Pirenne, commerce, and capitalism: the missing parts

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Pirenne has earned an honoured place in our historiography for many reasons, none less than his contributions to the debates about the origins and nature of capitalism. Today, scholars tracing the history of these debates treat him as a sort of founding father who has come to stand for a 'commercial' school that defines capitalism as the rational pursuit of profit through trade and that sees capitalism's origin in late medieval and early modern commerce. Indeed, in his *The Stages in the Social History of Capitalism* of 1914, an article that Jan Dhondt (1976, 89) considered "l'œuvre le plus remarquable qu'ait laissée Pirenne", Pirenne argued that:

> "all the essential features of capitalism – individual enterprise, advances on credit, commercial profits, speculation, etc. – are to be found from the twelfth century, in the city republics of Italy" (Pirenne, 1914, 495-496).[2]

Pirenne went on to criticise "the naïveté of historians" who believe that:

> "the commerce of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to have been …[nothing more than] that of simple peddlers, a sort of artisans incapable of rising even to the idea of profit, and having no views beyond the day's livelihood" (*Ibid*., 496).

Later in the essay, speaking of Godric, the displaced peasant-turned-entrepreneurial merchant whom Pirenne made famous, Pirenne concluded that:

> "one sees clearly in him that famous *spiritus capitalisticus*. Here is an eleventh-century merchant… combining his purchases, reckoning his profits, and, instead of hiding in a chest the money he has gained, using it only to support and extend his business" (*Ibid*., 504).

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[2] In Dhondt's view, Pirenne adopted a less progressive interpretation of history after the Great War, putting more emphasis on chance and more or less abandoning his idea that history evolved cyclically, in "stages".

For Pirenne, it is clear, commerce unleashed the 'capitalist spirit' of profit seeking because it was the realm of 'freedom'. In Pirenne's words, "liberty was the soul of commerce" (*Ibid*., 513).[3]

Although today much of what Pirenne wrote about capitalism's nature and its origins seems hopelessly naïve and patently ideological, the essence of his theory has had an undeniably long life, and rightly so: capitalism is about the rational pursuit of profit through trade. It is not rational in the sense of being *well* planned (we have only the world-wide crisis of 2008-2009 to remind us of that, if we have forgotten our Marx); rather, its rationality derives from quantification – "reckoning" as Pirenne said – of risk and reward. But any implication that the urge to trade for profit lodges deep within the human soul, waiting only to be freed from the chains of repressive power regimes, adds up to a kind of crude economism. And Pirenne's account is tainted with that brush.

In the first section of this essay, I position Pirenne's argument in the larger historiography about commerce and capitalism, first illustrating how he has been associated with sometimes reductive accounts but then, second, arguing that Pirenne was not so economistic as scholars have often too easily assumed. Here I will emphasise that his ideas about the 'entrepreneurial spirit' and the class politics that informed civic life in the textile cities of the Low Countries, where he concentrated his studies, reveal that he did not reduce the history of capitalism to economic meta-structures. Pirenne, I will insist, was more a political and social historian than an economic historian. He had an acute appreciation of politics in the most general sense of power relations, and he thought the history of commerce was a political history born of social differentiation and hierarchy.

The second section of the essay argues, however, that for all Pirenne's enduring contributions to the story of commerce and capitalism, he missed an important part – the story of consumption. Pirenne also ignored half the population, the female half. In doing so, he not only missed an opportunity to enrich his story but also risked distorting it. Thus, I will also add gender to the mix, using it, consumption, and the late medieval cloth industry to exemplify what we might learn about the so-called origin of capitalism by taking Pirenne's attention to 'politics' – power relations understood very generally – as our lens.

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[3] In this essay, Pirenne explicitly challenges the arguments of his equally famous contemporaries, Karl Bücher's *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft* (1893) and Werner Sombart's *Der moderne Kapitalismus* (1902), both of which argued for a distinctive, non-capitalist nature of artisanal production and trade in the late Middle Ages.

1. PIRENNE, COMMERCE, AND CAPITALISM

The historiography equating capitalism with commerce, although most closely associated with liberal theory, also includes a strand of the Marxist tradition. The Marxist understanding of commerce's role in the so-called transition to capitalism was most famously debated in the exchange of 1950-1953 between Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy (Dobb, 1947; Sweezy, Dobb, Takahashi, & Hilton, 2006), and continued in subsequent decades, explicitly or implicitly, in the pages of journals like the *New Left Review* and *Past and Present*.[4] Sweezy's position, although avowedly Marxist, was in many ways 'Pirennean'. While not quite equating commerce with capitalism as Pirenne did, Sweezy argued that the feudal economy was static, incapable of internal structural change, and that only an exogamous force could dislodge it. For Sweezy, as for Pirenne, that force was commerce, and commerce, essentially an urban phenomenon, led to capitalism. As he put it:

> "…when [trade] outgrew the peddling stage and began to result in the establishment of localised trading and trans-shipment centres, a qualitatively new factor was introduced. For these centres, though based on long-distance exchange, inevitably became generators of commodity production in their own right… We see thus how long-distance trade could be a creative force, bringing into existence a system of production for exchange alongside the old feudal system of production for use" (Sweezy, 1978, 42).

Somewhat later in the same essay, Sweezy quotes Pirenne to emphasise that commerce awakened new desires, in effect that it fuelled consumption:

> "In every direction where commerce spread, it created the desire for the new articles of consumption, which it brought with it. As always happens, the aristocracy wished to surround themselves with the luxury, or at least the comfort befitting their social rank. We see at once, for instance, by comparing the life of a knight in the eleventh century with that of one in the twelfth, how the expenses necessitated by food, dress, household furniture and, above all, arms, rose between these two periods" (Pirenne, 1936, 81).

Finally, Sweezy (1978, 43), concludes, there was "the rise of the towns, which were the centres and breeders of exchange economy"…

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[4] The exchange between Dobb and Sweezy, originally published in the pages of *Science and Society*, was republished, with additional commentary by such luminaries as Rodney Hilton, in a volume called *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*; that volume appeared in a new edition in 2006, as *The Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism*, by Paul Sweezy, Maurice Dobb, Kohachiro Takahashi, and Rodney Hilton.

In contrast, Dobb insisted that the increasing alienation of workers, intensified pressures for productivity and ever more onerous forms of surplus value extraction, all in the countryside, made trade ever more important, not the other way around. Indeed, to even entertain a scenario like Sweezy's

> "would be to make [the transition to capitalism] an exception to the general Marxist law of development that economic society is moved by its own internal contradictions" (Hilton, 1976, 59)

and, still worse, it would treat the 'economy' or 'commerce' as a *deus ex machina* that operated according to a logic of its own.

Robert Brenner, although best known for his 1976 *Past and Present* article on capitalism and land ownership, directly took up the question of commerce and capitalism in his 1977 critique of Wallerstein's *Modern World System* of the same year. Brenner aligned Wallerstein with Sweezy for having defined capitalism – here he is actually quoting Wallerstein – as "production for sale in a market in which the object is to realise the maximum profit" (Brenner, 1977, 27). But according to Brenner, Wallerstein's argument was profoundly circular: he assumed that medieval traders possessed a 'capitalist mentality' (profit-seeking through trade) *avant la lettre* – and then turned around to argue that this profit-seeking (Wallerstein's definition of capitalism) was the cause of capitalism's emergence. In this discourse, the capitalist spirit was, in effect, midwife to its own birth.

Although Pirenne lurks in the Marxist literature about the origins and nature of capitalism, he has a more clearly visible presence in liberal economic theory, with which he is more commonly associated. The latest and most powerful version of that theory, as applied to the question of capitalism's origin and nature, comes from Douglass North.[5] Although North's work, and more recently that of Asver Greif, has fuelled productive research about what they call the "transaction costs" of doing business, it is still tinged with the ahistoricism that plagues much of our historiography.[6] According to North, the emergence of a "market economy" (i.e., capitalism) depended on the ability of "institutions" to respond to demographic change so that historical actors were free to pursue profit through market activities. By institutions North means, above all, a legal regime able to guarantee secure individual property rights, a formulation that some critics thought reduces the state to an agglomeration of economic forces. Still more misleading, historical actors are assumed to possess a market mentality, in effect to be the

[5.] For his argument see in particular North and Thomas (1973).
[6.] See in particular Greif (2006).

economic men of modernity, longing to be free to pursue profit. As Robert Brenner (1976, 31) put it, such theory assumes

> "institutionalised relationships of 'equal exchange' between contracting individuals trading different, relatively scarce 'factors' under changing market conditions".

Thus the 'new institutional economics' can lure historians to what John Munro (who has himself made excellent use of the category of 'transaction costs' in his studies of the late medieval economy) once lamented as the 'progress-oriented' narratives that plague our accounts of the history of capitalism (Munro, 2001).[7]

Hence we are still awaiting a treatment of commerce and capitalism that fully recognises people, not meta-structures, as the agents of its history. By 'people' I certainly do not mean 'great men', but common individuals who make choices that are constrained by their social position, by existing cultural norms, and by technological capacities. Over time and in large numbers these patterned choices ultimately produce what we see as structure. To do so, we can follow Pirenne into archives where he did more work than he is sometimes given credit for. We could then add politics to our story. Pirenne seemed to urge us precisely in this direction when, in a letter to Karl Lamprecht, he commented that "l'humanité est au-dessus des contingences de l'histoire" (cited in Dhondt, 1976, 119) – thus people come not only before structure, but also before chance, a factor that in his later years Pirenne thought even more important.

Robert Brenner made the point more explicitly in discussing Pirenne's argument (in his *Stages in the Social History of Capitalism*) that capitalism proceeded as one group of capitalists retreated from high-risk commerce and were replaced by new men who have 'nothing to lose'. Brenner said that although

> "Pirenne's generalisation will not hold up… Pirenne did try to understand economic change in terms of the men who actually carried it out. In this respect, his approach can provide a necessary corrective to the economic determinism which has characterised many more recent explanations of economic development" (Brenner, 1972, 361).

To illustrate Brenner's point, we might take Pirenne's *Early Democracies in the Low Countries* (1963), a study of guild and urban 'democracy' in cities like Liège and Bruges and the class tensions that produced it, limited it, and

[7] Munro has explicitly attributed the concept to North and his colleagues but also to Herman Van der Wee and others.

in the end did it in. Here Pirenne insisted that we study the men who made capitalism, men whose ambitions were set by their social origins and whose intelligence or 'spirit' was unleashed, channelled, or repressed in their struggles for power. Like his contemporaries Weber and Sombart – and like Schumpeter and others after him – Pirenne thought people made history, not the other way around.

Arguably Pirenne's most kindred successor is neither Sweezy, nor Wallerstein, nor North, nor Greif, nor Munro. It is Fernand Braudel. The second volume of his *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, first published in French in 1979 as *Jeux de l'échange* and then in English as *The Wheels of Commerce* (1992), makes the case for us. This is a rather unwieldy text, and it can overwhelm students with its piles of anecdotes, its unexpected leaps from one theatre of history to another, and its allusive way of engaging previous scholars. It has irritated professional historians as well, for even as they acknowledge the brilliance and the learning they complain about the lack of analytical rigour. But one of Braudel's chief points was that rigour cannot be imposed on so messy and indeterminate a process. As Braudel put it,

> "capitalism cannot have emerged from a single confined source: economics played a part, politics played a part, society played a part, and culture and civilisation played a part. So too did history, which often decides in the last analysis who will win a trial of strength" (Braudel, 1992, 402-403).

In Braudel's discourse, capitalism emerged out of a socio-political process that transformed – and distorted – what he variously called "economic life", "the market economy", "the normal economy", or "the transparent economy" of traditional European society. This kind of trade, Braudel was at great pains to have us understand, was by no means new during these crucial centuries when, scholars by and large agree, something we call capitalism began to take shape. What was new was what others have called "commercial capitalism" and it was made possible, Braudel realised, not by trade as such but by the segmentation, abstraction, and radical politicisation of what he called the "normal", "transparent", or "market" economy.

In his interpretation, this occurred as trade expanded into foreign parts unknown to most Europeans and accessible by only a few intrepid traders and skilled financiers. The distances were long, but it was not geography alone that made them inaccessible. Rather, the long distance created black holes of information, places where goods were obtained, raw materials purchased, and European-made products sold, all unknown to ordinary people and unreachable by ordinary means of communication. The merchants who could travel

these routes or made connections along them had the freedom to set prices, control money flows, hoard information, and in the end amass enormous profits. This was capitalism of the early modern sort, different from both what Marx defined as industrial capitalism and what later theorists called finance capitalism. Here trade was conducted by what the Germans call *Fernhändler,* the figures often described as "merchant capitalists" in liberal historiography. But Braudel's merchant capitalists were not far-seeing men or ahead of their time, as described in much of that literature, including Pirenne's.[8] They were, less heroically, men who had the power to privatise information so that they, and they alone, could, to use one of Braudel's examples, buy a kilo of pepper for two grams of silver in the Indies and sell it for 20 or 30 grams in Europe (*Ibid*., 403-408). Braudel conceded that although capitalism would never have emerged in Europe if not for already developed markets and a segmented social system (an issue to which I will return), in the end

> "further development would have been impossible without the special and as it were liberating action of world trade" (*Ibid*., 601).

Pirenne did not emphasise global trade to the extent Braudel did, although he certainly distinguished long-distance trade and the merchants who controlled it from local markets and small retailers, and he, like Braudel, attributed his famous capitalist spirit to the *Fernhändler* who dealt in long-distance markets. Indeed, for Pirenne capitalism not only originated in long-distance trade, but during the medieval centuries it existed exclusively in the export/import sector. In a sentence Braudel himself could almost have written, Pirenne remarked that

> "it is capital which rules in inter-local commerce [i.e., long-distance trade], which determines the forms of credit, and which, fastening itself on all the industries which produce not for the city market but for exportation, hinders them from being controlled, as the others are, by the minute regulations which in innumerable ways cramp the activity of the craftsmen" (Pirenne, 1914, 497).

2. THE MISSING PARTS

For all that Braudel's book was a big step forward, the problem implicitly posed by Pirenne's formulations has not been solved. We are still searching

[8] For a study describing these merchants in rather more heroic terms, see Favier (1987).

for ways to expose the fact that people do not 'naturally' imagine that trade produces monetary profit, that the profit should be reinvested in more trade or production with the goal of accumulating capital; we need to look more closely at who came to imagine the world in this way and how, to return to politics, they were positioned – or compelled – to do so. My claim is that we can grasp this history only if we take the entire economic system into account – consumption as well as production and distribution. We must also include *all* players in our story – beyond the *Fernhändler* of legend, even beyond those like Pirenne's Godric who mysteriously emerged from the countryside to become merchant capitalists, and beyond the skilled artisans who became employers of their brethren and exporter/importers in their own right. The full picture will emerge only when we include nobility living passively from rents, poor peasants, common shopkeepers and craftspeople, struggling wage workers – and women. In other words, we need to look more closely at "the segmented social system" to which Braudel referred.[9]

Let me turn first to consumption, the third part of the conventional economic triad of production, distribution, and consumption. Long almost ignored by historians interested in the development of capitalism, consumption has in recent decades become a central issue in this historiography, taken up explicitly in an effort to rid the existing accounts of economism and ahistoricism. By switching the analysis to this part of the economic cycle, scholars believed they would find the individuals that were missing from meta-narratives, whether about class or commerce. Their willingness to acquire and the choices they made, these scholars thought, fed capitalism by determining what and how much was produced, what and how much imported, and who got rich providing the goods.

Although the thrust of work on consumption came in the 1970s, some scholars had earlier attempted to tell the story of capitalism's origin from the point of view of consumption. Werner Sombart can be said to have launched the inquiry with his 1922 *Luxus und Kapitalismus*, followed by Norbert Elias's even more powerful *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* of 1939. Both books were, however, virtually ignored, lost in the miasma resulting in part from Sombart's ambiguous association with Nazism but more generally from the isolation of Germanic historical scholarship during the decades following World War I and the distortions imposed on cultural and social history during the Nazi period. It was only in 1969 when Elias's study was reissued and the

[9] And which he discussed in some detail in *Wheels of Commerce*; his emphasis, however, was on the segmentation among the aristocracy, not the classes (and genders) that I will argue need to be brought fully into the story.

first volume translated into English (as *The History of Manners*) that historians awoke to the possibilities offered by such inquiries.

All scholars pursuing this inquiry proceeded from the assumption that what some have called "the consuming passions" are not just the hallmark of western capitalist society but its motor and its genesis, and that capitalism 'took off' in the 17th and 18th centuries with the systematic development of luxury industries like Wedgewood's pottery in England (Brewer, McKendrick, & Plumb, 1982; Brewer & Porter, 1993) that fed the emergent bourgeoisie's lust for things. Since the 1980s historians have pushed the so-called 'consuming society' back in time, to the Renaissance and the late medieval centuries, and beyond the courts where Sombart and Elias had concentrated. It has now become conventional wisdom that capitalism – its nature and its origin – had as much to do with consumption as production, and that the consumption at issue was not limited to the elites who bought rare and high-priced luxuries. Even economic historians, whether of Marxist or liberal persuasion, have now joined the search. Think, for example, of Joan Thirsk's *Economic Policy and Projects* (1978), on the one hand, or Jan de Vries's *The Industrious Revolution* (2008) on the other.

Despite the high quality of much of this historical research, and despite the stimulating work of cultural theorists like Mary Douglass and Isherwood (1979), Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984), Arjun Appadurai (1986), Daniel Miller (1977; 2005; 2008) and many others who have given us nuanced interpretations of these consuming passions, we are nevertheless stuck with a version of the problem posed by Pirenne's definition of capitalism: ahistoricism. To be sure, almost all historians today would reject any crude statement that people are 'naturally' desiring (although that remains the stubborn keystone of neo-classical economics). Most historians also reject any explanation that makes consumers the passive victims of advertisers or that consumption is simply a crude form of social competition. But most of the literature on the history of consumption in this age implicitly depends on assumptions perilously close to those: their historical subjects – whether Sombart's and Elias's aristocrats or Thirsk's and de Vries's housewives – are already consumers, waiting to burst out of the world of scarcity imposed by the absence of markets and of institutions to protect them.

Thus, we still have work to do if we are sufficiently to historicise consumption, making it not "natural" but in some sense unnatural, a product of a distinctive history that produced *particular* material desires among *particular* people who were not only able to satisfy their new-born needs but also constrained to do so. Here we might well draw inspiration from older Marxist literature by putting the pressure on power relations among social groups,

even as we shift the focus away from production alone. To do so, we have no better archive than the documents produced by the cloth industry because it can reveal what is too easily obscured – the connection between consumption and production and their mutual imbrication in politics. Not incidentally, the textile business – from sheep herding to silk growing to dyeing and weaving, to tailoring, and then to shipping and selling and pricing – was the most important of late medieval Europe's commercial industries. Its products were key luxuries of the age, since dress and its ornamentations were arguably the most important consumption goods of the period, the bearers of enormous cultural weight.[10] Finally, the cloth industry was the premier playing field of Pirenne's long-distance traders, most of who came from or dealt in the Low Countries where he did most of his research.

The cloth industry was also a battleground of gender politics at both ends of the economic cycle – production as well as consumption. The struggle at the production end came as the traditional sexual division of labour intersected with the growing commercial economy. Pirenne ignored this issue in his studies of the politics of cloth production, as did most of his contemporaries.[11] Since those days, however, we have learned a lot more about women's work in the industry. Cloth-making had been in their domain throughout the long centuries of medieval history, simply an aspect of their normal household duties, so when cloth began to be made for sale, women automatically took part. They did not control the commercial industry, however, for as commerce intensified, the traditional sexual division of labour in cloth making shifted in favour of men, leaving women with less remunerative jobs and giving men privileged access to those aspects of production that yielded the highest income and entailed political rights. Still, for centuries the sexual division of labour was not rigid, and in any case the line dividing female work from male did not neatly overlap with the murky boundary between work for subsistence and work for the market. Rather, particularly in northern Europe, both men and women produced cloth for

[10] For a recent study of the cultural meaning of dress in the Renaissance, see Jones and Stallybrass (2000). For a more general discussion and a guide to important literature on the meaning of dress in late medieval and early modern Europe, see the relevant sections of Howell (2010).

[11] One of the significant exceptions was Bücher (1910), who argued (and lamented) that demographic imbalances of the period forced women into the market economy, including the cloth industry.

sale, both worked for wages and as pieceworkers in the industry and both ran shops or other commercial establishments.[12]

Feminist scholars have emphasised, however, that no matter what their particular tasks, women rarely had independent rights to control production. Directly or indirectly, women wool combers, spinners, weavers, finishers, dyers, glovers, knitters, hatters, dressmakers and salespeople had entered the market as members of households that were production units, a form of what others have labelled "family economies". As such, they were subject to the household's male head, a fact efficiently expressed by community property law, the form of customary law typical of the late medieval North.[13]

Such custom granted husbands full control over all community goods, that is over all goods considered the collective property of the husband and wife (and eventually their offspring). In most places the community account excluded a certain amount of property that had been brought to the marriage by the respective spouses, but the account nevertheless typically included all the raw materials and inventories of the trades as well as cash, clothing, foodstuffs, furnishings, domestic animals, and in some places even urban real estate. Although 'joint' in some sense, this property was under the exclusive control of the husband; he effectively 'owned' it, for he could use it how he wanted, sell it, encumber it, even give it away.[14]

[12.] For representative empirical studies, see Wensky (1980); Houlbrooke (1984); Prior (1985); Hanawalt (1986); Howell (1986); Wiesner (1986); Wunder (1998); Carlier and Soens (2001); Chojnacka (2001); Hutton (2005); Hanawalt (1999).

[13.] On the family or household economy in late medieval and early modern Europe, see Tilly and Scott (1978); Howell (1986); Mendelson and Crawford (1998); Ogilvie (2003). By the late Middle Ages, especially in north-western Europe, these households were nuclear. The nuclear household had been formed by a couple who had first married as adults of about the same age, who had exercised a significant degree of choice in the selection of their spouse and who established their own residence. A household thus formed was populated only by the couple, their minor children, a few servants and the occasional dependent relative. Married couples governed their households, had full possession of the property that financed their marriage and directly participated, through the household's head, in community affairs. On the nuclear household, see in particular Hajnal (1965); Smith (1979). Wunder provides a lucid discussion of this social logic. In these households, she notes, "the bride and groom combined their resources to provide the basis for an independent life as a married couple. This life had to be secured by the work of the spouses, usually throughout their lives: through housekeeping in the narrower sense, but at times and in case of need through every conceivable kind of work" (Wunder, 1998, 68). See also Howell (1998).

[14.] For a discussion of northern customs of this type, see Jacob (1990); Godding (1987). Because these regimes tended to provide women the same succession rights that men enjoyed, some legal historians have considered them 'egalitarian' in spirit. See Gilissen (1962). For evidence of the non-egalitarian nature of these regimes, see Howell (2007).

Hence, this was no 'golden age' of women's work if that is understood to mean that women were made the approximate equals of men. Rather, it was a moment in European history when the imperatives of the emergent market coincided, however unstably, with the imperatives of the patriarchal household. And that moment passed as the commercial economy grew, for commerce threatened patriarchal control.[15] The threats came, in part, indirectly, as the vagaries of the market put pressure on the household economy by creating new risks as well as new opportunities for gain. Anxiety over market conditions, disputes about business decisions, a wife's failures as the vendor of her husband's wares, a husband's ineptness in the workshop – now such issues were ever more pressing and now they more easily disturbed marital harmony and gave women reason to complain or otherwise to challenge their husbands' authority. When women ran their own businesses, as many did, the situation did not necessarily improve, however, for in regions of community property law the women's losses, just as much as their gains, were their husbands. The system of *'feme sole'*, which allowed men to separate their wives' assets from their own, thus freeing them from the obligation to cover the women's debts, was a direct response to this danger. Although an indirect acknowledgement of women's activities in the market, it was by no means instituted to protect them.[16] It was instituted to serve men.

The commercial economy could even dissolve the unitary household economy or at least that part of it connected to the market, thus weakening patriarchal authority. That occurred when women began to work for wages paid by outside employers, thereby exchanging husbands or fathers for bosses who organised their work schedules, their wages, even the spaces of their work. In analysing the process in early modern France, James Collins put it this way:

> "When women found more [economic] opportunities as individuals, they began to pose more of a threat to patriarchal order … The independent business woman, although still socially part of a household, was economically distinct from it and from her husband … Young, single women came to possess cash resources, the fruits of their labours as servants and journalières, that helped to free them from parental tutelage … As the chief producers of cash for their households, rural

[15] For discussion of this tension and its effects in various settlings, see Medick (1976); Collins (1989); de Moor and van Zanden (2006).

[16] *'Feme sole'* is the English term; the convention existed throughout the north, as *kopvrouw* (*coopwijf* and various) in Dutch, *femme marchande publique* in standard French, *Kauffrau* in standard German. For a recent study of the practice in England, see McIntosh (2005). The same logic informed the inverse German convention of *Schlüsselrecht*, which, by granting the wife a fixed credit line with local retailers and service providers, limited the obligations she could incur in the course of provisioning the household.

women may have become more threatening to their husbands in an economy in which cash was increasingly important" (Collins, 1989, 467-468).[17]

Still worse for masculine power, community property law was Janus-faced, for even as it made a husband the 'lord' or 'baron' of his wife, as many texts of the day put it, it also gave his widow much of the authority that had been his. She then had control of the household unless, in some regions, there were adult male children, thereby acquiring a significant portion of marital property (in some places all of it). The archives from late medieval northern cities confirm that such widows often readily took charge, sometimes even when there were adult sons.[18] As beneficiaries of the same authority over the now 'headless' household, widows in this part of Europe could also serve as guardians of minor children, with no more supervision by their late husband's kin than their husbands would have had to endure as widowers.[19] In some places widows who headed households even represented the household in public affairs. In medieval Frankfurt am Main, for example, widows who headed households were required to provide guards on the city walls. To satisfy their obligation, they hired a substitute for the civic duties they were themselves unable to perform (just as incapacitated – or rich – male heads of households did). In medieval France, women even sat as *maîtres jurés* of guilds in which they held masterships (although they lost these rights in the early modern period).[20]

Such tensions between the economic and the cultural created a kind of crisis in gender relations, and the result was a gradual exclusion of many women from the market. Guilds, for example, began to write regulations explicitly excluding women from trades to which they had once been admitted, or they let regulations lapse that had once casually included widows, wives and daughters in the membership.[21] As cultural historians and literary scholars have long understood, the process of women's marginalisation from market production was accompanied and helped along by the wide circulation of misogynist images that put 'women on top', with the venerable trope of Phyllis riding Aristotle or the ubiquitous 'woman in breeches' as

17. On the new independence given to wage-earning women, see de Moor and van Zanden (2006).

18. For examples of these patterns, see Wensky (1980); Hanawalt (1999); Howell (1986).

19. For a close study of these practices in late medieval Ghent, see Danneel (1995).

20. For Frankfurt, see Bücher and Schmidt (1914). For Paris, see Collins (1989).

21. For representative studies of this process, see Hanawalt (1998) Wiesner (1986); Howell (1986); Collins (1989).

favourites.[22] Marriage was often at the centre of these stories, for it was usually the married or widowed woman – figures like the dangerous, if also ridiculous, Wife of Bath who, not incidentally, was described as a cloth weaver who could challenge the skilled artisans in Flanders – who could displace men as heads of household and she who could transfer property from one man to another by remarrying.

As these tropes circulated and as law was gradually rewritten, the 'public' space of the market was itself increasingly figured as male, or at least as a space dangerous for women. This was true even in cities where women had long played an important role in the market economy. As Barbara Hanawalt reminded us, the English poem *How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter* (which was written by a man) admonished that a woman in public acquired "an yvell name"; to avoid scandal, she was instructed to dress carefully, walk "modestly" and speak quietly (Hanawalt, 1998, 22). By the 19th century, as Joan Scott (1999) has eloquently argued, French polemicists labelled "l'ouvrière … un mot impie, sordide", insisting that the working woman's availability to the market was a sign that she was truly a 'public' woman.

The attacks on female workers were accompanied by furious diatribes about consumption, which combined two venerable discourses, one about luxury and one about females. The worries about luxury and wealth, although at the centre of European moral discourse for centuries, had intensified as commerce had expanded, for luxuries were now available more widely and in ever-mounting quantities where they seemed to pose an ever greater threat to individual morality and the entire social order.[23] As the attacks on luxuries grew, so did old tropes figuring women as vain, greedy and endlessly desirous acquire new force.[24] Commerce, it was endlessly repeated, awakened, fed and enabled female lust because it made 'everything' available to everyone, in a way that seemed uncontrollable. Comic tales levelled such charges by conflating the desire for luxuries with sexual desire – and assigning the

[22.] The "woman on top" trope was famously described by Natalie Zemon Davis in "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe" (1978). For examples of such images, see Moxey (1989).

[23.] It would not be until the 18th century that Europeans were able to fashion a discourse allowing them simultaneously to celebrate consumption and to put it to work in shoring up power structures. In the discourse that then developed, consumption, although motivated by selfish desire, also sped social intercourse and could be useful if governed. The trick, then, was to consume wisely. "Good taste" became the tool, serving both to provide a justification for consumption and to separate the worthy from the unworthy consumer. For a general discussion of the history of ideas about luxury's dangers (and benefits), see Berg and Eger (2003). On "taste" see Bourdieu (1984).

[24.] For a powerful analysis of this rhetoric in medieval culture, see Bloch (1991).

desires to women. The wives in the tales from the *Quinze joies de mariage*, for example, trade their bodies for finery, lie without shame and spend their hours plotting how to accumulate jewels and clothing. The wife in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* similarly exchanges sex for elegant dress. Where everything is for sale, these tales taught, the entire social fabric unravels; desire is unregulated, spiritual vows are discarded, kinship is betrayed, and the marital bond distained.

Italian sumptuary laws of the day, which so obsessively focused on women's dress and ornamentation, articulated the same logic. Often literally repeating misogynist rhetoric of the age, they charged women with relentless pursuit of finery, wanton disregard for their husbands' wallets and shameless preening. For example, the priors of Florence's *Officiale delle donne*, the body that enforced sumptuary laws in the mid-fifteenth century, declared that

> "… these officials … have an honest desire … to restrain the barbarous and irrepressible bestiality of women who, not mindful of the weakness of their nature, forgetting that they are subject to their husbands, and transforming their perverse sense into a reprobate and diabolical nature, force their husbands with their honeyed poison to submit to them … These women have forgotten that it is their duty to bear the children sired by their husbands and, like little sacks, to hold the natural seed which their husbands implant in them, so that children will be born. They have also forgotten that it is not conformity with nature for them to decorate themselves with such expensive ornaments" (Rainey, 1991, 222).[25]

As several scholars have pointed out, sumptuary legislation and the rhetoric that accompanied these laws worked not only to demonise women and their taste for nice dresses but also to disassociate the male elite of the city from the luxury they feared was destroying republican values. It thus, paradoxically, provided an excuse for the existence of these same luxuries, luxuries that were, after all, the source of male wealth in these mercantile settings. Diane Owen Hughes has argued, for example, that women, along with Jews, were made to stand for all that was both required and feared: by making women and Jews the culprits, men removed from themselves the stain of material desire, thereby freeing themselves to continue in the business of importing, making, and selling the same fabrics and garments (Hughes, 1986, 37-38). Carole Frick (2002) has similarly explained the hypocrisy that had Florentine men condemning women's love of finery even while they dressed their wives and daughters in elegant costumes for public display. The strategy allowed men to reserve for themselves the 'old' more conservative (if

[25] See also Rainey (1985).

nevertheless costly) dress and simultaneously to flaunt their riches. Women were thus simultaneously carriers of male wealth and its detoxifiers.

The combination of pressure on women's work and the attacks on frivolous consumption eventually produced a new ethic and a new set of social practices surrounding women, the market, dress, and consumption more generally. The discourse described, almost exclusively, the prosperous wives, widows and daughters of established artisans and merchants. Although in those days a minority of the female population, it was these women who would later come to define proper bourgeois womanhood. Such women were gradually retreating from business, quietly and tentatively submerging any work for the market or any assets they brought to the marriage under the umbrella of their husband's business. By the 18th century, and long before in some regions, such women only rarely took a visible role in urban commerce or market production itself.[26] Instead, they were learning the lessons imparted by the conduct books and housekeeping manuals of the period, which taught that a woman's job was to manage consumption in her husband's interests, carefully choosing and wisely using the treasures he brought home. This monotonously repeated lesson not only de-fanged consumption by domesticating it, but also provided ideological justification for yielding control over productive assets to men: just as wise consumption was woman's duty and the home her space, they taught, wise production was man's and the market his realm. In 1580, the Italian moralist Torquato Tasso (1997 cited in Welch, 2005, 221-222) put it this way:

> "It is well ordered that … the office of acquiring should be attributed to the man and that of preserving to the woman. The man struggles to acquire and carries out farming or operates in commerce in the city … but the woman looks after that which has been acquired and her virtues are employed inside the house, just as the man demonstrates his outside".

[26] Although, as Davidoff and Hall (1987) have shown, they played a key role in financing the household enterprise. Bourgeois women also continued to work actively in market production in some places beyond this period, as Bonnie Smith has documented; there too, however, they gradually retreated (Smith, 1981). According to Steven Kaplan (1984, 501), Parisian married and widowed women also remained active in grain brokerage into the 18th century. For an argument based on such evidence – that women's exit from market production and the associated social model of "separate spheres" was more an ideological construct than a social reality – see Vickery (1993). Be that as it may, this ideological construct had material bases and material consequences. Women may still have participated in market production – not just poor women or the wives of small shopkeepers, but richer women as well – but there is no doubt that the latter were in steady retreat from active participation. For an attempt to reconcile the apparently contradictory evidence that women were being driven from (or were voluntarily exiting) market production even while many continued to run shops, help in their husbands' businesses and take part in household financial management, see Collins (1989).

Juan Luis Vives's 1523 *De institutione feminae Christianae* (1998), which circulated widely in Europe both in Latin and in translations, was the implicit and often explicit model for such texts. Nowhere was its impact better registered than in the Low Countries, where the cosy domestic interior and the industrious housewife would serve as the antidote to what Simon Schama has memorably called "the embarrassment of riches". There moralists repeatedly issued *exempla* describing the good housewife as nurturer of family and domesticity, and painters set out literally to illustrate Vives's text. Maerten van Heemskerck's well-known print series of 1555, *Praise of the Virtuous Wife*, is typical. Although one of the six prints displays the wife selling the cloth she has woven and another has her buying a piece of land, all her buying and selling is for her family; her activities in the market represent her as the good consumer and household manager, not as player in commerce. Another three prints have her spinning, cooking and dressing her family, and the last pictures her bestowing a crown on the husband she serves.[27] Women, such images and texts insisted, had important work in the house and, although that did not preclude contact with the market economy, a wife's place was 'inside', a husband's 'outside'. England was no different; there, for example, an early 17th-century text seems almost to repeat the Italian language of a generation earlier:

> "The dutie of the Husband is to get goods; and of the Wife to gather them together, and save them. The dutie of the Husband is to travel abroade, to seeke [a] living; and the Wives dutie is to keep the house. The dutie of the Husband is to get money and provision; and of Wives, not vainly to spend it" (Cleaver & Dod, 1612 cited in Shepard, 2000).[28]

It was the same in German-speaking cities, where women were learning to behave as the conduct books instructed. Patrician and upper middle-class women, Heidi Wunder explains,

> "began to limit themselves to organisational tasks in the household and devoted more time to decorating the living spaces in a stately manner and enjoying a 'homey' life with their children and husbands".

Although the wives of less well-off artisans could not depend on servants as their richer neighbours could, domesticity also

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27. These images are reproduced and described in Veldman (1986).

28. For the way these tropes were endlessly reproduced in drama, see Korda (2002) and for an exploration of the relationship between male and female honour in this ideology, Dabhoiwala (1996).

> "began to determine their work roles. In the process, a woman's position as mistress of a household with authority over children and domestics became much more important. In this role they were … of incalculable value to their husbands" (Wunder, 1998, 81).[29]

Scholars have rightly been cautious about taking the conduct books as literal descriptions of practice. The tracts are, however, useful evidence for historians, for they articulate a vision of womanhood that would serve to demarcate class, and it is perhaps that function that made them so attractive a model for behaviour. Unlike poorer women who roamed the streets selling wares and competing for wage work, the women who populate conduct literature were safely at home, managing the money their husbands earned outside. These 'good housewives' – a group that ideologically included both the rich alderman's wife and the less prosperous shopkeeper's spouse – would never spend wastefully or wantonly; they would leave it to the aristocrats to dress fancifully and to the poor to try to copy that flamboyance with second-hand and third-hand goods.

The narrative of the conduct books thus not only sharply distinguished the home from the market, it created a gender-specific class ethic that freed middle-class women of the sins associated with commerce's wildness. These women were not the voracious, undisciplined – even sexually available – consumers depicted in sumptuary legislation or comic literature of the day; nor were they the public women whose labour was for sale and whose persons were on public display. They were the wise managers of consumption, the people who tamed it by being tamed themselves. To be sure, vain and silly women liable to whoredom threatened the industrious housewife, the tasteful consumer and the conjugal household in which such women served. But alongside these narratives would circulate their antidote – conduct books, plays, stories and poems that featured well-ordered households graced by women who bought and sold, not to satisfy their vanity but to serve their families. These were fictions, but they did non-fiction work by marking the boundaries of female honour and encouraging discipline.

So disciplined, these women became agents in the development of capitalist society. By ceding market production to men, they preserved male authority, giving them control of what was becoming the source not just of material wealth but also of socio-political power. Men were simultaneously disciplined because honour would now be assigned to those males who

[29] For examples of German conduct books of the period, see Ozment (1983), Münch (1984) and Puff (1998).

appropriately provisioned and governed their households, even if they earned their riches in ways that were frequently less than honourable. The women also legitimised consumption for their class by helping to make 'taste', the sign that one knew how to spend wisely, a principal marker of bourgeois status. Women's role in capitalist history even extended directly to market production itself, for their choices as consumers helped determine what and how much was produced – and by whom.

The feedback between consumption and production visible in cloth production surely operated in other industries and in other social locations, but here we can see, perhaps more clearly than elsewhere, the politics that fuelled the entire system. Here considerably more than class politics were in play – what feminist scholars have taught us to see as the politics of gender and what Arjun Appardurai (1986) has memorably called the politics of demand. Without those two parts of the story, the history of commerce and capitalism is an impoverished history, always perilously lurching towards a reductive economism.

Pirenne did not directly address questions of consumption and he had almost nothing to say about gender, except by way of publishing sources that displayed female as well as male workers in the textile industry. Hence, today neither historians of consumption nor historians of gender working on the centuries Pirenne studied turn to him for help, and only a few perfunctorily cite him. Rather, Pirenne has retained his honoured place in the historiography treating early capitalist development principally because he put commerce – long-distance commerce – squarely in its centre, helping to force long decades of study and debate that have not ended. This essay has argued that he deserves that place, but it has also proposed that his sensitivity to the politics of socio-economic development, understood simply as struggles for power, and his empirical work on the textile industry in the greater Low Countries offer historians today strategies that can help make clearer connections between consumption and production. The goal is to make them interdependent variables driven by the histories of individuals caught in time and place rather than ahistorical constants. Gender will play a central role in this history precisely because both consumption and production – not just of textiles but also of commodities more generally – were 're-gendered' during this period. Women – particular women, women that would come to be called bourgeois – came to play a much bigger role in consumption, indeed became arbiters of taste in the early modern and modern centuries. For their part, men not only took firmer control of market production, but also solidified male

dominance to the extent they did and, at the same time, enhanced their control over the body politic.

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Pirenne, handel en kapitalisme: de ontbrekende delen

MARTHA HOWELL

_____ SAMENVATTING _____

Pirennes werk over de langeafstandshandel neemt een centrale plaats in in de wetenschappelijke literatuur over de geschiedenis van het kapitalisme. Critici hebben echter betoogd dat Pirenne de kapitalistische mentaliteit als een ahistorische *deus ex machina* hanteerde, als een 'natuurlijke' neiging van mensen om winst in handel en herinvestering na te streven zodra ze bevrijd raakten van wettelijke, politieke en culturele beperkingen. Pirenne had daarnaast nauwelijks iets te zeggen over consumptie, die hij als een effect van productie en distributie zag. De rijke literatuur over consumptie sinds Pirenne heeft er bijgevolg impliciet toe geleid dat zijn bijdragen waardevol maar verouderd lijken. Hoewel Pirenne in zijn empirische werk over de textielindustrie in de Lage Landen de rol van vrouwen belichtte, negeerde hij de plaats van gender in de geschiedenis van het vroegkapitalisme.

Deze kritieken snijden hout, maar Pirennes inzicht in de socio-economische verandering was genuanceerder dan meestal aangenomen wordt. Zijn empirisch werk over de laatmiddeleeuwse textielindustrie samen met zijn studies over klassepolitiek in de Lage Landen laat ons toe de rol van zowel consumptie als gender in de geschiedenis van het vroegkapitalisme te integreren. Pirenne erkende ten volle dat politiek – kortweg de strijd om macht op elke maatschappelijk niveau – de drijfveer was van socio-economische veranderingen of dat het er minstens onafscheidelijk mee verbonden was. Vanuit dit inzicht kunnen we de onvolledige economische cyclus uit Pirennes werk vervolledigen, enerzijds door consumptie en productie met elkaar te verbinden en anderzijds door van de distributie (handel) meer dan enkel een link tussen beide te maken. Op deze wijze worden deze drie elementen onderling afhankelijke variabelen die elk gedetermineerd worden door hun relatie tot de twee andere. Zo worden we er ook toe gedwongen om, in tegenstelling tot Pirenne, rekening te houden met gender aangezien vrouwen en mannen een verschillende rol in deze processen vervulden.

Pirenne, commerce et capitalisme: les pièces manquantes

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RÉSUMÉ

La prise de conscience par Pirenne du rôle du commerce longue distance dans le capitalisme naissant a influencé de longues décennies d'études et de débats qui lui ont valu d'occuper une place de choix dans la littérature scolastique consacrée à l'histoire du capitalisme. Des critiques ont toutefois prétendu que Pirenne avait tendance à traiter la 'mentalité' capitaliste comme une construction anhistorique, comme une propension 'naturellement humaine' à rechercher le profit dans le commerce et le réinvestissement qui se sont développés après l'assouplissement des restrictions imposées par la loi, la politique et la culture oppressives. Pirenne n'avait également pas grand-chose à dire à propos de la consommation qu'il traitait comme un effet de production et de distribution; la riche littérature consacrée à la consommation et produite depuis son époque s'est donc ajoutée implicitement à la liste des charges à l'encontre de Pirenne en rendant sa contribution apparemment louable, mais désuète. Nous pouvons ajouter une autre charge: bien que le travail empirique de Pirenne sur l'industrie textile dans les Pays-Bas ait clairement démontré le rôle des femmes dans la production de textile, il a lui-même ignoré la place du genre dans l'histoire du capitalisme naissant. Les volumes consacrés à l'étude de la place des femmes et du genre durant ces siècles qui ont été publiés au cours des trente dernières années, environ, sont donc une réprimande silencieuse à cette omission.

Cet essai reconnaît la justesse de ces critiques, mais souligne que la compréhension qu'avait Pirenne du changement socioéconomique était plus nuancée qu'habituellement admis et que son travail empirique sur l'industrie textile de la fin du moyen-âge ainsi que ses études de la politique des classes dans des villes des Pays-Bas nous offrent un outil permettant d'intégrer le rôle à la fois de la consommation et du genre dans notre histoire du capitalisme naissant. Pirenne a totalement admis que la politique, simplement comprise comme une lutte pour le pouvoir à tous les niveaux de la société, a stimulé le changement socioéconomique ou était indissociable de ce changement. En nous basant sur cette vision des choses, nous pouvons compléter le cycle

économique de Pirenne en établissant un lien entre la consommation et la production (et inversement) et en faisant de la distribution (du commerce) plus que le simple lien entre les deux. Les trois notions deviennent ainsi des variables interdépendantes, chacune déterminée par son rapport avec les deux autres. En agissant de la sorte, nous serons également obligés de prendre en compte le genre comme ne l'a pas fait Pirenne, vu que les femmes et hommes jouaient des rôles distincts dans ces processus, rôles qui ont aidé à stimuler les processus de changement, et que leurs nouveaux rôles ont aidé à façonner les identités sexuelles des membres de la bourgeoisie émergente.