

Summary

In this article it will be argued that economic growth and urbanisation were no preconditions (as is generally argued for the English case) for the well-documented consumer and retail changes of the eighteenth-century. Most likely the ‘retailing revolution’ was closely intertwined, perhaps even triggered by profound ‘demand-side alterations’. In order to verify this hypothesis new empirical findings on both, consumer changes and retail responses will be studied simultaneously for Antwerp. This city witnessed an absolute and relative deprivation in the European urban setting and –in the period under scrutiny- lost its position as a leading ‘fashion maker’. Yet, this did not prevent structural consumer changes from empowering the retail sector in the urban economy.

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Text

Consumer and retail 'revolutions'.
Perspectives from a declining urban economy:
Antwerp in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

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I.

The study of consumption and consumerism hardly needs an advocate. Consumption is not only the central nexus of modern practice; it is without doubt a major preoccupation of many of the social sciences.³ For historians of the early modern times, the advent of a ‘consumer society’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is even shaping – as Maxine Berg claims– ‘*the grand narrative of the period, and replacing the former grand narrative of the industrial revolution*’.⁴ Paradoxically enough an in-depth understanding of the buying and selling practices of consumer goods is still lacking.⁵ So far, retailing and consumption have, very often been treated in isolation from one another. In this article we will explore the practices of retailers and consumers simultaneously.⁶ Obviously enough, the ‘birth’ of a so-called ‘consumer society’ was grounded on the development of commercial infrastructures and business practices that made the targeting (the distribution, marketing and selling) of the output possible.⁷ This raises questions about how consumers were induced to buy what they bought.⁸ Yet, few historians have met the challenge of turning the relationship the other way around by asking questions such as: to what extent did changing consumer preferences and buying practices influence the selling and retailing strategies? In this article we will argue that major developments in early modern retailing can only be understood when underlying shifts in the material culture and changing demand patterns are fully taken into account as explanatory variables.⁹

For decades already the debate about consumer and retail changes has been fuelled by contributions stemming from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon historiography.¹⁰ However, the English setting – where the dawn of a consumer society was matched by an equally important growth in population, trade, industry and commercial infrastructure – differs fundamentally from the continental context studied here. This article is about the Southern Netherlands, more especially about the city of Antwerp in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹¹ There are strong arguments pleading in defence of a study of consumer demand and distribution for this place and period.¹² At the start of the seventeenth century Antwerp no longer was the commercial metropolis it had been in the sixteenth century.¹³ This did not prevent the city and its surrounding hinterland from experiencing an ‘Indian Summer’ during the first half of the seventeenth century. The city remained one of the most influential centres of luxury production and taste formation in the Spanish-Habsburg Empire. Thus, Antwerp achieved an outstanding reputation in industries such as diamond cutting, furniture making, printing and painting (in this respect, names as famous as Rubens and Van Dijck immediately come to mind). Gradually, however, the city moved away from the core of the industrial landscape of Europe. The ‘crisis’ in the Antwerp luxury-industries (textiles included) from the late seventeenth century onwards has often been explained by the difficulties arising from the mercantilist commercial politics of neighbouring states.¹⁴ A stagnation of local demand (resulting from the waning zeal of the Counter Reformation-church and a decline in purchasing power), and a reduction in the quality and artistic creativity at the supply-side, further explained the de-industrialisation and de-urbanisation process of the city (especially during the first half of the eighteenth century). Economic researchers also appealed to changes in fashion, but so far empirical data have been lacking – a point we will return to later.¹⁵

By the second half of the eighteenth century the urban economy heavily relied upon textile industries in which predominantly poorly paid people were employed. At that time, compared to other cities in the Austrian Netherlands, the middling sort of people were of lesser importance.¹⁶ The relative decline of Antwerp in the European urban setting was enormous. In 1550 the Antwerp population still accounted for 27 per cent of the aggregate population of Antwerp, Amsterdam, Paris and London. By 1700 this percentage had fallen

back to scarcely 5 per cent.¹⁷ To conclude, the rationale behind our choice for this case study is the following. By focusing our research on a declining – albeit still important – urban economy, we hope to be able to discriminate between retail developments that need to be attributed to forces of urbanisation (and external economies of agglomeration) and those that occurred independently from economic growth. Thus it becomes clear that retail-evolutions in Antwerp in this period, can eventually be linked to changes in the demand-side.

II.

Strange as it may seem indeed, none of the important changes in consumption and material culture that were recorded elsewhere seem to have been absent in Antwerp, though some of them (such as the introduction of the so-called *chinoiseries*) only enjoyed a modest popularity. Yet, by 1780, the material culture of Antwerp was more colourful, more diversified, and more vulnerable to changing fashion trends than it had been two centuries earlier.¹⁸ In addition, the retailing sector of the city seems to have escaped from the downward trend of the overall economy as well. Indeed, through the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the number of shopkeepers experienced a continuous relative growth within the urban economy. The growth of the Antwerp mercer-guild (the guild grouping almost exclusively shopkeepers) is a clear case in point.¹⁹ At the end of the seventeenth century (around 1690) a retail-ratio of about 26 persons per mercer was attained, a figure which rose to one mercer for every 16 inhabitants in 1773.²⁰ In assessing the exact importance of these figures, one has to bear in mind that non-corporate retailers, second-hand dealers, peddlers and the like were even not included in these statistics. The case of Antwerp thus allows us to study the interplay between changing consumer and retail practices against the background of an economy and society coping with increasing social and economic difficulties.²¹ In so doing we intend to open new perspectives for comparative research and clarify causal relationships in the history of consumerism and retailing.²²

III.

The current literature about consumption pays particular attention to the introduction of new products and ‘novelties’, such as cotton, tobacco, sugar, hot drinks (coffee, chocolate and tea) and the refashioning of the material culture.²³ Many of these ‘new commodities’ quickly spread through society while gaining status as desirable items.²⁴ The evidence from late seventeenth and eighteenth century probate inventories suggests that the broad middling layers of Antwerp were indeed assiduous in appropriating newness and novelties. Judging from a large probate inventory sample drawn from notarial records, already by 1730 a large majority of modest households owned, for instance, tea-related utensils (see Table 1).²⁵

Caption table 1

It is likely that these changes at the demand side contributed to the attested relative growth of the commercial sector in Antwerp.²⁶ Retailers were quick and relatively successful in absorbing these new (very often imported) products and ‘novelties’ into the range of products they offered for sale. Our analysis of the new membership entrances in the Antwerp mercer guild makes this abundantly clear. The number of retailers that engaged in the selling of hot drinks during the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ is quite remarkable (see Graph 1). Retailers in coffee and tea accounted for much of this prosperous evolution: hot chocolate remained an exclusive privilege for the happy few till the end of the nineteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century, coffee- and tea-sellers represented nearly 10 per cent of the new entrances in the mercers’ guild.

Caption graph 1.

Similar observations can be made for almost any other new commodity. Take, for instance, tobacco and snuff. The spread of snuffboxes in Antwerp probate inventories does not seem to closely correspond to clear hierarchical social patterns (see Table 2). Moreover, the growing popularity of the product and the rituals surrounding it were almost immediately reflected in the mercer guild: at the end of the eighteenth century snuff sellers accounted for about 5 per cent of total guild membership. In the 1792-membership survey the number of tobacco and snuff-retailers had risen (in absolute numbers) to 85.

Caption table 2.

Caption graph 2.

IV.

The growing dependence of the Antwerp market on imported consumer items was not restricted to hot drinks and tobacco alone. Retailing in household-furniture, textiles and clothing became increasingly influenced by imported, 'fashionable' goods (predominantly French in nature). The 'tyranny' of French fashion heavily constrained the local luxury industries from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards.²⁷ This further explains the crisis of the Antwerp economy. Due to these changes, indeed, Antwerp evolved in a sense from a 'fashion-maker' to a 'fashion-taker'.

More importantly, however, from a structural viewpoint, the eighteenth century consumer pattern in general was becoming increasingly fashion-sensitive.²⁸ Customers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century were becoming more susceptible to ever faster changing fashion-cycles. The Antwerp probate inventories of the early eighteenth century reveal a keen awareness of the fashion-sensitivity of objects. The rare incidences referring to the quality of goods were no longer confined to descriptions such as 'good' and 'bad', but also to the 'fashionable' and 'new' features of the products. Fashion and design were thus becoming closely interlinked with the intrinsic value of objects. Newspapers too frequently advertised products being 'French', 'new', 'à la mode'.²⁹

A closer examination of the names and occupations listed in the entrance books of the mercers-guild, suggests that fashion changes played a more autonomous role in the crisis of the urban economy than has been previously thought. It is, for instance, striking to notice the appearance of retailers in 'French products' (like periwigs) from the late seventeenth century onwards. At the same time, the so-called 'à la mode' shop appeared. In spite of their presupposed elitist character, these fashion shops (dealing in clothing, handkerchiefs, and other fashionable accessories) even became quite popular in the eighteenth century (see graph 2). In 1700 (when the city went through the darkest days of its crisis) 47 fashion shops were servicing shoppers in and around Antwerp. In 1765 and in 1792, respectively, 42 and 35 'boutiques à la mode' were present.

Caption graph 3

Other changes in textile consumption also reveal the greater sensitivity to fashion during the eighteenth century. The success of cotton for instance and a growing diversity in mixed-cotton-fabrics – like the so-called 'siamoises' – can only be ascribed to a growing sensibility for fashion. These products were lighter, more diversified and beautifully coloured.³⁰ At the same time cotton was growing in popularity, the 'old' Antwerp silk industries were declining: another example of 'fashionable' substitution.

After Antwerp had lost its former leading role as a baroque-fashion centre, it increasingly pandered to new changing consumer habits. The mercer-guild successfully absorbed these new commercial branches (often of imported commodities), thus guaranteeing its continuous attractiveness. Further research will determine if it was exclusively the fixed shopkeepers who successfully managed to integrate these new commercial branches (such as

the selling of coffee and tea, cottons and mixed cottons) into their business. Especially after 1750 there are clear indications that all commercial retail-circuits were growing in Antwerp.

V.

Fondness for novelty and fashion contributed to the growing diversity in goods of the eighteenth-century material culture. The number of options open to consumers was considerably enlarged. Beds, for instance, diversified, as did tableware, clothes, and even books, as is clear from our knowledge of the 'reading revolution'.³¹ This diversification, and the need to adjust purchases to individual taste in turn, added to the transaction cost problem and reinforced the economic importance of commercial middlemen. Indeed, with the range of choice widening, customers increasingly became dependent upon advice and information provided by professional advisers.³²

The growing fashion-sensitivity and complexity of urban material culture made retailers aware of the advisory task they fulfilled towards demanding and dependent clients. Hence, they increasingly acted as strategic middlemen between consumers and producers. Let us, for instance, look at the business archives of a typical *à la mode shop* in Antwerp around the 1740's.³³ Customers of the *Au magasin de Paris*, a self-conscious titled fashion shop in Antwerp, continuously asked for *new* clothes and ornaments, in *the latest French fashion*. For instance, a certain widow Uffele, living in Bergen-op-Zoom, asked the shop 'to patch my bonnets according to the latest fashion'.³⁴ The shopkeepers themselves, Mr and Mrs Hoffinger, were informed on a regularly basis by Sollier, their contact in Paris, about what was 'most beautiful and most new', and should be considered 'good taste'.³⁵ Customers thus became highly demanding, continually in search of gentility and novelty. In so doing they, however, were also transferring important parts of the decision-making process to the shopkeeper, hence growing dependent upon their advice on good taste and fashion.³⁶ Unsurprisingly then, this market segment was marked by strong personal ties between customers and retailers, by specific location patterns mirroring the high status residential areas of town and a remarkable stability of business careers.³⁷

However, it was not only fashion that reinforced the advisory task of retailers. Consumer dependency was, among the members of the eighteenth-century urban elite at least, fuelled by a somewhat paradoxical tendency towards the homogenization of the urban interior.³⁸ Patricians, for instance, had numerous options to decorate, but they increasingly bought commodities that fitted well into a general *Gesampt* interior. Rich urban patrician dwellings consisted of stairs, window curtains and wall hangings made up or covered by one and the same (coloured) textile. Eighteenth-century architects and upholsterers derived a key strategic position from their advisory power, and archival evidence indeed shows that they contracted and coordinated craftsmen from a range of different trades.³⁹

On a lower, less exclusive level, the same logic was at work. In the fashion shop of Hoffinger described above, a customer not only bought clothes, but also shoes, ornaments of different kinds and wigs. Eighteenth-century fashion shopkeepers derived their privileged position as the clients' advisers from the complexity of the consumer pattern. In a world dominated by a growing range of options, customers needed someone to assist in the construction of their identity.⁴⁰ The extreme diversity of objects offered for sale and the often-unspecialized character of early modern shops is, seen in this perspective, a clear sign of its 'modernity'.⁴¹

Fashion sensitivity and the complex diversity of the material culture, reinforced the power of middlemen of different kinds (be it upholsterers, shopkeepers or architects). They became the crucial link between supply and demand, subcontracting craftsmen who formerly would probably have negotiated independently with the customer. The buying habits of James

Dormer, an Antwerp merchant at the end of the eighteenth century, are a case in point. When he bought a *new berline* from a Brussels coach maker, it is the latter that was contracting Parisian locksmiths, Brussels textile furnishers, glassmakers, and so forth.⁴² The need for a fashionable concept – which in the case of a typical conspicuous consumption item, like coaches, was strongly felt – drove the client to rely upon a middling person, in this case the coach maker. Not surprisingly then, several tailors complained about the competition of the fashion shops, which subcontracted not only tailors but also seamstresses, wigmakers, garment makers, shoemakers, and thus reduced the independence of guild masters. More generally, craft guilds lost their old privileged position in design and quality construction. Consumer changes thus accounted, at least partially, for the waning of the economic importance of guilds.⁴³

VI.

In the two centuries under investigation, a slow but important transformation in the material culture of Europe occurred. This transformation included an improved accessibility of ‘luxury’ to the urban middling sort of people.⁴⁴ The introduction of hot drinks, the changing fashion trends in textiles, the replacement of wall tapestries and gilded leather by wall paper hangings and several other basic trends in the history of material culture all share one common feature. They implied the gradual replacement of very expensive, high quality and durable products with a high secondary market value by less costly and equally less durable products.⁴⁵ Hence, the early seventeenth-century consumer pattern was largely made up of expensive, durable consumer goods that were well-suited for repair and resale. By contrast, the eighteenth-century consumer increasingly preferred cheaper and less durable commodities. Both the lower quality of the consumer product and fashion-sensitivity might – *ceteris paribus* – have contributed to the reinforcement of the retail sector (where predominantly new goods were sold) at the detriment of so called *secondary markets*. As a result, it might be expected that the growth of the retail sector would have resulted in the waning of the secondary markets.

While secondary markets, repair and resale were structurally embedded features of the pre-industrial economy,⁴⁶ in principle, they may also have drawn profits from a growing supply of old-fashioned objects, ready to start a second (or even third) life among customers in other geographical or social layers of society.⁴⁷ In our opinion, however, the likelihood of an opposite move taking place, makes at least as much sense. Given the decrease in average quality, durability and prices of goods, re-sellers may have experienced growing difficulties in making ends meet.⁴⁸ This interpretation is borne out by findings on the average value of objects that were given in pledge to the *Bergen van Barmhartigheid*, the official pawnshops of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see graph 4). The average value of pawns collapsed during the second half of the seventeenth century: a time when Antwerp products were rapidly substituted by more fashionable and cheaper ones.⁴⁹

Unfortunately it will be very difficult to verify this hypothesis for Antwerp. The lines of division between the *oudekleerkopers* (the guild of second-hand dealers) and the mercers in the city were far from clear. Consequently, many conflicts relating to the segmentation of the retail market arose between the two guilds. In Antwerp, as elsewhere, *oudekleerkopers* managed to combine the selling of new goods with their re-selling activities. In addition they held shops, public sales at the Friday markets, auctions *in situ* as well as renting out objects. There is, however, circumstantial evidence pointing in the direction of our hypothesis. When, for instance, at the end of the seventeenth century, the second hand dealers were forbidden to sell new goods any longer, the revenue of the excise on public sales suddenly collapsed. Thereafter, the *oudekleerkopers* seem to have declined enormously in importance within the

Antwerp retail sector. While the mercer guild continued to attract an increasing share of the male population of the city, the numbers of *oudekleerkopers* dramatically collapsed. In 1585 at least 250 *oudekleerkopers* were at work; in the eighteenth century (1755) scarcely 40 heads of family made their living in this guild.⁵⁰ They were not only less numerous, they also turned out to be significantly poorer. At the end of the sixteenth century *oudekleerkopers* in property tax lists equalled the social position of the retailers.⁵¹ By 1755, while the average shopkeeper employed 0,40 male or female servants, re-sellers had on average only 0,2 domestic servants.⁵² The contrast with the above mentioned fashion shop or *boutique à la mode*, employing on average 0,60 servants, could only be explained by the importance of selling novelty during the ‘age of enlightenment’. To conclude, in Antwerp the growth of the ‘shop sector’ resulted, at least partially, from a redrawing of the general retail map. Thanks to both institutional changes and transformations in material culture, sellers of new commodities reinforced their social and economic position at the expense of second hand dealers.

VII.

Retail and consumer changes were often slow to occur, they seldom deserved the label ‘revolutionary’. This did not prevent the accelerating changes of seventeenth and eighteenth-century consumer patterns, however, from profoundly affecting the pre-industrial economy, often in unexpected ways.

Slowly, but unmistakably, the Antwerp material culture after 1650 diversified, included more fashionable and colourful things and, above all, was increasingly composed of cheaper and less durable goods. These changes are not confined to Antwerp, of course: they can be attested for much wider consumer regions, such as Holland, England and France. They occurred, moreover, relatively independently from the economic success or failure of the cities studied.⁵³

These changes to material culture and consumption on the demand side, we argue, need to be included in larger explanatory models in order to understand the growing strategic centrality of retailing in pre-industrial economies. Indeed, structural consumer shifts profoundly interacted with changing retailing practices. The transformations identified in this article contributed to the growing importance, numerically, socially as well as strategically, of the retail sector in the European urban economy. Tobacco, sugar, chocolate, coffee and tea quickly conquered large consumer markets. And shopkeepers were successful in integrating new and imported consumer products into their product assortment.⁵⁴

But the impact of consumer changes upon retail development reached far beyond offering distribution outlets for the growing share of imported products. More important, however, were the growing possibilities for choice, the available options of all kinds of goods, and the increasing sensitivity of consumer durables to fashion shifts. These then pushed different middlemen into an unprecedented key position. For a large share of the material culture market shopkeepers gained as vital mediators between production and consumption. Thanks to this, shopkeepers were capable, among others, of increasingly subcontracting artisans (shoemakers, tailors and so on) who had formerly enjoyed a more independent position vis-à-vis their customers. Though the balance of power moved in favour of the distributive occupations, the nature of relationships within this market segment remained to a large extent ‘traditional’, i.e. of a personal nature dominated by acquaintance, credit, proximity and trust.

Consumer changes also account for the redrawing of the commercial circuits map: secondary markets in particular suffered from the reorientation towards new products. Whether or not sellers of old-clothes were capable of adapting to these challenges was highly dependent upon institutional settlements. In Antwerp, however, where *oudkleerkopers* were

cut off from the market for new products, they lost ground. After all, the eighteenth century was an age of novelty.

Credit, survival strategies, institutional elements and so forth all need to be taken into account when studying the retail sector. Yet, any study leaving out the consumer side of the story, or dealing with it in a 'passive' way, is doomed to fail. Retail changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, to a large degree, closely and compellingly determined by consumer changes rather than by economic growth and urbanisation.

Appendix.

Appendix.

Note on the construction, ranking and representing of a probate inventory database

The probate inventory evidence collected in this article fits in our larger research project on the material culture of Antwerp in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The probate inventories studied are stemming from notaries records of the municipal archives of Antwerp. Probate inventories in our period were drawn up mostly for the purpose of safeguarding the family inheritance after the death of a father or mother. Yet in Antwerp it was not a matter of course to have such an inventory drawn up. Inventories were costly, so they are rare among the poor.⁵⁵ Fortunately, for our purposes, that matters less than whether urban people of the middling and rich sort are well represented. Ideally, we would need other sources that would help us define social categories, and against which we might rank our probate inventories. Sadly, however, even in Antwerp the city archives lack such alternatives. Nor do the inventories themselves – unlike elsewhere, for example – contain valuations by sworn assessors. These deficiencies have forced us to devise our own criterion for assigning relative socio-economic standing to those whose inventories we have. We have settled on the number of rooms listed in inventories. Even though number of rooms is probably a rough proxy for movable wealth and social rank, it also has an obvious rationale. Moreover, it supplies a hierarchical ranking, in line with the hierarchies typically found in material culture studies of goods ownership. Not only that, but our samples of probate inventories – 80 to 100 for each sample period – are distributed quite evenly among the different categories by number of rooms. And, finally, in the case of Antwerp, we possess for 1667 a tax register, listing houses by their assessed rental value. For a handful of cases – eighteen in fact – we were able to connect these tax records with inventory testators.⁵⁶ Clearly this is a small number. Moreover, there is a significant time gap between our sample and the date of the tax register. Finally, the chances of positive identification rise substantially towards the top range of houses – those with more rooms and a higher taxable rental value – meaning that the information we have is biased towards the middle and upper echelons. There is also a problem in that families in the middling groups who sub-let some rooms in their houses appear better off in the register than they were in fact. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the correlation between the 1667 house rent tax assessments and the number of rooms occupied by 1680 probate inventory testators is an impressive 0.75. Graph 5 depicts this correlation visually, while Table 3 gives the numbers of testators for which a positive identification could be made in the tax register, by room numbers, and the average and median tax assessment.

Caption table 3

The full list of our categories for ranking by number of rooms is as follows. Category I, as indicated, comprises one-room dwellers, and Category II, those in one or two rooms. The other categories are broader: Category III, 4-7 rooms; Category IV, 8-11 rooms; Category V, 12-15 rooms. Category VI is a residual category, comprising 16 rooms and above. Such evidence on occupations as we have shows that Categories III and IV contain middling sorts of people: retailers and some professionals, plus an over-representation of successful master craftsmen, e.g. bakers, brewers, bleachers, hatters, etc. Categories I and II contain the working poor, a heterogeneous collection of individuals ranging from single women in religious orders, to a servant, to a gravedigger, a tailor and a shoemaker, though also an army captain and a noblemen of modest means. Category V contains representatives of the upper middle classes and some who belonged to the urban elites: for instance, Isabella Moretus, linked to the famous Plantin printing works. In Category VI there were richly decorated urban dwellings, occupied in a few instances by rich craftsmen (e.g. a highly successful brewer), but mainly by rich merchant families, a few professionals and of course the local nobility.

Caption graph 5

Graph 5 shows the percentages of persons taxed in 1667 (white bars) and those of identified taxed testators (black bars) in our 1680 sample, by tax class, in guilders. It is clear from the figure that the percentages of identified testators in each class match reasonably well those of the tax-paying population as a whole. It is also comforting that identifications occur in all tax classes. The numbers are small, and rich persons are more likely to have had an inventory taken: the 'poorest' half of tax-paying households generated fewer than thirty per cent of the inventories for which we found a match in the tax register. Graph 6 captures this effect. It also shows the positive aspect of this fact, that the chances for positive identification increase as we move up the social scale.

Caption graph 6

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Tables

Figures

Notes

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³ For useful introductory reading see: Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption*; Miller, ed. *Consumption*.

⁴ Berg, 'Consumption', p. 358.

⁵ However, especially in British historiography interest is growing in the commercial underpinnings of consumption. See, for instance Alexander and Akehurst, 'Introduction', pp. 1-15; Cox, *The complete tradesman*; Walsh, 'Shop design', pp. 157-176; Stobart and Hann, 'Retailing revolution', pp. 171-194.

⁶ Already in 1986 it was lamented that retail research lacked historical studies in which the 'interrelationships between retailing practices and changes in consumption patterns' were scrutinised. See Hollander, 'A rearview', p. 9.

⁷ See Thirsk, *Economic policy*; McKendrick, et al., *The birth of a consumer society*; Fairchild, 'Consumption', pp. 850-858; Glennie, 'Consumption', pp. 164-203; Beerbuhl, 'Die Konsummöglichkeiten', pp. 1-28; Stearns, 'Stages of consumerism', pp. 102-117.

⁸ Similar questions were asked by Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*. They admit at p. xiii that 'it is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that if a 'consumer society' can be said to have been born in that period [the 18th century], a firmly established network of shops, some of whose proprietors actively attracted customers, nourished the new society'.

⁹ Few historians have attempted to forward explanatory economic models from a consumer perspective. On a general level, see: De Vries, 'Between purchasing power', pp. 85-133; Berg, 'In pursuit', pp. 86-142; Church, 'New perspectives', pp. 405-435; Overton a.o., *Production and consumption*, pp. 1-12.

¹⁰ See, for instance, some of the recent work of authors like Muldrew, *The economy of obligation*; Stobart, 'Shopping streets', pp. 3-21; Walsh, *Shopping*; Lemire, 'Second-hand beaux and', pp. 391-417. On the continent, studies about retailing were closely connected with research on guilds. Recently, however, there has been an upsurge in comparative work. For France, see especially, the writings of Natacha Coquery and Laurence Fontaine.

¹¹ The complex and evolving world of buying, selling and shopping has long been neglected in Belgian historiography. The only synthesis about the history of retailing in Belgium dates already from 1938: Michielsen, *De evolutie*. Only recently is the study of early-modern retailing steadily growing, clearly in the wake of the renewed interest in the corporate and middle-layers of society. Currently and almost simultaneously PhD-research about retail-related topics is being carried out at the University Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent. For earlier studies one has to rely, predominantly, on MA-theses written at the University of Brussel at the VUB-Centre for Pre-industrial Production processes and Labour Conditions (directed by Hugo Soly). See Van De Weghe, *Het Gentse*; Neelen, *Het Antwerpse meerseniersambacht*; Steegen, *Handel en wandel*; Van den Nieuwenhof, *Faiseurs de rien*.

¹² As Benson and Ugolini, 'Introduction', pp. 23-24, argue: 'it is comparison, after all, which allows us to confirm or refute narratives and explanations that can easily appear self-evident and irrefutable when considered in a single geographical or chronological context'.

¹³ For an overview, read Van der Wee, 'Industrial dynamics', pp. 307-381; Van der Wee and Materné, 'Antwerp', pp. 19-31; Blondé, 'The 'reconquista'', pp. 187-210; Limberger, 'No town', pp. 39-62.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Thijs, 'The Scheldt', pp. 165-273; Thijs, 'Structural changes', pp. 207-212.

¹⁵ For the larger historical context concerning the so called 'crisis of the seventeenth century', see Van Damme, 'Het vertrek van Mercurius', pp. 6-39.

¹⁶ Blondé, 'Disparities', pp. 41-52.

¹⁷ De Vries, *European Urbanization*, appendix 1.

¹⁸ See Blondé, 'Tableware', pp. 295-311.

¹⁹ See Blondé and Greefs, 'Werk aan de winkel', pp. 207-229; Van Aert and Van Damme, 'Retail dynamics', pp. 139-167.

²⁰ Within the Southern Netherlands these were very high retail-numbers. Small cities (less than 10.000 inhabitants) like Lier or Turnhout had an average retail-ratio of 26 persons per mercer in the second half of the eighteenth century. Middle-sized cities like Leuven, Mechelen and Ghent attained ratios of respectively 35, 96 and 155 persons per mercer in the first half of the eighteenth century. Brussels – the only city that in seize was more or less comparable with Antwerp – counted in 1738 one mercer for every 128 persons. (Calculations based upon figures in Van Den Nieuwenhof, *Faiseurs de rien*, pp. 40-42). The enormous density of retailers in Antwerp even surpassed the London ratio where in 1759 there was an average of 30 persons per shop. Mui and Mui, *Shops*, pp. 37-41.

²¹ See also Blondé and Van Damme, 'Southern Netherlands', pp. 392-394.

²² International comparisons between Italy, England, France and the Low Countries are currently being published by Blondé, Stabel, Stobart and Van Damme, eds., *Buyers and Sellers*, forthcoming. See also Blondé, Briot, Coquery and Van Aert, eds., *Retailers and consumer changes*.

²³ For an introductory overview, Musgrave, 'The rise', pp. 59-85.

²⁴ Campbell, 'The desire', pp. 246-261.

²⁵ See appendix.

²⁶ However, recent historiography tends to stress the dangers embedded in labeling these consumer changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as 'revolutionary'. See, for instance, Shammas, *The pre-industrial*, pp. 291-299.

²⁷ Thijs, 'Antwerp's luxury', pp. 105-113.

²⁸ The growing dependence on fashion was also attested for other countries. See the special issue on fashion in *Textile History*, 2, 22 (1991); Berg, 'French fancy', pp. 519-556; Crowston, 'The queen', pp. 92-116; Fontaine, 'The circulation', p. 89-102; Panhuysen, *Maatwerk*, pp. 91-107.

²⁹ No wonder, contemporary economic and religious commentators were anxious and really upset about this '*blind idleness and the folly of conceit*'. The perceived fondness of people for fashion and newness and novelty, only led to economic downturn, social mixing of classes and, worst of all, damnation. See for this, Van Damme, 'Zotte verwaandheid', pp. 187-203.

³⁰ It is significant that the real boom of the cotton-retailers only took place at the end of the eighteenth century, when the industry itself was buoyant.

³¹ See, among others, Riley, 'A widening', pp. 233-264. For the 'reading revolution' see Engelsing, *Der Bürger*.

³² Similar remarks are to be found in Crask and Berg, 'Art and industry', pp. 829 and 833; Sargentson, 'The manufacture', p. 131-133.

³³ For more details see Coppens, 'Au magasin', pp. 89-92.

³⁴ Municipal Archives Antwerp, *Insolvente Boedelskamer*, nr. 2363: letter from P.V. Uffele (21 augustus, 1750).

³⁵ Municipal Archives Antwerp, *Insolvente Boedelskame*, nr. 2636: letters from J. Sollier (for instance the ones dating from 24 October 1742 and 28 march 1743).

³⁶ See also Crask, 'Plan and control', pp. 187-216 and Edwards, 'The upholsterer', pp. 53-69.

³⁷ Van Aert and Van Damme, 'Retail', pp. 153-159.

³⁸ This is also attested for France, see Garnot, *La culture matérielle*, p. 87.

³⁹ Municipal Archives Antwerp, *Notariaat*, Protocol, nr.189 (F.B. Beltens) shows us around in 'De Grote Robijn', a house situated in one of the major streets in Antwerp (de Lange Nieuwstraat). The interior is a case-example of homogenization. In this case, Jan Peter van Bourscheit de Jonge (1699-1768) was the appointed '*architecte et ingénieur*'. See also, Baudouin, 'Bouw-', p. 188; Idem, *Jan Peter van Bourscheit*, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁰ Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*, p. 57; Jones, 'The fashion manipulators', pp. 198-226.

⁴¹ Berger, 'The Development', pp. 127-128.

⁴² Municipal Archives Antwerp, *Insolvente Boedelskame*, nr. 1792, *Mémoire de la nouvelle Berline, que la veuve de Gaspar Simons maître sellier en la ville de Bruxelles at fait et livrée pour la service de monsieur Dormer*.

⁴³ See De Munck, *Leerpraktijken*.

⁴⁴ Earle, *The making*, pp. 299-301; Shammas, 'Changes', pp. 177-205.

⁴⁵ Blondé, 'Tableware', pp. 295-311. See also De Vries, 'The industrious', pp. 43-71.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Woodward, 'Swords', pp. 175-191; Lemire, 'Consumerism', pp. 1-24; Styles, 'Clothing the North', pp. 139-166 and very recently Lambert, 'Cast-off wearing apparel', pp. 1-26.

⁴⁷ Roche, *Le peuple de Paris*, pp. 222-223 ; Verlet, 'Le commerce', p. 28.

⁴⁸ Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers', p. 134 is following a similar argument for 19th-century Edinborough. However, she fully acknowledges that '*understanding the precise character of this market is difficult*'.

⁴⁹ Soetaert, *De Bergen*.

⁵⁰ Deceulaer, 'Urban artisans', p. 224.

⁵¹ Van Roey, *De sociale structuur*, pp. 109-119.

⁵² Municipal Archives Antwerp, *Privilegekamer*, nrs. 2561-2564 and General Archives Brussels, *Fiscaal Officie Brabant*, nr. 395. Cf. Blondé, *Een economie*, pp. 59-64 and pp. 258-271.

⁵³ Evidence for other declining economies stems from Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de gevel*.

⁵⁴ De Vries, 'The industrious', p. 43-71.

⁵⁵ Schuurman and Servais, eds., 'Inventaires après-décès', pp. 131-151.

⁵⁶In 1667 at least 7346 Antwerp inhabitants were forced to pay a tax based upon the rent value of their houses. The tax registers lists both, tax contributions as well as (an assessment of) the total amount of yearly rents paid by Antwerp families. The lowest value upon which tax had to be paid was about 20 guilders, though several families with rents above 30 guilders were exempted. At the other end of the spectrum the highest value recorded was 1000 guilders. The famous 'Golden Compasses' inhabited by the family Moretus, for example, was estimated to represent a yearly rent value of 750 guilders. Needless to stress, however, these top families were by definition very exceptional. The rule was modesty and even though about 7000 Antwerpens were forced to contribute, a significant share of population seems to have been exempted. Statistically speaking the real threshold for tax exemption seems to be located at a rent value of about 40 guilders per year. The median figure for the tax-paying population was about 84 guilders, the average rent value amounting to 109 guilders.

Table 1. Percentage of Antwerp probate inventories containing items related to the consumption of hot chocolate, coffee and tea, 1680-1780

Social category	Hot chocolate			Tea			Coffee		
	1680 n=86	1730 n=93	1780 n=75	1680 n=86	1730 n=93	1780 n=75	1680 n=86	1730 n=93	1780 n=75
I.	0	12	7	0	59	67	0	0	37
II.	0	36	[0]	0	64	[100]	0	14	[50]
III.	3	25	38	0	58	95	0	29	71
IV.	0	63	71	0	89	93	0	47	71
V.	18	71	[67]	0	86	[100]	0	75	[100]
VI.	40	100	100	0	100	100	0	83	100

Source: see appendix.

Table 2. Percentage of Antwerp probate inventories containing snuffboxes (%)

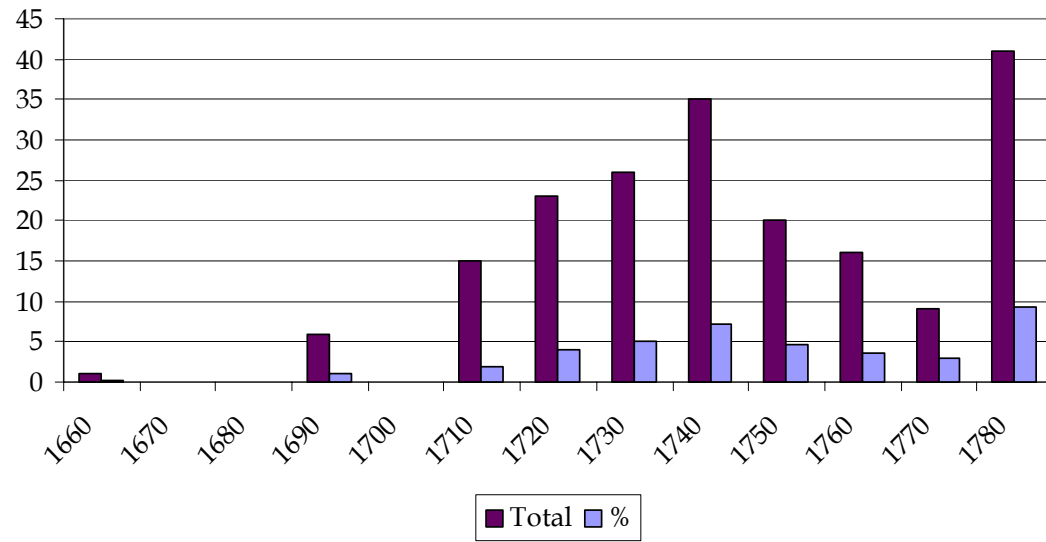
Social category	1680 (n=86)	1730 (n=93)	1780 (n=75)
I.	0	0	26
II.	0	0	[100]
III.	2,7	4,2	33
IV.	8,3	5,3	43
V.	0	7,1	[0]
VI.	0	14,3	67

Source: see appendix.

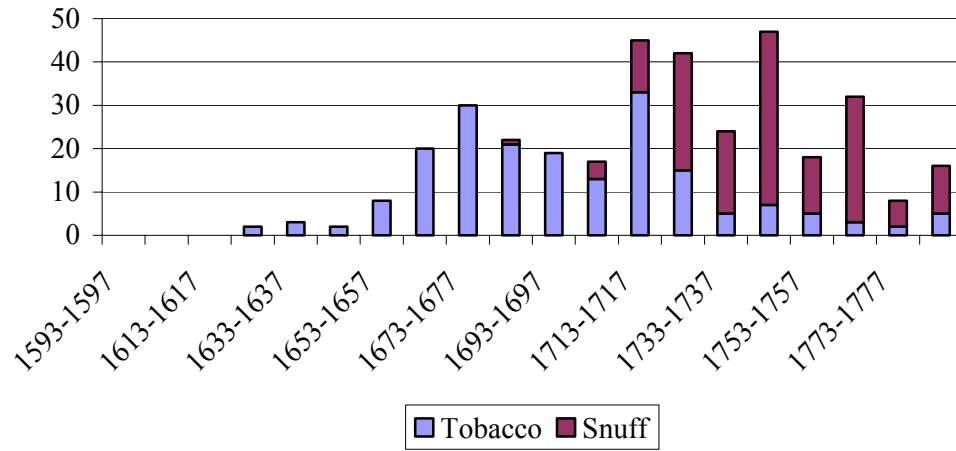
Table 3. Comparison between probate inventories anno 1680 (columns 1, 2) and house rents in 1667 (columns 3, 4)

Category	Number	Average rent assessment in guilders	Median rent assessment in guilders
II	1	[48]	[48]
III	9	82	84
IV	3	103	100
V	4	235	175
VI	1	[400]	[400]

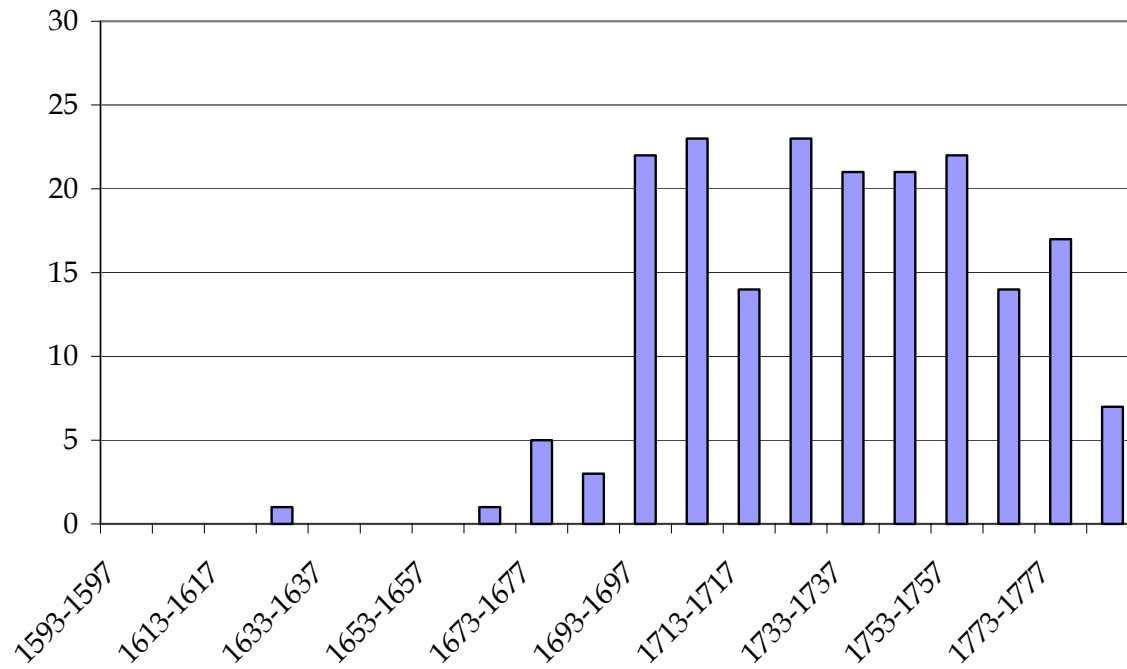
Graph 1. New mercers: chocolate-, tea- and coffeeshops
(N and %)



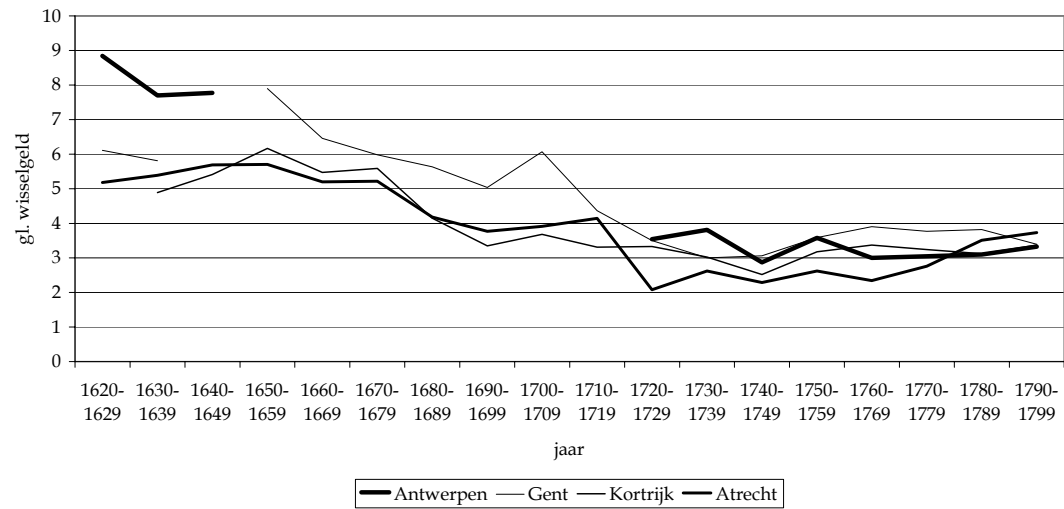
Graph 2. New mercers: tobacco and snuff shops



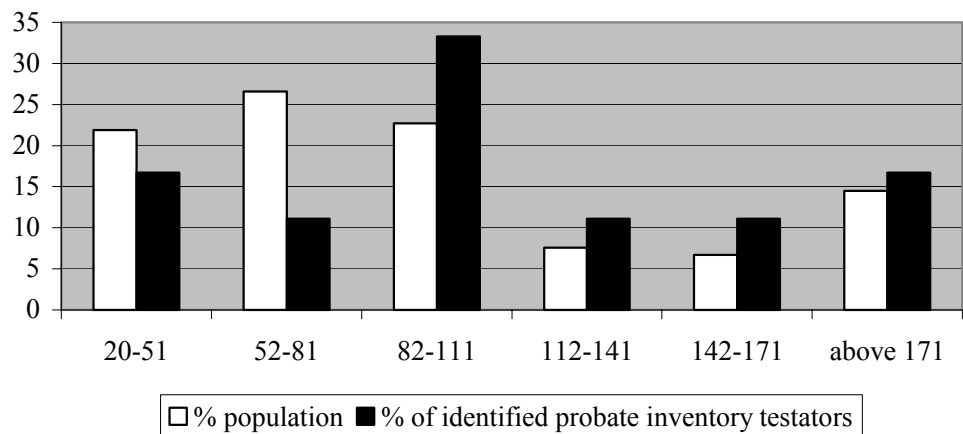
Graph 3. New mercers: fashion shops (boutique à la mode)



Graph 4. Average value of pawns pledged in the "Bergen van Barmhartigheid"
 (official pawnshops)
 (Source: P. Soetaert)



Graph 5. Percentage of household rent value taxpayers in 1667 and probate inventory testators (sample of 1680), by house rent tax category, in guilders (x-axis)



Graph 6. Percentage of identified/unidentified probate inventories,
by social category

