WORKSHOP ‘POLITICS AND CONSUMPTION IN THE MODERN AGE: NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES’

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Workshop abstract

Since its origin, the history of consumption has been written from a number of disciplinary perspectives, thus largely overcoming the initial divide between economic and sociocultural approaches. Thus, in the last two decades, innovative points of view have drawn special attention to shopping practices, consumer identities and spatiality. However, in this rapid expansion, one aspect that has been often overlooked is the political dimension of consumption in the past. Far from being a marginal component, the political implications of consumption are crucial to developing a critical thinking that will allow us to deconstruct contemporary discourses (developed during the pandemic crisis) related to the consumption of activities and goods: who defines what is necessary, desirable or reprehensible and why? What role do time and space play in this evolution?

To address these questions, this workshop aims to gather scholars who empirically investigate what can be broadly defined as ‘politics of consumption’ in central as well as peripheral European regions and in the Atlantic world, encompassing several time periods from the early-modern era until the present day.

This workshop will include contributions focusing on political and state structures that have shaped consumer practices (top-down), on how consumers have attached moral and ideological meaning to their commodities, turning consumption into a marker of political identity (bottom-up), on how particular spaces were influenced by consumption practices and changed their functions accordingly, and on how various intermediary organisations have tried to regulate and frame consumer practices according to their political agendas. The speakers will specifically focus on how these political acts and discourses intertwine with concerns regarding social class, gender, race and generations, to shed light on the genealogy of the citizen-consumer.

By charting recurring concepts and dichotomies such as superfluity vs. necessity and austerity vs. hedonism, and by comparing them for different regions and periods and for different products – including foodstuff and consumer durables – the conference papers will contribute to finetuning the conceptual framework within which material politics can be understood.

Overall, this workshop will provide an in-depth analysis of the sources and methods that can be used to write the political history of consumption, presenting the (preliminary) results obtained from a range of diverse sources, through quantitative and qualitative analyses and by employing state-of-the-art software applications.
**Presentation by Jonas M. Albrecht** (Postdoctoral researcher, Johannes Kepler University Linz, AT)

**Biography:** Jonas M. Albrecht is a PhD researcher and University Assistant at the Department of Social and Economic History at Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria. His dissertation focuses on the origins and consequences of food market deregulation in Vienna between 1775 and 1885. His publications include The struggle for bread. The Emperor, the city and the bakers between moral and market economies of food in Vienna, 1775–1791, in History of Retailing and Consumption, Vol. 5, Nr. 3, 276-294, 2019 and „Das Ringen des Freihandels mit dem Prohibitivsystem.“ Politische Ökonomie und Infrastruktur der Brotversorgung Wiens, 1815–1847, in Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften (OeZG), Vol. 30, Nr. 2, 67-99, 2019.

**Preliminary Title:** “When liberty killed solidarity. Wheat rolls, rye bread, and food market liberalisation in Vienna, 1860-1885.”

In 1860, the introduction of freedom of commerce on the imperial and the abolition of the bread assize on the urban level created a largely free bread market in the capital of the Austrian Empire. Out of a rather thoroughly regulated market in line with notions of the moral economy, these legal changes issued within just a few months eliminated not only the guild structure of bread production and distribution but also the price structure of formerly officially calculated wheat roll and rye bread prices. Building on research provided recently by eminent historian Jan de Vries on The Price of Bread (2019), this contribution will analyse the consequences liberalisation had on the interplay of the prices of various bakery products in the decades after deregulation. I will argue that the assize had involved an essential function of cross-subsidisation between more luxurious wheat and rather ordinary rye products, which had helped to maintain lower rye bread prices by overtaxing wheat consumption. As this core function of the assize was eliminated in 1860, rye bread became more expensive relative to wheat. I will thus show that market deregulation did enable better-off consumers to shift their diets towards eating wheat whereas poorer customers depending on rye faced increasing costs of their daily bread. Therefore, whereas the assize had provided an institution of public solidarity that subsidised rye consumers through taxing those who could afford wheat, liberalisation terminated this setting. After 1860, rye consumers subsidised the consumption of wheat rolls. Bread market liberalisation largely benefitted those better off while poorer consumers lost a key measure of public solidarity and equality.

**Presentation by Dr Federico Chiaricati** (Postdoctoral researcher, University of Trieste, Italy)

**Biography:** Federico Chiaricati is a Post-Doc researcher at University of Trieste. He obtained the PhD at the University of Trieste with the thesis "Organizing the Interests: State, entrepreneurs and food consumption between Italy and United States 1890-1940". He is the author of "Nationalism and nation-building in the dietary consumption of Italian migrants in the United States: a transnational perspective", Modern Italy, 4, 2020. His research interests include international history, migration history, food history and Italian and American history.

His paper will focus on the political meanings about food consumption among Italian Americans at the turn of the Century underlining how and where these meanings were spread and thus affected the idea of “italianness”. Food advertisements published on ethnic newspapers reported political messages and the images of great Italian personalities, such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, Cristoforo Colombo or Dante Alighieri, fostering the sense of nostalgia among migrants. This dynamic reveals
how Italian Governments tried to “use” migrant communities as a convenient means of lobbying or an entry point for commercial and political expansion, creating a common sense of “Nation” among an ethnic community more tied with the village of origin than with the idea of Italy. The groceries and other small food shops that sold these goods represented not only a place to buy things, but also a hangout for the ethnic community and they depicted the landscape of the ethnic neighbour. Often the owner came from the same village of his customers and became a symbol because his origin ensured the authenticity of the products. Go to a particular shop and buy a particular food could represent a political choice that Italian Governments, and above all the Fascist Regime, forced migrants to do in order to demonstrate to be loyal patriots and kin with the family left in Italy.

**Presentation by Charris De Smet** (PhD researcher, University of Antwerp, Belgium)

**Biography**: Charris De Smet is a PhD researcher at the Centre for Urban History at the University of Antwerp. As of November 2020, she is working as a PhD Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders. Her research proposal “Politicians on the market? Framing French consumerism in an age of regime change (Paris, c. 1780 - c. 1870)” aims to study the political embedding of consumption in nineteenth-century Paris. The project questions how political debates have shaped commercial parlour at the dawn of the modern era.

**Preliminary title**: “Au sein du luxe et de l’opulence”. Charting discourses on consumerism throughout 19th-century French parliamentary debates

My paper will feature a comparative study of nineteenth-century French parliamentary discourses expressing MP’s opinions on consumption, material cultures and changing attitudes towards both in contemporary French society.

Combining the insights from historical research on the interrelations between politics and consumption during the French Revolution with the methodological framework provided by pioneers in the historical study of political discourse such as Antoine Prost, I want to propose a long-term exploration of how French parliamentarians sitting in the National Assembly have spoken about issues relating to consumption and the coming-of-age of French consumer society. The question I aim to resolve with this diachronic discourse analysis is how politicians from varying backgrounds have addressed the social, economic and cultural effects of consumption in the transition period towards a mass consumer society and how political debates on the national level have discursively framed and therefore tried to shape consumerism.

The main research objective when reconstructing these parliamentary discourses on consumption will be to test if discursive divergences occurred along the main ideological divides. In other words, do republican, liberal and conservative politicians promulgate other views according to their ideological affiliation? Or do factors such as origins, social status or even the MP’s closeness to the establishment influence his opinions on consumerism more decisively? In order to gather this information on the lives and deeds of the MP’s I will use the *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français*.

The second research objective, closely related to the first, is to link the development of a parliamentary discourse on consumerism to the different regime changes that dramatically accentuated French political life throughout the nineteenth-century. My research hypothesis is that the alternation of monarchical, republican and imperial state forms played a crystallising role in the
formulation of opinions about consumption along ideological lines and that the revolutions that accompanied these regime shifts functioned as a sort of catalyst in the development of concrete policies of consumption in nineteenth-century France.

My methods are essentially data-driven, employing the software program nVivo and other digital tools to make large comparisons possible and to enhance my qualitative data analysis. Furthermore, I make use of large digitised newspaper archives made available through the National Library of France. Their site Retronews features an OCR-reading application and digital search tools so that the historical sources can be subjected to targeted questioning through the use of search terms.

Presentation by Dennis De Vriese (PhD researcher, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium)

Biography: Dennis De Vriese is a PhD researcher at research group HOST (Historical Research into Urban Transformation Processes) and FOST (Social and Cultural Food Studies) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research focuses on the regulatory transformation of the late- and post-corporative Brussels meat market (1770-1860), with particular attention to processes of de- and reregulation, their origins and their impact on the urban economy.

Preliminary title: “The public will benefit”. (De)regulating the Brussels meat market (1800-1860)

My paper focuses on the deregulation of the Brussels meat market in the first half of the nineteenth century, when centuries of regulation were overturned and abolished. From who could sell meat over the prices they could sell it at to where sales could take place, urban regulation disappeared and in its place an ever freer market for meat emerged. In contrast, slaughter was put under more strict regulation than ever before. The paper seeks to explain this relatively sudden sea change by exploring which actors were involved in this shift and which discursive strategies they employed. In doing so it not only seeks to reveal political actors’ and interest groups’ shifting influence, but above all changes in perceptions of the urban authorities’ role. By analysing how discursive strategies centred on consumer interest became dominant over other concerns and how various, at times contradicting, interpretations of consumer interest were mobilised by actors, the paper aims to explore changing conceptions of urban authorities’ responsibility towards the inhabitants of Brussels, both as citizens and increasingly as consumers.

Presentation by Ian Mitchell (Honorary Research Fellow, University of Wolverhampton, UK)

Biography: Ian Mitchell is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. His current work is on shops and shopping in provincial England in the 1870-1914 period. He has previously published an article on ethical shopping in this period.

Preliminary Title: “Three Cheers for the Little Guy”: Shopkeeper Associations in England, 1870-1914

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth independent shopkeepers continued to dominate the retail sector. But they faced, or at least believed that they faced, a growing number of threats. These included the advance of newer retail formats such as multiple stores and co-operatives; government intervention to regulate working conditions; growing consumer awareness of issues to
do with working conditions and that they had the power to influence these; and the difficulties experienced in controlling credit and not allowing bad debts to spiral out of control.

Some degree of collaboration was needed to counter these threats. Well-established Chambers of Commerce were often dominated by larger businesses. Chambers of Trade, which increased in numbers in this period, became the voice of the smaller, independent retailer. Other organisations directly targeted the Co-op, or gave practical assistance in helping shopkeepers identify customers with a poor credit history, or who might be deliberate fraudsters. As well as responding to perceived threats, these organisations could raise the profile of the independent shopkeeper through, for example, arranging so-called shopping weeks or by helping the sector to engage collectively with local government.

The paper will use a range of local examples to explore these issues. It will also consider the tension between the need for independent shopkeepers to collaborate while being in competition with each other; and the way in which this sector was adapting to the requirements of a more complex society in which account had to be taken of a wider range of stakeholders.

Presentation by Daniela Nunes Pereira (Postdoctoral researcher, University of Evora, PT)

Biography: Daniela Nunes Pereira is an expert researcher - in History, integrated in the Interdisciplinary Center of History, Cultures and Societies (CIDEHUS) of the Évora University, with extensive experience in research History of urbanism and cities (XV-XVIII centuries). In 2021, she concluded her PhD in History, at the University of Évora, supported by a 4-year PhD scholarship, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and UNESCO Chair - Intangible Heritage and Traditional Know-how: Linking Heritage. Her PhD thesis addresses Marketplaces in Portuguese cities (16th-18th centuries), a subject that hadn't deserved a similar study in Portugal so far, contributing with unprecedented and crucial data for the understanding of these urban spaces and the evolutionary dynamics related it. This was the first study to show, for example, how commercial activities had an enormous impact on the formation and transformation of Portuguese cities, identifying and analysing the different mechanisms involved, such as the need to allocate a space, a building and legislation for the exercise of trade, or the disputes between different powers.

Preliminary Title: “The effects of commercial activities on urban (trans)formation: some Portuguese cases in the early modern age.”

In my presentation I will demonstrate how commercial activities had an impact on the formation and transformation of urban spaces, taking as an example some Portuguese cities.

From the second half of the 15th century, the terreiro, rossio or campo, where it was customary to hold fairs and big markets, were being converted into urban squares, surrounded by a peculiar architecture, which allowed the trade and merchants to be housed. In formal terms, they were residential buildings with a porch or arcade on the ground floor. In the case of Portuguese market spaces, the architecture around the squares, streets and commons was the essence of commercial organization in the urban space, a tool that the crown used to control market spaces in the urban fabric. As regards the surrounding architecture, it can be estimated that the existence of porches or arches was a condition inherent to market areas. The construction of these architectural structures, which were subject to the king’s authorization, represented an advantageous investment and, therefore, brought numerous disputes over the use, property and rights of profits and tax
management.

In order to solve these problems, several administrative models emerged, conveyed in the most diverse ways, forcing rules and conditions ranging from urban occupation, through the size and shape of buildings, to the use of limits, to construction contracts and tenure. This question may represent one of the reasons why the authorization to build arches and porches in urban spaces had to have royal or municipal consent, always under special conditions. Indeed, these actions are a demonstration of control and governance through architecture.

With the starting point of the function of the porch on a façade, ideal as it was for housing commercial exchanges, one can, in effect, speak of a commercial, topographic demarcation in the city, are, possibly, an aspect that serves to accentuate the difference in functions of the various arteries. In functional terms, the permanence or removal of the counters added or eliminated covered spaces which could harbour sellers or artisans.

**Presentation by Silvia Pizzirani** (PhD researcher, University of Bologna, Italy)

**Biography:** Silvia Pizzirani studied History in Bologna, where she graduated in 2014 (BA) and 2017 (MA). Her final dissertation thesis, “Female organisations and energy consumption in England, between the Twenties and the Fifties”, analysed the politics of consumption of two female associations in Great Britain from the interwar period to the Post-War. Now her PhD research focuses on the relationship between politics and consumption during the Seventies, in Italy, using different popular sources such as magazines, and she is studying how two key enterprises (Eni and Fiat) reacted to the crisis and austerity policies. Her interests also include political history, labour history, environmental history, cultural studies, gender studies, digital humanities and global history.

**Preliminary title:** Against the Dictatorship of Rationality. The political debate concerning consumerism and sacrifices, during the Italian austerity in 1970s

The political use of dichotomies is a practice that we can find in different cultural and social contexts, throughout History. Consumption practices have always been subjected to discursive strategies and hierarchized in order to influence citizens’ behaviour: productive and unproductive consumption (J. S. Mill), efficient and inefficient consumption (A. Marshall), till the divisions, typical of the Italian political debate in the Economic Boom, between primary and secondary consumptions and between collective and individual consumptions. This classifications could be designed for moral, economic and political purposes, in order to build specific boundaries of how to act inside the private space, which actually heavily influenced people’s actions in the public sphere.

During the 1970s, while Italy was marked by the energy crisis and political ferments, a particular rhetoric of sacrifices and austerity was formulated by the political ruling classes: a common effort of the nation was necessary in order to solve the economic crisis. A new discourse around consumer was born: in order to be both a smart user and an efficient citizen, the good consumer had to act in the most rational way possible. The rhetoric of rationality was a political tool promoted by economic elites and various political groups, which could even have different goals.

Women were at the centre of this discourse, as they were both represented as big spenders and the Nation’s savers. This dichotomization was used in order to formalize positive and negative attitudes
and were therefore criticized both by feminists and, even if in a more subtle way, by some female magazines.

Another famous opposition to this rhetoric was promoted by the so called “Movement of the ‘77”, which popularized slogans such as “You want us to live crawling and crying, better get up and die laughing”, “Revolution is either a party or it’s not” and “Up Up Up Prices go up. Let’s get our stuff and pay no more”, a heterogeneous movement which promoted irrationality as a revolutionary behaviour, aimed at overturn the rhetoric of sacrifices, thus even encouraging luxury expropriations, the famous “right to caviar”.

In my paper, I would like to analyse the debate around rational consumption and how it was used both by political elites and the advertising world. I am also going to focus on how women were depicted and how some of them responded, both in a political and unpolitical ways.

Presentation by Dr Wout Saelens (Postdoctoral researcher, University of Antwerp, Belgium)

Biography: Wout Saelens (*1993) obtained his master’s degree in history at the University of Ghent. For his master’s thesis (2015) he studied the social structures, networks and identity of the Ghent weavers in the fourteenth century. Since October 2016 he is affiliated with the Centre for Urban History at the University of Antwerp as a PhD researcher. He defended his doctoral thesis on household energy consumption and the material culture of energy before and during the early Industrial Revolution in the Low Countries (c. 1650-1850) in May 2021.

Preliminary Title: The material politics of energy in the age of coal: Ghent, 1750-1900

Recent research has shown that good and cheap access to energy markets – provided by coal – became more important in the material culture of urban consumers from the late eighteenth century onward (Saelens 2021). Energy was treated as a necessity – both for domestic and industrial purposes – but also as a source of comfort and well-being. As Mosley (2008) has shown, the comfortable bourgeoisie claimed to have a direct entitlement to plentiful fuel based on property rights. Coal smoke was not only seen as a necessary by-product of economic growth but, in fact, widely interpreted as a sign of social progress.

At the same time, coal smoke was seen as a source of waste and inefficiency. Smoke pollution caused the destruction of buildings and green spaces and drastically increased the time and energy spent on the cleansing of homes and public spaces. Over the course of the nineteenth century, middle- and upper-class citizens developed a growing sensitivity for the environment and wanted to live in clean and peaceful streets (Walter 1990; Gugliotta 2000; Uekötter 2009). These bourgeois sensibilities towards comfort and waste often went hand in hand and ushered a new material politics. The demand for plentiful and clean gas-lighting – both in the streets and at home – required the construction of a piped distribution system (Schott 2008), while the demand for overall comfort and pleasure needed polluting and noisy industries to be relocated towards separate industrial districts. The tension in the bourgeois ideology of coal as a sign of both ‘comfort’ and ‘waste’ resulted in residential and ecological segregation: the pollution of smoky industry was successfully removed towards the outskirts of the city, while the availability of decent energy infrastructure was maintained in the city centre.
In this paper, I wish to study how (often diverging) civil sensibilities towards coal and smoke were translated into a new energy policy in nineteenth-century Ghent – the first industrial city on the Continent that quickly entered the age of coal from the late eighteenth century onward. I will study how the need for cheap fuel and gas-light was negotiated with the demand for clean air and the concern for the urban environment and how this negotiation materialised into the rebuilding of the cityscape and its energy infrastructure. I will do so by a mapping of the benefits of coal consumption: who had access to (public) gas-lighting and the principal coal markets; as well as a mapping of the costs of coal consumption: where were the most polluting industries (re)located in the course of the nineteenth century? The mapping of energy infrastructure will be compared with the political motives of the users behind it. The perspective of the material politics of energy is used here to grasp how citizens living in an industrial city like Ghent dealt with both the comforts and discomforts of the transition to coal in the nineteenth century.