Introduction

Questioning the ‘consumer variable’ in history goes straight to the heart of most important debates in recent retail historiography. Once causality in retail change was thought to be rather straightforward: the distributive trades were seen as an appendage of the supply side system, responding sensitively to production change and growth. Small-scale production equaled buying directly from producers’ shops or via periodic markets and peripatetic salesmen; whereas ensuing industrialisation and mass production were followed by an equally ‘revolutionary’ and large-scale retail transformation (Jefferys 1954). Since the twin curves of demography and living standards were thought to bump inevitably against certain structural ceilings, any active role of consumer demand in engendering retail change was in any case reckoned to be small and unsustainable before the nineteenth century.

Only from the end of the 1970s did historians start to study the agency of consumer demand in earnest (Bianchi 1998). Unfortunately, the horizon and terms of these initial consumer debates were very much a continuation of normative, Cold War intellectual skirmishes. In direct opposition to the older, influential conceptualisations of the Frankfurter Schule and radical sociologists of the 1950s and ’60s – in which shrewd salesmen and an ever more persuasive advertising machinery were accused of creating a hollow, materialistic society of one-dimensional, civically unengaged citizens – the consumer now entered the ring as champion of free choice. The (neo-)liberal political-economic context of Thatcherism and Reaganesconomics goes a long way in explaining why the consumer, and the act of consumption itself, was suddenly given a crucial empowering, even liberating role (Slater 1997, 33–62; Trentmann 2006, 1–27). If society were to be imagined as a marketplace, then the real puppeteers could never have been the capitalist suppliers and advertisers of goods and services, but the end-users of these commodities whose individual consumer preferences and decisions eventually guided collective investments, historical change and the progress of the nations.

In this “consumer democracy” vision of history, the locations and activities of shopping and retailing were discovered anew as important sites of cultural experience and meaning, rather than places and moments that fulfilled the basic utilitarian functions of distribution and provisioning. The notion that such a thing as consumer culture was less of an oxymoron than was once thought, gained precedence in concomitant postmodern theorising. After all: in a world
where complex signs and meanings, and the continuous appropriation and aestheticisation of everyday practices, is believed to take precedence over simple needs and wants, core societal values and identities become entangled with or negotiated through consumption and the world of goods (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 6–35). Inspired by such postmodern beliefs about the self and society, the historical reappraisal of material culture, the study of fashion cycles and the history of shopping were only one aspect of a growing body of literature devoted to the active role of demand-side issues. The real challenge for historians, however, became finding the source of everything that followed: answering the gnarling, almost existential questions of how and why we became a world of consumers, and where and when to locate the birthplace of our equally celebrated and condemned consumer society.

Looking back with hindsight on almost forty years of debate over the active role of the demand-side in (retail) history, it is apparent that our collective attachment to origins – our urge for finding a consumer (r)evolution of some sort – has not only been historically misleading but also an intellectual cul-de-sac. Speaking of the birth of a consumer society leads to historical tunnel vision: it was an unfortunate metaphor, as Frank Trentmann recently stressed, because ‘unlike a baby, consumption was not set on a natural, almost universal path of growth and development’ (Trentmann 2016, 10). When our demand-side perspectives continue to broaden in time as well as in space – taking in, for instance, the consumer variable in Renaissance Italy (fourteenth-seventeenth centuries), Ming China (1368–1644), or for that matter Mogul India (1526–1857) and Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868) – the diversity and complexity in material culture, tastes and lifestyles in world history urges us to become more nuanced and modest in our grand narratives. But even more important is nurturing a post-colonial awareness and sensitivity for our own historical discourses and situatedness – a point still curiously absent in most textbooks on consumption and retail history alike. To be sure, an origins perspective blinds us intellectually: it obscures the fact that consumer revolution narratives are fundamentally enmeshed with core western values and persistent western narratives of modernity, progress and superiority.

To illustrate and substantiate this central historiographical claim, we will focus in the rest of our chapter on two consumer (r)evolutions and specifically their impact on retailing and shopping. This will be done for two periods of almost axiomatic importance in the history of North-Western Europe – the region against which other European and non-European regions continue to be weighed in consumer debates, and this despite our recent turn to the global.

Firstly, we will delve into The Enlightenment (c.1670–1830), which cemented our typical core Western values and narratives of assigning freedom and liberation to consumer choice. By de-moralising private consumer wants and stimulating material desires, North-West European societies – England and the Low Countries especially – were set on a track towards further commercialisation, industriousness and eventual industrialisation. The demand-side, and especially the consequent cultural constructions around consumption and the role of the consumer in society, played a crucial role in explaining why present-day nations like England, Belgium and The Netherlands figure prominently in historical debates on the birth of a consumer society. However, despite a growing propensity or willingness to consume among the (urban) layers of North-Western Europe and the concomittant development of retail circuits, our reappraisal of recent literature and research will be of a more nuanced and less superlative kind: social inequalities, rooted in an ancien-régime political-economy, remained very large and debates have often focused more on newness in consumer habits and behaviour, rather than considering continuities and path-dependencies.

Secondly, we turn to the Fin-de-Siècle World (c.1870–1914), a period that again became crucially linked to core Western notions and assumptions that people should not only have the freedom, but also the means and possibilities to consume. Late-nineteenth-century North-Western
Europe undertook a feverish technological journey towards mass production of standardised consumer goods. These were distributed, among others, through large-scale, mass retail innovations, such as chain stores and department stores, which experienced their real breakthrough in this period. Western imperialism and accompanying rapid globalisation were integral to this move towards the consumer masses, not only for opening up consumer markets abroad, but also for importing cheap energy and raw materials (especially grain) to North-Western Europe (Moore 2015). By freeing the increasingly dominant industrial wage labourer – albeit still partially and imperfectly – from the high costs of paying for food, industrial nations like England and Belgium were set on the path to become true mass consumer societies. Not only were cities and the number of urban consumers growing, people in general had more financial leeway to indulge in consumer wants and desires above basic needs at the start of the Interbellum. Gaining access to more and diverse consumer products, and crucially being “entitled” to consume, became integral to the rise of another retail innovation, the co-operatives. Meanwhile, widespread social and political mobilisation around consumer interests gradually paved the way for North-West European welfare states.

In the light of this historical change, it is again small wonder that demand-side issues, and their connections with retailing, figure dominantly in historical discourses on the late-nineteenth-century. However, we will end on a sobering note, warning against all too triumphalist perspectives that link consumption to conquering and liberating Western consumer modernity. We do well to remember that this period started and ended with bloodshed, warfare and influential social unrest, such as the 1870 Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution in 1917. In a period where, on both sides of the Atlantic, the so-called robber barons were becoming increasingly wealthy on the basis of their returns on capital and the exploitation of natural resources, the returns for labour were – despite growing labour productivity – still very small and not well protected by laws and collective labour agreements. The Fordist mode of turning labourers en groupe into mass consumers would only become a fully realised, albeit unstable, political project after WWII.

An enlightened ‘consumer revolution’?

On 12 May 1740, Jan Teding van Berkhout, son of a prominent Delft family, wrote a letter home from Paris. Whilst there, Jan Teding had commissioned beautiful summer clothes from one of the most famous Parisian couturiers. Writing to his brother, however, he admitted that he would, most likely, not be in position to wear these garments upon his return in Holland because they were ‘trop beau pour oser les porter en Hollande’ (Verhoeven 2009, 271–272). This nicely illustrates the major importance of Paris as a fashion making metropolis in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century (Coquery 2011). While Louis XIV failed on the battlefield, the French fashion paradigm conquered Europe – albeit, as this anecdote demonstrates, not without appropriation. It also indicates how, even in the absence of stringent sumptuary legislation, consumer practices in the Low Countries were still regulated by forces of social control and moral restraint. In the bourgeois society of the Netherlands, a careful management of conspicuous consumption was needed to avoid any over-ostentation. As such, this anecdote emphasises the very idea of the Netherlands as the cradle of a new, bourgeois consumer model, one that eventually paved the way towards our new consumer society: ‘It was in north-west of Europe, in the Netherlands and Britain, that a more dynamic, innovative culture of consumption came to take hold in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ (Trentmann 2016, 53). In both of these countries, economic growth and urbanisation paved the way for a new consumer model adapted to the needs and mentalities of an urbanised society with strong middling sort of people, rather than courtly and
socially skewed societies. The following paragraphs will build on that claim, highlighting and discussing the changing mental and moral mindset of consumption in the late early modern period; the related changes in European material culture and the propensity to consume, and the links between this feverish consumer culture and changing retail structures and practices.

In the early eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville wrote his provocative *Fable of the Bees* in which he argued that the pursuit of luxury, obviously a private vice, was highly beneficial to public welfare (De Vries 2003). Mandeville, a Dutchman who migrated to England, wrote in marked contrast to a long-standing European tradition of the critique of luxury, which itself continued through the eighteenth century. It was one of the seminal texts that fueled the famous eighteenth-century luxury debate. On both sides of the English Channel, awareness among intellectuals grew that, on an aggregate level, the individual appetite to consume—a vice—was a powerful source of improvement and economic growth. Later in the eighteenth century David Hume, among others, refined Mandeville’s framework by connecting luxury to refinement and civilisation. Increasingly, as the luxury debate of the eighteenth century progressed, private wants were considered (either positively or negatively) as a major stimulus of industriousness and civilisation (Berg 2005, 21–45). The new luxury discourse did little but offer the theoretical sanctioning of an already modified practice. It was not without antecedents, moreover. In Renaissance Italy, another major cradle of a refined and feverish consumer culture, splendour and magnificence were positively appropriated as reflecting virtue (Guerzoni 1999; Welch 2002), even though the moral regime of pre-modern Italy still had little in common with a modern consumerist attitude (Allerston 2007). Yet, it also coincided with a major transformation in European luxury culture. Italy in particular has been credited with a profound refurbishment of the home. The material renaissance was urban, favoured design above the intrinsic value of things and was fueled by an ever-expanding world of goods that required appropriate urban behaviour (Goldthwaite 1987, 1993; Welch 2005).

The lively luxury debate of the Enlightenment did not come as a coincidence, therefore, but went hand in hand with a world of goods that fundamentally transformed: one that was marked by novelty, variety and availability. Generally speaking, Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century were surrounded by an empire of things. Their material culture was more varied, comfortable, colourful and pleasurable. According to Jan de Vries, industrious revolution was not only marked by an intensification of the allocation of household time to the production and consumption of market-mediated goods and services, it also implied the transition from an ‘old luxury’ to a ‘new luxury’ model (De Vries 2008). The former was geared towards leisure and the conspicuous consumption of elites in society; luxury consumption was morally suspect, since it always bore the risk of endangering vested social hierarchies. In contrast, new luxury was not necessarily preoccupied with social distinction per se, but appealed to a larger set of values, such as comfort and pleasure. The new luxuries required taste and civilisation; they were also cheaper and so accessible to larger groups in society than were the ostentatious old luxuries. In his search for the origins of this new luxury model, Jan de Vries arrived in the Netherlands where the bourgeois model of consumption described above blossomed in the seventeenth century (Blondé and Ryckbosch 2015). This new model would come to full force in eighteenth-century England, where Neil McKendrick and others identified the birth of a consumer society (McKendrick 1982b): a beneficial love triangle of social equity, economic growth and consumption, facilitated by the political and moral liberty to consume freely. Historians no longer believe in a pre-industrial consumer revolution, let alone the birth of a consumer society in eighteenth-century England; but the very idea that the pre-industrial era somewhere witnessed a critical transition towards a new consumer model never lost its appeal (Berg 2004, 85). What exactly defines the essential features of the “new luxury” model is not easy to pinpoint, though novelty,
variety and the speed of change (fashion sensitivity) clearly distinguished the late eighteenth-century consumer basket from its antecedents. It did so with a series of new goods (such as hot drinks, tobacco, toys and trinkets) as well as important changes in the design and value construction of the world of goods (Trentmann 2016, 53; Blondé 2002).

The material culture changes that came along with this ‘new luxury’ pattern, were first mapped for the Netherlands and England (De Vries 1975; Weatherill 1988; Shammas 1990; Overton 2004); but they were not confined to these rapidly growing economies. Increasingly, economic historians find evidence from all over Europe attesting a broad and widely shared consumer transition in both expanding and stagnating economies (Wijsenbeek-Olthuis 1987; Blondé and Van Damme 2010). Jan de Vries hypothesised about the origins of an industrious revolution, and especially a transformation in the allocation of household resources to the market economy, to reconcile the evidence of an apparent material affluence with low real incomes and modest economic growth. Other scholars argue that product changes and productivity gains account for a relative fall in the price of industrial products and a consequent increase in the consumption of consumer durables, even in countries where income and wages lagged behind (Malanima and Pinchera 2012). Generally speaking, even with less money, eighteenth-century town and countryside dwellers could afford and consciously enjoy more things, very often of a so called populuxe nature (Fairchilds 1993). In short, the transition towards a new material culture was not confined to the core regions of the Atlantic economy; rather, it applied to Europe in general. Moreover, it did not require economic growth, which also casts doubt on the Adam Smith’s argument for the beneficial interplay between the desires of men and economic improvement.

This remarkable proliferation of the empire of things went hand in hand with the expansion of retailing and retail modernisation, as was suggested by the extensive treatment of advertisements and new commercial techniques such as the use of showrooms, trade cards and the like in McKendrick’s seminal work (McKendrick 1982a). Indeed, the commercial landscape of early modern Europe was rapidly evolving in the centuries prior to the industrial revolution. Although figures are extremely hard to compare, almost everywhere shops grew in number, both in absolute and relative terms. This was paralleled with a growing diversity of specialised shops serving a varied clientele (Mui and Mui 1989; Van Aert and Van Damme 2005; van den Heuvel and Ogilvie 2013; Mitchell 2014). For sure, fixed shops were already a common feature in medieval towns and they were successful and complementary to markets, as is demonstrated by the obligation for sixteenth-century Venetian shopkeepers to shut doors and take stalls in the square during the Sensa Fair (Welch 2006, 43). Yet, as Fernand Braudel noticed in the 1970s, the real take off of fixed retail outlets happened in the early seventeenth century (Braudel 1979, 2:52–53). Ever since, with varying degrees and intensities, one witnessed a more or less general growth of retail outlets everywhere in Europe; a phenomenon that intensified in the period after 1650 and paralleled the rise in the wide array of new consumer goods and colonial groceries that became available at that time. This growth was not confined to England where Mui and Mui recorded a shop density of about one shop for every fifty-nine inhabitants in 1759, while the London ratio stood at 1:30 (Mui and Mui 1989, 37–41). Even in the Southern Low Countries, an area deprived of strong economic growth in the late seventeenth century, the number of retailers expanded from 1:26 by 1690 to 1:16 in 1773 (Van Aert and Van Damme 2005, 149–150). Overall the growth in the number and variety of shops is generally recognised as part and parcel, if not the backbone, of an early modern “retail revolution”. Indeed, generally associated with the advent of the department store and its economies of scale, fixed prices and price ticketing, early modernists were quick to discover modern retailing practices before the advent of the industrial society already (Stobart and Hann 2004).
A large share of this expansion of the retail sector in the eighteenth century was closely intertwined with rapidly changing consumer habits and preferences in the late early modern period (Blondé and Van Damme 2010). The changes in consumer and material culture we briefly touched upon earlier help to explain the rapid growth of the commercial sector in various ways. First and foremost, the attested retail densification was intimately connected with the growing importance of imported goods in the consumption bundle. Colonial groceries such as sugar, coffee, tea, chocolate and spices impacted enormously on the early modern consumer and the world economy. They also affected the retailing scene, reinforcing vested trades and trade patterns (Stobart 2013). In many countries these newly imported products were sold by members of the retailer’s guilds or integrated into the supply of general stores. In no time tobacco, coffee and tea conquered households of all social ranks, profoundly reconfiguring consumer patterns. While in the mid–seventeenth century only a handful of tobacco sellers were recorded in Amsterdam, by the mid–eighteenth century a little army of at least 233 tobacco shops serviced the daily needs of Amsterdam citizens at various selling points across the urban map (Lesger 2013). In Antwerp as well, a substantial part of the growth of retail businesses can be accounted for by the increase of imported groceries, but small-town mercers shared in the prospects of these new consumer habits as well. The volume of tobacco sold in the small town of Maastricht, for instance, almost doubled in thirty years’ time, from about 31,000 kilograms in 1730–34 to 56750 kilograms in 1757–62. Coffee and tea followed this trend, albeit at a slightly more modest rate of growth. Unsurprisingly, these colonial groceries were dispatched to countryside consumers as well (Steegen 2006, 267). Hence, the need to supply imported groceries to consumers reinforced the weight of shops in society. Whether this was to the detriment of local suppliers such as beer brewers is harder to figure out, but it seems highly likely.

Not only did the retail sector grow as a result of the inclusion of new products, the changing material culture also impacted enormously (Blondé, Van Aert, and Van Damme 2014). The eighteenth century was characterised by the gradual replacement of expensive, durable products possessing a high secondary market value and a potential for resale and reuse, by cheaper, less durable and more fashion sensitive products (Blondé 2002; Stobart and Van Damme 2010). Cheaper textiles (such as printed cottons) came to replace more expensive woollens; tapestries and gilt leather wall hangings made way for textile and paper wall hangings, and silver and pewter lost in importance relative to porcelain (Shammas 1994). On the daily scene, these transitions fundamentally altered the relationship between people’s material culture stock and the flow of their consumption. They also necessitated more frequent shop contacts, a result of the declining durability of goods and a growing fashion sensitivity. Across the urban hierarchy, consumers were increasingly subjected to metropolitan fashion and the fashion cycle was moving faster as the century progressed (Berg 2006). Consumers eager to find their way through the increasing consumer choice and the volatility of fashion cycles, had to rely upon the advice of commercial middlemen, such as upholsterers and shopkeepers to steer their consumer choices (Sargentson 1998; Craske 1999; Edwards 2005; Blondé and Van Damme 2010). The latter did everything to offer a pleasurable shopping environment, an arena of polite shopping, to their consumers. Daniel Defoe, for instance, complained how, in London there ‘never was such painting and gilding, such sashing and looking-glasses among shopkeepers as there is now’ (quoted in Stobart and Hann 2005, 178). Undoubtedly, the majority of shops across North-Western Europe were still sparsely furnished, with a major emphasis on the mere displaying of the variety of the goods for sale. While metropolitan retail outlets were pulling in shoppers with attractive sales environments and novel commercial techniques, most provincial and village shops were simply furnished and relied upon rather ‘traditional’ sales techniques (Stobart 2007). However, elaborate metropolitan models were not without influence in provincial towns and
the commercial vocabulary of trade cards and advertisements, with a major emphasis on the variety of goods, prices, qualities as well as the novelty of goods both betraying and enhancing a growing consumer fever (Coquery 2004).

Such transformations also affected the balance of power in the retail landscape. As long as furniture, silverware, clothing represented an important asset (with an high intrinsic value), it could always be used as an alternative currency allowing people to barter or pawn (Lemire 2005). As material culture increasingly shifted from intrinsic value to design, taste and extrinsic attributes, the resale value of used objects was detrimentally affected. Secondary markets were and remained firmly rooted in pre-industrial societies where they played a strategic role in redistributing used goods across the map and the social hierarchy (Allerston 2007; Fontaine 2008; Stobart and Van Damme 2010). They also contributed to spreading the eighteenth-century fashion imperative among different social groups. Overall, however, secondary markets declined in turnover and social esteem compared to the retail circuits that specialised in producing and selling novelties (Allerston 1996; Blondé and Van Damme 2009). Eventually, the social depreciation of reselling resulted in a geographically and socially segmented low-end market for used goods next to a high-end market for valuable antiquities in the nineteenth century (Van Damme 2015a). That said, the expanding world of the shopkeeper did not prevent traditional circuits from contributing to the new consumer climate as well, as is amply shown by the role played by peddlers in spreading consumer innovations (Fontaine 1996; Deceulaer 2006). In short, while alternative uses and exchanges did not disappear, it was shops that profited most from the expansion of semi-luxuries in the age of Enlightenment. Even producers were obliged to enlarge the variety of goods on offer by including products made by others and elsewhere into their product array (De Munck 2010; Coquery 2011).

The number of shops and the frequency of shop visits grew as a result of new material culture and changing consumer patterns in the eighteenth century. However, this happened in the context of overall economic stability (Van Zanden 2001). How can this paradox be explained? The answer seems to be twofold. On the one hand, the growing number of shops did not necessarily imply an equally growing prosperity for shopkeepers. While much of the retail revolution narrative is inspired by the spectacular growth of retail densities in eighteenth-century society, part of this growth was offset by lower incomes earned by many shopkeepers. Several popular new products – such as hot beverages, tobacco, haberdasheries, cottons and fashion shops – required smaller amounts of capital from aspiring shopkeepers and, as a result, attracted salesmen and women of relatively modest means. The new luxury goods recruited more and more participants, but most buying and selling practices still depended upon very traditional ways of connecting with clients. In the absence of real productivity gains in retailing itself, the importance of their direct contribution to a sustained increase in per capita incomes, and hence to economic growth, must be questioned. Both the lower capital intensity and the cheaper location of several new luxuries can be credited with having facilitated the entrance onto the retail market of more modest players that also appealed to a more modest social clientele (Coquery 2011, 286–300).

Even though the aggregate income growth of the retail sector was much more modest than employment growth, overall per capita expenditure on shopping still seems to have risen in the eighteenth century: ‘Households reoriented their consumer behaviour to make heavy use of shops despite their high cost, not because of major supply side reductions in the transactions cost of retailing’ (De Vries 2008, 170). What the economic historian could frame as a transaction cost problem seems to have been perceived and experienced rather as an enjoyable cultural phenomenon. Moreover, it was a phenomenon that trained or even conditioned consumers in becoming the sort of material pleasure seekers that underpin modern consumer economies. Both in the metropolis and the provincial town, a pleasurable shopping environment and culture
became part and parcel of polite society (Borsay 1989; Walsh 1995, 2003; Stobart, Hann, and Morgan 2007). In fact, shopping achieved its particular linguistic significance in this period. Elite customers of the Au magasin de Paris, an Antwerp fashion shop, frequented its luxury premises on a very regular basis, most of the time to buy a handful of haberdasheries or services while expending modest sums of money only. It is clear from this that the need to spend more money and time on the act of buying – the need for more frequent shop visits that went hand in hand with the more fashionable and less durable consumer culture – was turned into a valuable and pleasurably pastime: a real culture of shopping.

This shopping and consumer culture, however, did not come as a revolution; it had already matured for centuries. From at least the end of the Middle Ages, changing sensibilities in shopping behaviour began to influence retail practices (Keene 2006). In line with Renaissance notions of the personal and public display of taste and affluence, luxury consumption was gradually un-attached from its religious and moral overtones. The daily world of shopping for necessities continued to colour the world of buying and selling, but its practices were enriched by an urban, civilised lifestyle aimed at aesthetic refinement, knowledge of taste and being à la mode. Shopping as a public performance of collectively shared norms and values, and as a polite pastime, became intrinsically linked to being urban and urbane (Blondé and Van Damme 2013). Economically speaking, the practices that were fostered by this shopping culture developed along very traditional paths of the retailing business. What mattered was variety and choice, trust, knowledge, proximity, advice and the provision of credit (Mitchell 2014; Van Damme 2015b). In sum, the best model into which we might fit the rapidly changing world of retailing in early modern Europe is a cultural one and a traditional one as well – a model that has little to do with an imagined economic revolution.

Towards mass consumption and retailing in the fin-de-siècle world

On 14 April 1910, the new department store Grand Magasins Leonhard Tietz had its grand opening in the Rue Neuve, one of the major shopping streets in belle-époque Brussels. The newspaper reporting on this major social event was overwhelmed by the enormous quantity and variety of goods, offered in a luxurious and splendid, bright setting, which the journalist described as kind of “Noah’s Ark” of material culture (Arnout 2015, 37–41). Journalistic reports such as this were the rule rather than the exception for the time: whether in London, Paris, Brussels, New York or Chicago, contemporaries in Europe and North America were impressed by the sheer architectural monumentality of these retail structures that so heavily contrasted with the more modest and mundane shops with which they entered into competition. Increasingly equipped with restrooms, restaurants and cafés, department stores not only offered goods for sale, but crucially also provided tactile entertainment: a genuine, modern and leisurely shopping experience (see the chapter by Elvins in this volume).

There are many reasons why department stores figure so prominently in consumer and retail historiographies of the turn-of-the-century world (Crossick and Jaumain 1999; Howard 2015). Department stores – some of which had inauspiciously and gradually evolved from drapery shops – became icons of a late nineteenth-century consumer revolution, the shock waves of which were soon to be felt all over the world. From their very beginnings, these cathedrals of consumption echoed Western modernity: they became the perfect foil for contemporary and later commentators to project both awe and anxieties about Western civilisation (see the chapter by Fujioka in this volume). In Europe, early urban theorists like Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel saw them as embodiments of modern Western culture, centred around urban shopping and a tantalising, sensory spectacle of objects; the economist Werner Sombart equated
them with modern Western capitalism (Slater and Tonkiss 2001; Trentmann 2016). With the benefit of hindsight, however, it seems fair to say that department stores were more important as an idea or imagining of Western progress and superiority than as forces that fundamentally revolutionised the retail landscape. At the end of the 1930s, for instance, they still monopolised only a tiny fraction of retailing in Britain (no more than 5.5% of total retail sales). This was not significantly different in many other Western and non-Western countries where department stores had been heralded as shining symbols of modernisation (Haupt 2012, 272; Harada’s chapter in this volume). The real question then becomes why it was that department stores encapsulated and warped Western imaginations. Using department stores as a starting point, we question how to reinterpret retailing and its connection with the consumer variable in a period that figures so prominently in consumer and retail historiography. It focuses anew on how our shared consumer and retail knowledge have become fundamentally enmeshed with persistent, western narratives of modernity and with core western values, and concludes that any triumphalism about this period is misplaced and unwarranted.

When reconsidering consumer and retail evolutions at the end of the nineteenth-century, it is essential to adopt a broader contextual perspective. Department stores should never be isolated from the environment in which they emerged: they were an integral aspect of urbanisation in a feverish period of city building, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, that had radically broken open the pre-industrial urban landscape of North-Western Europe. Beginning in Paris under the influential guidance of Baron G.E. Haussmann, new, apartment-filled boulevards and shopping avenues began to emerge in capital cities such as Vienna, Brussels and Berlin, and in many expanding metropolitan centres in America. Private, commercial enterprise was integral and, in many ways, essential to such endeavours, since it drove up property values and promised future owners and urban municipalities a healthy return on investments by transforming the most congested and unsanitary inner-city neighbourhoods. Especially after the 1870s, when a global economic downturn hit financial markets, wealthy investors and local politicians followed each other into urban renewal and channelled massive public and private capital into the beautification of the public domain and the modernisation of the accompanying hotel, café/restaurant, and retail sectors. Promoting Western cities as shining stars of a fashionable and rapidly modernising leisure and consumption landscape became integral to attracting a growing group of visitors and wealthy, suburbanising citizens alike (Wagenaar 2001; Howard 2015).

Department stores clearly profited from and contributed to this urban “boosterism”: some of the technological and architectural marvel and expertise that accompanied the planning and engineering of urban renewal rubbed off on the outsides and insides of department stores. Built out of iron and sometimes with spectacular glass facades, connected to electric lightning, gas and water pipes, modern sewage systems, and equipped with new escalators, these buildings were themselves seen as an exhibition of what Western “superiority” and industrial progress were able to accomplish at the turn of the century. Moreover, just as the impressive arcades and covered market hall buildings, which for similar reasons underwent an upsurge from the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, department stores materialised a radical symbolic break with the past. From a physical point of view, such a break with the filth and ugliness of days gone by was quite genuine, and Romantic observers woefully lamented the destruction of picturesque streets and structures that had to make room for modern city-making. Outside North-Western Europe as well, in cities as diverse as Shanghai, Cairo, Istanbul, Buenos Aires and Mexico City, Haussmannisation and the arrival of Paris- and US-styled department stores, not only signalled the foreign penetration of Western capital and imperialistic efforts, but was also seen quite literally as a physical tabula rasa over a “horrendous” and “barbarous” non-Western past (Hazel Hahn 2015).
Figure 3.1  Exterior of La Maison Tietz, a grand department store in fin-de-siècle Antwerp, Belgium
Source: Courtesy of Collection Janssens.
However, from the point of view of an already long-running consumer and retail continuity in North-Western European cities, the department store—myth—the idea of it being connected to Western progress and modernisation—begins to crumble when placed in proper retail perspective. Department stores were not only applauded for their architectural and technological prowess, but also for allegedly opening up the market for an unparalleled cornucopia of material plenty and desires: haberdashery, furniture, clothing, glass, china—they were all organised in different sections of the department store. In reality, however, this was not mass consumption, since most of the products that department stores sold were rather highly priced and aimed at an upper market clientele. True, the sheer diversity and variety of goods on offer could never be matched by the type of much smaller eighteenth-century fashion shops and à la mode magazins described above. Yet, these fashion shops had promoted themselves by stressing diversity and variety of supply, and effectively offered cheaper semi-luxuries to a much wider segment of people than before—very similar to what department stores were doing a century later (Walsh 1999).

It can also be seriously questioned if department stores were really as liberating for urban consumers as often has been claimed. In particular, their importance in the life of shopping women—providing a civilised safe haven from the vulgarity of the street and marketplace—has been much exaggerated. Emile Zola, most famously, focused in Au Bonheur des Dames (1883) on the inner psyche of a young, fragile country girl from Normandy, Denise Baudu, who becomes completely intoxicated and seduced by the machinery of a Parisian department store. The topos lingered on and became stock material for typical masculine anxieties and phantasies about women (Tiersten 2001, 15–54). If Zola’s text could at least be interpreted as a socially heartfelt critique of the working conditions in department stores, others had a harder time keeping in check their male, erotic imaginations around consuming women, with a sex scene in the bedding...
department of a Swedish store being the questionable climax of *Det stora varuhuset* (1926) by Sigfrid Siwertz (Trentmann 2016, 216). In the real world, shopping women in North-Western European cities had been a common and unremarkable sight for centuries; much of the late nineteenth-century moral panic around kleptomaniac or insatiable, spend-crazy female shoppers should in fact be read in reverse. Far from being an adequate description of the urban world, they tell us more how the puritan and curtailed Victorian mind filtered department stores and female shopping in the imagination. They can be placed in the same category as other conservative or well-meant paternalistic reactions against the “New Woman”, who was gradually emancipating herself in the social, economic and political male-dominated arenas of society (Rappaport 2001).

The point where contemporaries and generations of historians did get it right about department stores is in their use of relative innovative marketing and business techniques. Department stores deployed efficient and cost-cutting business strategies, in part by acting as wholesalers or by directly contracting producers, while in the meantime also importing some of the bad working conditions that had been pioneered in the industrial sector: long hours, low wages, authoritarian rule and organisation, etc. Goods were ticketed, prices fixed, keen prices advertised, end of season sales promoted and a choice offered between paying ready money for lower prices or via more expensive forms of product instalment credit. Lower profit margins per item sold were compensated by higher turnover which also facilitated a more direct interplay with fashion cycles and warranted large advertising budgets bent on luring as many customers as possible into the stores (Alexander and Akehurst 1998; Howard, 2015 – see also the chapter by Elvins in this volume).

In many of these retail innovations, however, the department store was not a stand-alone in the consumer landscape of the nineteenth-century city (Lesger and Furnée 2014). The breakthrough of the department store was built on a whole range of earlier retail innovations pioneered in shops and previous large-scale retail formats such as the sixteenth-century *panden*, seventeenth–century shopping galleries and early nineteenth-century *bazaars* (Vermeylen 2003, 19–28; Walsh 2003, 52–79; Stobart 2014, 26–27). More importantly, other emerging late-nineteenth-century retail formats – most conspicuously the retail chain and co-operative – used similar business innovations, arguably to much wider effect. Retail chains and co-operatives certainly started to attract and reach bigger segments of society than the belle-époque department store (Alexander, Shaw, and Hodson 2003).

However, with the advent of the retail chain and co-operative, urban consumer landscapes did not change overnight. Almost everywhere the number of shopkeepers followed urban population growth (bakeries, for instance, are a good case in point) and even old retail circuits, such as the peddlers, successfully defended their position in the changing consumer and retail market of the fin-de-siècle world. Street vending as well as open-air markets proved extremely resilient in fulfilling the basic needs and wants of the masses (Stobart and Van Damme 2016; Calaresu and Van den Heuvel 2016). Yet, both the retail chain and the co-operative, much more as the department store, can be seen as formats linked to burgeoning mass market aspirations and profound social transformations in the urban field. With the increase of urban population, working-class demand for cheap food and standardised goods (shoes, clothing, etc.) was on the rise. Often growing organically out of small food shops, grocers, chemists, and shops attending to, for instance, the sale of cheaply manufactured *prêt-à-porter*, the retail chain or multiple retailer, tried to find a rational solution to what had become a growing problem in the expanding North-Western European cities around 1870, namely provisioning for basic, day-to-day needs at much lower prices than before (Stobart 2008, 138–143). Moreover, with the final breakthrough of industrial modes of production, consumer trust had to be earned for selling mass-produced items, including hitherto unknown items such as meat extracts, margarine, conserves, canned food and so on.
Although retail chains were not solely, nor even firstly devoted to selling food, distributing cheap food and manufactured foodstuffs became central to the political economy of industrialising Europe and North America, since this would cut directly into the high cost of living for the expanding and still badly paid labour force (Atkins and Oddy 2008). When, due to agricultural mechanisation and innovations in rail transport and steam shipping, cheap grain – and soon afterwards fruit, vegetables and frozen meat – began to pour into European ports from the 1870s onwards, the multiple retailer followed suit by branching out their operations on both the local and supra-local levels (see the chapter by Kruger in this volume). Soon, retail chains, addressing their customers with recognisable shop architecture, brands and names (Sainsbury’s is a long-lived example in Britain), operated complex networks of logistics and distribution which allowed for unprecedented retail coverage, economies of scale, and in the end cheaper prices and a trustworthy retail format for everybody. Co-operatives started developing and multiplying along similar lines, sometimes producing their own food to secure quality and trustworthiness of sale in an industrialising product market. They differed, however, from the more commercially oriented multiple retailers by being built on dominant political-ideological concerns about the material improvement of the labouring classes. Customers had to become a member of the co-operative and commercial profits of the retail operation could eventually be used for schemes of social and
moral betterment (Furlough and Strikwerda 1999; see also the chapter by Hilson et al. in this volume).

By focusing on the co-operative movement, among others, the fin-de-siècle world has rightly been recognised for putting consumer rights and the entitlement to consume high on the social and political agenda. The idea that better-paid labourers could be made into consumers became integral to the Fordist mode of production; as was the Taylorian idea that a more structured and better organised working schedule could both improve labour productivity and create leisure time for the employed (Tomka 2013, 192–262). For most North-West European and North American countries, however, the actual implementation and legal realisation of these ideas would only come after the horrors of the World Wars and the setbacks of the Great Depression, which made social restructuring mandatory. In Belgium, for instance, new social laws were being issued in the last two decades of the nineteenth century under pressure of, among others, the rising Socialist Party, but these only remedied the most grievous ills of the industrial labour model (abolishment of child labour and required schooling, wage protection by abolishing truck systems, and so on). Of arguably greater importance in placing the consumer in the centre of the political arena in this period were the growing consumer movements taking the form of both concerned ‘leagues’ of housewives and full-blown urban protest and social mobilisation around essential consumer goods and services, like gas and water (Chatriot, Chessel, and Hilton 2004; Taylor and Trentmann 2011). In their attention for public safety and health, however, the initiatives of concerned consumer-citizens stayed very much in tune with typical

Figure 3.4 A traditional shop selling dried fish displayed on the shop front and on trestles in the street; next door, a more modern looking tobacconist has neatly arranged his merchandise behind a glazed window. Antwerp, Belgium, c.1893

Source: Courtesy of Collection Janssens.
From consumer revolution to mass market

Turn-of-the-century bourgeois prerogatives and sensibilities. Mass mobilisation around improvements in the purchasing power of the labouring classes was in general not part of the agenda.

All in all, the rise of new retail formats at the end of the nineteenth century did not revolutionise the retail world. Retailers proved to be innovative in adapting to larger changes in the fin-de-siècle world; from the perspective of the urban consumer, however, not that much fundamentally changed. Although the building of new department stores, and to a lesser extent the new arcades and market halls, was accompanied by physical destruction and uprooting of existing streets and neighbourhoods, these core symbols of nineteenth-century consumerism should not, in the end, be understood as having invented urban shopping as a leisurely and civilised pastime; they merely coloured its flamboyant, belle-époque outlook. Catering for rising urban consumer demand had a big impact on the activities of especially multiple retailing and the co-operative movement, yet here as well claims about the advent of an age of mass consumerism should be nuanced. Despite unquestionable improvements in the living standards of the expanding middle classes, North-Western Europe and North America around 1900 remained highly socially polarised and divided between labour and capital. Mass markets did not come with an impressive treats-for-all consumer party before wartime: avoiding hunger and making hard choices around proper clothing and the home was the best most labouring people could aspire for.

Conclusion

While major narratives about Western retail and consumer revolutions were severely attacked in the past decades, they continue to govern our interpretations of late early modern and nineteenth-century transformations in buying and selling practices. And while, quite often, the connections between the changing worlds of retailing and consumption are intuitively presupposed – as is exemplified for instance in the abundant literature on advertising – studies that really interconnect changes in consumption and distribution are few. By focusing upon two periods of critical transformation in material culture of North-Western Europe, consumption and retailing, this chapter explored the possibilities of bringing together these research traditions. Other regions and periods might readily serve this purpose as well, although they remain under-represented and under-theorised in overall historiography.

Recent research has done a good job in downplaying the revolutionary character of consumer and retail changes. After all, economic growth was slow and even supposedly modern late nineteenth-century retailing took place in the context of a socially skewed society, targeting urban elites and the middle classes, rather than the mass market consumer. Hence, it probably does not come as a surprise that linear stage models, in which the rise of the department stores was seen as the logical and necessary outcome of economic modernisation and urbanisation, were quickly abandoned. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries different commercial circuits coexisted, competed but also complemented each other. Shopkeepers, as is clear by now, were not only victims of the competition of department stores: to a certain extent they also benefited by intercepting customers frequenting these same department stores. And while street vending was considered an obsolete and ill-trusted model, it continued to play its role well into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. The same argument can be made about basic open-air markets, which often proved to be more attractive and successful as the newly constructed, but sometimes cumbersome covered market buildings. Without necessarily downplaying the cultural and societal impact of these eye-catching nineteenth-century retail innovations and enterprises, at the start of the twentieth century, the lion’s share of buying and selling across Europe developed in rather common, “traditional” retail outlets, often using well-known, day-to-day retailing methods.
However, by stressing deep-historical lines of continuity and downplaying triumphant Western modernisation theses, it would be easy to miss one crucial and very important long-term transformation. Strikingly enough, both in the early modern period and the nineteenth century alike, shopping and retailing were clearly on the rise, and their development was determined to a large extent by consumer and material culture changes that necessitated more frequent shopping activities, preferably in an enjoyable and civilised (urban) context. Despite clear and obvious innovations in doing retail business, common traditional sales qualities—such as the personal and informative relationship between buyer and seller—continued to dominate. In fact, on an aggregate level, a large part of the retail growth and diversification happened despite the absence of significant productivity gains in retailing practices. People spent more time and money on shopping, without necessarily enriching the individual shopkeeper. In the nineteenth century as well, supply side cost reductions in the production and transport of goods ultimately turned the retailing moment into a challenging economic bottleneck. Remarkably enough, however, shopping was not considered an increasing social cost, but instead became framed as a civilised and pleasurable part of an urban, bourgeois lifestyle. Indeed, the early modern consumer changes, such as the growing fashion sensitivity of the material culture, necessitated more frequent shopping visits. Yet, the need to go out for shopping (and spend more money on the act of shopping) was captured and appropriated by turning it into an enjoyable and pleasurable pastime and leisure activity. Hence, shopping activities were increasingly part of an evolving bourgeois mindset through the deployment of a genteel shopping environment and vocabulary. The arcades, covered market halls and department stores—as iconic cathedrals of consumption—were the elaborated outcome of a process that set in well before the industrial revolution took off. In the metropolitan environment, at least, the retail revolution was foremost a cultural revolution—albeit in the first place one for the well-to-do and bourgeois.

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