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The Progress and Changes in the Retailing System in the Small French Provincial Town of Besançon during the 19th Century

Marie Gillet

Introduction

Up to the early nineteenth century, retail trade was essentially dominated by fairs, markets and peddling (in French towns) and itinerant trade still appeared until the mid-19th century as the best mean of supply for novelties and manufactured goods in small provincial towns and villages. If fixed shops were only present in important cities at the beginning of the 19th century (Verley, 1997), they considerably gained in importance in medium-sized towns during the century. Indeed, many factors had an influence on this change: the economic growth, the rise of peoples' living standards, the urbanisation and the arrival of new goods onto the market favoured the consumption, the increase of shops and as a consequence the competition. Thus, retail trade modernised during the century by adopting new strategies to attract demanding consumers.

However, this kind of trade in the 19th-century France has been neglected by researchers who essentially focused on peddling and department stores or more recently on retailing in the early modern period. A few studies are available about specific professions (butchers, bakers, booksellers...) but studies dealing with retailing history as a whole especially in medium-sized provincial towns are still missing.

Besançon, county town of the Franche-Comté, is a medium-sized provincial town located in north-eastern France halfway between Strasbourg and Lyon and near Switzerland. It was established by the end of the 18th century as a regional capital with a population of 25,000 inhabitants (in 1794). Considered as a military and administrative city, its economy was largely based on a service sector activity characterized by retailing (in spite of the development of the clock-making industry specific to the city), which predominated until the end of the 19th century. The multiplicity and diversity of shops present in Besançon make it an ideal field of research: we therefore suggest studying changes inherent to provincial retail trade during the 19th century in this town, essentially based on probate inventories and trade directories. Of course this study is a first approach and will need to be broadened later.

First, I will describe the situation of retail trade in Besançon and its change during the 19th century in order to capture the commercial practices and habits of retailers. Then, I will talk about shop interiors to understand in which ways shopkeepers tried to make their work place more attractive and finally I will focus on the varied supply available in Besançon during the century.

I. The retailers community in Besançon

After the tumults of the revolutionary period, Besançon recovered its trade activity thanks to its proximity with Switzerland, with which most of the transactions are carried out¹ (Annuaire du Doubs, 1804) and to the reestablishment of fairs (6 in 1807 instead 4). However, in spite of the dynamism of the leather market and annual fairs, the economy of the city was not really revived and growth was short-lived. Roads were so much deteriorated and peddlers

¹ "En général, le commerce du département du Doubs se réduit au commerce d'importation et d'exportation avec la Suisse », "Generally speaking, the trade of the department of Doubs is no more than an export and import trade with Switzerland."

met so many difficulties to travel that trade was sometimes interrupted² (De Bry, 1802, p. 125). Moreover, in 1810, the prefect wrote in a letter addressed to the internal affairs Minister that he was “more and more convinced that Besançon or another town of the departement could not be considered strictly speaking as a trade place because only simple retailing for consumption was carried out”³. He added one year later that the city was essentially composed of people working individually on their own behalf and for the exclusive consumption of the department inhabitants⁴. That proves the trade influence of Besançon was limited to the close area despite its favourable position in the middle of the commercial axis formed by the two urban centres of Basle and Strasbourg.

In 1811, the depreciation of merchandise stocks due to the shortage of cash and the fall of primary goods prices led first to the bankruptcies of wholesalers and then retailers. Thus, in the first 8 months of 1811, 13 bankruptcies were registered and especially affected retailers such as linen merchants or tobacconists for example. The situation got worse with the introduction of a municipal tax on some of primary goods as drinks, foods or fuels involving a rise in prices especially in bread prices. The consequences were disastrous for all kind of retailers who committed suicides because of their unfortunate business⁵. Around the 1820s, descriptions made about the trade situation by some of the citizens were reluctant. In 1821 C. Weiss wrote down in his journal that the trade in Besançon was “languid” (Weiss, 1972, p. 325), and L. Bretilot considered retail trade “was carried out in a rather restricted number of shops and stores” (Bretilot, 1878, p. 102). It is very difficult to estimate the real number of established shops in the city at this period because local directories did not mention merchants before the 1830s. Indeed, contrary to other provincial foreign cities in Germany (like Leipzig, Homburg, 2000) or in England⁶, where lists of retailers and wholesalers were available from the 18th century and the early 19th century, the local directories of Besançon named tradesmen only from 1837 and in an irregular way. In addition, other nominative sources used to find out about commercial activities as census reports are incomplete and only the reports concerning some districts of the city of Besançon are obtainable for the beginning of the 19th century (the first complete census report is dated from 1836). Peddlers were still numerous at this period (44 peddlers are mentioned in the trade directory of 1837) and were accused for some of them to be prejudicial to retail trade by abusing consumers with fraudulent prices (L’impartial, 13th December 1829). According to F. Braudel, “the place where peddling is predominant is usually a proof of an economic discrepancy”⁷ (Braudel, p.73) and even if peddling could be adapted to the market, it symbolizes in the 19th century an archaic form of retailing.

During the July Monarchy, the municipality proceeded to great works to improve the transport network and make the city more attractive: many roads were constructed and a waterway connecting the Rhone river to the Rhine river was opened (1833) contributing to the start of a the wholesale trade (which did not exist in the city 10 years before) and thereby allowing the population to access to a multitude of goods. Streets were widened, paved and lighted, building fronts were lined up and many shops opened attracting an abundant clientele: “It is an astonishing thing, (said a citizen) to see in Besançon almost every house in construction, shops open... and it is a matter of who will make them the most attractive and decorate them the most elegantly as possible. If that carries on, there will be soon more sellers

² « (...) Les routes du second et du troisième ordre, qui sont indispensables pour le commerce intérieur, sont dans un tel état de dégradation, que ce commerce est quelques fois interrompu. Cette circonstance a fait diminuer le nombre de marchands clincailliers porteurs de balles.»

³ Situation commerce, 7 septembre 1810, M2403, archives départementales du Doubs

⁴ Situation industrie et commerce Besançon, Lettre au Conseiller d’Etat, 18 mai 1811, M2403, archives départementales du Doubs

⁵ We learn for example in the journal of Charles Weiss, town librarian, that mister Gomet, upholsterer killed himself the 10th July 1817 because of the poor situation of his business (Weiss, p. 174).

⁶ (Cox, complete tradesman, p. 39, see <http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/b1.asp> for a digital access to trade directories (1750-1919) of England and Wales)

⁷ « La ou il a priorité (le colportage), la preuve est faite, à l’ordinaire, d’un certain retard économique »

than customers”⁸. The commercial activities of the city rapidly grew and the number of shops boomed: the appearance of the city was changing thanks to an important campaign of renovation led by the municipality and the retailing system progressively moved on to modernity. In 1837, 937 shopkeepers (including craftsmen) were listed in the trade directory for 29,167 inhabitants, what represented a ratio of approximately 31 inhabitants per shopkeeper. Amongst them, were specialised merchants such as 13 jewellers, 14 hatters, 19 wigmakers, 15 confectioners, 65 bakers, 64 butchers and pork butchers, 19 tobacconists, 9 cabinetmakers, 10 leather merchants, 11 linen merchants, 6 clock merchants, 11 perfumers, 10 druggists, 5 novelties merchants, 12 milliners, 4 wallpaper merchants to name but a few. Even it is true that we do not exactly know the proportion devoted to retailing rather than manufacture for a few of craftsmen such as shoemakers or tailors, the distinction between retailers and manufacturers became more obvious during the 19th century (for example the faience merchants are distinguished from the faience manufacturers in the trade directory of 1837 and it is the case for many others).

In 1860, Besançon was unmistakably considered as the capital city in French clock industry and significant progress were registered in many other fields such as the commercial activity. The retail trade was flourishing and if the commercial concentration was doubtlessly located midtown in the first part of the 19th century, it increasingly expanded to the periphery from 1840. Indeed, economic growth, population increase and important town-planning works rapidly cleared the town centre in favour of the outskirts “where shops opened in order to satisfy the needs and pleasures of new consumers”⁹ (Bretillot, 1878, p. 111). Thus, in the second part of the 19th century, 16 % of retailers from our sample were located in the periphery against only 2,4 % of them in the first part of the 19th century. New retailers established their shops in this part of the city such as milliners, linen merchants, jewellers, tobacconists or druggists who were completely missing in the first part of the century. Furthermore, the semi-luxury trade developed and new manufactured products arrived onto the market such as sewing machines, artificial flowers, photography, varnish, clothing industry. More and more specialized retailers opened a shop serving then the demands of an ‘economy of consumption’ (Verley, 1997, p.275). New kind of professions emerged in the end of the 19th century such as mineral water merchants, iron furniture merchants, white item merchants, rustic chair merchants, fishing item merchants and so on (even if we register some specialisations from the 1830s). In spite of the development of department stores in the 1860s such as Le Bon Marché or Galeries which are considered as dangerous rivals for small shops with their new sales techniques (fixed prices, free entrance, windows display, advertisements)¹⁰, the number of shopkeepers remained important in the end of the 19th century: 1,341 (one thousand three hundred and forty-one) retailers were established in 1895 amongst which 168 grocers (that is to say almost 3 times more than in 1845). However, the competition between shopkeepers was real and the increasing number of shops during the 19th century (a 43% increase of shops has been registered between 1837 and 1895) led tradesmen to reorganize their workplace and adopt new sales methods to attract consumers.

⁸ Laviron cité dans Fohlen , p. 318 « C’est une chose étonnante de voir dans Besançon construire dans presque toutes les maisons, pratiquer des ouvertures de boutique... et c’est à celui qui les embellira et les décorera le plus élégamment. Si cela continue, il y aura bientôt plus de vendeurs qu’acheteurs ».

⁹ « où des magasins ont été ouverts dans le but de pourvoir aux besoins ou aux plaisirs des nouveaux consommateurs »

¹⁰ A local newspaper Le Petit Comtois published in 1890 an article about the disastrous consequences of department stores on retailing and accused this new kind of retailing to ruin the traditional shops.

II. Shop interiors:

Shops appearance was into the past, characterized by sobriety and simplicity and their design were neglected during the Ancien Régime. However, “if some shopkeepers looked for a greater practicality of their work space, many of them opened up to interior design from the second part of the 18th century”¹¹, or even from the early 18th century according to D. Defoe who wrote in 1726, “Never, was such painting and gilding, such sashings and looking-glasses among shopkeepers as there is now”¹². Lighting, furniture and decorative items aimed to improve the convenience and the aesthetic of the shop in order to captivate walkers and potential customers. Probate inventories are ideal sources to find out about interiors and allow investigating luxurious shops as well as modest ones. However, descriptions are unfortunately limited to indoors and the descriptions of shop fronts are cruelly missing¹³, as well as information about interior architecture (such as chimneys, stairs, windows, ceilings, wall paintings...).

The basic set of furniture owned by the shopkeeper was essentially composed of a counter, some chairs or stools and some storage furniture as shelves or credences, whose quantity and quality differed according to the financial means of every tradesman. The counter generally made of fir-tree, oak tree or walnut tree was the main piece of furniture in a shop and was used to put away papers and money as well as to show the different products to the customer. In the first part of the century, its appearance remained modest and it was often described by the notary as being “old” or “in a poor state”¹⁴. Only one shopkeeper, a hatter, had a glassed-in counter (Jean-Louis Peulier, hatter, 1822) probably used to display his products. Moreover, we notice the presence of portable counters at the beginning of the century attesting of the shopkeeper’s mobility, who moved into fairs and markets (in spite of his fixed shop) to sell off their stock of goods but this kind of counters will be totally removed from mid-19th century inventories attesting of the improvement of fixed shops activity.

The improvement of the comfort in shops and the convenience of customers involved the presence of many seats to wait and engage in conversation while the shopkeeper was preparing orders. About 48 % of registered shopkeepers, owned this kind of furniture coming in the form of basic chairs, benches, stools, wall seats, armchairs and sofas (which only appeared from 1875). During the 19th century, the quality of these seats improved and the classic straw chairs were substituted by stuffed seats. In 1855, Paul Hein, a tailor, arranged in his shop, 6 walnut tree chairs stuffed with red damask, one armchair also stuffed with red damask and one card table probably installed to make the customer wait creating for this occasion a special atmosphere.

Storage furniture employed to put into order merchandises ran along the wall of shops and represented, even first before the counter, the most adopted type of furniture by shopkeepers (almost 77%). Shelves could simply represent basic boards stocked with boxes or cases to protect goods from dust as well as be more sophisticated and include decorative elements such as mirrors (Virgile César Margot, grocer, 1898). Other furniture such as credences,

¹¹ si certaines boutiques recherchent une plus grande fonctionnalité, beaucoup s’ouvrent à la décoration, surtout à partir de la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle », C.LEFEBURE, « Boutiques d’autrefois », p.49

¹² (1726, Complete English tradesman, p. 182-183 quoted in N. Cox, The complete tradesman, p. 90)

¹³ architectural sources such as architect plans are not available for the 19th century in Besançon 18th and 20th centuries architects should submit their old files to the municipal library but it was not the case for the 19th century. Consequently, only files concerning the architecture of municipal buildings are available for the 19th century..

¹⁴ Except Goguely who owned a counter with a value of 45 francs.

dressers, cabinets, cupboards (glassed-in or not), sideboards, larders (used by grocers) or sets of compartments were not only used for professional purposes but also for personal purposes. Indeed, the limit between the work place and the domestic part was not always well-defined (especially in the first part of the century) and some shopkeepers used these furniture to place clothes for example (Jean François Belin, wine merchant, 1808). In addition to storage furniture, tradesmen utilised display furniture (in 29% of cases) to emphasise their products such as showcases, tire racks, nest of drawers (used by clock merchants or jewellers) or special display cases including mirrors (and used by hatters for example)¹⁵. *Some hallstands and umbrella stands are also made available to customers.*

Shopkeepers also liked to decorate (for 24% of our sample) their shops with small decorative items such as mirrors with a gilded border, which made the shop lighter. Rich tradesmen did not hesitate to abuse of these decorative elements symbolizing the “great luxury”. That was the case of Hyppolyte Robardet, a fur merchant, who installed in his shop “8 mirrors for pier-tables” and “four other big mirrors”, valued at 180 francs. A multitude of other elements composed the shop interiors such as picture frames, paintings, reproductions, wall clocks, muslin curtains, vases, window boxes, statues, stuffed animals, barometers or thermometers. Despite a wider accessibility to decorative items in the second part of the 19th century, shopkeepers showed at any time their strong taste for superfluous elements. Thus, in 1807, Nicole Marchand, a second-hand clothes merchant, laid in her shop, a big antique mirror, two statues of the Virgin’s and Christ faces, three reproductions, a big gilded picture frame and two clocks.

Moreover, the arrival of new techniques using gas and electricity onto the market (from 1840 in Besançon and 1825 in Paris) allowed an important part of shopkeepers to adopt various lighting equipment and benefit from more brightness to make their shop more attractive. Indeed, only 30 % of registered shopkeepers were fitted out with a lighting equipment (candleholders, candelabums, oil lamps and lanterns) between 1800 et 1810 as against about 64% of them between 1890 and 1900 (harps, gas burners). However, if this kind of equipment became accessible to a large part of the population, it remained the privilege of the wealthiest shopkeepers such as Octave Joseph Ducat, a hatter, whose fortune amounted to 32,336 francs and who owned 5 gas lights.

Despite the fact that descriptions of architectural elements composing shop interiors are missing from probate inventories, some notaries mentioned the presence of a few things such as woodworks valued at 60 francs in the shop of an apothecary¹⁶; a “glassed-in door with its curve” valued at 30 francs in the shop of a milliner¹⁷; a pediment adorning the entrance door of a shop¹⁸ or a “glassed-in dividing wall” in the shop of a clock merchant¹⁹. Moreover, a citizen of Besançon, G. Coindre drafted a picture of shopping streets and used many varied terms to describe the implanted shops like : “unimpressive front shop”, “impressive coloured display windows”, “excessive pretentious front shop”, “exiguous shop”, “curiously old-fashioned”, “pleasant shop sign”, “neat shops”, “original shop sign”, “striking decorative strangeness”. He added about a milliners’ shop: “the shop sign was superb: a bride with her most beautiful dress in a real size; and (...) a curtain drew during rainy days to protect this work of art”, and about the interior of a jeweller’s shop: “the luxury of a white marble chimney in the middle of the shop appeared as an incredible luxury”. The variety of these terms is a conclusive evidence of the gap existing between traditional and old-fashioned shops

¹⁵ Octave Joseph DUCAT, hatter, 1896, 3^E28,203

¹⁶ (Inventaire après décès : Jeanne Louis PERRIER, 1821, 3^E28,19)

¹⁷ Inventaire après décès : Thérèse PARISOT, 1824, 3^E28,129

¹⁸ Inventaire après décès : Jeanne Pierrette AUBRY, 1880, 3^E28,129

¹⁹ ¹⁹ Inventaire après décès : Léontine Jeanne Elisabeth Marie FAIVRE, 1899, 3^E28,215

like those described by Balzac and Zola (dark, dusty and outdated shops), and those more elaborated ran by richer tradesmen, both forming the commercial landscape of Besançon during the 19th century.

III. Shop supply

To face with a more demanding population with varied needs, tastes and choices, Besançon retailers were forced to adapt their supply and regularly renew their stock to keep up with successive changes in fashion. Novelties, luxury goods, semi-luxury goods, standard consumer goods or second-hand products were available in variable quantities onto the market of provincial towns to satisfy customers.

During the 19th century, Besançon shopkeepers allowed the population to access to luxury and semi-luxury products but in a very limited quantity. Luxury products available in Besançon shops were destined to a medium-sized town bourgeoisie whose tastes, judgements and incomes were perceptibly different from those of the Parisian bourgeoisie (items viewed as luxurious in Besançon belonged to the semi-luxury category in Paris). This kind of high-value product made in precious metals or resulting from a very skilled craftsmanship, essentially concerned products from the clock industry, whose local production was as well-known as those coming from Switzerland or Paris. Thus, Louis Simon Perron (1835), a clock merchant, offered to his customers a regulator in a mahogany case valued at 250 francs or a gold watch valued at 200 francs, and Auguste Arsène Barthet (1899), also a clock merchant, sold a gold repeater watch with a gold winder valued at 328 francs (it has to be said that the average daily wage for a local labourer ranged from 2 francs to 3 francs in 1855)²⁰. The most expensive items registered in our sample was sold by a fur merchant²¹ offering a batch of pelts for 2,500 francs and by a jeweller²² who offered a set of jewellery made up with diamonds for 1,100F. Moreover, some shopkeepers sold semi-luxury products also destined to a population concerned by estheticism and social significance but contrary to the clientele of luxuries, they attached importance to moderate prices. Appeared during the 18th century, these products were essentially distributed in Besançon by the same shopkeepers as those offering luxurious goods allowing offering a broader choice of prices and qualities and attract various customers. Thus, Louis Simon Perron, the clock merchant previously named, offered luxuries as well as more accessible products such as pinchbeck watches valued at 3 francs a piece.

L. Bretillot wrote that from the 1830s, “Spacious and elegant stores were set up, doubling at least the number of those previously opened. There, not only goods that were necessary or useful to various ways of living, but all objects the possession of which flatters taste and gives life charm and variety, were offered to consumers from within and out of town.”²³. Indeed, shopkeepers relied on a broad range of goods to attract customers from different social classes. The abundance of goods and the arrival of manufactured items onto the local market made some products accessible to the middleclass consumers. Moreover, the second-hand trade allowing a circulation of goods from a privileged population to the lower classes, also contributed to the diffusion of a middle-class model of consumption (by means of auction and public sales for example) This kind of trade was well-integrated into the retailing system of Besançon during the first part of the 19th century (with 60 % of retailers of our sample selling old and worn products), but it was progressively reduced in the second part of the century

²⁰ Statistique générale 5F3

²¹ Hypollite Robardet, 1894

²² Claude Joseph Augustin Billot, 1832.

²³ Bretillot, p. 108

(with only 24 % of retailers of our sample). However, some shopkeepers kept on using the second-hand trade to clear their stock such as François Verdier (1891), a stove merchant, who offered 3 second-hand stoves for 80 francs (that is to say one piece valued at 27 francs) whereas a new one was valued at 50 francs, or Auguste Arsène Barthet (1899), a clock merchant, who in addition to precious gold watches offered an important quantity of second-hand jewels such as stud earrings, lockets, necklaces, hairpins and so on. Indeed, offering at the same time second-hand products and novelties appeared as an attractive sale argument for shopkeepers who wanted to satisfy middleclass consumers as well as a more privileged clientele. But the number of retailers using this argument in advertisements in the end of the century was small (the word “second-hand” is only used by 9% of retailers in avertisements published in the guidebook of Besançon in 1892).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the commercial landscape of Besançon was progressively modified during the 19th century by an increased number of various shops. Badly supplied at the beginning of the century, the retailing system changed with the arrival of wholesalers and the decline of fairs and peddling, which still represented an archaic form of trade for a 19th-century medium-sized town. The growth of the clock industry combined with a great improvement of transport influenced a massive arrival of goods and shops appeared to be “stocked like those in Paris”.

Moreover, to face with a stronger competition, shopkeepers had to be more inventive: decor and comfort (like those in bourgeois’ interiors) were imported into the shop allowing some shopkeepers to show the signs of their upward social mobility. But traditional and old-fashioned shops were still existing and both relied on the diversity of their stock to meet the needs of customers with varied financial means and tastes.