whenever the situation allows it, and in particular when a war is in progress, smuggling and illegal warehouses multiply. Men circulate under the same conditions: the richest as far as possible avoiding the costly city registration with the purchase of "bourgeoisie" rights, scrambling both city and peddler hierarchies.

Some families achieve outstanding success, which must not hide the fact that many of the large trading houses or banks started out this way, through the juxtaposition of income from peddling on credit to the more humble and that from loaning money to the more affluent. Among the most famous companies are that of the Perrolaz of Magland in Savoy who, associated with Belmont, Lichier, Ribola and Casal from Val d'Aosta and Brentano of lake Como, monopolized the retail trade throughout the middle Rhine in the 1700s at the same time as they were becoming bankers.

In the distribution system that these families set up, three types of peddler can be observed according to the assets they can offer as surety for the goods supplied on credit by urban traders.

The poorer only have their personality to offer and for these peddlers, half-beggars and half-vagrants, the act of sale itself is more important than the goods on offer. They give a show, stage themselves and sell entertainment and dreams. Ultimately, they sell their person and everything that their

words, spoken or sung, kindles in the imagination. They do not seek individual contact with buyers in the privacy of their homes, but public squares, fairs, busy places, and moments of enjoyment where a circle of many people can form around them. These entertainments can comprise singers or poor migrants exhibiting a curiosity, such as the groundhog that accompanies certain mountain dwellers or the bear brought down from the Pyrenees by others. Some have a few goods to offer - haberdashery, toys, some reading material - and to sell them, they showcase peasants' dreams and aspirations. The ballads and tales that Autolycus, portrayed by Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale*, carries with him expose isolated villagers to the events of the world, the strangeness of some behaviors, and the vagaries of the news. It does not matter that the news is weird and wonderful, what is important is the assertion by the narrator that it is new and true: all the stories he relates are "true" and "happened less than a month ago". He then sings about his goods, fabrics and ribbons in such contrast with the dull peasant clothing, the pleasure of giving and wearing them, and how they can make the wearer fashionable:

[...]O master, if you did but hear the pedlar at the door, you would never dance again after a tambour and pipe; no, the bagpipe could not move you [...] - He could never come better; he shall come in.[...] - He hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes; [...] He has the prettiest love-songs for maids [...]. -Has he any unbraided wares? - He hath ribbons of all the colors i' the rainbow; points, more than all the lawyers in Bohemia can learnedly handle, though they come to him by the gross: inkles, caddisses, cambrics, lawns: Why, he sings 'em over, as they were gods or goddesses; you would think a smock were a she-angel, he so chants to the sleevehand, and the work about the square on 't.2 .

Lace and ribbons become the medium to vicariously enjoy the adventures of the traveler; they are imbued with foreignness. And like Autolycus, the peddler that a century and a half later Diderot sets on the path of Jacques the fatalist, sings about his bale and fashion, opening through the them windows onto other ways of life, other conditions. He sells garters, belts, watch chains, rings, snuffboxes in the latest taste -genuine Jaback, he explains, because fashion only favors real Jaback goods, named after the eponymous hotel in Paris-, or selling jewelry and novelties of all genres.

To the window onto other worlds, some add the quickly shared knowledge of fresh facts, dreams soon to be realized, of regaining health and understanding the future. The quacks who bring potions, pills, powders and ointments make available to all the medical knowledge, the power over sickness and death.

The peddlers whose assets are sufficient to ensure their credit, have, in turn, accredited suppliers and faithful clients. They set out between the end of August and the end of November, depending on the requirements of farmwork, the dates of cattle markets and when they can be replaced in the

² William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, act IV, scene 4.

village. Their return dates show that the needs of trade outweigh those of agriculture, since no peddlers return in time for the first work in the fields. They acquire supplies firstly among the emigrants who have set up shop, and then they supplement their wares from other traders and in regions that make specialized goods, such as Troyes, whose blue collection of small novels and almanacs, full of practical advice and predictions, is highly prized in the countryside. Among the first, they make the bulk of their purchases and borrow all or part of the money necessary for their campaign. With the second, over the years a family tradition is born and we can follow the special relationship that families of peddlers have maintained over the generations with the same families of suppliers between the seventeenth and nineteenth century. The peddlers usually have one or two small, fixed routes that they travel constantly in the hope of being reimbursed for previous purchases and selling new items. They keep account books that show that the bulk of their transactions is done on credit.

When they become successful, they become peddler traders who, based on solid assets, move around in wagons, making lengthy stops at fairs and villages, sending their servants to all hamlets and all the way to the more isolated farms. If business continues to prosper, they set up shop, although they are ready to return to roaming should affairs be bad. They use the latest selling techniques, printing business cards and publishing advertisements in the press to boast about the modernity of their store, which is still often just a wagon.

The wares of all these peddlers who have a mount comprises a wide assortment of fabrics (muslin cottons, percale, calico, silks), a large lot of haberdashery and baubles, a few items of clothing and accessories (gloves, socks, caps, hats, belts and capes), supplemented by a few small luxury items (glasses, fabric collars, bracelets, spices and items used in peasant ceremonies), religious items (mainly rosaries and small crosses) and remedies. In addition, each item is offered in a wide range of textures, prices and qualities, allowing them to meet the needs of all pockets and reach out to more varied social groups than just the lower classes. In the countryside, in 1684, two Dauphiné peddlers thus sell «canvas, needles, wire, pins, hooks, buckles, buttons, glasses and glass cases, mirrors, gloves, combs, garters, stockings, jerkins, writing desks, pens, knives, forks, laces, ribbons, lace and frills, handkerchiefs, rosaries, snuffboxes, a few rings, spices (cloves, nutmeg, pepper), and commodities (sugar, tobacco, anchovy, olives), wax, whiting powder, etc.; each item being available in a great variety of textures, prices and qualities: gloves vary between 5 and 12 «sous» to a pair, stockings from 12 pounds to 30 sous each, tinplate hand mirrors costing 1 sou 7 deniers, while golden or cardboard ones fetch between 15 sols and 6 deniers.»

The descriptions of the time always insist on the novelty of the items that the peddler offers from village to village and farm to farm. His commitment to items that are new and/or in high demand makes them a good indicator of prevailing fashions, consumers' desires and how these change over the centuries. In addition, when excitement over a new product is very strong, specialized networks develop around it. This was the case first around religious items and subsequently books

and watches, and when the business virtually disappeared after the first world war, some continued to operate but specializing in eyeglasses.

The different networks formed around printed matter in the eighteenth century all had an international influence, such as the one described in 1754 in a letter addressed to the director of the French library, a former head clerk of one of the great publishers of the Enlightenment based in Geneva:

The book trade in Spain and Portugal, as well as in many cities in Italy, is all in the hands of the French; all come from a village located in a valley of the Briançonnais, in the Dauphiné province. These people - active, hardworking and extremely sober - successively move into Spain and almost always form alliances with each other. [...] Not only is the book trade in their hands, but also that of geographical maps, prints, clocks, paintings, floral indienne fabric, stockings, bonnets, etc.

In fact, this network of booksellers and peddlers originating in Le Monétier-les-Bains, acquired, via bases in Geneva, Avignon, and Marseille, a very large share of the book market in Mediterranean Europe, in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Its history between the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century could be described as a network of peddlers, predominantly protestant, carrying through Catholic Europe books of theology and religion, with a protestant bible here and there, which a century later becomes a network of Catholic peddlers spreading, at the end of the Old Regime, the writings of the Enlightenment" slipped into some other book so they are not detected during checks" or "on loose sheets mixed up with the wrapping paper, to keep them hidden".

By bringing the written word into homes well before literacy was prevalent, by spreading -altered and amplified- both official news and items that the powers that be would have gladly kept secret, peddlers brought many people into contact with printed matter, helped them develop a taste for it, and allowed them to participate in the spreading of new ideas, whether those of Protestantism or Enlightenment; people who, without them, would have been kept ignorant.

Thus the success of peddling comes not only from an organization particularly well suited to the weaknesses of the economic markets of the time, where trust was very little institutionalized, but also undoubtedly from its ability to offer luxury items, novel, quite often illicit, and at better prices than the established shop-owners and jewelers; not to mention the fact that, before the arrival of the railway, travel was not easy and peddlers had the immense advantage of going to people's homes.

Finally, peddlers also spread objects and ideas that help people develop and shape their personality. However they were used, they all gave people the opportunity to express their own unique individuality. And that in itself was a radically new concept.