

From Neighbour to Consumer
The Transformation of Retailer-Consumer Relationships in
Twentieth-Century Germany

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Modern mass consumer societies are organized around two principal actors. On the one hand, the consumer is often seen as the unchallenged sovereign, deciding what will be bought. On the other hand, retailers and retailing have established themselves as a central branch of the economy, deciding what people can buy and what will be sold. While it is debatable which of these two actors is more powerful, the changing relationship between them is clearly crucial to an understanding of modern consumer societies.

While studies of consumption have become a fashionable topic of historical and sociological research, the history of twentieth-century retailing in Germany remains largely unexplored.¹ This chapter will use the changing perspectives of retailers to provide new insights on the changing relationship between retailers and consumers in twentieth-century Germany. It will focus on retailers' awareness of consumers, their practices and behaviour within stores and, finally, on their changing understanding of their own strategic position for the consumer. Retailing has been and remains a fragmented economic sector. Rather than isolating the retailing sector, however, it is important to situate retailers and consumers within the broader socio-economic and political developments that helped shape their relationship.

Retailing and Shopping in Imperial Germany

The late nineteenth century was the formative phase of the modern consumer society in Germany. In contrast to other Western societies, especially Britain, France and the United States, however, consumer awareness was underdeveloped here.² In Germany there were no self-conscious consumers who expressed themselves in public politics and discourse before the turn of the twentieth century, when price increases and quality problems led to regional food riots, boycotts and political mobilization.³ The relatively slow and incomplete evolution of consumer identity resulted not only from the relative weakness of the liberal bourgeoisie, but also from the strong position of academic and commercial experts, who regulated the broad fields of

everyday consumption. For instance, the German food law of 1879 introduced fairly effective food control and, from 1885 on, was reinforced by official norms of the 'normal' composition of the most important foodstuffs. Quality standards were set by producers in different branches, such as the chocolate and cocoa industries from 1876. Chemists and lawyers, too, were experts, who moved a growing number of consumption-related problems on to the political agenda.

The most important consumption expert, however, was the retailer, in most cases the qualified owner of a small shop. Although their qualification might appear low in hindsight, for most shoppers retailers were *the* experts for new and seasonal consumer goods. In the late nineteenth century this expertise became more and more important, as increasing specialization of production led to a wider range of goods that had to be introduced and explained by retailers.

The number of these everyday experts of consumption increased rapidly in the late nineteenth century. In Germany the expansion of retailing far exceeded population growth. The number of businesses in 'trade with goods' rose from 483,300 in 1875 to 659,714 in 1895 and to 942,918 in 1907.⁴ Expansion had significant implications for consumer-retailer relations. Competition increased, but in most cases it was not purely about price but service.⁵ Shopping standards increased, thus changing the human relations between retailer and customer. In the German Empire, especially from the late 1880s, the shopper became increasingly recognized as the oft quoted 'king'. Increased purchasing power established a new, virtual hierarchy between retailer and customer.⁶ Far from being fixed, the relationship between the two was fluid and contested in a kind of everyday theatre. The retailer became the link between a growing number of mass-produced consumer goods and a growing number of customers with expanding tastes and desires.⁷ As experts of mass consumption, retailers had to adjust to individual customers in a distinct, personal fashion – a performance practiced in front of dozens of other shoppers.

On the eve of World War One, most German retailers were convinced that this cult of the individual had reached an unsurpassable height. The changing relationship between retailer and consumer reflected profound social changes in modern retailing.⁸ Although the independent retailer remained the norm, the number of employees grew significantly in the late nineteenth century. Unlike the independent self-sufficient neighbourhood retailer, employees were trained in a new, professional way. For shop assistants, the shop was important but not the only site of work. In many cases, they had to visit and deliver goods to bourgeois customers at home. Home delivery and related services intensified during the 1880s. Working-class, like middle-class, customers now had their milk and bread delivered early in the morning. While retailers complained about the resulting increase in costs, male employees viewed such services as a challenge to their professional ethos and sense of duty.⁹ They insisted their professional place was inside the shop, centring on personal contact with the customer – anything else was seen as a loss of status vis-à-vis clerical white-collar workers in wholesaling and administration. Consequently, the professional

profile of sales personnel changed. Bourgeois manners and behaviour became a prerequisite. Likewise, the bourgeois consumer became the ideal customer for most German retailers. This socio-cultural transvaluation called, in turn, for new training methods, since most salesmen, and especially the quickly growing number of poorly paid saleswomen, came from the lower middle-classes and the working-classes.

The reform of behaviour and habitus led to a more differentiated type of business organization. Errands became the duty of apprentices and temporary workers, while salespersons and retailers remained in the shop, attending to regular customers. New forms of advertisement were used to attract new customers. Although the retailer was still a neighbour in many areas and although personal elements still dominated retailer-consumer relations in small and medium-sized shops, new reflexive forms of communication established themselves. Shopping was transformed into a ritual, where the process, aim and subject of commercial communication between retailer and consumer were increasingly regulated.¹⁰

The relationship between retailer and consumer, then, was situated in a normative discourse. The consumer should be respected as a generalizable subject, not as an individual with personal characteristics. A customer was entitled to high regard for being a customer, not for his or her particular personality. Salesmen and saleswomen, too, were not supposed to behave in a personalized, individuated fashion but to perform a general task. The standardization of products and salespersons was a parallel process.

The well-trained retailer was recast as a depersonalized facilitator of the sales transaction. Retailers were to attract the customer in an abstract not intimate fashion, guiding and instructing the consumer without obstructing the way to the product. This had two major emotional and psychological consequences for the consumer-retailer relationship. On the one hand, it required a new degree of self-discipline. Retailers and salespersons had to master and subordinate their own emotions to the imperatives of commercial success. Professional training and advice literature emphasized to retailers the need to control and analyse themselves in a self-critical way and to fight and eliminate personal preferences.¹¹ The relationship with consumers was determined by their solvency. On the other hand, 'knowledge of human nature' became the basis for a new style of customer management.¹² Retailers learnt how to profile the customer at first glance and abstract social background and even character. This knowledge enabled salespersons to act and serve in a differentiated and successful fashion. They were encouraged to lip-read a consumer's desires, but it was not their simple duty to fulfil existing tastes. Rather, retailers were trained to educate consumers and motivate them to buy goods of higher quality. A salesperson should present the requested goods but should also offer the customer better goods to choose from. At a basic material level, this upgrading practice reflected a commercial rationale of increasing turnovers and profits. In cultural terms, however, this new form of the service encounter also inscribed new habits and expectations into the relationship of retailer and consumer and their respective

identities; it was a demonstration of the new ethos that the consumer was sovereign and free to choose.¹³

Compared to France or Britain, advice from salespersons was a normative expectation in Germany. Retailers' competence and trustworthiness became an ever more important, indeed central, feature of their role as experts of consumption. Of course, competence was an idealized discourse and conflict was a regular part of everyday life in a shop. Still, the communication of commercial expertise and skill were vital resources in the competition for the trust and custom of consumers. Knowledge of one's customers' life was considered essential to tie them to one's shop as faithful consumers: 'The customer must be turned into an acquaintance, otherwise the relationship will not endure'.¹⁴

The emotional and psychological reconfiguration of the interaction between consumers and retailers proceeded in tandem with the spatial transformation of shopping (see Figure 2). The space of shopping expanded, most prominently in the new department stores and the ambience of the shopping experience changed, especially in the larger stores. Shopping became a mass phenomenon.¹⁵ Personal obligations and considerations retreated behind the new, more open and transparent, worlds of consumption.



Figure 2 The Shop as a Stage: Rudolf Hertzog, Berlin, 1913

Source: P. Lindenberg, 'Berlin und das Haus Rudolph Hertzog seit 1839', in *Agenda Rudolph Hertzog Berlin 1914*, (Berlin: Rudolph Hertzog, 1913), p. 49.

Regular contact with the customer required skills that increasingly became associated with female qualities. At the turn of the twentieth century the growing number of low-paid female employees was concentrated primarily in shops selling goods directly to customers, while male employees occupied more attractive senior and managerial tasks.¹⁶ One consequence of the intensified feminization of direct selling was that even medium-sized shops began to turn to cheap saleswomen. The shop became a differentiated and gendered workplace that mirrored the 'nature' of different genders.

These new forms of organizations allowed higher efficiency and became the basis of modern business management. Book-keeping became more common and indicators like turnover and profit rates more important. Especially 'new' business types, like the department stores and multiple shops, changed the way of selling to maximize profits.¹⁷ Early marketing knowledge was rooted in commercial practice and became professionalized in newly established business schools.¹⁸ At the same time, the practices and conventions of both retailers and customers were becoming regulated by an increasing number of governmental norms set by a range of academic experts. Hygiene regulations transformed the display and handling of groceries. Packaging became more important. The interiors and exteriors of shops were planned with the help of architects, psychologists and advertising experts. Retailer–consumer relations were one part of this broader framework of managing rationality and efficiency.

Middle-class and academic efforts to educate the consumer in the art of tasteful and morally upright consumption had limited success.¹⁹ From the 1880s, especially, consumer cooperatives became an active force in the socialisation of the consumer.²⁰ They tried to improve the situation of the worker as a consumer by delivering high-quality products at non-profit costs. Their model of an egalitarian consumer society was based on the ideal of a rational consumer who knew his or her needs and who bought without being manipulated by commercial advertising.²¹ Consumer and retailer here featured as allies in the development of a rational consumption that eventually would secure the coming of the cooperative commonwealth. While the behaviour of employees could be regulated with the help of instructions, the behaviour of the consumer was primarily understood as a problem of enlightenment and education. To reform capitalist society the consumer was instructed to buy as many goods as possible in the cooperative shop and to respond in a rational, flexible fashion to price rises or problems of supply. The consumer was seen as a vital link in a chain of social transformation: 'Inspired by a single wonderful vision, we, the army of consumers, are able to create paradise on earth'.²² This vision, however, won over only a small number of consumers. Although consumer education remained a distinct branch of cooperative culture, competition with commercial retailers led the cooperatives to adopt retailer–consumer relations comparable to those of their profit-oriented rivals. For most consumers, cheap prices and standardized quality were more important than the idea of an egalitarian consumer society.

The First World War changed retailer–consumer relations dramatically. The established hierarchy of a buyer’s market was transformed into a new hierarchy of a seller’s market. The main focus of retailing was no longer to sell, but to obtain goods. Raw materials were increasingly controlled and regulated, while clothing and foodstuffs became part of an expanding rationing system. Retailers were integrated into the German war economy. They had to adopt the increasing number of regulations and communicate these to their customers. Tension between retailers and consumers grew rapidly. Retailers were blamed for scarcities, poor quality products and inflationary prices, resulting from the collapse of international trade and ineffective state controls. At the same time, many retailers tried to take advantage of wartime shortages and enhance their social standing by exploiting their superior position vis-à-vis consumers. Regular customers were favoured. Products were held back and prices raised excessively. As access to goods became a matter of life and death and prices spiralled from inflation to hyper-inflation in the war and immediate post-war years, the previously ‘sovereign’ consumer found itself at the mercy of the retailer. The retailer was now king, ruling over his small kingdom, his shop: ‘Who doesn’t honour the saleswoman isn’t worth the merchandise’,²³ as a typical saying put it during the war.

The economic crisis of the war had institutional consequences for consumer–retailer relations. At the end of 1914 consumer cooperatives, trade unions and housewife organizations founded the War Committee for Consumer Interests, whose main task was to represent consumers vis-à-vis local, military and governmental authorities. Although praised as ‘a new factor of power’, the Committee effectively became an arm of government planning during the war. Although it had some success in minimizing scarcities and price increases, its main function was to educate consumers, especially housewives, in the organized and economical consumption of food and clothing. Since it was unable to change the structural problem of a seller’s market, however, the Committee’s moral politics of consumption was largely ineffective.²⁴

More important were changes in everyday supply, which undermined the central position of the retail trade. Customers made their own efforts to secure goods and to find alternative ways of supply. In the course of the First World War, the retail trade’s share of consumer spending fell dramatically, as many customers bought directly from farmers and producers. In addition, many firms and local authorities began to purchase goods directly from producers, seeking to stabilize production and public order.²⁵

Retailers found their commercial freedom increasingly circumscribed by the growing number of state regulations.²⁶ To protect consumers, maximum prices and supply rates were fixed. Retailers were obliged to start lists of their customers and adopt more transparent sales practices; for instance, prices had to be labelled openly. Price controls became routine, tax rates increased and a specialized bureaucracy took root. Meanwhile, the turnover of articles of everyday use decreased dramatically,

inflation minimized real incomes and the state began to support bigger and more efficient forms of business. Although retailer–consumer relations therefore changed in retailers’ favour, the First World War at the same time undermined their position in the supply chain and resulted in a drop in income and an increase in bankruptcies.²⁷

A Late Consumer Society: Germany Between the Two World Wars

Peace in 1918 and the end of the Allied blockade and the rationing system in 1919 marked the beginning of the end of the seller’s market. Retailer–customer relations in the immediate post-war years were characterized by widespread poverty, the disintegration of international and wholesale trade, inflation and political instability. The situation improved after the currency reform in 1923 and, after 1924, relations partly returned to their pre-war state: ‘The hunt for consumer goods was replaced ... by the struggle for customers’.²⁸ Turnovers and ranges grew and contemporaries observed a new ‘quality selection of the customer’.²⁹ For retailers this situation offered new opportunities, but in the first instance it meant new investment and increased fixed costs.³⁰ Weimar Germany witnessed a widespread debate about rationalization and its implications for retailers and consumer alike.

Although ‘rationalization’ was a topic in German retailing long before the First World War, the discussion of scientific management intensified in the 1920s, focusing on better business management.³¹ Cost-benefit analysis, book-keeping and rational store management were propagated as the foundations of successful retailing.³² The business school system was expanded. Rationalization also meant a new understanding of the customer. The idea of a uniform shopper was abandoned for the idea of segmented consumer types. This had different consequences for different branches of the retail sector.

Although department stores, consumer cooperatives and multiple shops enjoyed disproportionate growth between 1924 and 1932, small and medium-sized firms continued to dominate German retailing. In 1925 there were 768,618 retail establishments, in 1939 833,192. The number of employees per business rose from 2.14 in 1925 to 2.67 in 1939.³³ Personal relations with the customer seemed to stand a good chance of survival in the competition with larger, more impersonal stores.

As a consequence, shop owners tried to improve personal service. Retailers presented themselves as a ‘competent partner and lively interested friend’, who gives ‘advice and help’ and shows ‘tact and discretion’.³⁴ Of course, this was a marketing strategy. Simultaneously, new index card systems were developed, which recorded customers’ preferences and personal data. The training of apprentices was intensified.

Product quality became a prominent topic once again in the late 1920s. Next to the growing chain of one-price stores, there was also an expansion of the specialist store. This was promoted as a place where consumers could buy individual goods of

high quality that, perhaps, were more expensive than mass-manufactured articles at the time of purchase but ultimately offered superior quality and durability. Specialist retailers positioned themselves as the champions of long-term use, quality and economy against consumerist mass production.³⁵ Choice and purchasing decisions were located in a moral discourse of social corporate responsibilities: consumers were urged to back small retailers because of their social function.³⁶

The ghost that haunted the German debate about 'rationalization' was the 'Americanization' of German retail trade associated with department stores and cheap one-price stores (see Figure 3). Although their wealth was admired, the character of American consumers seemed very different from that of their German counterparts: 'The people are so uniform, their demands and all the articles produced to cover them so standardized, that one cannot believe that they are human beings. Customers are viewed as machines that instinctively buy what advertisements tell



Figure 3 Saleswomen as Objects of 'American' Advertising, Berlin, 1925

Source: *Warenhäuser. Ein Spiegelbild volkstümlicher Verkaufsstätten. Auf Grund einer Darstellung des grössten Warenhauskonzerns Europas im Eigenbesitz: Hermann Tietz*, (Berlin: Schröder, 1928).

them to'.³⁷ German visitors to the United States, by contrast, learnt to recognize new forms of service and recommended them to German retailers. Far from amounting to a paradigm shift, however, such recommendations were most influential where they reinforced established traditions and practices of service in German retail trade, such as an emphasis on kindness.³⁸ American retailing was embedded in a culture of competitiveness that was not comparable or applicable to the German situation. Large firms, which used service *and* price as elements of 'competition for the favour of the customer',³⁹ were successful because the importance of cheap goods increased especially during the world economic crisis. Still, the symbol of 'Americanization' of German retailing, the famous Karstadt department store on Alexanderplatz in Berlin, proved a commercial failure when turnover collapsed in 1930.

The consumer cooperatives, too, started to rationalize their organization in 1924. Although most managers rejected the cultural consequences of 'Americanization', they consistently applied scientific management. The education of their consumers remained one key element of rationalization. The consumer was regarded as a partner in the quest for global justice and equality. In the late 1920s the cooperatives even excluded more than one million so-called 'paper soldiers' from their membership, that is, dormant consumers who had ceased to buy in cooperative shops. Leading managers knew that education on its own was not enough: 'The struggle for sales is a struggle for the consumer's soul. In this fight the power of the cooperative idea stays at the side of the consumer cooperatives, but this non-material weapon is not enough to achieve far-reaching results in sales promotion'.⁴⁰ As a consequence, the cooperatives stressed the high quality of cooperative products.⁴¹ Cooperative managers believed in the vision of Fordism, of perfect mass-produced goods. In social practice, the development of a 'rational' consumer remained a distant goal. Most members did not concentrate their purchase on cooperative products; fashion and brand articles especially were bought from capitalist competitors.

The relative failure of consumer cooperatives documents the dilemma of attempts to rationalize consumer behaviour. The consumer as 'king' required well-furnished shops, fast and competent service, a broad and well-packaged range of articles and low prices. To rationalize consumer behaviour was like trying to square a circle: 'If it were possible to educate the consumer to make his purchasing decisions only in a rational way, it would be possible to rationalize distribution, that is the different branches of distribution, too'.⁴² In this view, rationalizing retailing failed because of the 'irrationality' of consumer behaviour. Consequently, at the beginning of the world economic crisis most experts still thought that consumers had to be educated and even regulated: retailing and consumption had to be rationalized simultaneously.

The new relationship between retailer and consumer in the 1920s developed in the context of limited competition. Even by the late 1920s large segments of the retail trade were regulated. Price competition was limited. The price of bread and bakery products was fixed in the whole country, meat prices in southern German towns. Fish supply was nearly monopolized, milk prices were set by local authorities. Brands

with fixed prices made up more than half the turnover in the grocery trade. In food retailing, price competition existed only for so-called 'competitive articles' like salt, sugar or lard and even these were regularly sold below purchase price.⁴³ Between 1926 and 1932 the quickly growing market share of one-price shops showed that price competition could be a successful strategy. But, significantly, it did not become the general rule in retailing.

To educate consumers required hard empirical data. In this way, the attention given to consumer education facilitated the professionalization of market research and statistics. At the level of single firms, branches and business organizations, book-keeping and statistics had started long before the First World War.⁴⁴ Indicators like turnover, profit margins and turnover rates gave a first impression of consumer behaviour. This data was used as an empirical base for more detailed characterizations of consumers. Psychological research established differentiated consumer types. The consumer was no longer a person distinguished only by income and preferences, but was segmented further by cultural types, opinions and associations, such as 'the elegant lady, the practical housewife, the countryside shopper, the woman with a shawl, the old lady, the young girl, the child, the gentleman, the good lady-friend' or 'the demanding, the expert, the self-opinionated, the objective, the expensive one'.⁴⁵ It was hoped that such information would make the retailer-consumer encounter in single shops more productive. At the level of the retail trade in general statistics acquired new significance towards the end of the inflationary period. Retail trade associations collected and published data which was condensed by the new institutes researching economic cycles and commerce, such as the *Institut für Konjunkturforschung* in Berlin and the *Institut für Handelsforschung* in Cologne (see Figure 4). Rhythms and changes of consumption in different branches and businesses became the subject of systematic analysis. At the level of products and product groups, commercial market research began to be professionalized in the late 1920s, when journals like *Der Markt der Fertigware* and *Blätter für landwirtschaftliche Marktforschung* were published.⁴⁶ Founded in 1934, the institute of consumer research (*Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung*) combined quantitative data and psychological research to optimize the sales efforts of producers and retailers and to redirect consumer behaviour in line with Nazi policies.⁴⁷ As a result of this statistical transformation, retailers were able to reflect on consumption and consumers in a more abstract, scientific fashion.

In the 1930s retailer-consumer relations were more and more structured by state regulations. The national-conservative and then the National Socialist governments understood retailing as a necessary bridge between producer and consumer. Organic and corporate ideas of the economy now became dominant. On the one hand, this meant a rejection of the model of 'anonymous' distribution. 'The healthiest form of satisfying demand is when the retailer knows the customer and the customer knows the retailer', as one retailing advocate put it in 1934.⁴⁸ The retailer should 'ennoble'⁴⁹ commercial aspirations and educate the consumer as an active member of the racial

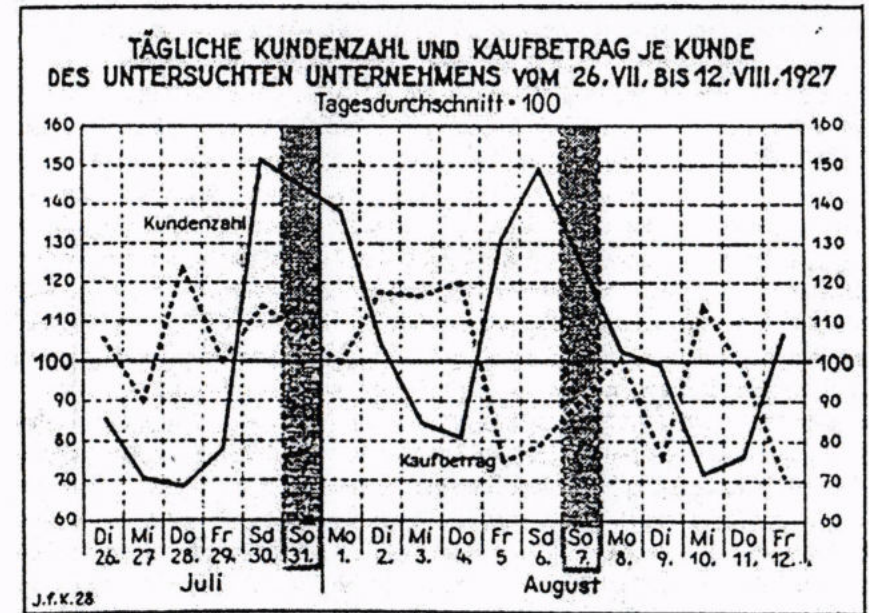


Figure 4 A New View of the Consumer: Rhythms of Purchase 1927

Source: H. Grünbaum, *Die Umsatzenschwankungen des Einzelhandels als Problem der Betriebspolitik* (Berlin: Hobbing, 1928), p. 34.

community, the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The relationship between retailer and consumer became a crucial element in the promotion of 'healthy' consumption and anti-Semitic behaviour. As two authors concluded in 1935: "Public interest against self-interest" has been accepted in the sphere of the economy and has to create a new type of salesman... A salesman can and may only be someone who has the mental capacity to act from an economic and cultural point of view... The first duty, resulting from this, is to suppress the bad one to give the good one a breathing space. As the peasant continuously weeds the fields, to secure the yield, the healthy one will only push through on the field of culture, if the bad one is pushed back'.⁵⁰

If retailer-consumer relations in the 1930s became dominated by the call for education, it was now officially propagated as a relation between partners with equal rights. The retailer was obliged to obtain the judgements of the consumers, to pass them on to the wholesale trade and industry. One result was the promotion of an efficient, but medium-sized retail trade as the economic norm. Large-scale enterprises, small shops and itinerant traders were suppressed, while new tax laws supported the establishment of a broad and decentralized network of independent and viable shops. Rationalization did not stop but was aimed at attracting the consumer.

Shops should be clean, tidy and beautiful. The interior of shops should express respect for employees and customers alike.⁵¹ The design of products and packages should be simple but attractive. Consumption in Germany created communities that had to fulfil reciprocal duties. 'This sphere of a responsible satisfaction of demand can't be solely left to "her majesty, the customer".'⁵²

After 1936, when the four-year plan intensified war preparations, retailer-consumer relations became ever more uneven. Personal relations always meant control of everyday activities: retailers knew who bought too much butter, coffee, alcohol, tobacco, sexy underwear or 'hygienic' articles. Customers had to register themselves to obtain scarce and popular products. Retailers became an integral part of directing consumption – a first sign of a re-emerging seller's market⁵³ – anticipating aspects of a rationing system already prior to the Second World War.

Germany entered the Second World War much better prepared than it had been for the previous war. Market research was one key element in Nazi consumption policy. By the mid-1930s the consumer was recognized as a 'risk factor'⁵⁴ for an imperial policy of expansion. Consequently, consumer research was intensified 'to control the unrestrained behaviour of the consumer somewhat and to direct it into reasonable directions', as one researcher put it in 1936.⁵⁵

The rationing system once more established a seller's market, but the Nazi regime tried to contain conflicts between retailers and consumers. A price freeze and the rationing of raw materials and a growing number of consumer goods led to a 'directed freedom of consumption',⁵⁶ characterized by a 'comprehensive simplification of demand',⁵⁷ too. In the Second World War the function of the retailer changed dramatically in contrast with that in the First World War: the retailer now had moral authority and was responsible for 'just distribution'⁵⁸ and social morale. From 1942 on, the number of offences by retailers rose. Regular customers normally received privileged treatment from retailers. Until 1944, however, strict punishment limited practices of hoarding and corruption. Most German retailers and consumers behaved the way propaganda intended.⁵⁹

Imagining Consumers in West German Society

The end of the Second World War did not lead to an immediate structural overhaul of the system of distribution. The Allied powers re-established the institutions of the German war economy to solve the most severe supply problems. As a result, the close relationship between retailer and customer continued during the subsistence crisis. The post-war years revealed the consequences of a seller's market. Although the strictly regulated official retail trade did not lose its main function in distributing basic supplies, new informal and unofficial systems, like black markets, expanded quickly. Many retailers profited from this situation and resulting suspicions and hostility eroded trust in retailer-consumer relations.⁶⁰

The transition to a market economy in the western zones brought about by the currency reform and the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany created new institutions and business organizations. These would gradually change the relations between retailers and consumers. Although shortages, black and grey markets did not disappear overnight, the introduction of the Deutschmark in 1948 amounted to a cultural paradigm shift for post-war society.

In the context of the new post-war market economy, debates about rationalization and the necessity of modernizing the retail trade led to significant changes in the management of distribution. Forms of retailing that had been suppressed by the Nazis, like the consumer cooperatives and multiple shops, developed new forward-looking standards. For example, they became pioneers of self-service in 1948, a decade before the general breakthrough of this new practice. Multiple shops started an aggressive price and advertisement policy to increase turnover.⁶¹ Although medium-sized firms still dominated the retail trade, these new tendencies of commercialization left their imprint on the image of consumer and retailer alike. The sovereignty of consumers was the 'cornerstone of the new economic order',⁶² the social market economy. Informed by neoclassical economics, the 'right to vote with money' would lead to an 'emancipation of the consumer'.⁶³ In this view, the role of the retailer was that of a dependent supplier. We have seen earlier that the idea of the sovereign consumer had been part of a long-standing fiction and had influenced the ritual of the commercial encounter between retailer and customer in medium-sized shops ever since the turn of the twentieth century. Developments after 1945, however, pushed notions of consumer sovereignty into new directions. On the one hand, the idea of sovereignty was challenged by new sociological perspectives. Attention to the complex realities of consumption was reinforced by a disillusionment with liberal ideals of the individual: 'The disoriented consumer, not the sovereign of the market, is the reality of the twentieth century'.⁶⁴ Like American consumers in the 1920s, German consumers in the 1950s were analysed as easily tempted dupes, in the grip of external, prearranged stimuli and at the mercy of modern advertising. The consumer was the product of 'economic degeneration': 'This is a picture of a human being who is empty and has degenerated to a materialist state'.⁶⁵ In this analysis, retailers regained a position of respect and importance as educators who could assist the consumer to regain a better life. On the other hand, economic experts began to stress the ongoing self-organization of the retail trade. Here, too, the sovereign consumer lost much of its liberal agency and was reduced to a mere economic function.

The main consequence of this debate was an intensified consumer protection policy, which set a modest regulatory framework for retailing. Consumer protection emphasized the need to provide consumers with better information and to institutionalize neutral advice. New consumption experts emerged who undermined retailers' traditional monopoly of expertise.⁶⁶ New forms of communication provided consumer information through journals, magazines and advice literature. Knowledge

and expertise came to rely less on personal contact and more on general, statistical and abstract knowledge of goods and services. At the same time, consumer protection was also designed to allow for fair competition amongst retailers. To strengthen price competition, the Liberal–Conservative government cut down cooperative privileges. The cooperative and discount law (1954) thus limited the dividend of the consumer cooperatives to 3 per cent. The cooperatives consequently began to sell at current prices, forcing medium-sized retailers to join retailer-purchasing cooperatives (Edeka, Rewe) or the new voluntary chains run by international groups. Importantly, retail price maintenance began to unravel in the late 1950s and was officially forbidden in 1967.

The introduction of quality standards and safety regulations was a second policy initiative that challenged the retailer as expert. Consumers were greeted by an expanding number of quality signs and categories and an increasingly standardized set of consumer goods.⁶⁷ Norms and regulations were normally set in consultation with producers and retailers, but the German food law of 1958 shows that they were sometimes introduced against the organized resistance of the commercial sector. The quality of goods was no longer represented by the retailer but delegated to symbols and academic experts. The test of an article's quality no longer took place in the shop but was communicated through an expanding network of 'objective' scientific institutions, like the consumer research testing agency, *Stiftung Warentest*, in Berlin.

Consumer policy developed as a reaction to fundamental changes in West German retailing from the late 1950s. This was, first, a response to changes in industrial production. The increasing number of consumer goods and a rise in real income led to an intensive differentiation among retail types. The ideal of the shop as the normal place to shop was replaced by clear-cut images of different business models.⁶⁸ Second, it was the result of new business organizations themselves. In West Germany the first supermarkets opened in 1958, a response to increasing market segmentation. The range of goods increased, fresh products were integrated, self-service became the new convention (see Figure 5), and the size of shops grew exponentially, all of which encouraged very different ways of rationalizing consumers' shopping practices. Third, the transformation of German retailing was based on a more price-oriented commercialization of the sector, resulting in a new price awareness among consumers. The success of the discount shops after 1962 illustrates the growing commercialization of consumer behaviour. First denounced as a 'primitive sales' technique', which reminded contemporaries of the war economy, these new discount shops forced competitors to cut their own prices, to differentiate their business strategy, or to close shop altogether.⁶⁹ Branded goods started their long triumphant march to hegemony, although premium brands could still be valued for their higher quality, rather than price.⁷⁰ The expansion of retail firms led to tough price competition, with special offers dominating newspapers and shop windows. The focus on the regular customer was abandoned; those consumers retreated to the declining number



Figure 5 Self-Service Takes Command, 1956

Source: 'Selbstbedienung setzt sich durch. Hannover eröffnete seinen siebten Selbstbedienungsladen', *Der Verbraucher*, Vol. 10 (1956), p. 116.

of medium-sized shops. Price wars and commercial transformation focused attention on internal organization, the sourcing of goods, purchasing power, discounts from suppliers, turnover per square meter, or how to differentiate one's firm from competitors.⁷¹ Intensified market research and a growing number of academic research institutes assisted these developments.

The commercial transformation of customer–retailer relations, then, resulted less from the alleged rise of the manipulated consumer than from complex socio-economic changes in the 1950s and 1960s. The individual retailer ceased to be the centre of the shop, marginalized by a new culture of self-service and standardized consumer goods. Instead of the personal encounter with customers, retailers now concentrated on administration and logistics.⁷² Personal communication became a cost factor. From the middle of the 1960s the medium-sized retailer symbolized for most consumers expensive articles and old-fashioned business. The phrase 'Tante Emma Laden', Aunt Emma shop, the new nostalgic nickname for small shops in

the 1960s, nicely captured the cultural recoding of the previously dominant small retailer as an old-fashioned vestige in the world of modern shopping.

This, of course, was not the end of personal relations between retailer and consumer. Rising turnovers and the advancing concentration of the retail trade did not mark the end of the evolving relationship between retailers and consumers. Advancing market saturation and the declining share of retailing in the consumption of private households since the late 1950s prompted fresh debates about the future place of retailing and the future role of consumers. The economic depression of 1973–4 amplified a sense of crisis for the model of concentration and cut-throat pricing.⁷³ There was a flourish of nostalgia that helped for a short time to re-establish smaller, mobile shops,⁷⁴ although many of these developments were far from traditional and drew on market research that had identified retail deserts in smaller towns and the countryside. Post-materialistic values promoted the new anti-hero of the 'new consumer', who consumes in a socially and environmentally responsible and reflective way.⁷⁵ Significantly, the niche market for ecological products started with small shops, thus re-establishing the figure of the honest, reliable and informed retailer, who favours consumers with advice and help.

In the early 1980s the concept of the 'new consumer' was appropriated by marketing experts in studies analysing differentiation and market segmentation. The consumer was increasingly sub-divided in efforts to specify the attraction of particular sales techniques in particular segments of the market. As a consequence, the personal characteristics of retail managers received renewed attention.⁷⁶ Leading retailers started to differentiate their shop ranges to attract different clientele. The assortments of supermarkets and early shopping malls were fused again. Regular promotions structured everyday shopping. In the late 1980s the model of polarized consumer behaviour introduced the microsegmentation of shop ranges. Today shops are planned on the basis of the socio-economic data of potential consumers. Trained salespersons are used to enforce a promotional event culture, to attract consumers' attention and to offer advice. In the 1980s segmentation and the renewed personalization of the shopping encounter thus came to coexist with the continuing emphasis on cut-throat price-oriented competition driven forward by discount stores.

Retailers and Consumers in a Planned Economy: a View from East Germany

The West German experience of commercialization, however, was not the only development after 1945. In the eastern zone, too, supplies were a central problem after the Second World War. The rationing system of the German war economy was perpetuated. The Soviet Military Administration and the newly established German Administration of Trade and Supply controlled the official part of retailing and

organized the difficult task of procuring consumer goods.⁷⁷ Consumer cooperatives were re-established and became important suppliers. In general, though, the retail trade was still dominated by small or medium-sized, privately owned shops.⁷⁸ Things changed only slowly after 1947, when a planned economy was introduced to improve industrial production and supply.⁷⁹

Although it took years to institutionalize a planned economy, this decision had far-reaching consequences for retailer–consumer relations. Relations were now framed by the socialist concept of demand.⁸⁰ Individuals were seen to have concrete needs, resulting from the state of productive forces. Consumers were normally also producers in this view. In capitalist society, where individual consumption and production were separated, the result was alienation and manipulation. In socialist society, by contrast, the collective ownership of the means of production would promote harmony between people's work and consumption. The people were sovereign, but as socialist consumers they would consume in a reflective and responsible way, aware of collective needs. A planned economy aimed at concentrating production and distribution to fulfil collective needs. Planning acknowledged the possibility of distinct tastes and habits of consumption – people had different skills and needs – but they had to be conditioned by the state of productive forces and the hierarchy of collective needs.

The logic of planning had far-reaching consequences for retailer–consumer relations. In a socialist society they were partners, working in different capacities for the same collective goal. Consumers had to be treated with respect and kindness, but retailers and salespersons were also expected to communicate collective needs. And collective needs were fixed through planning in the form of 'consumption funds'. Retailers and salespersons should help the consumer not to buy as much as possible, but to choose the right products. Their task was to rationalize consumption, to develop critical, responsible preferences. In short, socialist planning fused the egalitarian ideals of earlier consumer cooperatives with a technocratic vision of standardization and functionality. If the planned world of collective needs required an element of personal contact and instruction, relations between retailers and consumers were clearly depersonalized in socialist society, as aims and values were imposed from outside this relationship through the process of planning, leaving little space for the relative autonomy and individuality of either retailer or consumer.

When the first two-year plan began in 1949, it propagated an attractive vision: industrial development would focus on every-day supplies.⁸¹ In reality, the reconstruction of the East German economy was dominated by investments in heavy and primary industries. The production of consumer goods was of subordinate concern. The retail sector was seen as little more than an economic necessity. Problems of supply were exacerbated by the slow but steady 'liquidation of futile and unhealthy elements' in the retail trade, that is, privately owned shops.⁸² During the 1950s the face of the retail trade became more and more that of the female salesperson. Officially they were to provide service and convenience, but in everyday practice

retailing was often reduced to little more than the handing out of goods or the explaining of supply problems.⁸³ Nevertheless, living in a seller's market meant consumers needed to develop special relationships with retailers to obtain scarce products and to maintain or improve their standard of living. Shops thus served as communication centres, where information was shared and where protest and spontaneous criticism could be articulated.⁸⁴

The 1953 uprising demonstrated that this could be dangerous for the socialist regime. As a result, the regime not only adjusted its policy of consumption but reinforced the ideological education of salespersons. The retail body *Handelsorganisation* and consumer cooperatives were presented as an 'effective tool of our economic policy'⁸⁵ – the avant-garde of socialist consumer awareness. Their magazines were full of exemplary salespersons (see Figure 6). New symbols – like the Q sign (for quality) – were to symbolize to customers the benefits of consumer culture under socialism.⁸⁶ Socialist self-criticism revealed the gulf between ideal and practice. As one contemporary writer emphasized, salespersons were not normally 'polite, nimble, courteous and helpful'.⁸⁷ Many retailers were not motivated, behaved in an unfriendly way, or shut their shops before official closing times. The increasing amount of consumer goods led to untidy salesrooms. Inefficient shopkeeping and irregular supplies meant the loss or destruction of goods. By the early 1960s the retail trade was seen as a 'concentration point of negative influences arising from the private sphere, from production and private consumption'.⁸⁸ The critique of the retailer was complemented by a critique of the consumer. 'Bourgeois' expectations were criticized, as panic buying and hoarding became routine parts of everyday consumption.

The deep political and economic crisis had two main consequences for consumers and retailers. First, there was an expansion and professionalization of market research from the late 1950s. To fix production and consumption plans, the rationing system and the planned economy needed statistical information. In the late 1940s and 1950s socialist policy was able to draw on the principal categories of consumer research from the inter-war years, such as household budgets and market observation. The



Figure 6 Improving Selling Culture in East Germany with the Help of Self-Criticism, 1958

Source: *Handelswoche*, 3(40) (1958), p. 5.

problem was that planning experts and politicians failed to interpret this data in a satisfactory fashion. 'As long as a solid rationing system for consumer goods exists, the determination of the demand is a relatively simple thing', as one expert put the received wisdom crudely.⁸⁹ The end of the rationing system in 1958 demonstrated both that the coordination of supply was inefficient and that the standardization of consumer goods was underdeveloped. The image of an average consumer altogether underestimated regional differences in consumption and simultaneously caused scarcities and gluts of goods. As a result, the socialist regime began to professionalize research on economic demand. In 1961 the Institute of Demand Research was founded in Leipzig, which investigated the wholesale trade as well as the retail trade and consumer behaviour.⁹⁰ The decentralized retail trade had been unable to provide industry and planning bureaucrats with adequate data. This now became the function of experts.⁹¹

A second result was the transformation of the retail trade into a more modern, efficient sector, a process beginning in the late 1950s. Socialist policy in this area was partly a reaction to structural changes in consumption, such as the growing significance of consumer durables. Yet there was also an effort to put retailer–consumer relations on a new level. Efficient sales organizations were to rationalize distribution and consumption, to emancipate consumers from basic needs and to develop a modern socialist personality. Rationalization would free salespersons to concentrate on giving standardized personal advice to customers.⁹² Self-service became an integral part of Eastern German retailing. A relatively late arrival from a Western perspective, self-service shops spread at an astonishing rate in the late 1950s and early 1960s. By 1956 only seven self-service shops existed; by 1966 the number had increased to 18,530. The gains from rationalization may have been limited and many shops may have been smaller than in the West, but the repercussions for retailer–consumer relations were nonetheless profound.⁹³ A more anonymous shopping encounter replaced personal interaction. Shop committees were established to offer customers a substitute arena for direct contact, advice and consultation.

In 1965 two department store combines (*Centrum* and *Konsument*) were founded, which centralized the shopping of durable consumer goods. Small shops lost their customers and faced closure. In addition, the privately owned segment of the retail trade was reduced to a handful of surviving shops. New forms of retailing, like mail order shopping, expanded in the 1960s; in 1965 the HO and the Konsument Mail Order House distributed one million catalogues. Centralized and depersonalized forms of retailing like mail order shopping further eroded the traditional role of the small retailer as expert and friend of the consumer.⁹⁴ Together, these developments amounted to intensified state influence and the decline of a "bourgeois" sales culture'.⁹⁵ Government propaganda celebrated these changes as a manifestation of an increasingly mature socialistic consumer culture, but statist centralization merely made the discrepancies more apparent between town and countryside and highlighted the limits of production plans.⁹⁶

The different function of prices in a planned economy made for very different developments in East Germany compared with those in West Germany. In Eastern Germany prices had to be set, but nobody 'knows how to set prices in a centrally planned economy'.⁹⁷ In a market economy prices reflect the relation between supply and demand, in a socialistic economy the division between basic and luxury needs. Prices of the latter were not designed to allocate investments, but to regulate consumer behaviour. Though reflecting costs of production and distribution, prices had a mainly political function. This divide between basic and luxury price systems was mirrored in a divide between retail systems, when the 'free shops' of the nationally owned *Handelsorganisation* were founded in 1948 to sell products of better quality and 'luxury' products for higher prices and without rationing stamps.⁹⁸ This decision created different types of customers: those who were able to buy in more exclusive shops and those who had to buy rationed goods in the basic retail trade. Although the price differences between the *Handelsorganisation* and the other retail trade were gradually minimized with the help of growing subsidies, new forms of retailing perpetuated the segmentation of Eastern German consumers. In 1955 the Intershop was established, where foreigners could shop with foreign currency. From the middle of the 1960s these shops became open to select groups of East German customers and in the course of the 1970s to more and more ordinary consumers purchasing quality products for (West) German marks.⁹⁹ Even earlier, socialist consumers had the opportunity to buy fashionable and 'luxury' products in the *Exquisit* and *Delikat* shops, founded in 1961 and 1966.¹⁰⁰

This segmentation of the retail trade was a result of changing demand structures, which were not mirrored adequately by a change in retail prices and subsidies. The cautious reform of the price system during the 1960s did not change the misallocation of resources. While in West Germany intensified price competition led to a fundamental change in retailing and unprecedented price awareness among consumers, this structural turn was never possible in East Germany. The end of the New Economic System and the intensification of politically motivated subsidies after 1972 led to a structural crisis, which was a crucial turning point for the eventual collapse of the German Democratic Republic.¹⁰¹

The lagging transformation and rationalisation of East German retailing – between 1971 and 1977 the number of shops decreased by a mere 16 per cent¹⁰² – perpetuated a system of distribution with a high number of relatively small and inefficient outlets. The intended mechanization of consumption failed; the number of salespersons stayed relatively high. When changing demands and post-material values found their way into East Germany in the early 1980s, personal elements and the expertise of salespersons were promoted once again.¹⁰³ But this renaissance of human resources was accompanied by insufficient investment in the design and interior of shops. Plans to promote a distinct socialist shopping culture were limited to the most important urban centres, while ordinary shops lacked the resources to integrate new elements of the promotional-event culture, like 'tasting corners, special sales or test sales'.¹⁰⁴

Limited product ranges, the relative dependence of consumers and the dynamics of a seller's market continued to be the bottleneck of consumption in the GDR. The often romanticized ingenuity of East Germans, with their ability to overcome supply problems, came to a quick end when the two German states were reunified in 1989/1990. The East German retail trade collapsed and consumers had to learn the hard lessons of rationalization, commercialization and price competition.

Everywhere and Nowhere: Retailer–Consumer Relations in Segmented Markets

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, relations between retailers and consumers retain elements of ritual, but the rules of the game have changed substantially in the last hundred years. Today the framework of retailing is normally determined by managers and executives, who reduce consumers and retailers to economic indicators in a battle for profitability and shareholder approval. The cash-nexus rules.¹⁰⁵ Discounters represent the ongoing economization of the retail trade and of retailer–consumer relations. Market imperatives have transformed social relationships. The role of the salesperson is reduced to that of a cashier or shelf-stacker, who is poorly paid and lacks professional education. Nevertheless, the success of such bargain-shopping concepts should not be entirely reduced to cheap prices. Today discount stores offer reliability without any frills. As one commentator has observed, shops like Aldi perform the function of a hyper-community, offering consumers a sense of shared identity: 'To shop at ALDI connects people, because everybody is part of a popular and collective movement, united by the belief that at ALDI all human beings become "brothers in greed"'. Stepping into an ALDI market is a liberating process of de-individualization. Here no one has to bother about etiquette or put on airs. Instead, they become part of a greedy mass that – backed by the rational mask of thrift, quality and the cult of modernity – plunders shelves and boxes and brings them to the checkout'.¹⁰⁶

The identity and perception of consumers have acquired a growing repertoire of performative and emotional characteristics. The cultivation of 'personal' relations between shop and consumer and between brand and consumer have become a vital part of marketing and retailing. Drawing on psychological and economic research, some marketing has substituted 'real' with constructed, imagined 'personal' relations. The fate of small-sized, traditional, ecological retailers shows that most consumers will not pay for the personal integrity of the retailer. By contrast, high-quality ecological supermarkets have been successful: shopping here is part of social representation and distinction. Consumers do not mind paying more in cases where they enjoy participating in more expensive rituals of consumption. In affluent societies, consumers may be selfish, but also selfish enough to demand they play their own part in the consumption experience. Retailers are often little more than

part of the stage set. This may be functional for the smooth working of modern consumer society, but there are also costs:

We live in a culture where the primacy of the self and its satisfaction is everything. We are bombarded with messages telling us that we should have what we want because we're worth it. As consumers, we are kings. We know that we have rights, that brands seek our favour; that as long as we can pay, we feel powerful. We like that sensation. It is seductive because it is so at odds with the reality of the rest of our lives.¹⁰⁷

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The Making of the Consumer

Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World

**Edited by
Frank Trentmann**

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