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Arnaud Bartolomei, Claire Lemerrier

► **To cite this version:**

Arnaud Bartolomei, Claire Lemerrier. Travelling salesmen as agents of modernity in France (18th to 20th centuries). *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*, 2014, 59 (2), pp.135 - 153. hal-01317392v2

HAL Id: hal-01317392

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01317392v2>

Submitted on 7 Nov 2017

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Travelling salesmen as agents of modernity in France (18th to 20th centuries)

Arnaud Bartolomei/Claire Lemerancier

«Isn't the travelling salesman – a figure that was unknown in Antiquity – one of the strangest silhouettes created by our contemporary mores?»¹

As is often the case with Balzacian sentences, this one concisely expresses the most pertinent historical questions that can be asked about travelling salesmen. While the relationship between commerce and travel is arguably timeless, the travelling salesman is a very specific figure who only emerged during the Industrial Revolution: he was considered a novelty by contemporaries. This paper, based on preliminary work on the French case – exploratory results from a few systematic sources as well as a careful reading of the scattered literature on the topic – aims to provide a more precise definition of this affinity between travelling salesmen and modernity. Along the way, we will also be qualifying the accepted chronology of this occupation by putting more emphasis on its early stages, before the age of the railroads.

Balzac was not very explicit about the exact modern «mores» that could have created this new figure, thus suggesting that their nature was as obvious for his readers as it was for him. Was the travelling salesman a typical man of the French July Monarchy, a regime famously open to the new elites of industry and banking which would therefore more generally legitimize commerce as a pathway for social promotion? Or was he a figure of the Industrial Revolution and/or of the Consumer Revolution which flooded the world with new

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«Le commis voyageur, personnage inconnu dans l'antiquité, n'est-il pas une des plus curieuses figures créées par les mœurs de l'époque actuelle ?» Honoré de Balzac, *L'illustre Gaudissart*, in *Œuvres complètes de H. de Balzac, volume 6, tome 2*, Paris 1874, 318. A first version of this novel was published in 1833, before it became part of the *Comédie humaine* series in 1843. This is the first sentence.

merchandise, travelling further and further to frivolous customers (as opposed to the implicitly wiser people of Antiquity)? And in which ways was the travelling salesman so «strange»?

There is not much historical research available to answer such questions, especially if one uses, as we will do here, a definition of the travelling salesman that is narrower than simply any person who travels to sell. In French, travelling salesmen were generally called, in the 18th to early 20th century, *commis voyageurs*, *voyageurs de commerce* or *représentants de commerce*. These words cover what we intend to study in this paper: people (at that time overwhelmingly men) whose main or only occupation was to travel in order to sell goods that they did not own (in contrast to merchants or peddlers) either to retailers or, mostly in the 20th century, to consumers. They never enjoyed as much autonomy as commission merchants: they had orders to follow. They could be contractors or employees of their instructing party, or occupy a position in between. Andrew Popp, in a pioneering investigation of the English case, succinctly sums up a similar definition, which is especially useful as it contrasts travelling salesmen with peddlers, who have been more often studied by historians:

«Peddlers, normally working solely on their own account, sold limited quantities and varieties of goods, normally from saddlebags, to largely private customers for cash. Travellers, on the other hand, working for merchants and factors, sold by sample and pattern book, employed sophisticated instruments and systems of credit and over regular journeys developed sustained relationships with customers who were other businesses, normally wholesalers and retailers but also some manufacturers.»²

If we follow this definition, there is only one country where travelling salesmen have found their historians, with book-length studies: the USA, thanks to Walter Friedman and Timothy Spears.³ However, their history is different from the one we will tell, as it only properly began at the end of the 19th century, after the Civil War. Before that time, there were peddlers, of course; but travelling salesmen, as defined in our paper, seem to have appeared in Western Europe one century before they did in the USA. As for Europe, some very interesting

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Andrew Popp, *Building the Market: John Shaw of Wolverhampton and Commercial Travelling in Early Nineteenth Century England*, in: *Business History* 3 (2007), 321–347, here 324. On peddlers, see esp. Laurence Fontaine, *History of pedlars in Europe*, Durham 1996.

3

Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman. The Transformation of Selling in America*, Cambridge 2004; Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road. The Traveling Salesman in American Culture*, New Haven 1995.

papers have already discussed aspects of the British (mostly), Italian and Swiss cases, but research remains extremely scattered and centred on the second age of the occupation, after 1870.⁴ There is an even greater lack of research for France.

Direct discussions of French travelling salesmen are found in a few detailed case studies based on primary sources, e.g. correspondence between salesmen and their employers or diaries they kept during their travels.⁵ While many historians cursorily mentioned travelling salesmen when writing about industrial firms, they were for the most part not interested in the history of marketing: they took the salesmen's presence for granted and did not engage in a more detailed discussion.⁶ Brought together, such case studies, however fragmentary, provide thought-provoking fragments that hint at the modern character of travelling salesmen. In addition, in 2010 a group of researchers gathered for a conference in Nice to discuss the various occupations connected with travel and commerce in early modern and modern Europe. This provided an incentive to write a number of new case studies that specifically

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Popp, *Building* (cf. n. 2), citing complementary references, esp. the two previous papers that took into account early cases for England: Neil McKendrick, *Josiah Wedgwood: An Eighteenth Century Entrepreneur in Salesmanship and Marketing*, in: *Economic History Review* 3 (1960), 408–433 and S.R.H. Jones, *The Country Trade and the Marketing and Distribution of Birmingham Hardware*, in: *Business History* 1 (1984), 24–42; even closer to our purpose Andrew Popp, *From town to town: how commercial travel connected manufacturers and markets during the industrial revolution*, in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 4 (2009), 642–667; Michael French, *Commercials, careers, and culture: travelling salesmen in Britain, 1890s-1930s*, in: *Economic History Review* 2 (2005), 352–377; Andrew Popp/Michael French, «Practically the Uniform of the Tribe»: *Dress Codes among Commercial Travelers*, in: *Enterprise and Society* 3 (2010), 437–467; Daniele Andreozzi, *Vers la professionnalisation. Les agents de commerce et les commis voyageurs à Trieste au XIXe siècle*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 146–163; Roman Rossfeld, «Au service de Mercure»: *réflexions sur une histoire économique et culturelle des commis voyageurs en Suisse, de 1890 à 1980*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 194–211. See also a more monographic study for Japan: Andrew Gordon, *Selling the American Way: The Singer Sales System in Japan, 1900–1938*, in: *Business History Review* 4 (2008), 671–699.

5

Solange de Montenay, *Les tribulations d'un voyageur de commerce à la fin de l'Ancien Régime, ou de l'inconvénient de ne point savoir parler allemand en Allemagne*, in: *Annales de Bourgogne* XXXIX (1967), 197–235 and Jean-Joseph Chevalier, *La tournée française d'un représentant choletais en mouchoirs (1849)*, in: *Le mouchoir dans tous ses états. Actes du colloque international, Cholet 1997*, 49–63. Robert Darnton also studied such a diary; he has not yet published about it but discusses the source in a talk: *Étude du journal d'un commis voyageur*, in: *L'édition et la librairie sous l'ancien régime: la science de la contrefaçon*, 2004 (<http://www.archivesaudiovisuelles.fr/190> [letzter Zugriff 15.7.2014]).

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Among such studies, some are nevertheless very interesting for us, Claude Fohlen, *L'industrie textile au temps du Second Empire*, Paris 1956, 151–152; Marc de Ferrière, *Christofle: deux siècles d'aventure industrielle (1793–1993)*, Paris 1995, 127–136; Claude Beaud, *L'innovation des établissements Schneider (1837–1960)*, in: *Histoire, économie et société* 3 (1995), 501–518; Gérard Gayot, *Les draps de Sedan*, Paris 1998, 399–405.

focus on French (and European) travelling salesmen; these were recently published as a special issue of *Entreprises & Histoire*.⁷ In the absence of any systematic study, generalizations must still be made with caution.

The general lack of interest for travelling salesmen among *Annales* historians is rooted in their focus within the modern period on the Industrial Revolution which, until recent re-evaluations, was considered as industrial in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. rooted in changes in technology and the organization of large-scale production. In this frame of reference, modernization did not have much to do with commerce and/or consumption. The part of the famous general economic and social history of France that deals with the 19th century was, significantly, entitled «The advent of the industrial era» and devoted only ten lines to travelling salesmen.⁸ Accordingly, historians of labour focused on workers and presented the 19th century as part of «The era of revolution». The main textbook on this topic devoted a few pages to peddlers and travelling salesmen, identifying these as particularly modern occupations, but the text was more anecdotal than systematic.⁹ More recently, shifting the spotlight to cultural history has benefited the topics of travel and merchant culture; the key works that examine these questions take into account the educational travels of young merchants but fail to discuss travelling salesmen as a complement to or a substitute for these.¹⁰

However, things are changing: the historiography of the Industrial Revolution puts greater emphasis on consumers and merchants as important actors and maybe even first movers.¹¹ Integrated industrial firms financed on the stock market and controlling the activity

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Although the present paper has a very different structure, it extracts some ideas and data from Arnaud Bartolomei et al., *Les commis voyageurs, acteurs et témoins de la grande transformation*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 7–21. We thank Silvia Marzagalli for authorizing it. Several papers of the special issue also deal with people who travelled to sell or buy goods or collect debts before 1800, but who were not travelling salesmen as we define them here.

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Pierre Léon, *L'avènement de l'ère industrielle (1789–1880)*, Paris ²1993, 287–288.

9

Claude Fohlen/François Bedarida (eds.), *Histoire général du travail, tome III, L'ère des révolutions*, Paris ²1996, 17–32, 225–226.

10

Franco Angiolini/Daniel Roche (eds.), *Cultures et formations négociantes dans l'Europe moderne*, Paris 1995; Daniel Roche, *Humeurs vagabondes. De la circulation des hommes et de l'utilité des voyages*, Paris 2003; Albrecht Burkardt (ed.), *Commerce, voyage et expérience religieuse, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles*, Rennes 2007.

11

A pioneering work in this respect was Neil McKendrick et al. (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer*

of their workers are recognized as a phenomenon of the late 19th century.¹² Meanwhile, the rising demand for luxury and fashion goods and the precocious globalization of trade that began in the late 18th century, for example the fashion for Indian printed cotton clothes, are seen as key factors of economic modernization. Patrick Verley is one of the most convincing proponents of these new theses, and he is also the only historian who has given serious consideration to travelling salesmen in a broad essay.¹³ We have followed his path in order to specify how travelling salesmen can be considered symptoms of modernity, as Balzac pointed out, or even as key actors of these changes, e.g. of the «Great Transformation» as described by Karl Polanyi and regularly discussed by historians since. We use the word «modernity» to denote a wide set of processes, cultural and social as well as economic, that are generally labelled as such by historians as they were by contemporary actors. More specifically, we focus on the processes that are thought of as connected with the Industrial Revolution» (although this phrase is too restrictive), namely the rise of industrial production and related technologies, the development of marketing and mass consumption, the birth of the bourgeoisie, the working class and the middle class, and the rise of new, more materialistic and/or individualistic ways of thinking. While our focus is more economic and less cultural, we follow in the path opened by Andrew Popp and Michael French, who showed that English representations of commercial travellers embodied “central aspects of modernity: urbanization, commodification, fragmentation, anonymization, mass culture and consumption, mobility, and destabilization.”¹⁴

We postulate that travelling salesmen are important symptoms and/or actors of modernization in four different respects: they took part in the Industrial Revolution; they played a role in the birth of the integrated firm, in that of the middle class and in the changing embeddedness of commercial transactions.¹⁵ Our hypotheses could plausibly apply to most of

Society: The Commercialization of eighteenth-century England, Bloomington 1982.

12

Philippe Lefebvre, *L'invention de la grande entreprise. Travail, hiérarchie, marché. France, fin XVIIIe-début XXe siècle*, Paris 2003.

13

Patrick Verley, *L'échelle du Monde. Essai sur l'industrialisation de l'Occident*, Paris 1997, 260–274.

14

Popp/French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4), 462.

15

These ideas are developed in greater detail in Bartolomei et al., *Les commis* (cf. n. 7).

Europe, and we hope that new research will test them. We thus expand current research on travelling salesmen, which predominantly considers them in the context of the (cultural) history of consumption and/or the «new marketing history»¹⁶ in order to make it an integral part of a more general history of modernization and especially of the Industrial Revolution. Before coming back to these hypotheses in our conclusion, we will present our evidence in the French case. We will first consider literary sources, and thus the emergence of representations of a new occupation in the 19th century. In the second part, we will turn to more direct evidence of practices in order to discuss when and in which sectors this occupation was born – which will actually lead us back in time, to the second half of the 18th century. The third part will describe what we perceive as being the main evolutions of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, as travelling salesmen became more common, while their status was hotly discussed.

Travelling salesmen in French literature

Balzac was not the only novelist in the first decades of the 19th century to mention travelling salesmen. Although his colleagues did not explicitly characterize this occupation as modern, the way they use it as a literary figure is interesting. We can assess it systematically thanks to Frantext, a database of the French canon, including the most famous literary works along with some essays, for a total of more than 4,000 books, which has been compiled by linguists and offers various search options.¹⁷ The number of books per year is roughly the same for the 18th–20th centuries, which allows simple comparisons.

Using this database, we are able to pinpoint the moment when travelling salesmen became literary figures, which means that they were identified as a new, separate occupation and even as a social type by writers and by their imagined readers. Three quarters of the

16

On «new marketing history», see e.g. D.G. Brian Jones, *A History of Historical Research in Marketing*, in: Michael J. Baker/Michael Saren (eds.), *Marketing Theory*, London 2010, 55–66, who cites McKendrick, *Josiah* (cf. n. 4) as a pioneering example.

17

An English text presenting Frantext is Mark Olsen, *Gender representation and histoire des mentalités: language and power in the Trésor de la langue française*, in: *Histoire & Mesure* 3–4 (1991), 349–373. Our research has been performed on the 6th September 2010 (<http://www.frantext.fr/> [last access 15.7.2014]). We have taken the two usual spellings «*commis voyageur*» and «*commis-voyageur*» into account and we have looked for the singular and plural forms of each phrase. When we only give names of writers, titles of works and dates, we are referring to the edition included in Frantext – our primary source here is Frantext itself. All translations are ours.

mentions of travelling salesmen in Frantext occur within the period between 1828 and 1914. The two first writers to mention travelling salesmen in widely recognized works did so in 1828 and 1829, in a published diary and a collection of song lyrics:¹⁸ works that gathered texts written a few years before. While these were not the most prestigious of genres, they were closely connected with current events. Despite this mundane beginning, the new figure rapidly became more common: there are many mentions in novels of the 1830s to 1850s, e.g. in writings by Gustave Flaubert, George Sand, Stendhal and Eugène Sue; interestingly, mentions seems to have flourished at the same time and with similar contents in British literature.¹⁹ Balzac was definitely the author who made the greatest use of travelling salesmen, both with regard to the number of mentions²⁰ and the role they played in his novels. His salesmen were sometimes actual characters and one of them is even the protagonist of *L'Illustre Gaudissart*. In this same period, a travelling salesman was also the hero of an 1838 play (not included in Frantext) which gave realistic details about his lifestyle: he sold Alsace and Champagne wine in French towns, travelled in coaches and was paid according to his sales.²¹

In the second half of the 19th century, frequent mentions of the figure were more concentrated in texts discussing current events and modern mores, such as the literary diary of the Goncourt brothers (15 mentions in various volumes of the *Journal* from 1863 to 1891). At the same time, new phrases describing the same occupation appeared: *voyageur de commerce*, which was first mentioned in 1866 (as with the British «commercial traveller», it is the logical

18

Etienne-Jean Delécluze, *Journal: 1824–1828*, 1828; Pierre-Jean Béranger, *Chansons*, Paris, 1829.

19

These writers were and are among the most famous of that time. Eugène Sue mentioned travelling salesmen 15 times in *Les mystères de Paris*, 1843; George Sand two times in collected letters (*Correspondances*, 1831, 1841), and 39 times in *Le compagnon du tour de France* (1851). See Popp/French, «Practically» (cf. n. 4) for British literature.

20

His first mention of travelling salesmen occurred in *César Birotteau* (1831, 12 mentions). Then came *Ursule Mirouet* (1842, 1 mention), *La Barbouilleuse* (1843, 1 mention), *Illusions perdues* (1843, 1 mention) and *L'Illustre Gaudissart* (1843), followed by *Le cousin Pons* (1847, 4 mentions), *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1847, 4 mentions), *La cousine Bette* (1848, 5 mentions), *Le député d'Arcis* (1850, 1 occurrence), *Petites misères de la vie conjugale* (1850, 1 mention).

21

Paul Duport/Laurencin, *Casimir, ou le commis-voyageur: Comédie-vaudeville en deux actes*, Bielefeld 1841. We do not know whether the play was successful, but at least three different versions printed in Paris and Bielefeld are now available in libraries.

complement of the travelling salesman) and *représentant de commerce*, first mentioned in 1881 (equivalent to «sales representative»). In *commis voyageur* and *voyageur de commerce*, the man was primarily described as a traveller, while *représentant de commerce* emphasised less his mobility and more the fact that he represented a firm and/or presented products. We do not yet know why the new phrases appeared, only that they appeared roughly at the same time in various sources. If we group the three phrases, we get a total of 295 mentions of travelling salesmen before 1914 (94 per cent to *commis voyageurs*) and 190 after 1914 (43 per cent *commis voyageurs*, 38 per cent *voyageurs de commerce*, 19 per cent *représentants de commerce*): they did not disappear as a literary figure, but clearly were less present in the 20th century.

Of course, a few hundred mentions is not a great deal. In comparison with the total of 358 mentions of travelling salesmen, we found approx. 10,800 mentions of *marchands* (merchants), 2,000 mentions of *commerçants* (a more modern, more universal and less prestigious word for merchants), 1,700 *négociants* (an older, more prestigious term for merchants and specifically wholesale merchants), 445 of *colporteurs* (peddlers) and 413 of *boutiquiers* (shopkeepers, a somewhat pejorative word). Travelling salesmen were obviously not central in literary depictions of commercial activity which either did not differentiate occupations (with *marchand* and *commerçant*) or focused on the higher classes (*négociant*). However, they were as frequently mentioned as other less wealthy and prestigious, and often ridiculed, figures of commerce, such as shopkeepers and peddlers.

In addition, they were generally confined to the background of the main story and/or used as ridiculous supporting characters. This secondary place in literature can be read as a testimony of the modernity of the figure: including it in the background adds a realistic touch to novels situated in the contemporary world, at a time when literature was very much connected with social investigation.²² The travelling salesman was the epitome of commonplaceness, and pompous vulgarity places him as a symbol of the modern world, or at least of its most materialistic tendencies. In this way, he was more or less presented as the opposite of the writer – as the typical *petit bourgeois*, at a time when this class had just begun to be described and criticized. He seemed to concentrate the bad qualities of peddlers,

22

On the use of social types in 19th century French literature, see Judith Lyon-Caen, *Saisir, décrire, déchiffrer: les mises en texte du social sous la monarchie de Juillet*, in: *Revue Historique* 2 (2004), 302–331.

shopkeepers and employees – the three occupations to which he was closest, the two latter being the backbone of the *petite bourgeoisie*.²³

Illustrations of the role of travelling salesmen that produce a realistic effect and act as recognition of their new prevalence on the roads include mentions of their presence in stagecoaches in texts that describe daily experiences. Their first mention in George Sand's *Correspondance* belongs in this category. The unavoidable character of this presence is explicit, as well as the characteristic features of the occupation that make the travelling salesmen interchangeable: «My stagecoach was more or less arranged as you had predicted. A fat, sanguine, apoplectic travelling salesman, then a pleasant, tender, smooth talker of a Republican.»²⁴ The diary published by the historian Jules Michelet includes no less than six such encounters during travels.²⁵ Balzac, in *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, on the contrary put a travelling salesman in full spotlight; however, even in this context, he used a metaphor that connects the occupation with modernity while keeping the salesmen in the role of a gear, not an autonomous individual: «These intelligent pistons of the steam engine called Speculation.»²⁶

As for the portrayal of travelling salesmen as vulgar *petits bourgeois*, a literary scholar who studied humorous travel writing describes travelling salesmen as the «anti-travellers» or «idiotic travellers» of this literature.²⁷ they were not only mocked for the less than humorous stories they told at hotel tables, but also pitied because they only travelled in order to sell, without enjoying the beauty of the landscape. One of George Sand's narrators bitterly said: «I understood that because of my bland expression, she had mistaken me for a travelling

23

See Geoffrey Crossick/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe, 1780–1914. Enterprise, Family and Independence*, London 1995, which however focuses on the independent part of the *petite bourgeoisie*.

24

«Ma diligence était à peu près composée comme vous me l'avez prédit. Un gros commis-voyageur sanguin et apoplectique, puis un républicain aimable, tendre et beau parleur.», George Sand, *Correspondance*, Paris, 1831, 912.

25

Jules Michelet, *Journal* (1848), various pages.

26

«Ces intelligents pistons de la machine à vapeur nommée Spéculation». Honoré de Balzac, *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, Paris, 1843, 563.

27

Daniel Sangsue, *Le récit de voyage humoristique (XVIIe–XIXe siècles)*, in: *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 4 (2001), 1.155.

salesman», and Flaubert recalled the advice of his father before he departed to the Eastern Mediterranean: «do not travel like a grocer or a travelling salesman».²⁸ Similar sentences are found in collected letters or published diaries. A Belgian journalist, Oscar Lessines, describing salesmen who travelled in Germany, wrote: «It is always the same loquacity that singularizes some travelling salesmen; they repeat the same jokes, wilted and spoiled, cut out from an old almanac, with unshakeable nerve. You can easily figure out the empty, annoying conversation of our character.»²⁹ The last sentence shows that this whole description was already a *cliché* and was supposedly based on an experience shared by all readers. Flaubert wrote that a funeral prayer «seemed to have been written by a travelling salesman turned beadle»,³⁰ and the Goncourt brothers were particularly harsh: «The fat, heavy cheerfulness of a travelling salesman», «he is so verbose that he reminds me of the noisiness and commonplaceness of words shouted by a travelling salesman at a dinner in an inn, at the time of stagecoaches».³¹ The last quotation is also interesting as it stresses the past modernity of travelling salesmen: in literature, they are clearly associated with the age of stagecoaches, not that of railways.

French travelling salesmen were mocked in literature in ways similar to their counterparts in other countries, with their vulgarity especially singled out for ridicule.³² They were also the object of a process similar to that investigated by Timothy Spears in the US, and by Andrew Popp and Michael French for Great Britain: they appeared as a very modern figure

28

«Je crus comprendre qu'à la platitude de mon expression elle me prenait pour un commis voyageur», George Sand, *Lettres d'un voyageur*, Paris 1857, 9; «Ne voyage pas en épicier ni en commis-voyageur», quotation from Flaubert in Sangsue, *Le récit* (cf. n. 27), 51.

29

«Toujours la même faconde signale certains commis voyageurs; les mêmes plaisanteries, fanées et déflorées, découpées dans un vieil almanach, sont toujours répétées par eux avec un aplomb imperturbable. On peut aisément entendre la conversation vide et fatigante de notre personnage», Oscar Lessines, *Un mois en Allemagne*, Bruxelles, 1864.

30

«semble écrite par un commis voyageur devenu bedeau», Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, Paris, 1878, 156.

31

«une grosse gaîté lourde de commis-voyageur», Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire*, Paris, 1863, 789; «c'est un verbeux, qui me rappelle la bruyance et le commun des paroles d'un commis-voyageur à un dîner d'auberge du temps des diligences», *ibid.*, Paris, 1890, 912.

32

Rossfeld, *Au service* (cf. n. 4); Michael French/Andrew Popp, «Ambassadors of Commerce». *The Commercial Traveller in British Culture, 1800–1939*, in: *Business History Review* 4 (2008), 789–814.

that had rapidly become a thing of the past. However, this appearance happened in 1830 to 1860 in Europe, not in 1900 to 1930 as had been the case in the US. At that time, travelling salesmen were not mostly, as those studied by Spears, selling groceries, travelling in the country or using railways, but were more strongly associated with older changes in consumption and production³³.

Birth of a salesman: documentary evidence

Archival sources – and non-literary printed sources – even allow us to date the birth of the travelling salesman to the 18th century, and not the beginning of the 19th century, although our investigation is not as systematic as in Frantext. The historians of the *Annales* school who alluded to travelling salesmen tended to postulate a technological explanation. They believed that the occupation had appeared in France in the second half of the 19th century as a consequence of the expansion of railways «without which this activity would be impossible».³⁴ Also, in accordance with traditional narratives of the Industrial Revolution, more recent studies by the same group of authors state that the origins are to be found in 18th century Britain – the «Manchester men», connected to the birth of large factories, and probably invented by the industrialist Matthew Boulton. The peace with England, both in 1802 and after 1814, would have allowed British cloth-sellers to travel in France and the French to imitate them.³⁵

The case studies we have gathered, however, indicate otherwise. We do not have many direct clues about foreign influence, but we definitely know that the first French *commis voyageurs* travelled in continental, mostly German-speaking Europe in the 18th century and that the occupation was not just germinating, but was already well-established by the end of the Napoleonic period. Interestingly, Fohlen and Bedarida point out the publication of the first handbooks during the Restoration. They mention an *Art of the travelling salesman* published in 1824 and a *Code of the travelling salesman* in 1830.³⁶ It is interesting to note that this first

³³

Spears, *100 Years* (cf. n. 3); Popp/French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4).

³⁴

Léon, *L'avènement* (cf. n. 8), 288, mostly based on Fohlen, *L'industrie* (cf. n. 6). Jacques Lacour-Gayet, *Histoire du commerce*, t. IV–V, Paris 1952 gave the same chronology.

³⁵

Fohlen/Bedarida, *Histoire* (cf. n. 9), 225.

³⁶

wave of handbooks occurred one century before its US counterpart, and at the same time as the British³⁷ – although there was of course also a 20th century wave of handbooks claiming a more scientific status in Europe. Similarly, a full-text search for travelling salesmen in French-speaking Google Books provides only printed sources from the 1840s or later, discussing accountancy or jurisprudence as related to the occupation. Jurisprudence journals started to become widespread in France in the 1820s; anecdotal evidence from this source suggests, for instance, that there was an established custom among Parisian wallpaper merchants of hiring their travellers («leurs voyageurs») on one specific day each year, with one-year contracts.³⁸ All these texts are, in fact, not symptoms of novelty, but of the institutionalization, the growing taken-for-grantedness of an occupation that was here to stay and therefore required rules or routines to be created or changed – as are the literary allusions previously discussed.

A slightly more systematic research in printed sources actually shows that travelling salesmen were already an integral part of the world of commerce during the Napoleonic period. A well-known handbook of commercial law from 1801, written for merchants, includes a standard letter intended to accompany a travelling salesman, along with a document claiming credit on the addressee: «Citizen François Denis, my travelling salesman, carries my letter of credit on you».³⁹ This confirms what we have seen repeatedly in case studies based on archival material: at least during the first decades of its existence with a separate name, the occupation was not only associated with sales, but also with other functions that could be performed by a travelling agent. The most important of these functions was debt collection which, of course, could also consist of mere delayed payments of previous sales.

This relative non-specialization, however, did not prevent contemporaries from recognizing the core activities of travelling salesmen, as is very well shown by a French-

Art du commis voyageur, Code du commis voyageur, mentioned ibid.

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Spears, *100 Years* (cf. n. 3); Popp/French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4), 449.

38

Gazette des tribunaux de commerce (25 October 1827), 4.

39

«Le citoyen François Denis, mon commis voyageur, est porteur de ma lettre de crédit sur vous». Pierre-B. Boucher, *Institutions commerciales*, Paris 1801, 1.541. Our search in printed non-literary material has mostly been allowed by Gallica, the website of the French National Library (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/>).

Italian conversation handbook of 1814 which provides a two-page model dialogue between a travelling salesman and a customer.⁴⁰ In this book, which is not only intended for a merchant audience, the travelling salesman travels for a producer. He does not say whether he is his employee. In his attempts to sell silk cloth to a wholesale merchant, he shows samples and a price list and tries to eloquently praise the merchandise.

This is the definition of the new profession in a nutshell, and it is actually set in one of the trades that pioneered its use in France: according to Françoise Bayard, even if there were commercial journeys previously, the occupation as such emerged among Lyonese silk-makers in the 1760s–1770s. These firms had full-time travelling salesmen, who were sometimes employees, as the name *commis*, generally used for employees of merchants, indicates, but were also sometimes associates of the firm.⁴¹ We found a similarly early date for a practice already considered routine in only one other trade: that of Sedan woollen cloth.⁴² Here, salesmen were also employed by those who directly gave production orders to workers, but this production was centralized in a factory, contrary to the decentralized Lyonese system of workshops. The admittedly huge Sedan factory seems to have employed as many as 160 travelling salesmen in 1775, and this did not surprise the administrative officer sent to discuss its production. Serge Chassagne also cursorily mentions the fact that a printed cotton cloth factory in Angers, belonging to the Danton brothers, employed two full-time travelling salesmen in 1768.⁴³

After (parts of) the textile trade came wines – at least to our best current knowledge. These two sectors were also the first to use travelling salesmen in Switzerland.⁴⁴ In the wine

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P. L. Constantini, *Dialoghi italiani e francesi all'uso delle due nazioni*, Paris 1814, 50–51., reproduced in Arnaud Bartolomei, *Dialogue franco-italien entre un commis voyageur et un négociant*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 248–249.

41

Françoise Bayard, *Voyager plus pour vendre plus. Les commis voyageurs lyonnais au XVIIIe siècle*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 62–78, based on private archives of silk-makers.

42

Gayot, *Les draps* (cf. n. 6), 403–405, quoting a report of the official factory inspection, in: Archives nationales, F12 1356, 24 May 1775.

43

Serge Chassagne, *La manufacture de toiles imprimées de Tournemine-lès-Angers (1752–1820): étude d'une entreprise et d'une industrie au 18e siècle*, Paris 1971, quoted by Chevalier, *La tournée* (cf. n. 5).

44

Rossfeld, *Au service* (cf. n. 4).

trade, travelling salesmen were sent by wholesale merchants who, depending on the regions, were themselves producers or had a distant relationship with them. Two authors who studied Burgundy and Champagne wines write that pioneering travels took place in the 1760s to 1780s and that the practice became routine at the end of the century, despite or because of the disturbance of traditional commercial routes by the European wars.⁴⁵ The novelty here seems to have been the systematic effort by wholesalers to find new markets, as opposed to their predecessors, who waited for representatives or orders from their clients.

Most of these case studies are based on private company archives. It is thanks to these invaluable sources that we can directly document the existence of travelling salesmen, see how it became routine, understand the range of their functions, their status, and the fact that it was or was not a full-time occupation. At the same time, the disadvantage of these sources is that it is generally difficult to know whether the practice was well-established in the rest of the trade: some of the firms that have been studied could be pioneers or exceptions. However, these limits notwithstanding, we believe that the available studies provide an interesting pattern that merits further examination.

Textile goods and beverages – along with hardware and cheap books – are classic items for the «consumer revolution» thesis. The role of peddlers in their distribution in the countryside has been well studied, as have changes in the urban landscape that made retailers more attractive and accessible to consumers.⁴⁶ Much, however, remains to be learned about the circulation of merchandise from producers and wholesalers to urban retailers, and travelling salesmen seem to have played a key role in this respect for products that were increasingly unlikely to be considered luxury goods in the second half of the 18th century. In this context of expanding markets, wholesale merchants who were either also producers or closely controlled a decentralized production at first travelled by themselves, perhaps more frequently than in the previous centuries.⁴⁷ Apparently, at some point, they however chose to

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Montenay, *Les tribulations* (cf. n. 5); Benoît Musset, *L'expérimentation d'une nouvelle pratique commerciale: la maison Moët d'Épernay et ses commis voyageurs (1790–1815)*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 103–115.

46

Fontaine, *History* (cf. n. 2); Bruno Blondé et al. (eds.), *Retailers and consumer changes in Early Modern Europe*, Tours 2005.

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Interesting 18th century cases in this respect are discussed by Françoise Bayard, *L'Europe de Bonaventure Carré et de ses associés, marchands lyonnais, au XVIII^e siècle*, in: Albrecht Burkardt (ed.), *Commerce* (cf. n. 10), 55–86; Serge Chassagne, *Les voyages d'un marchand de soie catholique à la fin du XVIII^e siècle: Joseph-Marie Guérin*, *ibid.*, 87–112, and Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *Les deux rêves du*

delegate this task to a specialist who increasingly focused on the search for new clients, debt collection, the search for new suppliers, the collection of information on the taste of existing clients and/or that of their orders.⁴⁸ This change happened at a time when production (of Champagne wine, Sedan wool and Lyons silk) rapidly increased, although we do not know whether it was a cause or a consequence of changes in methods of selling; these products were sold in small batches to hundreds of different retailers. For Cholet handkerchiefs, the search for new continental markets was also related to the loss of colonial Atlantic markets.⁴⁹ In all our cases, these new markets were chiefly sought in the centre of Europe, from the Netherlands to Northern Italy, with only occasional forays into Spain, England or Russia.

Afterwards, in a period when changes in commercial routes during the European wars could have led merchants to return to the practice of travelling by themselves, a contrary development seems to have occurred and the use of specialized travelling salesmen became routine, even outside of these pioneering sectors. For some companies, this development only declined when they had established geographic clusters of customers, which allowed them to set up local subsidiaries or deal with commission merchants.⁵⁰ These cycles of opening and then stabilizing new markets took place in increasing numbers of firms and sectors, thus making the occupation more common after 1815 – and attracting the interest of writers. As has been noted in a pioneering paper by Andrew Popp, the first generation of travelling salesmen paved the way for followers who could use the various institutions – from inns to handbooks and more or less standard contracts – that were tested or invented in this first age.⁵¹

commerce. Entreprise et institution dans la région lilloise, 1780–1860, Paris 1991.

48

Angela Orlandi, *Les précurseurs des voyageurs et représentants de commerce parmi les hommes d'affaires toscans de la Renaissance (fin XIVe–début XVIe siècle)*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 22–36 interestingly discusses the similarities and differences between men who travelled for merchants in the late Middle Age and modern travelling salesmen. The main difference seems to be the focus on finding new clients. For our period, Popp, *From town to town* (cf. n. 4), 652 lists the same functions when he discusses the «Manchester men»: «Journeys combined two functions; the soliciting of new orders and the collection of debts. However, these journeys must also have involved considerable exchanges of information, not only that related to commercial factors but also on fashion and taste as consumption was shaped through feedback processes.»

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Chevalier, *La tournée* (cf. n. 5), 63.

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Musset, *L'expérimentation* (cf. n. 45); Bayard, *Voyager* (cf. n. 41).

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Popp, *Building* (cf. n. 2), 342.

It would be interesting to assess with greater precision whether the birth of the travelling salesman was the consequence or the enabling condition of a change in production, namely the transition to production even without previous orders from specific clients, which would seem to imply a permanent need for new prospects. Investigating travelling salesmen thus allows us to better understand and specify the sequence of changes associated with the Industrial Revolution.

The expansion and institutionalization of an occupation: the long 19th century

Our narrative of the expansion of the occupation, like that of its birth, fits well with recent revisions to the history of the Industrial Revolution.⁵² It is more and more seen as a slow process of diffusion, e.g. of factories, new technologies, new forms of retailing, experiments in the subordination of workers, rather than a succession of discrete phases (e.g. the revolution of steam, then of railways, and then of the chemical industry). Accordingly, the flow of travelling salesmen from pioneering sectors, their transformation into either subordinated employees or independent contractors and their insertion in social hierarchies were slow and non-linear processes, with probably important differences between regions and countries that we are at present unable to clearly assess. We can, however, provide landmarks and specify questions for future comparative research about the number of travelling salesmen, their legal status and their social position.

The case study of Roquefort Société in the second half of the 19th century is interesting because Sylvie Vabre has reconstructed maps that describe the geographical expansion of travels. She also documents various ways that salesmen kept contact with retailers, depending on the type of retailers and the enduring character of commercial relationships.⁵³ Here, there is an obvious connection between the increase in production, the number of salesmen (one in 1851, 146 in 1914) and the systematic character of their travels. However, it is still difficult to establish precise causal relationships. We lack comparisons between firms that could help to pinpoint the necessary or more contingent character of such evolutions.

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Esp. that of Verley, *L'échelle* (cf. n. 13).

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Sylvie Vabre, *Le représentant et le Roquefort de la Société des Caves (1851–1914)*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 131–145.

We also lack global data of the type used by Walter Friedman for the USA or Roman Rossfeld for Switzerland⁵⁴ which would allow us to assess the total number of travelling salesmen in France. As is often the case, aggregate statistics shed little light on the occupation, and their categories are probably more helpful for our investigation than the numbers themselves. The 1921 population census thus counted approximately 42,000 sales representatives and 7,000 travelling salesmen active in France; however, this category only included those who could not be classified according to what they sold (e.g. food or cloth).⁵⁵ In cases where the product was known, salesmen were aggregated with merchants, and are thus lost in the statistics. We do not know what proportion of the total number of travelling salesmen was included in this total of approx. 50,000. It cannot be directly compared with the 100,000 to 150,000 found in the UK in 1911 to 1951 (as opposed to 20,000 in 1871), or with the rise from 15,000 in 1893 to 35,000 in 1914 in Switzerland – although we can safely consider that these numbers are in the same range and that there was no lack of travelling salesmen in France.⁵⁶ We can, however, learn a few more precise things from the censuses.

First, non-specialized travelling salesmen were part of a wider category that also included commission merchants and brokers (*courtiers*): they seem to have been considered by the authors of the censuses as closer to these independent, wealthier categories than to employees. This choice was enduring: while many other things changed in the way censuses dealt with occupations, this group of categories did not from 1896 to 1931.

Secondly, the two different terms – sales representatives and travelling salesmen – seemed to have generally been associated by contemporaries with different statuses. Both in Paris and its suburbs in 1901 and in France in 1921, 65 to 80 per cent of non-specialized travelling salesmen were considered employees, while 80 to 95 per cent of non-specialized sales representatives were considered self-employed (without employees). In Paris in 1901 and in France in 1921, 5 per cent of sales representatives were even considered employers. The two terms thus seemed strongly and early associated with the two possible legal statuses that were discussed in the same period; the more independent status of sales representative

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Rossfeld, *Au service* (cf. n. 4).

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Statistique générale de la France, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population*, Paris 1896–1931 (censuses took place at intervals of five years).

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French, *Commerciaux* (cf. n. 4), 353; Rossfeld, *Au service* (cf. n. 4).

seems to have been more frequent, accounting for three quarters of the Parisian and suburban totals of 1901 and 95 per cent of the French total in 1921. However, these figures only include non-specialized travelling salesmen. It is likely that employees were more frequent among those who only sold one type of merchandise, while more independent sales representatives would have worked for several firms and sold various goods.

Thirdly and finally, these figures, as well as those given in the censuses for the wider category mixing sales representatives with commission merchants and brokers, indicate that approximately one third lived in or immediately around Paris. Important secondary locations were the departments including the towns of Marseilles, Lyons and Rouen (for a total of around 20 per cent). This, however, still means that half of even the least specialized and most independent travelling salesmen were based in less urban and commercial departments.

What these numbers measure is the second age of the occupation, when it had become common in many trades and places, with railways, bicycles and ultimately cars having contributed to this development. The role of at least some of the travelling salesmen also changed during this process, as they could be sent to visit smaller and smaller retailers or even consumers. This development and diversification caused tensions inside the occupation, between those who considered themselves as employees, or wanted to be offered such a status more clearly, and those who saw a better future in independence from large firms.

While travelling salesmen indeed clearly followed a process of professionalization from the end of the 19th century, in France this process did not lead to a convergence towards one single status. On the contrary, the 20th century saw a multiplication of positions, each designated by a different acronym, which covered the whole spectrum from closely controlled employees to independent professionals working for multiple firms. Even the acronym VRP (for *voyageurs-représentants-placiers*), which is common in contemporary French and has connotations similar to those of the 19th-century *commis voyageurs*, was actually invented to cover three slightly different statuses.⁵⁷

In the 19th century, travelling salesmen were already very present in commercial courts and hence in legal publications due to conflicts with firms. These conflicts were made all the more complicated because no one was sure about the proper status associated with their

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On the birth of VRP and more generally on legal aspects of the occupation mentioned in this paragraph and in the following ones, see Jean-Paul Barrière, *Entre salariat et indépendance: le statut hybride du représentant de commerce en France de la fin du XIXe siècle au milieu du XXe siècle*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 164–176. On the fact that some British salesmen saw their associations as unions (sometimes connected to the Labour Party) while others joined chambers of commerce (and sometimes supported the Conservatives), see French, *Commercials* (cf. n. 4).

function. Their contracts often were ambiguous, partly resembling those of employees, partly making them quasi-associates or external commercial partners.⁵⁸ Conflicts arose on payment as well as on rights generally associated with the subordination of salaried employees, and also on who held the rights to the prospects found by the salesman. In practical terms: could the salesman be obliged to pay a percentage on his losses? Was he entitled to time off on Sundays? Could he leave the firm with his prospects? In France, as in many other countries, travelling salesmen were therefore a special case that attracted great interest from lawyers at the time of the stabilization of the contract of employment, when a new limit was drawn between employees and independent professionals. Neither travelling salesmen nor their employers had clear incentives to choose either of the statuses. Both had their advantages and drawbacks, and the very circumstances of this occupation made this choice all the more difficult. For example, at least until recent advances in communication and localization technologies, it was not possible to closely monitor the salesman's activities, so that salaried travelling salesmen could arguably enjoy the protection given to employees without losing their autonomy. It would therefore be extremely interesting to study precisely the changing attractiveness of each status and see how each led to a changing degree of internalization of the sales prospecting function. Contemporary figures show a sharp increase in numbers of independent «commercial agents» from the 1990s on,⁵⁹ but we do not know if this occurred at the expense of the numbers of travelling sales employees or due to a general boom of travelling salesmen.

What is certain, however, is that France followed a special path as regards the status of travelling salesmen during the first half of the 20th century. In many other countries, as the occupation was increasingly professionalized by the creation of collective organizations, special schools, etc., travelling salesmen tried to differentiate their position from close ones that were generally poorly considered, such as sedentary sales employees or peddlers, who were closely watched by the police at that time.⁶⁰ This was generally translated into a

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Examples are given in Musset, *L'expérimentation* (cf. n. 46) and Claire Lemerrier, *Un litige entre un commis voyageur et sa maison de commerce en 1827*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 228–231. Our assertion on the number of lawsuits is based on Claire Lemerrier's cursory investigations in the archives of the Paris Commercial Court (Archives de la Seine, series D2U3) and in the journal *Gazette des tribunaux de commerce*, as well as in various publications made available in Gallica.

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Jacques Delétang/Nadine Autréau, *Les intermédiaires du commerce: rôles, métiers, statuts, évolutions*, in: *Entreprises & Histoire* 66 (2012), 217–227.

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preference for an independent status, despite the protections that salaried employees were starting to enjoy. In France, the most independent segment of the occupation, the commercial agents, was the first to collectively organize in 1898, at the time when the first special schools opened their doors. However, travelling salesman did not become a profession like a lawyer or an architect, and most were not even considered as independent traders, although a law of 1921 made their registration in *Registre du commerce* compulsory, along with merchants of all sizes. The law of 1937 that created the status of VRP gave them protection similar to that of employees, e.g. in cases of accidents or redundancy, and decided that they would not pay the taxes associated with the status of merchant. This peculiar French trajectory is probably due to the high, rising level of social protection that French employees enjoyed in the interwar period compared to shopkeepers or other small-scale entrepreneurs. It was, however, short-lived: after World War II, and especially in the context of laws introduced after 1958 with the aim of creating a uniform status throughout Europe, jurisprudence tended to shift towards less protection and more independence.

The legal ambiguity of the occupation is strongly related to its social ambiguity. As outlined above, early on the occupation was considered by writers as the epitome of the new middle class: a *petite bourgeoisie* that considered itself as smart but lacked good taste, and whose only motivation was material. In this respect, it is all the more interesting that travelling salesmen were a sort of combination of employee and small entrepreneur. Recent scholarship has insisted on the prevalence of trajectories crossing the border of independence, especially among migrants and/or in times of economic crises.⁶¹ Travelling salesmen offer the opportunity to conduct a slightly different assessment of middle class trajectories. The occupation is often portrayed as an opportunity for young men who want to climb the social ladder, but we actually know very little about their careers. When and where (if at all) did women enter the occupation? Were travelling salesmen always young? Were they the sons of merchants, of travelling salesmen, or were the skills required so generic that the occupation was very open? Did travelling salesmen try to become independent merchants and/or associates of their former employers?⁶²

See e.g. Friedman, *Birth* (cf. n. 3) and Andreozzi, *Vers la professionnalisation* (cf. n. 4).

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E.g. Anne-Sophie Beau, *Les salarié-e-s du grand commerce: des «employé-e-s»? Les parcours professionnels des salarié-e-s du Grand bazar de Lyon aux 19e et 20e siècles*, in: *Travail, genre et sociétés* 8 (2002), 55–72; Claire Zalc, *Melting shops: une histoire des commerçants étrangers en France*, Paris 2010.

62

We cannot yet give general answers to such questions, although the limited evidence we already have helps us to qualify stereotypes. For example, population censuses only include 7 per cent of women among travelling salespersons active in France in 1926, and 5 per cent among sales representatives – for a total of around 3,000 women and a percentage seemingly higher than in the UK⁶³. Similar figures are only available for Paris and its suburbs (Seine department) for 1901, but they show one striking contrast: while most numbers are similarly small, there seem to have been one quarter of women (around 1,800) among sales representatives living in the city of Paris. These intriguing figures merit more micro investigations to attempt to uncover which Parisian women described themselves as non-specialized sales representatives.

More anecdotal evidence for other periods points to the interest of a history of the social mobility of travelling salesmen, among or across the middle class. Were they part of it during their whole life, maybe sharing specific values, different from those of the working and upper classes? Or did they navigate from social group to social group, mixing habits and relationships, travelling in the social as well as in the geographical space? These are important questions to ask about the middle class generally and its degree of cultural autonomy, and travelling salesmen provide interesting limit cases in this respect. For example, Maurice Guibert worked for the Champagne firm Moët et Chandon – a pioneering employer of travelling salesmen – when he met Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec at the end of the 19th century. In a context that probably involved women and alcohol, he became a friend of the artist and a renowned amateur painter and photographer.⁶⁴ In 19th-century UK, commercial newspapers also alluded to the «potentially fluid social position» of travelling salesmen, with their «ability to mix with all levels of society» and «chameleon-like» appearance.⁶⁵

Beyond such anecdotal or discursive evidence, small samples of the classic sources of social history can help shed light on the complex social position of 19th century travelling salesmen in France – and wider samples could easily be gathered in order to more firmly

One very local study clearly documents the latter strategy: Jérôme Cucarull, *L'industrie de la chaussure à Fougères avant 1914 d'après les dossiers de faillite des entreprises*, in: *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 1 (2007), 163–184.

63

French, *Commercials* (cf. n. 4), 368-369.

64

See e.g. <http://www.toulouselautrec.free.fr/amis3.htm> [last access 15.7.2014].

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Popp/French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4), 449.

answer our questions. In a study of 15,000 marriage records in northern France, despite the high incidence of rural and proto-industrial villages, we still found more than 60 travelling salesmen, mostly at the end of the century. What is interesting about this dataset, apart from the fact that many had ties in rural places, is the wide age spectrum, ranging from 20 to more than 60 years old, and their social status, as represented by the occupations of their kin or friends described in the record.⁶⁶ Fathers of travelling salesmen could be entrepreneurs as well as spinners, clerks of the tax administration as well as innkeepers; witnesses at their marriage often had commercial or legal occupations, but we found a travelling salesman whose brother-in-law was a servant and whose wife was a day-labourer, while another one was witness to the wedding of an architect and a music teacher. Similarly, Parisian notarial records from 1851 show sons of cultivators as well as physicians among the occupation.⁶⁷ What seems clear is that there has always been an elite of traveling salesmen that was considered as part of the bourgeoisie, and not the *petite bourgeoisie* of clerks or shopkeepers. The Sedan wool representatives of the 18th century studied by Gérard Gayot were already the best-paid employees;⁶⁸ one century later, official lists of elite merchants established by co-optation, which were generally closed to shopkeepers, included a handful of travelling salesmen.⁶⁹

In addition to this wide social diversity inside the occupation, the very activity of travelling salesmen seems to have made the navigation between social groups easier. Sociological studies of the end of the 20th century tend to indicate that despite discussions among French statisticians about their classification in the group of employees or in «medium-level occupations» (*professions intermédiaires*, between employees and

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The database is presented in Claire Lemerrier/Paul-André Rosental, «Pays» ruraux et découpage de l'espace: les réseaux migratoires dans la région lilloise au milieu du XIXe siècle, in: Population 4-5 (2000), 691-726.

67

Database ARNO created by the French National Archives:
<http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/arno/> [last access 15.7.2014]. No traveling salesmen were found in the equivalent 1751 and 1761 ARNO databases, confirming the chronology presented above.

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On similar logics of good payment inside a large integrated firm, see Roman Rossfeld, *Suchard and the Emergence of Traveling Salesmen in Switzerland, 1860-1920*, in: Business History Review 82 (2006), 750-751.

69

Jean-Clément Martin, *Hiérarchie et structure de la société commerçante: les listes d'électeurs au tribunal de commerce de Niort en 1864 et 1874*, in: Le Mouvement social 112 (1980), 66.

management), the daily experience of sales representatives was in fact closer to that of managers or independent professionals.⁷⁰ While the two latter groups are generally considered as being part of the higher classes, sales representatives are not, but share their experience in terms of autonomy and long working hours spent in non-manual, mostly relational tasks.

An under-investigated source of social history adds to this complexity by hinting at the wealth and taste of travelling salesmen in the late 19th century. These inventories of property (*scellés*) were written by justices of the peace; they generally listed the goods owned by deceased people from the popular classes, who in fact had little or nothing to pass on to their heirs. However, Anaïs Albert, who is investigating popular consumption in this source, found five travelling salesmen in a small sample from a popular neighbourhood in Paris in 1895.⁷¹ Three of them were married or divorced, hence not young bachelors; two of them died at 68 and 69 and were still described as travelling salesmen.⁷² One of them had married a very wealthy woman and lived in a perfectly bourgeois apartment; however, his wife had filed for divorce. The others lived in smaller apartments, but all of them owned at least a few items that were uncommon among mere clerks and would have been considered as luxuries by workers. These items were not directly related to their representative task: most were intended to grace their apartments. All these elements were already present in the figure of Casimir, the hero of the 1838 play, who earned enough to own elegant and colourful clothes, but could not save enough capital to settle and marry. The very same mentions of unusually luxuriant outfits in not so wealthy homes were found by Andrew Popp and Michael French in 19th-century British newspaper reports.⁷³ This addition of allusions hints at the occupation as a conduit of tastes

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Hints on this question can be found in Baudoin Seys, *De l'ancien code à la nouvelle nomenclature des catégories socioprofessionnelles*, in: *Economie et statistique* 171–172 (1989), 162; Pierre Boisard/Jean-David Fermanian, *Les rythmes de travail hors norme*, in: *Economie et statistique* 321–322 (1999), 111–131; Alain Chenu, *Les horaires et l'organisation du temps de travail*, in: *Economie et statistique* 352–353 (2002), 151–167. Barrière, *Entre salariat* (cf. n. 57), 175 also mentions that discussions on the status of travelling salesmen were used in the definition of the status of the manager (*cadre*) after 1944.

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We thank her for sharing her data with us. The source is Archives de Paris, D5U1 140 and 141 (records of 1895).

72

French, *Commercial*s (cf. n. 4) also found very long careers as travelling salesmen (in a sample centered on the lower middle-class in the occupation), thus questioning the stereotypes of the young man and social mobility.

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Duport, *Casimir* (cf. n. 21); Popp/French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4), 446.

and habits between classes, which could lead to conflicting values for salesmen themselves. It also hints at ties to a precise place, and even home, that are often neglected in narratives of life on the road or in the train that are generally associated with travelling salesmen.

Conclusion

Most of the history of French travelling salesmen remains to be written. However, what we have already learnt about its main turning points and dilemmas helps shine a fresh light on several aspects of more general modernization narratives.

First, the very existence of such a separate occupation, which as far as we know, appeared in some firms in the second half of the 18th century, and its expansion during the whole 19th century, could be considered as a new indicator of the Industrial Revolution, both in the broad and the narrow sense of the expression. In the broad sense of economic modernization, it should be stressed that travelling salesmen are not a mere consequence of the availability of new means of transportation. Although new technologies contributed to increase their numbers and to change their activity in the second half of the 19th century, what created them in the first place was a new vision of how goods could be sold. In some cases, it was the view of producers who wanted to become more independent from wholesalers and to gain more direct control over their sales. Hence the idea that travelling salesmen could also be a symptom of the Industrial Revolution in the narrower sense of an increasing power of industry as opposed to commerce, or of producers as opposed to middlemen.

Secondly, this internalization of the sales function is part of the history of the large, integrated firm. The function of the travelling salesman appears as one of the first that was differentiated among employees of commercial and industrial firms, along that of the accountant, and long before that of, for instance, the foreman.⁷⁴ However, this did not automatically lead travelling salesmen to become salaried employees or independent professionals. Their history is also that of non-linear changes in choices of internalization; the rationality or contingency of such choices very much remains to be studied, which requires us to leave behind the overly simple ideal types of the integrated firm and the decentralized industrial district. While the status of travelling salesmen was increasingly legally defined in

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Accountants: Pierre Labardin, *L'émergence de la fonction comptable en France*, Rennes 2010; foremen: Lefebvre, *L'invention* (cf. n. 12).

the 20th century, this did not lead to one unified status but to a differentiation between degrees of autonomy.

Thirdly, travelling salesmen might be an exceptional, extreme, but also therefore revealing part of the middle class. Although their individual social mobility should not be over-estimated without further information, they certainly had opportunities to interact with various social groups and especially to contribute to the development of tastes, first in the big towns and then in the countryside.

Fourthly and finally, the very birth of the travelling salesman questions classic narratives about the growing anonymity of modern commercial transactions.⁷⁵ We have seen that Balzac compared them to parts of a big engine, thus insisting on their subordinate and more or less anonymous character. If merchants employed travelling salesmen instead of travelling themselves, it could be viewed as a disruption of traditional commercial relationships that were very much embedded in more private ties. However, the same Balzac also wrote one of the only literary eulogies of travelling salesmen, presenting them as ambassadors of «the genius of civilization and Parisian inventions»,⁷⁶ boldly fighting non-believers, thanks to their rhetorical skills. A mere mechanical device could not perform such a task. Similarly, Andrew Popp argues that the use of travelling salesmen reinforced the personal character of trade relations, not the anonymity of markets; he concludes that «the sociability characteristic of economic exchange in the early-modern period survived the spatial reordering witnessed under the process of industrialization»⁷⁷. As Walter Friedman has put it, the «visible handshake» of the travelling salesman, a human, highly interpersonal and even physical interaction, was one of the necessary conditions of the expansion of trade. This should lead us to more subtly discuss the embeddedness of commercial transaction, without equating the disappearance of a precise sort of tie with anonymity.

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E.g. Douglass C. North, *Understanding the process of economic change*, Princeton 2005.

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«le génie de la civilisation et les inventions parisiennes», Honoré de Balzac, *L'Illustre Gaudissart*, 1843, 563.

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Popp, *From town to town* (cf. n. 4), 667. See also Popp and French, «*Practically*» (cf. n. 4), 463, on travelling salesmen performing «emotional labour».