

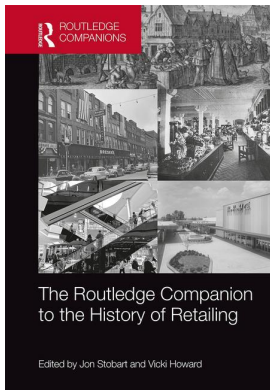
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AT THE MARGINS? ITINERANTS AND PEDLARS

Laurence Fontaine

Introduction

In dictionaries as well as in literature, the pedlar is an ambiguous figure, hard to fit into straightforward categories. In France, the word was first used to mean one who traversed the town selling pictures and loose printed sheets. Second, it was applied to the itinerant rural tradesman who had been known up until then as a *petit mercier*, *porte-balle*, *marcelot* or *mercelot*. The first meaning refers to a recognised trade – albeit an unimportant one – whereas the second is nothing more than another way of saying “tramp” or “trickster” (Furetière, 1690). It was only from the second half of the eighteenth century that rural peddling acquired the status of a trade; in the 1762 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* it appeared as *mercier* rather than just *petit mercier*. Nonetheless, the pedlar remained a disturbing figure who was on the fringes of society and someone to be guarded against.

In England, the word developed in the opposite direction. Chapman was originally a generic term for anyone who bought and sold merchandise. Often the word was modified by the addition of the adjective “petty” which denoted the beginnings of a hierarchy between the well-off merchants of Manchester and Yorkshire, who rode all over the country to deliver their wares to shopkeepers, and the lowliest pedlars who, pack on back, travelled cross-country to far-flung villages. In the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, petty chapmen were described as those who ‘buy up commodities of those that sell by wholesale and sell them off dearer by retail, and parcel them out’. This term had an equally pejorative connotation: ‘Hawking . . . has its derivation from the spying, thievish habits of the bird and man. They also acquired a reputation for ruffianism and brigandage’ (Westerfield, 1915, pp. 314–315).

In Spain the pedlar was known as *gabacho*, the coarse man from the mountain of the North; in Italy he was the *merciajuolo* or *merciajo*; and in the Ticino region he is variously recorded in legal records as *mercante*, *girovagho*, *trafficante*, *pertegante* or *romero* (Corominas, 1954; Pecori, 1980, Fietta, 1985). In Germany each town had its own name for him; as well as the more general term of *Hausierer*, he was also known by the fashion in which he plied his trade – hence, *Gänger*, he who walks; *Ausrufer*, he who shouts in the street; and *Hockerer*, he who squats down. Some pedlars were associated with small luxuries, and were thus called *Tändler*, or they were known quite simply as *Gaukler* or charlatans (Augel, 1971).

Echoing these definitions, right up to the end of the nineteenth century, the pedlar was depicted in literature as a rogue or trickster, half merchant and half thief. He was someone who belonged to another world, who sold both the stuff of everyday life and the stuff of dreams. He came from far away and possessed secret knowledge; his misdeeds were compensated by his clever trickery. If names and images reflect the diversity of their figures they can however be regrouped in two different categories: one is embedded in a larger network of people from the same origin; the other encompasses poor local men and women of the places, who, for lack of work, survived through reselling all kind of food and clothes.

Pedlars and networks of migrants

From the time it first appeared right through to the mid-nineteenth century, peddling was primarily dominated by the mountain dwellers. Indeed, for Western Europe, a map showing the origins of the first migrant merchants reveals three main places: the Alpine curve, the Pyrenees and Scotland. Since the Middle Ages, pedlars from the high Alpine valleys had established a presence on the trade routes. Savoyards from the North and men from the Valle d'Aosta moved to the centres of commerce on the Swiss plateau and the mid-Rhine region (Martin, 1942; Gothein, 1892). The east-west trade movements, between Italy and Spain, had swept the Southern Alp valleys (Fontaine, 1996). In the sixteenth century, the migrant merchants from the great Italian lakes moved on – some towards the North and others towards Southern Italy and Sicily (Merzario, 1984). Finally, from the seventeenth century onwards, the migrants from the South – the “welches” – met up with an influx of northern European merchants from Brabant in Holland (Hemmert, 1979). Scotland scattered her merchants, pedlars, leather craftsmen and weavers across all of northern Europe to Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The first settlements date back to the second half of the fifteenth century when Scots were to be found on both sides of the Channel, in western France, Norway and the Baltic (Riis, 1988; Grosjean and Murdoch, 2005). Quantifying these pedlars is an impossible task given the inexact and debatable nature of the professional evidence. However, the fact that the confusion between geographical origins and professional activity ran so deep that a German merchant would find himself called *der Deutscher Italiener* and that in Denmark the word *scot* meant a pedlar provides us with another means of measurement.

These commercial organisations operated on two levels. The first was made up of familial relatives, supported a family banking system and, through opening warehouses and shops in the city, created a vast geographical web. The second level was a distribution network linked to migratory movements. It had a rigid hierarchical structure and was based upon temporary migration and the labour of men from the home village. At the first level, the Giraud family, originally from La Grave in Oisans in the Dauphine, were part of a Protestant merchant network which can be partially reconstructed from Jean Giraud's record book, kept at the end of the seventeenth century. It extended over Switzerland, northern Italy, southern France and Spain: between Lyon, Geneva, Mantua, Perpignan and Cadix. The Brentano family originally came from the valleys surrounding Lake Como and relied on four family branches: the Brentano-Gnosso, the Brentano-Tocchia, the Brentano-Cimaroli and the Brentano-Tremezzo. In the Tremezzo branch of the family, the first Brentano to come to Frankfurt was Martino. In 1662, he obtained permission to sell his citrus fruits from a table, as a *Hockerer*, sharing this privilege with the old and infirm. His son Domenico, born in 1651 in Tremezzo, developed the business in partnership with his brothers-in-law and in 1698 opened a shop in Frankfurt. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, members of the Brentano family established themselves in Amsterdam, Bingen, Brussels, Koblenz, Cologne, Constance, Cracow, Diez, Frankfurt, Fribourg,

Heidelberg, Mannheim, Mainz, Nuremberg, Rothenburg, Rotterdam and Vienna. If we also add to the above the towns where their relatives had opened shops, then their establishments covered all of northern Europe (Augel, 1971). Scottish merchant migration proceeded along similar lines (Spufford, 1984). Mathew Cuming, for example, travelled in England between 1683 and 1686. Profiting both from his income and from the credit to which he then had access, Cuming loaded up his ass with bundles of material, which he then took to London to sell in order to finance the importation of dyes from Holland, and to get a share in a boat bringing sugar and tobacco from Virginia. He thus broke into the world of “big business” and prepared to venture onto the Continent.

At the core of many networks at this upper level of activity was a family banking system, which bound the network together and enabled it to maximise resources, since each member invested the best part of the family fortune into the firm. Commercial inter-marriage was therefore one of the cogs in a mechanism which aimed to protect the banking system and the loyalty that each member felt towards the merchant network. Exceptions to this rule were the result of compromises that the migrants had to make in order to gain access to markets in the countries where they settled. These family networks organised themselves into very flexible firms, which could be set up and disbanded in response to commercial necessity, death and the relative wealth or poverty of its members. Therefore, despite settlement in the towns, it was still a question of temporary migration: progressing imperceptibly from one activity to another more important and remunerative one, the length of absence being in proportion to these variables.

In order to develop their businesses, these merchants relied on village migration. At the top of the hierarchical structure were generally relatives of members of the organisation who, having completed their apprenticeship, remained in the service of the business until they had the capital necessary to set up their own business or take a share in the company employing them. Alongside the relatives, the merchants had numerous apprentices. These young men, sons of members of the organisation or of their relatives, came to undertake their apprenticeship as packmen. There were sometimes a fair number of them in the host town, generating complaints from native merchants, who complained that all these young men not only were not registered with the town authorities but also peddled their wares with impunity.

On the lower level of commercial organisation were a great many pedlars. A hierarchy also became apparent within this group. At the top were travelling merchants who did not have shops, but who were always referred to as “merchants” and numbered amongst the richest inhabitants of their home villages. From the end of the seventeenth century, notaries’ deeds concerning travelling merchants demonstrate the essential role of these men as a pivot between the two halves of the organisation. In the lowlands they were part of the network developed by shop-owning merchants from whom they got their supplies. One only needs to examine the stocks held by the merchant shopkeepers, and all is revealed. In the two shops and the stockroom he had opened in Lyon, Jacques Berard had 195 pairs of stockings, twenty dozen bonnets, 360 woollen bootlaces, lots of braid, ribbons, laces of all possible colours and fabrics: cordillat, cadiz, serge, druggat, calico, canvas, ratine, muslin, wool, woollen cloth and homespun. Documents confirm the pedlars as clients since most of Berard’s debtors were the same rich pedlars from the Alpine valleys himself came from.

In the mountain villages, the wealthy travelling merchants acted as intermediaries through whom one could trade in winter. Pierre Gourand, from Clavans in the Dauphine, owed more than three hundred *livres* to Jean and Daniel Horard, merchants of Mizoën in the form of four obligations dating from 1665, 1668, 1670 and 1672. The Horard family, linked by marriage to the Berards and other trading families, were responsible for the Burgundy link in the network of upper Dauphine merchants. In his turn, Gourand acted as a link between the families in the

village and the merchant network of which he himself was part. He did so by finding work for other migrants, providing them with merchandise and acting as banker and intermediary between them and more important merchants with whom, as with the Horard brothers, he enjoyed a special relationship. These pedlars, who were very much a part of the economic life of the village, were the pivots of the village migratory system.

In their turn, the packmen, who stocked up from the factories and warehouses established in the town by their compatriots, employed servants and apprentices. However, unlike other members of the company, the pedlar's employees were not allowed any opportunity to line their own pockets: they were forbidden to act as wholesalers or retailers on their own behalf or to lend money (the other method of building up one's own business); moreover, any social activities likely to divert them from their work – such as dancing, playing billiards or going to the theatre – were forbidden. The Perroman company from Savoy made use of this structure from the end of the fourteenth century to distribute textiles, scythes, metals, saffron and saltpetre, which they imported in bulk; the packmen collected fresh supplies from a storehouse set up by their employer in the shop or hostel of a compatriot (Guichonnet, 1948).

Even allowing for exaggeration, the complaints that the German towns and guilds made regularly to the Diets indicate how far the peddling hierarchies had extended. At the Diet of Zurich in 1516, Schwyz, from German Switzerland, denounced

those persons who travel around the region, hawking their cheap goods, from village to village, from farm to farm and from house to house, up hill and down dale. So much so that no home is safe: they worm their way in with their servants and children – even the lowliest of them has three or four. They also beg and live off the backs of the poor, without paying a pfennig to a single innkeeper.

(quoted in Augel, 1971, pp. 193–194)

In the seventeenth century, the local spice merchants took every opportunity of denouncing Italian and Jewish organisations that used five or six boys to distribute their products, on public holidays as well as working days. The boys stopped off in inns, wriggled their way into the houses of the middle classes on wedding days and knocked on every door. Danish rulings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries forbidding Scottish merchants to send their apprentices and servants to hawk their wares in the surrounding countryside also bear witness to the existence of links between the now sedentary business community and the trade done by itinerant pedlars who originated from the same village. From North to South, the existence of peddling reveals the extent of recruitment which bound the migrant community together and included even its poorest members.

These small business networks had a certain number of common characteristics. They relied on commercial diversity: merchants and pedlars traded in all types of merchandise, depending on demand and commercial opportunities, although most families had a specialty which often had its roots in the produce of their home region – the southern Tyrol for carpets, Lake Como for citrus fruits or the Upper Dauphine for gloves. Three factors forced them to offer a wider selection of goods: the desire to reach a larger clientele by offering the widest possible range of products; methods of payment in which exchange and barter played a large part; and the search for new or forbidden goods, which would mean larger profits. Thus, in 1692, the stock list for Antonio Brentano's shop in Nuremberg revealed that he had on sale salted herrings, salmon, beef, cheese, tobacco and prunes. At his death eleven years later this also included 1537 pounds of coffee, 67 pounds of tea, 65 pounds of truffles, potatoes, oil, candy sugar, cotton, paper, Spanish

and Rhenish wine, and Dutch and Spanish tobacco. During the same period, Carl Brentano's shop contained casks of capers, figs, salted lemons, Parmesan, bay leaves, rice, nuts, almonds, olives, oil, lemonade, 180 pounds of chocolate, a cask of dried truffles, four barrels of truffles in oil, Spanish wine, Brazilian tobacco, 34 pounds of Spanish snuff, two boxes of rubber, a barrel of indigo, a small cask of cochineal, 140 caskets of blue and pink wood, three bales of cotton and sixteen bales of silk. Moreover, the peddling organisations turned trade circuits to their advantage. Pedlars sold their goods on credit, demanding repayment in the form of buying or renting fields or as a share of the harvests which they stored there in the village in rented cellars and barns. In this way they multiplied their access to other markets and short-circuited a certain amount of trade between town and countryside.

One final aspect of these merchant organisations is that both men and merchandise circulated and worked on the fringes of the law. This constant is, of course, the most difficult to establish, even if one can hazard a guess at the profits gained from the skill with which these men manipulated the rules. Goods were transported along routes where it was possible to avoid customs and tolls, especially when some of the goods were of smuggled origin, as was the case with raw wool and, in particular, tobacco which was grown on a large scale (despite the ban on this) in the Alpine valleys of Lombardy and processed in the towns of the Rhine where the laws were more flexible (Caizza, 1965). As soon as a new market opened up or circumstances allowed (in particular during times of war), smuggling and illicit warehouses multiplied. The wealthiest pedlars tried as hard as possible to avoid paying costly registration fees in cities, thus confusing both urban and peddling hierarchies. A society based on order and status here came up against the organisational logic of the peddling network; thus, as soon as one or two members of the family firm were legally established in the city, the others saw no advantage in paying duties and taxes which they would have to add to the sale price of their goods. It was also a sign that they did not yet share urban values. These same merchants were careful not to register with the local administration the vast number of young men who came to work for them several months of the year, nor to purchase status for them. A substantial amount of the profits no doubt came from the accumulation of all such fraudulent practices and irregularities.

The eighteenth century: a return to the regional areas

The balance between locations was the basis of the migratory structure, at the centre of which were several powerful families from the home villages. Because of this structure, despite the constant friction with the sedentary merchants and in defiance of the political moves to contain them and change their trading practices, the links established at the end of the Middle Ages between town wholesalers and itinerant pedlars from the same region lingered until the end of the eighteenth century. Long before this, however, the vast peddling networks had become fragmented and withdrew to regional areas. The chronology of this withdrawal, a result of the encounter between internal changes in the adopted country and those in the home villages, had its own logic and periods of inertia: the break-up was sometimes abrupt and sometimes the result of a gradual change, depending on the region. But by the end of the eighteenth century, this transformation had been accomplished everywhere.

In the French and Savoyard Alps, the first crack in the migratory system was a political one. In France the affirmation of royal sovereignty, centred on religious unity and the war, upset the balance of the mountain economy between 1685 and 1715. The decision to go into exile taken by the majority of the peddling elite and a significant proportion of the Protestant population of the villages threw the networks into disarray. The war brought its own difficulties and the Treaty of Utrecht established for the first time a border between the two sides of the

mountains. In Savoy, the conflict between the Sardinian states and the French monarchy forced the merchants to choose sides. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars completed the process of fragmentation, but the flow was already greatly reduced through the combined effects of national politics, municipal obstacles and the merchants' growing lack of interest in the highlands. The networks which had been built up between Scotland and the Baltic States suffered the same fate, despite renewed activity during the Jacobite uprisings of 1715–1745. The dominant position occupied by the Dutch in Baltic commerce for over a century and the opening up of the English market following the Act of Union with Scotland had already signalled the decline of Scottish merchant and pedlar migration: since emigration was no longer as widespread, men gradually integrated into new communities and, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the transformation was accomplished in Poland and Denmark. The renewed activities of the sea adventurers can be traced in the customs records, where names changed after a number of decades (Smout, 1968). The same phenomenon had occurred a century earlier in Sweden where political expediency had led to gradual integration into native families via settlement and marriage.

Conversely, those peddling networks that were organised around the east-west commercial axis and that looked towards Mediterranean Europe, benefited from the shift of the main trade movements towards the Atlantic coast and continued to profit from commercial structures which remained weak in the Iberian peninsula. Families from Briançonnais and Queyras, for instance, forced to abandon the Italian market in the eighteenth century, now directed their attention in the opposite direction, towards Spain, Portugal and their American colonies. Other migratory movements took advantage of the change of direction in the peddling networks to set up their own commercial organisations, as did men from the Auvergne and the Bas Limousin in Spain (Poirineau, 1985). Similarly, ethnic minorities – particularly Jews – took a further step towards integration by moving into the place left vacant by the Italians and Savoyards and by extending their activities towards Western Europe.

The break-up of many large networks brought about change within the profession of travelling merchant. Although the timing varied from country to country – starting from the early seventeenth century in England and in the eighteenth century in France and in the Rhine regions – the geography was always the same, with border mountain regions or outlying areas providing most pedlars. In France, pedlars came from the Alps, the Pyrenees and the Massif Central area as well as from the Jura mountains and from Brittany. In Britain, although migration was less dominated by the highlands because of the existence of a peddling structure organised around the industrial zones, nonetheless Scotland still accounted for the largest number of pedlars. In Belgium it was the Hainaut region which upheld the old tradition, and in Italy, pedlars always came from the Alps or the central region of the Apennine mountains. Whilst the origin of pedlars had changed little, however, the new structure very different. It was distinguished by an increase in the number of pedlars; by the use made of pedlars by all urban commerce and no longer just by the village elite who had settled in the towns; by the wider range of goods offered by the pedlars; and by the disappearance of the multiple transactions involving the pedlar (in which payments in foodstuffs and goods bypassed other markets) in favour of credit alone.

The increase in the number of pedlars was evident everywhere, although it is impossible to determine precise numbers. That England had an early start is obvious, as much from the upsurge in numbers as by the subsequent decline, which had begun even before peddling in France really took off. England thus had a century's head start over the Continent: from the end of the seventeenth century the distribution network covered by the travelling merchants had reached the furthest corners of the land, whilst on the Continent the rural areas had only been partially conquered. In France, the growth in numbers was significant from the 1760s

onwards: whilst notaries' records had referred only to 'merchants' in the seventeenth century; from the eighteenth, 'pedlars' appeared in droves. There was a commensurate hardening of definitions, merchants being distinguished from merchant-pedlars and from pedlars (Fontaine, 1991, pp. 43–46). This upsurge was the consequence of the general development of urban business; pedlars no longer worked solely for merchants who came from the same valleys as themselves but also bought their stock from other city merchants who used pedlars to further their own business concerns. This new development brought with it other changes: the better-off pedlars neglected the products of family industry to devote themselves solely to the resale of goods; the less well-off, who were selling their craftsman's knowledge, gradually abandoned this in favour of city goods. Thus the knife-grinders and scissor-sharpeners tended to give up these humbler professions and concentrate solely on trading.

Eventually large quantities of a new product – printed material – became part of the pedlar's range of wares. Initially this was distributed from centres of production in eastern France and the German regions of the Rhine, from Paris and Lyon; by the mid-eighteenth century it had reached most rural areas. Before specific peddling networks were built up around it, printed matter was an extra commodity much valued by pedlars of haberdashery. Trading in prohibited books became a very attractive business for the pedlars since there were large profits to be had. Paul Malherbe, a Norman pedlar linked to the *Société Typographique de Neuchatel*, ordered books from Neuchatel, stored them in a secret warehouse and resold them to pedlars because they were

the goods with the biggest turnover at the moment . . . the pedlars are extremely eager for this type of book; they earn far more than on other works, because the price is perfect, a snip given the demand for the book.

(Darnton, 1987, p. 130)

The same appetite for prints can be traced for England (Spufford, 1981, pp. 111–128).

In the mid-eighteenth century, most large towns in northern and central France boasted a bookseller-cum-printer who catered for pedlars. At the same time as printed material was finding its way into the haberdasher's backpack, certain regions were beginning to specialise in this type of peddling: Cotentin and Briançonnais in France and the Ticino valley in Italy. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, peddling on a large scale – where the entire population of the home village benefited from the network of shops established by the wealthiest families – was only made possible by the market for printed material. This durability is explained by the choice of product: printed material was a new commodity, very much sought-after, likely to bring in substantial profits and one where there was a market for both legal and smuggled goods. In 1754, François Grasset, formerly chief clerk with the Cramer booksellers in Geneva, wrote in a letter to the director of the French library that:

The bookselling trade in Spain and Portugal, as well as that of many Italian towns, is totally controlled by the French; all of them from a village in a Briançonnais valley in the Dauphiné. Active, hard-working and moderate, they make successive trips to Spain and almost always marry amongst themselves . . . not only is the bookselling trade in their hands, but also the market for geographical maps, prints, clock-making, cloth, printed calico, stockings, hats and so forth.¹

And Grasset was right: they dominated the market for print material in Portugal and Spain and hold a good share of it in Italy (Fontaine, 1996, pp. 50–72). However, if the network emanating

from the Briançonnais appears to be the most important, it was not by any means the only one. The Remondini publishers of Venice, originally from Bassano, made their mark in the second half of the eighteenth century by means of a similar network. De Lalande, in his book *Le Voyage en Italie*, points to the printing operation run by the Remondini family as the largest establishment of its kind in Europe and the only one to have a completely integrated production process, from the paper manufacture to the sales network (Lefrançois de Lalande, 1769). The firm employed a thousand workers, 1,500 business correspondents in Italy and a further fifty in Europe and more than 2,000 travelling salesmen, all originally from the Ticino valley. Similarly, a peddling network for books and other printed material developed in northern France around Cotentin. It also had an international dimension especially strong in northern Europe (Casselle, 1978, pp. 84–85; Sauvy, 1967).

A flexible typology

The best criterion for distinguishing between types of travelling merchant during this period concerns the way in which the trip was financed. This allows us to identify three groups of pedlars in terms of the security they could offer to the city merchants in return for the goods supplied. The importance of the amount of credit allowed thus serves to distinguish the half-starved pedlars with nothing to offer from the regular pedlars who had enough property to guarantee their loans and the merchant-pedlars who, with a solid financial base, could travel by cart and open shops. A typology such as this has two distinguishing features. On the one hand it is flexible: the pedlar who carried a pack could hope to attain the higher ranks of the profession; for many, it was seen as a career with scope for progression, even as far as opening a shop in the city. On the other hand, these different types of pedlar were bound together as much by family ties as by the business links that existed within the profession. Alongside these three a new model emerged in England: the “Manchester Man”, who heralded a radical innovation in that his ties with his home community were relaxed in favour of the firm for which he worked on a virtually exclusive basis. Four groups then, each with their own methods of selling, obtaining their supplies and attracting customers.

The sociological diversity was greatest amongst the destitute pedlars, since they had nothing to offer as security against goods and credit. Their trade thus slipped easily through the net of interdependency and restraints which bound other pedlars together. Three sub-groups can be identified: those who, in villages where there were craftsmen and pedlars, had been expelled from credit circles; those who came from villages which specialised in the sale of devotional images, where the profession came within the framework of family interdependency, like the *santari* from Campli in Italy or the *chamagnons* from the Jura; and finally, the blind, who in Spain succeeded in obtaining a virtual monopoly for themselves in the sale of printed sheets (Trifoni, 1989, pp. 113–120; Darmon, 1972; Botrel, 1973, 1974). The first group took any work which came along, and in between jobs went hawking their wares and begging. Their ties with the home village had not been broken and their temporary itinerancy was primarily an economy of absence – a saving of the bread that they would not be there to eat in the village in winter. For these pedlars, who were half-beggar, half-tramp, more important than the goods was the act of selling itself. They put on a show and sold entertainment and dreams. They were not seeking one-to-one contacts with purchasers nor the intimacy of the home, but public square and fairs – places where people passed through, times of festivity when a crowd might form around them. The *cantastores*, the charlatans, teeth-pullers, hernia-shrinkers and Bergamasque maskers spread prophecies as they travelled from one town square to another in Italy. Those from the Ticino region who sold pictures and small booklets threaded them onto a piece of string and

told their story using a hazelnut twig to illustrate the tale. In Germany such pedlars resorted to large illustrated boards (*Bild*) the tale of which he told as he sold his booklets; as did his French counterpart (Niccoli, 1987; Passamani and Manfredi, 1972; Duval, 1991). On these fringes of entertainment were to be found the destitute vagrants who exhibited curiosities, such as the marmot which accompanied the mountain dwellers of the Savoy region; the bear which certain dwellers of the Pyrenees brought with them; or the Mohawk Indian put on display by a Jewish pedlar from England in 1765. Acrobats, organ grinders and bear-tamers from the mountain villages of Tuscany all became familiar figures in the city (Endelman, 1981, pp. 113–126; Sarti, 1985).

The regular pedlar, who had established suppliers, faithful customers and enough of an inheritance to guarantee his credit, was the pedlar *par excellence*. Generally speaking, he set out between the end of August and the end of November, depending on the demands of farm labour, the dates of the livestock markets and the number of people in the household. These pedlars stocked up primarily at the shops opened by émigrés, then made up the rest of their stock from other merchants. They made the bulk of their purchases from the former and borrowed from them much of the money they would need for their campaign, forging strong relationships that were often built up over successive generations (Fontaine, 1996). In contrast to the scattered nature of suppliers of goods in France, London was the place where many minor English merchants filled their packs. At the end of the seventeenth century, over three-quarters of the supplies of fabrics were still bought there. The city was also the major centre for the redistribution of porcelain imported from China (Weatherill, 1986, pp. 51–76). To the supplies purchased in London were added more specialised products from the provinces. At his death, Thomas Teisdale of Lincoln owed £192 to five London merchants; he made up the rest of his stock in Glasgow (for Scottish cloth), Manchester (for needles and small articles of ironmongery) and Newport (for braid). Long-standing personal relationships developed between pedlars and London suppliers to the point where certain among the latter remembered their “faithful” pedlars when they died and left them some money so that they might buy a mourning ring in memory of them (Spufford, 1984, pp. 79–80). These packmen generally undertook one or two small-scale predetermined trips. They kept account books. Knowledge of the places and the people went hand in hand with another relationship, one as much economic as cultural – that of credit. This was the basis of the relationship between the pedlar and the villagers: they paid him back over the year, in dribs and drabs, payment being made when the pedlar turned up again, and always coupled with a further purchase and thus further credit.

The merchant-pedlar who rented a shop seldom withdrew from the migrant network or abandoned his former practices; on the contrary, he was prepared to go back on the road if business went badly. However, to consolidate his success, he employed the newest sales technique, using for instance the press as an advertising medium and if he was a bookseller he would have catalogues printed (Da Gama Caeiro, 1980; Fontaine, 1996, pp. 140–163).

The new figure to emerge in seventeenth-century England was the Manchester Man. He could be distinguished from the traditional pedlar by the way in which he obtained his supplies, through his customers and sales techniques. The Manchester Man was a pedlar working for a factory, who did not travel from door to door but from shop to shop. He remained an itinerant merchant, but the vital difference was that he operated as a middleman between manufacturers in the north of England and retailers, shopkeepers and pedlars across the country. As early as 1685, the existence of the Manchester Men was well-established. They criss-crossed England with their mules or horses loaded with cheap fabrics and clothes, ironmongery and cutlery, to which assortment they also added watches and almanacs. A bell worn by the lead horse signalled the arrival of the convoy. As an intermediate stage in the distribution network, they sold

in bulk to shopkeepers and to pedlars who they met when visiting fairs, thus competing with London merchants for the custom of itinerant merchants. They all attended the fairs, which became places where deals were struck between, on the one hand, the London merchants or their agents and the Manchester Men and, on the other, the pedlars, who took this opportunity to settle their previous debts and to obtain the necessary goods for their next campaign. The London merchants, like the Manchester Men, offered extensive credit to the packmen. In addition, the Manchester Man, who in the eighteenth century was one of the preferred agents of the manufacturers as they set out to create a mass market, played on his respectability, creating the illusion that he had the same social status as an established merchant. To lend substance to this impression, he had ostentatious decorated visiting cards and headed notepaper printed, which he left with businesses to indicate that he had called, or published in the local newspapers to advertise his imminent arrival (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 1982, pp. 77–89; Westerfield, 1915, pp. 313–314).

The demise of the profession

Marginalised in the business world and discredited in the home villages, peddling began to decline as early as the eighteenth century in England and from the middle of the nineteenth in France. Following the rejection of organisations based on extended family groups and the withdrawal into a narrower family structure, the end of the profession was marked by a double breakdown which put an end to all future development: both family tradition and credit structures were demolished. This final stage reveals that, behind the continued use of the term pedlar, there lay a radically different way of thinking and of operating as a migrant merchant.

During the twenty years that followed the great agricultural crises seen in mid-nineteenth century France, definitive emigration supplanted seasonal emigration and the basis of peddling fundamentally shifted. An analysis of the censuses of 1896 and 1901 for the peddling villages in the valleys of the Oisans reveals that the profession, which up until then had been passed down from father to son, now only survived on the margins of families. Only single men who belonged to atypical families still practiced the profession: brothers living together or men who were the only wage-earners in the family. Moreover, an analysis of the records for military conscription for this same group of villages highlights another aspect of this marginalisation: one-third of the conscripts who had been pedlars had engaged in the trade only occasionally and the majority only peddled for a year or two before or after military service, or returned home and became packmen after having failed in other careers (Fontaine, 1991, pp. 43–68).

Certain traditional pedlars, however, managed to continue in their profession for a few decades longer. In each peddling region there were a few families who turned their attention to a new specialisation or by selling new or luxury goods. In the Dauphine, haberdashers became opticians, seed merchants or florists; in the Pyrenees they became booksellers; in the Auvergne, wine merchants; in the southern parts of the Black Forest they peddled glass jewellery; on the other side of the Rhine it was pictures. In the Apennine valleys of Lucques, pedlars became known as *figurinai* because they sold plaster figures. There was a wide range of specialities and the organisation of itinerant trade was not confined to one single model since, depending on the markets canvassed, the goods offered and the village traditions, either the old way of doing things was resurrected, or original ways of selling were invented to fit in with the new economic constraints of the end of the nineteenth century.

The most profitable forms of specialisation combined luxury goods with the conquest of new markets. The florist-pedlars from the Oisans in upper Dauphine offer an excellent example. Originally from traditional families of cloth merchants and haberdashers, they gradually

discovered new markets, new customers, and new ways of selling and financing their expeditions. The florists sold all sorts of fruit and ornamental trees, decorative plants, rosebushes and various sorts of bulbs and seeds. They packed them in sturdy wooden boxes, added a few baskets, and picked a destination, depending upon the time of year when they were setting out. Those who set out in autumn headed for Latin America, the Mediterranean basin or the Middle East; those who could only leave at the beginning of winter went to countries where spring came later: the Northern States and Russia. Jean-Pierre Magne, one of the first great florists, born in 1806 in Mont-de-Lans in the Dauphine, travelled all over Europe from Ireland to the Balears, North Africa, Egypt, Russia and Brazil; he also took over seven trips to the eastern part of the United States, from the Great Lakes to New Orleans. Claude Chouvin, born in 1853 in the neighbouring village of La Garde, travelled to Mexico, North America and Canada and then specialised in trading with Latin America. Others went as far as the borders of Russia and of Iran. Their target customers were dignitaries and the rich middle classes: their sales pitch combined evocations of luxury and the exotic. Once they had reached their chosen destination, they set out to look for a shop to rent in a busy shopping street and went about advertising their presence. In Latin America, where the rich middle class was relatively large, they placed advertisements in the newspapers; in Russia and Egypt, where those in power constituted a limited elite, before putting their wares on display they first presented them to the local dignitary in the hope that by gaining favour with the prince they would attract the small number of people of standing into their shop. Whatever the circumstances, they had to make a sale quickly: customers were few and the plants either withered or demanded too much attention. They hoped to sell most of their stock within a month at most, off-loading the remaining plants at one or two smaller towns on the way back.

As well as the plants, they offered dreams to the bourgeoisie. Their sales pitch primarily targeted the imagination: they had calling cards and invoice slips printed which created the impression that their shop was a branch of a large business which counted amongst its customers the most important people in France; they hung pictures of flowers in their shops, generally painted with stencils, reproducing the descriptions in the advance catalogues they published. The flowers, seeds, bulbs and the bare trees advertised as being on sale took on surprising and unexpected shapes and colours in their promotional material: green and blue roses in the shape of a turban, up to 14 centimetres wide, three-coloured hyacinths, gentians with thousands of red flowers, strange orchids, flowering ferns and so on.

The financial structure of their business was similar to that of other pedlars, in that they approached the important people in the valleys for backing. However, there were three important differences. First, their suppliers were outside of this circuit, the merchant-pedlars borrowed money, but never merchandise. Second, because the initial capital outlay was large and involved cash payments for stock, business associations involved more people than for other types of peddling: the florists set out in groups of three or four, and sometimes more; their partnership was usually agreed verbally and lasted for the duration of the journey; two months after the merchants returned home they settled their accounts and dissolved the partnership. Third, this type of business made use of nascent banking services, whether for insuring their goods or transferring money. More than any other type of peddling, the flower trade was an extremely risky business with uncertain profits. The merchant could lose his merchandise at any point in his campaign; but profits were in proportion to the risks taken and sometimes enormous. These pedlars thus managed to get round the major problems which beset pedlars who travelled in France: by choosing countries with loose business networks and a rich clientele who were able to pay cash, they were able to continue practicing the profession profitably without being constrained by the traditional shackles of debt. However, the economic slump that hit South

America at the end of the nineteenth century was the final factor in dissuading florists from a profession which had been depreciated despite the potential earnings: families wanted no more itinerancy but saw success in terms of a settled life and a fixed income, even if it was a small one (Fontaine, 1996, pp. 152–156).

The death of peddling in Europe, marked by the great variety of pedlars, can be seen as symbolic of the migrant merchants' final attempts to adapt to the explosion of new sales methods, which were forcing them to the fringes of the market. The increasing number of sales outlets, new distribution networks, the opening up of the rural areas and, of course, the rapid development of mail order all made them redundant as intermediaries.

Peddling as a resource for the poorest everywhere in early modern Europe

The migrant pedlars have never been the only ones to sell in the streets since reselling small goods was the first survival strategy for the unemployed and for people who were rejected from trade organisations. Moreover, many shopkeepers sent their wives and servants to peddle their merchandises illegally in other districts of the city or at its outskirts (Montenach, 2013; Van den Heuvel, 2007). Street vendors were part of two important markets: food and second-hand objects. Indeed, next to the official food markets, myriads of hawkers criss-crossed streets and markets, went up and down staircases and entered inns. The housing conditions of most people were such that they had no place for storage or even for cooking and all kinds of small traders sold meat directly from slaughterhouses outside the capital, as well as cheese, milk, fruit and vegetables (Reynald, 2002). Some stood behind a table, others moved with a basket or tray, and still others sold from a cart. Furthermore, cities developed a vast chain of sellers and resellers, both men and women, who recycled leftovers from well-to-do houses. Water carriers and drink vendors completed the picture (Fontaine, 2014).

The peddling of foodstuffs was largely handled by women. In Nuremberg in the sixteenth century, the market was full of women selling food, candles, even books and pictures. Their small-scale retail operations included the distribution of household production, but they also sold exotic items of long-distance trade such as citrus fruits, dyestuffs and spices. They shared this market with the networks of Italian peddlers and, like in Paris, they were active in the urban peddling of books, engravings and news (Merry Wiesner, 1981, pp. 3–13; Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, 2001, p. 282). Permitting these small traders to exist was a political strategy employed by the city to give them the means to support themselves and thus avoid falling back on charitable institutions. This strategy of reserving to the poor segments of small retail was very common in European cities, but they were generally allowed to sell only one kind of merchandise – the distribution of official news being the most common.

To access the needed capital to buy their merchandise, most of them had to borrow from usurers on a day to day basis. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, an acute observer of the small Parisian economy, recounted that the latter set up their agencies around markets and that the women merchants were to accept collective liability:

He [the usurer] then goes to an out-of-the-way house, to a room where there is only one bad carpet, a pallet, three chairs and a crucifix. There he grants an audience to sixty women, – vulgar food sellers, street hawkers and fruit sellers. Then he speaks to them in a stiff voice: “My friends, as you can see, I am not better off than you; here is my furniture, here is the bed I lie on when I come to Paris; I give you my money and rely on your conscience and religion; as from you I have no signature, you know, I can

ask nothing of the law. I am useful for your trade; and when I lavish my trust, I must have my surety. So be all of you jointly liable, and swear in front of this crucifix, the image of our divine Saviour, that you shall do me no wrong, and that you shall faithfully return to me that what I shall entrust to you". All the vulgar food sellers and fruit sellers raise their hands, and swear to strangle the one who would not be faithful in payment: dreadful oaths are taken and long signs of the cross made.

(Mercier, 1994b, pp. 548–551)

Caught between the will to let the poor earn a living and the desire to keep prices low for the working-class population, urban authorities have tried to regulate the activity of numerous resellers and fought against the immediate resale of goods. In France, the hours during which resellers could operate in the market were regulated to give people the time to buy, carry and sell their small produce (Petrowiste, 2004, pp. 316–320; Duval, 2001, p. 327). In Spain, small resellers and regraters (regatones) were either not permitted to sell in the market or strict restrictions were placed on them to avoid the very widespread practice of purchase and immediate resale. In London and urban Holland restrictions were also taken against food hawkers (Blasquez, 1996, p. 118; Van den Heuvel, 2016, pp. 94–95).

As consumer credit was formally forbidden in many parts of Europe, pawn broking was the major tool to access it, creating a micro-economy in which clothing circulated as a form of currency, and was rented out and pawned according to need. Women were at the heart of these markets: their social roles, in an incompletely monetarised economy and in a legal environment which marginalised them, explain why they were active, along with recognised guilds and migrant networks in the sale and resale of used clothes. In Paris, for instance, in 1725 the female second-hand dealers were between 6000 and 7000 (Fontaine, 2008, pp. 104–111; Roche, 1989, pp. 328–344).

From the eighteenth century, in these societies where the poor hardly counted, new values marginalised them even further. Health and safety requirements were imposed, requiring more capital investment to adhere to the new standards. As and when they were imposed, women would, for lack of rights and capital, be replaced increasingly by men and by sedentary merchants. On the other hand, city dwellers pushed municipal authorities to domesticate the street and the market by facilitating the movement of people so that the air and the water could be cleansed of unpleasant smells and noxious air, and the street and pavements cleared of cumbersome street vendors. Louis Sébastien Mercier echoed these new values in his description of the markets of Paris in 1799. Not a single one found favour in his eyes: on top of their 'hideous and repulsive appearance', he lamented that to access the merchandise, 'you have to lay yourself open to the sharp tongue of sellers, resellers and sub sellers'. He then denounced the links between the official merchants and the vendors from the countryside which spoiled the only pleasant market of Paris: 'Why does the quadrangular *Marché des Innocents*, so vast and so airy, with easy exits, only present to the people a forbidding row of umbrellas that eager farmers rent at a hundred louis per year from wretched rag dealers?' (Mercier, 1994a, pp. 1296–1299).

Finally, the establishment of a patent law in France obliged all sellers and resellers to pay a tax which the poorest could not afford. One of two women accused of selling clothes without a patent at a fair in 1796, invoked the paltriness of her business: 'of such little value that she had not been liable for a patent'. The counsel for the two women stated that they had no other choice to survive because

the woman Moreau, a housewife and mother, who owned nothing and who only put on sale her own meagre belongings as well as those of her husband and goods

entrusted to her by a female patented trader . . . that she is obliged to sell to feed her family.

As for her sister, the counsel explained,

indigent and crippled, she is not in a position to earn her living in any other way but by making rags for children out of old clothes . . . that she is in the habit of going to the markets of Paris and the areas nearby and that she was never asked whether she had a patent.

In his conclusion, he emphasised the extent to which such practices were common for

the Moreau women and the girl Toutain are like many other citizens from all the communes of the Republic who like them made children's rags with the old clothes they get as they are in no position to pay for the least patent, most of their businesses not even being equivalent to the price of the smallest patent.²

These women and all the petty street vendors were also victims of the official merchants' determination to keep their monopoly on trade (Fontaine, 1991, pp. 85–95; Van den Heuvel, 2015). Mercier castigated the confiscation of goods of men and women trying to benefit from the market to earn their livelihood:

There is nothing more common and nothing which dishonours our legislation more. One often sees a commissioner with bailiffs running after a rag seller or a small iron-monger carrying a portable shop. A woman is publicly stripped of the forty odd pairs of breeches she is carrying on her back and her head. Her old clothes are confiscated in the name of the majestic community of secondhand clothes dealers . . . a man in a jacket carrying something wrapped in his coat is arrested. What do they confiscate? New shoes that the poor man had hidden in a teatowel. The shoes were taken away by order, this sale becoming prejudicial to Parisian cobbling.

(Mercier, 1994b, pp. 143–144)

This tells us clearly that the survival of men and women living hand to mouth depended on the market and trade, for at the time everyone was more or less a trader. But this access to the market was one thing the big players always wanted to keep for themselves. From the Middle Ages, they obtained regulations directed at excluding migrants, women and all those looking to derive from selling a small additional income or simply the means to survive. At the end of the *Ancien Régime* and in the nineteenth century, the new standards of hygiene requiring greater capital reinforced the dominance of the sedentary traders, for the poor, who lived on small transactions and small productions, could not conform to them. The fact that market activity was the livelihood of the poorest mattered little at that time and the State compounded matters further by taxing them to meet its monetary needs and to control the itinerant sellers and their ware.

Notes

1 Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Fr. 22130, fo. 37, November 1754.

2 Archives Nationales, BB 18822 Justice Seine et Marne, quoted by Cobb, R. (1985). *La Mort est dans Paris*, Paris: Chemin Vert, pp. 170–171.

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