STORE WARS

SHOPKEEPERS AND THE CULTURE OF MASS MARKETING, 1890–1939

David Monod

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Cover illustrations: (Front) Grocery department in Liesemer & Studer's Didsbury, Alberta, general store, 1915, featuring expensive glass-topped 'silent salesmen,' prominently displayed brand-name goods, and high-priced storage bins behind counter. Items in front of counter were moved there for the sake of the photo, to emphasize richness of stock. (Glenbow Archives, NA-703-8)

(Back) 'Interior of Jewish store, Calgary,' c. 1920. This shoestring operation has one relatively inexpensive glass display case, but the rest of the fixtures are plain wood. Some attention has been given to organization of stock, but the effect remains chaotic. (Glenbow Archives, NA-2916-2)

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Abbreviations Used in the Text

CMA	Canadian Manufacturers' Association
CPhA	Canadian Pharmaceutical Association and its provincial chapters: PEIPhA, NSPhA, NBPhA, QPhA, MPhA, SPhA, APhA, BCPhA
FMA	Furniture Manufacturers' Association
FTL	Fair Trade League
ISA	Industrial Standards Act
NFTC	National Fair Trade Council
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Administration
NRA	National Recovery Act
OCP	Ontario College of Pharmacy
ORDA	Ontario Retail Druggists' Association
ORGA	Ontario Retail Grocers' Association
ORHA	Ontario Retail Hardware Association
PATA	Proprietary Articles Trading Association
RMA	Retail Merchants' Association of Canada and its provincial chapters: PEI RMA, NS RMA, NB RMA, QRMA, ORMA, MRMA, SRMA, ARMA, BC RMA
RMAC(S)	Retail Merchants' Association of Canada (Saskatchewan)
rpm	resale price maintenance
SCO	Supreme Court of Ontario
WDA	Wholesale Druggists' Association
WGA	Wholesale Grocers' Association

Contents

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Introduction

The Shopkeeper, the Historian, and the Petite Bourgeoisie

'Who am I?,' asks a Retail Merchants' Association flysheet from the mid-1920s:

Je rampe comme le dragon de l'Apocalypse, à travers les vallées,
les montagnes et les plaines.
Je ne constuis pas des villes.
Je ne développe pas des fermes.
Je n'érige pas des bâtisses.
...
Je viens pour prendre, non pour donner ou aider.
Je coup les dépenses, je ne fais pas livraison ni de crédit.
Je n'encourage aucune industrie locale.

The answer: 'Je suis chain store. Propriété des étrangers.'[1] Such naïve verse, bristling with hostility to what has become so ordinary, sounds almost quaint today. Were people really moved by these self-serving words? Could the mass merchandisers have been seriously considered such marauding and unnatural intruders? Doggerel then, but does that make it any less significant? Propaganda such as this was, after all, pretty common fare in the early decades of the twentieth century. Thousands of people were involved in anti-chain and anti-department store protests, and they produced, in their efforts, an immense amount of paper. Throughout the early twentieth century, aggrieved shopkeepers lobbied governments, spattered the press with demands for protection, and bombarded the public with flyers. Currency alone does not, of course, denote value, and the poetry itself is pretty bad. But reflect a moment on the ideas themselves: imagine the emotions that must have

motivated the shop owners' complaint, sense the panic behind the rhyme, and then recoil from its nativism and narrowness. There is, after all, something uncomfortably alive about this faded, dated protest.

What gives our reading of the retailers' words a special resonance is the collective memory of the 1930s. Emotions such as those expressed here – xenophobia, traditionalism, a fear of bigness, and a suspicion of modernity – have often been associated with movements of right-wing protest. This is because retailers (who together with artisans and farmers are generally thought to form the petite bourgeoisie or lower middle class) were prominent members and electors of Italian and German fascist parties, and their yearnings, resentments, and loyalties have been widely considered to have supplied the emotional energy for both movements. As early as the mid-1930s, social scientists were proposing that fascism was itself a manifestation of the 'psychic derangement' experienced by traditional business people confronting the modern age.[2]

Intellectually cramped and stilted, trapped in their petty concerns and unable to see past their own front doors, independent shopkeepers are thought to have entered the twentieth century psychologically hamstrung. Having sacrificed art, learning, imagination – curiosity, even – in the pursuit of their petty business interests, they are depicted as being incapable of accepting the challenge of progress. Big business and big labour appeared to them as threats: monster interests crushing cozy neighbourhoods and time-honoured work practices in their remorseless advance. As class lines sharpened and big corporations emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, members of the petite bourgeoisie panicked. And because of certain psychic predispositions, independent retailers and other self-employed people turned for relief to demagogic politicians who promised to punish those disrupting their world. It did not matter whether small shopkeeping was really being undermined by big-business competition; what mattered was that independent retailers thought they were suffering. And such a belief was as much a result of the store owners' antediluvian mentality as it was of any real insecurities.

As Svend Ranulf explained in his 1938 monograph *Moral Indignation and Middle Class Psychology*, the peculiar mentality of lower-middle-class people – the 'puritanism' born of the long 'frustration of their natural desires' – led shopkeepers to seek relief from anxiety in 'the punishing of others.' As a result, they chose to lash out at the symbols of economic progress and change: foreigners and outsiders (Jews especially), communists, trade unions, liberated women, jazz music, and big businesses –

anything that represented a threat to their own narrow conception of the social order. Change threatened the mental security of the petite bourgeoisie, creating 'status anxieties,' 'cultural despair,' and 'emotional crisis.' It was this 'psychic' breakdown – the exaggerated, pathological response to social transformation – that explained the rise of right-wing mass movements in the twentieth century. For some analysts, this hatred of innovation and fear of disorder served as the tap root of all that was nasty in the modern world. As the great American sociologist Harold Lasswell observed, 'a disinterested tendency to inflict punishment practically does not exist in communities where the lower middle class is of little significance.' There is nothing innocuous, then, in the Canadian retailers' versifying against the mass market; the quaint anti–chain store flysheet can be read as a proto-fascist tract, and the desperate protests of a group suffering the impact of competition can be seen as a foretaste of genocide.[3]

Ideas such as these became part of Canada's intellectual inheritance with the rise of sociological history in the years after the Second World War. Before the fifties, when economists dominated Canadian studies, retail protest was largely interpreted as a simple form of business atavism. Progress, the economists reasoned, was bound to involve an increasing centralization of economic activity, and while Judgment Day might not be as swift or as clean as the independent retailers imagined, they were at least right in sensing its coming. Railways and automobiles and economies of scale had made mass distribution inevitable, and traditional retailing was only so much grist for modernity's mill. 'The chain stores have made and will continue to make inroads on the unit store,' observed a government analyst in 1926, and 'they have found the progress easy because of the slackness and inefficiency of many small merchants. Naturally, such inefficiency, in the face of keen competition, has been responsible for business failures. From the viewpoint of the public interest, this should not be regarded as an evil ... but as the beginning of the solution.' In other words, the problem lay not with the mass merchandisers, who were bearers of efficiency, but with those traditional shop owners who were unable to accept the accelerated pace of contemporary business life. Consequently, while independent retailers might be deserving of some sympathy, they were hardly worthy of analysis. Proprietary enterprise, Lloyd Reynolds noted in 1940, was quite simply 'archaic,' making twentieth-century small-business protest no more interesting than 'the smashing of machines by hand workers during the Industrial Revolution.'[4]

It was only in the fifties that Canadian scholars accepted the European idea that small-business protest was produced by a peculiar and dangerous 'lower-middle-class psychology.' Despite a reluctance in these early Cold War days to engage in class analysis, Canadian authors did quietly adopt the idea that economic change generated a group-specific psychosis. John Irving, in his classic study of Social Credit in Alberta, saw 'resentment,' 'insecurity,' and 'hate' behind the 'mass psychology' of social unrest. Social Credit, like other movements of right-wing protest, arose, he explained, 'when primary, or even derived, needs are frustrated.' 'Right-wing populism,' Irving explained, was 'a rural and small town' phenomenon, backed by members of 'a puritanical lower middle class' tortured by visions of 'social disintegration' and driven by fear towards 'a strong-willed, dauntless leader who would take them out of the wilderness.' Similarly, William Mann, in his treatment of religious dissent in western Canada, found evangelical 'non-conformists' to have been primarily members of the lower middle class who, he noted cryptically, were 'inclined to neurosis and neurasthenia.' A few years earlier, Everett Hughes, in his study of Drummondville, made the same connection in tracing anti-Semitism, nationalism, xenophobia, and sympathy for Naziism largely to the 'aggressions,' 'insecurities,' and 'resentments' of the 'French Canadian small businessman.'[5]

In fact, it was in Quebec that the idea of a lower-middle-class psychosis proved most influential. Quebec's postwar intellectuals, pumped up on European culture, discovered in the petite bourgeoisie the symbol of everything that they found backward, trivial, and weak. To their widely opened eyes, the traditional lower middle class appeared the bulwark of archaic nationalism, the mainstay of Quebec's parochialism, and the source of Duplessis's power. By the early 1960s, social critics such as Trudeau began to use the term 'petit bourgeois' in the way that many French intellectuals did – as a form of abuse. For those who thought the rebellion of 1837–8 a nationalist fiasco, the petite bourgeoisie was to blame; for those who disliked ultramontanism, there was a petit bourgeois ideology; for those who thought pre–Second World War Quebec nationalists excessively conservative, there was a 'petit bourgeois mentality' at work; for those who abhorred Quebec anti-Semitism, it was a petit bourgeois aberration; for those opposed to Abbé Groulx and the Action française, it was a manifestation of petit bourgeois anti-modernism; and for those who thought that the Quiet Revolution provided a clean sweep, there was a new middle class seizing power from the old.[6]

Ironically, outside Quebec, interest in the petite bourgeoisie declined

in the 1960s just as class as an historical concept began to enjoy increased acceptance. This change was in large measure a result of the growth of a Marxist consensus within social studies and the ascendance of working-class history. For those engaged in studying the proletariat's struggle, the lower middle class must have seemed a dead skin that needed to be discarded. Not one of the two real classes within modern capitalism, the petite bourgeoisie was intriguing only in the degree of its proletarianization. Artisans continued to attract attention, but only because interest shifted from studying them as part of a small-business grouping to their role as members of a working class carving out its identity. Little space within this emerging perspective was accorded to those engaged in retailing, an occupation which, to working-class historians, offered nothing more than the distressing possibility of *embourgeoisement*. Consequently while occasional Lasswellian comments continued to fleck the works of some Canadian historians – most notably, the business histories of Michael Bliss and his students – by the 1970s independent retailers had all but disappeared from view.[7]

This has not been the case in Europe or, to a lesser extent, in the United States. Since the 1970s, a certain disaffection with economic growth has come to characterize social and economic theory, and this discontent has helped to spin the historiographic compass in new directions. Among European historians, the main focus of the revisionism has been the idea that lower-middle-class people have a psychological predisposition to irrational and reactionary behaviour. Instead, two theories have been advanced to explain petit bourgeois extremism. According to some historians, the rightward drift of small-business politics in the 1880s and 1890s was a result not of latent reactionary tendencies, but of the manipulations of conservative politicians seeking to fragment the left-leaning petit bourgeois–proletarian alliance of the mid-nineteenth century. Orleanist industrialists and landowners in France, Junkers and 'feudalized' capitalists in Germany, Catholic Party strategists in Belgium – these are now seen as the puppet-masters of petit bourgeois protest. As for the independent proprietors, their susceptibility to manipulation is still most often explained in terms of psychological factors: the trauma of military humiliation in France and Germany, the isolation produced by the leftward march of the trade union movement, the resentments caused by economic marginalization. Though this interpretation accepts the psychic instability of the petite bourgeoisie, it breaks from the older approach in portraying small business people as victims rather than as villains.[8]

An alternate, though not necessarily contradictory, view is to emphasize the petite bourgeoisie's real, rather than 'ideological' or ideational, problems. Where this interpretation differs from the preceding is in the way that some historians present the stratum's economic and social problems as producing extremist behaviour. From this angle, the lower middle class was not pulled to the radical right by self-serving politicians or driven there by left-leaning workers; it grew reactionary of its own accord. Modernization attacked the small-business community: it spawned low-priced big-business competitors; it undermined customer loyalty; it drove down profits and narrowed opportunities. Quite logically, small business people protested against these changes using time-honoured associations, experiences, and mutualisms. Voluntary organizations – shooting clubs, religious associations, gymnastics groups – promoted the sort of small-town values (apoliticism, thrift, enterprise, and xenophobia) which lay at the heart of twentieth-century *völkish* ideologies. Similarly, petit bourgeois theatre, with its anti-Semitism, nostalgia, and anti-establishmentarianism, legitimized an extremist response to social change. Economic distress served, in this interpretation, to politicize the class culture of the petite bourgeoisie and to transform once-local associations into movements of mass protest. Once again, however, there was nothing intrinsically irrational or psychotic about the lower middle class; desperate times simply produced a call for extreme solutions.[9]

Like their European counterparts, students of small-business protest in America have worked recently to dispel the image of the irrational lower middle class. They write, in this regard, in the shadow of Richard Hofstadter, whose searing indictment of American populism as a precursor of McCarthyism (and McCarthyism as a kind of American fascism) owed so much to the writings of Lasswell, Ranulf, and Reich. But unlike European historians, American scholars have generally shied away from class analysis and have instead used generalized terms like 'the middle class,' 'the small business community,' and even 'the people' to describe a group that in Europe would be considered thoroughly petit bourgeois. Thus Robert Weibe never refers to a lower middle class in his discussion of the 'status anxieties' and desperate protests of late-nineteenth-century small business people and farmers confronting the emergent mass society. Still, in spite of this tracing of consensus history, American analysts have followed the main trends of the European historiography: in the 1950s and 1960s they associated anti-trust activism, populism, and McCarthyism with the unreasoned fears and irrational

resentments of small business people; in the 1970s and 1980s they treated anti-monopolism as an insurgency grounded in traditional community values and work cultures; they saw Bryanite Democrats and white supremacists as luring the populists to the right; they questioned the 'reactionary nature' of the 'old middle class'; and they redefined McCarthyism as a conspiracy of the Republican establishment.[10] The main difference is that American historians have generally gone further than their European counterparts in their redemptive efforts. By rooting what in Europe is regarded as small-business jacobinism in a Jeffersonian tradition, American scholars have depicted nineteenth-century petit bourgeois values as viable and even admirable. Indeed, they suggest that community-centredness, independent entrepreneurship, and participatory democracy all represent the basis of a new idealism; one struggled over by left and right, it is true, but a positive force none the less. The ideas of a declining stratum driven to unreason by modernization have become, in the eyes of many interpreters, the hope for America's future.[11]

The new work being done on the social history of the lower middle class has helped restore a much-maligned stratum to its senses, but certain difficulties remain. Underlying much of the scholarship, new and old, is the idea that retailers and other petits bourgeois constituted a premodern fragment – a traditional group set adrift (whether psychologically or materially) on the waves of economic and social change. Their response, which most agree involved battening down the hatches and awaiting a political saviour, might well have been understandable, perhaps even logical, but it was none the less desperate. Even if they were motivated by positive community-oriented traditions, lower-middle-class activism still seems to carry the pathetic features of a lost cause.

The trouble with this characterization is that even as social historians have been busily rethinking petit bourgeois politics, a few enterprising business and economic historians have been reconceiving the dynamics of modernization. And while their ideas have yet really to challenge the institutional, big-business bias of so much of the literature, the idea is spreading that small might not be merely beautiful but efficient and enterprising as well. Proprietary manufacturing in the developing world has undoubtedly been the greatest beneficiary of the new interest in the economics of small business, but attention is now also being paid to independent retailing. The reappraisal began when economic historians took a fresh look at the nineteenth-century French economy and realized that it enjoyed significant growth despite its domination by small firms.

Proprietary enterprise, it seemed, was not by definition unproductive or unimportant. Armed with this knowledge, researchers in England and America began to investigate petty entrepreneurship's contribution to the development of countries whose economic histories had long been dominated by the study of the large firm. While Marxist historians started negotiating the concept of 'combined and uneven development' – implying the continuing relevance of earlier forms of enterprise within a subsequent economic formation – conservative business analysts chortled over the evidence of entrepreneurial opportunities. According to Philip Scranton, it all serves to show that small business should be considered in its own right and not as a 'peripheral' element in an economy shaped by bigness. Seen this way, 'proprietary capitalism' represented 'a different version of industrial development,' in no way inferior to the managerial route simply because its advocates 'followed a different path to profit, prominence and accumulation than did the mass-production corporate giants.'[12] Long thought a doomed element in the modern economy, small-scale property is now emerging as a viable and even necessary contributor to business development.

This rediscovery of small property is having a profound effect on the business history of the self-employed. At its furthest extreme, it has led a number of neo-conservative historians, inspired by the discovery that large-scale capitalism did not eliminate small-scale opportunity, to denounce optimistically the whole theory of petit bourgeois decline. By showing, for example, that the number of independent artisans actually increased at the very moment when factory producers were supposedly blotting them out, these historians have demonstrated that small enterprise remained a functioning element within nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Though ultimately, artisanal and retail labour may have changed, it did not disappear; rather, it found a new home in the manufactory and convenience store. Adaptation is therefore perceived to be the key, for far from languishing in backwardness, small business people were competitive and alert to changing techniques. Big businesses certainly existed, but independent enterprise preserved its vitality by charting a separate route to modernity. Eschewing the image of the trembling economic reactionaries, the new conservatives have recast the petty proprietors as resourceful entrepreneurs brimming with business initiative.[13]

These different perspectives – the social and the economic – have yet to be fully joined. If small business people were capable of adapting to the demands of the modern economy, how is their politicking to be