

THE GROCERY TRADE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARIS: A FRAGMENTED CORPORATION

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Shops are unexplored territory. Although shopkeepers may be frequently mentioned in studies on social stratification¹, or in essays on the history of the relationships of production,² and although such analyses are certainly better than the usual observations borrowed from Zola's *Au bonheur des dames*^{*}, the essential questions about shopkeepers none the less remain unanswered. This is because of the scarcity of concrete information, on the one hand, and the absence of any problematic, on the other. Does this mean to say that whatever their professional specialization, and whatever the size of their business, the men and women who lived by the retail trades occupied the same position in society and had common interests and common enemies? And if indeed they did form a social group or class, what period saw the making of this class? What was its stability over the years? What rules governed the renewal of its members? Finally, what exactly is the history of retail distribution itself? The organization of production, the competition between rival systems of distribution, the different modes of consumption practised in society are all determining factors for shopkeepers, with regard both to their economic function and to their social utility.

The difficulties besetting the study of the retail trades are numerous. The documentation is widely dispersed or buried deep in sources that are not easy to exploit. There was no official enquiry in France before 1912. The solution lies in monographs, patiently worked-out analyses, trade by trade, which take into consideration all the economic and social aspects of the history of each one. This approach avoids the cumbersome statistical machinery of quantitative history, and is the only one capable of producing the information needed to work out a problematic, with rigour and without losing touch with reality. The monograph, moreover, was particularly favoured by the social sciences of the nineteenth century, and one of

¹ See, for example, A. Daumard's contribution, on Paris, in *Les Fortunes françaises au XIXe siècle*, Paris-La Haye, 1973.

² See the first part of the study by C. Baudelot, R. Establet and J. Malemort, *La Petite Bourgeoisie en France*, Paris, 1974, 10-40.

^{*} A new English translation of this novel, by April FitzLyon, and entitled *Ladies' Delight* was published by J. Calder (London) in 1957.

their most precious [155] methodological contributions: witness the enquiries of the Paris Chamber of Commerce (simply a collection of monographs), the works of Le Play and of his followers, or the earliest enquiries of the Labour Office (*Office du travail*), at the Ministry of Commerce.

Needless to say, a monograph in isolation makes little sense. There is always a risk of its becoming engrossed in the picturesque and peculiar details of a given trade. Only studies conducted in parallel, following similar guidelines and asking the same underlying questions, can provide the grounds for any general reflection about this section of the economy and of society. This article, which deals only with the grocery trade in Paris, is more modest in its intentions. Based primarily on the study of bankruptcies between 1880 and 1895, it does not pursue the history of the trade up to the present day. A simple monographical essay, then, but written with the following conviction in mind: the infrastructural analysis of a trade is indispensable if we wish to understand the image which its members had of themselves. The institutions which they created for the defence of their interests, and, more broadly, their acts and behaviour in society.

A CORPORATION UNDER LOUIS-PHILIPPE (1830-48)

Contemporary clichés, and much retrospective idealizing, have blurred the image of what shops were like in this period, known as the age of the 'notables'. Even the simple fact that the shop was then a relatively new phenomenon is generally overlooked. In grocery, as in other trades with popular clientèles, the itinerant dealer, with his loud street cries, had only gradually been supplanted by the shopkeeper during the course of the eighteenth century. This omission is but a minor oversight, however, when set against the whole nostalgic vision of the trade conjured up by some of its members, at the turn of the century. In their view, the grocery trade which their predecessors had known was an activity upon which the gods smiled; an honest occupation with no unfair competitive trading practices and no inequalities within the trade. The sole preoccupation for a grocer in those days was ensuring that the business would be handed down to his son or to his son-in-law. Today, the analysis of the historians who hold that in France, in 1848, 'the petite bourgeoisie meant shopkeepers' is reached, of course, from an entirely different standpoint. But the conclusions drawn are not so very different: the employers behind the till, already fulfilling a market function of distribution alone, represent a distinct social category, marked off from the people by property ownership. In political terms also, they represent a distinct force, on account of the number of them who manage to qualify as electors. The period, then, is portrayed either as that of the historic emergence of the petite bourgeoisie, or as the golden age of the shopkeeper.

These interpretations call for careful scrutiny. A detailed analysis of the milieu of grocers furnishes an excellent case to study, since they were amongst the most numerous of the retail traders of the French capital. Is it true, then, that one grocer's shop was worth much the same as another? An examination of the lists of [156] men who qualified for the vote by the amount of taxes they paid does not support this hypothesis. In 1846, for example,³ scarcely 290 out of a total of 1649 retail grocers to be found in the general trade directory (*Bottin*) attained the level of taxation needed to qualify as electors. More than eight grocers out of ten did not have the vote. Moreover, the distinction between voters and non-voters was not due primarily to

³ The year 1846 has been chosen on purpose as a year following the new law on the professional tax (*patente*) passed in 1844. The application of this law in Paris tended to increase the amount of tax paid by the lower categories of taxpayers, among which were the grocers.

taxes paid on landed property: only a third of the grocers who were enfranchised owed their vote to the taxes they paid on real estate. Even more striking, the higher the professional tax (*patente*) paid by the grocer, the less likely was it that he was a property owner.

But if the grocery trade as a whole remained a realm of small-scale enterprises (a mere handful of grocers paid the kind of taxes required in order to be able to stand for election) there was none the less an unmistakable hierarchy within the trade. Beneath a multitude of small- and medium- sized shops, scattered throughout every neighbourhood of the city, there existed a number of really tiny retailers, still termed 'hucksters' in the assessments for the professional tax. In 1806, 18 per cent of Parisian grocers were hucksters⁴. A whole world separated such little matchbox concerns from the businesses of the grocers who were prosperous enough to have the vote. The shops of the latter flourished in the fashionable residential districts of Paris: Chaussée d'Antin, the area around the Palais-Royal, or in the rue Vivienne. The barons of the trade were to be found in the Saint-Avoie quarter, in the network of little streets around Saint-Merri. Here they were close to the wholesalers and at the heart of one of the areas of the highest grocery sales. Amongst these grocery élites, and here only, there was sometimes family continuity within the trade,⁵ or continuity in complex dynasties of several families and generations. So, to summarize, there were a few important families, surrounded by a host of little shopkeepers. Grocerdom was a world of contrasts.

The real aristocracy of the trade, however, was not composed of these few big retailers, but of the group of wholesalers and large dealers. Their warehouses were located in the rue de la Verrerie, a kind of central market - like *les Halles* - for the grocery trade. Here were stored all the wares sold by the grocers of the capital: 'colonial produce' (sugar, coffee and tea), foodstuffs from pasta to jam, as well as diverse cleaning materials for the house and a multitude of products for lighting. Because of their control over supplies, the wholesalers also controlled the shops. In their transactions with the retailers, however, they showed considerable flexibility, concerned as they were to maintain their outlets: discounts and rebates in return for prompt payment, and cautiously granted credit terms for shopkeepers in difficulty. Thus the middleman ruled, but he was a constitutional monarch. A few grocers, those whose wealthy customers meant that they had considerable sales, purchased their wares directly from the producers, but this was exceptional. Doing business with a rich clientèle, which never paid on the nail and sometimes did not pay at all, was not without its risks. As a whole, then, and in spite of the inequalities between its members, the grocery trade formed a unified group behind its suppliers, an authentic commercial corporation. [157]

As for the wholesalers, their power stemmed from a manufacturing sector which was highly fragmented, particularly where foodstuffs were concerned. The producers themselves rarely tried to intervene directly in the market, either with the

⁴ Rapport du directeur des contributions directes (Archives de la Seine, DP2 (1)).

⁵ The French Grocers' Association (Syndicat de l'Epicene française, 32, rue du Renard, Paris) possesses a manuscript entitled 'Letters from a grocer' shop assistant'. This is a collection of the voluminous correspondence which Jean-Alexandre Bauche addressed to his father, a grocer at Lardy (Seine-et-Oise) between 1807 and 1810. The donator of the collection provides the following biographical notes about Jean-Alexandre, who was his grandfather: 'He died in Paris on 19 August 1839, leaving three sons set up in the trade in Paris (1) Jean-Alexandre, in the rue Saint-Lazare from 1833 to 1855; (2) Emile-Nicolas, established in the rue de Sèvres from 1836 to 1854; (3) Camille-Marie a grocer in the rue de Bondy between 1847 and 1862. This is a rare example of a line of Parisian grocers which covered nearly the whole century, since I myself had the honour to be a member of the corporation until 1881, and to have been vice-president of the French Grocers' Association.'

retailers or with the consumers. The wholesaler's role, therefore, was to collect the various goods together before delivering them to the grocer, in bulk and unprocessed. All the preparation of these wares for sale – weighing out, packaging and labelling – was carried out in the shop itself. Groceries at this time were produced by anonymous manufacturers and bore no brand names. Consequently, for the choice and the handling of his merchandise, the good grocer had to have quite as much know-how as many artisans. The assimilation between producers and retailers was only natural at a time when the vast majority of grocers' shops also comprised processing works. These works were by no means marginal in comparison with the specialized workshops. Thus, in 1848, the 1130 grocers' shops of the capital which also incorporated workshops produced 17 per cent of the jam, 23 per cent of the chocolate and 77 per cent of the roasted coffee. As a small-scale food industry, the grocery trade employed in its premises a whole host of apprentices and assistants, the shops' factotums. Their 'savings', we are told,⁶ gave them the prospect of setting up on their own in the trade. At the beginning of the nineteenth century commerce and industry were far from being generally divided into distinct spheres of activity. Indeed the evolution towards this separation was only just commencing.

Just as the work in the shop still had an individual character, so also the relations which evolved between the seller and the customer were of a personal nature. The shop was a place where each measured his or her respective strength, and the very act of buying was conflictual. The grocer who catered to a working-class clientèle had to adapt to the habits and requirements of its custom: long opening hours (6 a.m. to 10 p.m.), and the retail of goods in infinitesimal quantities. 'The people do not buy cheeses in large quantities, nor even a pound of sugar or a pint of oil... they buy in small quantities, even a single clove. In the morning they buy only what they need for lunch, and in the evening only for supper.'⁷

Credit, of course, was important, because chalking up sales on a slate made sure that the customer would return regularly. The higher prices which were the consequence of selling in tiny quantities may be considered as the interest which the grocer charged on these inevitable little debts. The absence of fixed and marked prices, and the anonymity of the products, meant that the customer was supposed to know what the market prices were, and to have the possibility of checking on the quality of his or her purchases. The manifest unlikelihood of this placed all shopkeepers under a permanent cloud of suspicion. Finally, buying on tick, with all its possible confusion, and buying in trifling quantities, encouraged the salesman to look out for even the slightest chance of a little extra profit: cheating on the weights sold (rendered all the more easy by the fact that the metric system was extremely slow in gaining acceptance), and, above all, adulteration of the foodstuffs sold. The innumerable dodges of the trade were frequently denounced at the time. Inspectors responsible for the observation of trade regulations deplored the consumers' generally passive attitude [158], whilst repeatedly calling the attention of the authorities to the people's latent hostility towards shopkeepers. They warned of the serious disturbances that might result from this hostility 'in the case of food shortages or high prices'.⁸ If indeed it is property which marks the division between the classes, it is as much for the profits it allows property owners to make as for the manner in which these profits are made.

⁶ Chambre de commerce de Paris, *Enquête industrielle de 1847-1848*.

⁷ Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, vol. XII, Paris, 1789, 78.

⁸ See for example, the files at the archives of the Préfecture de Police, 'Police alimentaire' (DB 462, 463 and 465)

HOUSEWIFE'S DELIGHT

During the second half of the nineteenth century the production and distribution of foodstuffs were fundamentally transformed. Retailing was penetrated by methods and thinking in total opposition to its existing traditions. In grocery, after 1860, capitalism began to undermine the old corporative structure. At the origin of these changes was the extraordinary success of a venture conceived and directed by Félix Potin, one of the founding fathers of mass consumption.

Potin's large food stores followed the same golden commercial rules that some of his illustrious contemporaries were applying in their department stores for drapery and fancy goods. A large turnover – the heart and the principal aim of the whole system – was combined with a calculated scale of profits: entice the customers in with low prices on a few essential articles (loss leaders) in order to get them to buy all the others. But food was not drapery and the methods of supplying the traditional shops were no good for the large new grocery stores. For these everything had to be created, starting with new commercial channels. Potin began his career as a direct buyer on the major import markets and, particularly for sugar, by negotiating supply contracts with the producers themselves. The low prices he thus obtained permitted the sale of his loss leaders. But there was also another bottleneck. By this date food production was no longer entirely domestic or confined to the shops, but it remained none the less widely dispersed in numerous small units. Potin began to manufacture his own products, and this on an ever-expanding scale. By the end of the century his factory at La Villette, and his warehouses in the suburb of Pantin, were turning out enough to feed a whole city. Highly integrated, then, Potin's firm had become an immense selling machine.

However, this diversified capital could have borne no fruit had it not been for a revolution in selling practices. The principles were elementary: to maximize the seller's profits inspire the buyer with total confidence; precise profit margins; marked prices; cash payments. Customers whose purchases were delivered to their homes (a large part of the clientèle) were obliged to pay their bills without delay. Sales in minute quantities, necessitating endless handling, were out; everything was sold in fixed units of weight or volume, or in the larger fractions of these units, and with no extra charges added. The wares arrived at the shops already weighed out, packaged and, above all, labelled with the company's name. For Potin's shops did not sell groceries, they sold Félix Potin products. The end of selling goods [159] loose meant the appearance of brand names, along with their harbinger, advertisements. Potin invented neither brand names nor advertisements, and others, exploiting the new medium on a far grander scale, would follow in his footsteps. But he may be considered as the real innovator for both, and his very success indicated the way to follow in the disciplining of consumers. Even prior to the capital, however, the idea which was the secret of Potin's success was to build up a clientèle loyal to his name and convinced that the cheapness, the full weight, the freshness and the reliable quality of products all came down to the name on the label.

So, what with advertising, the industrialization of production and the elimination of middlemen, distribution had decidedly entered a new age. After Potin, whose company was unique in its integration, the modern grocery trade in Paris grew in two related domains: the factory and the large food store. The decades after 1880 saw the emergence of a large-scale food industry: canneries, chocolate factories, jam factories, distilleries, biscuit factories and so on. Henceforth the manufacturers themselves also emerged from their anonymity and sought to create their own outlets. Advertising imprinted their brand names on everyone's

consciousness, whilst the professional retailers became mere subordinates in patterns of consumption beyond their control. The triumph of advertised products not only transformed the retailer into a simple stockist of packets, bringing to an end his intervention in the production processes, it also radically altered the act of selling. Personal exchanges gave way to automatic gestures programmed by the power of signs. Economie imperialism made its debut on the home market. Finally, for the best-known brands, the retailer was forced to accept only the smallest of profits. The heavy demand created for such articles turned them into reference items which the shopkeeper had to be prepared to sacrifice if he wished to keep his clientèle.

Though less spectacular and more irregular, the development of large-scale retail grocery was nevertheless the other important phenomenon of the second half of the century. In 1860 the Chamber of Commerce noted seven large establishments beginning to attract the customers of the 'little grocers'. Already Potin was not alone. Using the same commercial methods as the leader, this large-scale grocery sector was one of the major clients for the producers. Although it showed steady growth, which accelerated after 1900, it none the less failed to attain the gigantic proportions hoped for in some business circles.⁹ The vitality of this sector was due to the long-term decline in coffee and sugar prices, brought about by industrialization and customs reforms. Taking advantage of its supply methods, the large-scale grocery trade systematically cut prices on these commodities. This was offset by higher profit margins on fresh foodstuffs which began to appear in grocers' shops at this time: fresh fruit and vegetables, confectionery and, sometimes, meat and poultry. Thus, as it grew, the trade became less specialized, a development which also added to the lure of the big stores. Domination of cut-price brand name articles, price wars on basic items: what was left of traditional grocery in all these storms? [160]

THE NEW YOUNG GROCERS

As a necessary preliminary step towards answering this question we need to know the number of grocer's shops, and how this number varied. In theory this may appear straightforward, but in point of fact the nature of the sources makes the counting of commercial establishments particularly tricky. The nominal rolls for the professional tax would of course constitute the best source, but no such lists exist prior to 1885, and for the period after this date, the utilization of these enormous registers would need a whole team of researchers. Trade directories, where they have survived – as is the case for the grocery trade – remain therefore the most reliable guides (Table 3).

Table 3 *Grocery shops in Paris*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number of establishments</i> | <i>Index</i> | <i>Source</i> |
|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1860 | 3370 | 100.0 | Chamber of Commerce |
| 1891 | 4494 | 133.3 | Annuaire Garnaud |
| 1896 | 5094 | 151.1 | Annuaire Seigneurie |
| 1910 | 4179 | 124.0 | Annuaire Seigneurie |
| 1914 | 4334 | 128.8 | Annuaire Seigneurie |

⁹ The Louvre department store had an ambitious project for a vast food bazaar, to be opened in 1889 at the same time as the Terminus Hotel (P. du Maroussem, *La Question ouvrière*, IV, *Halles centrales de Paris et commerce de l'alimentation*, Paris, 1884, 172-3).

Two phases emerge in this period of just over half a century. From 1860, the year in which the suburbs around Paris were annexed to form today's twenty *arrondissements*, up to the mid-1890s, there was a very significant increase in the number of shops. The apparent boom between 1891 and 1896 is not feasible, and is to be explained by the change of source. The growth was then followed by a profound crisis, which began to ease off towards the end of the period. This overall view is misleading, however, because it conceals contradictory tendencies inside the city of Paris.

Table 4 shows that within the chronological phases identified above, the evolution was quite different for the central zones of Paris and the peripheral ones. The oldest centre of the city – the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th *arrondissements* – was an area of continuous depopulation, and saw grocers steadily thinning on the ground. As for the remaining *arrondissements* of the original, pre-1860 city, the situation in these was more or less the same, whatever the demographic changes. During the first phase, from 1860 to the mid-1890s, in only three of these *arrondissements* did the number of grocers actually increase, and only by small proportion. After 1891 all these *arrondissements*, with the exception of the 9th, saw numerous departures. Over a period of fifty years, the ten *arrondissements* of central Paris lost a third of their grocer's shops (573 establishments). By 1914 the grocers of the centre of Paris represented only a little over a fifth of the total for the city. In the outer, working-class districts – the 13th, 14th and 15th, the 18th, 19th and 20th, and the 11th and 12th *arrondissements* – the first thirty years following their incorporation into the city of Paris saw [161]

Table 4 *Paris grocery shops: analysis by arrondissements*

| <i>Arrondissement</i> | <i>Number of retail grocer's shops</i> | | | <i>Number of inhabitants per shop</i> | | | <i>Evolution of the population (%)</i> | |
|-----------------------|--|------|------|---------------------------------------|------|------|--|-----------|
| | 1860 | 1891 | 1914 | 1861 | 1891 | 1911 | 1861–1891 | 1891–1911 |
| 1st | 131 | 76 | 60 | 683 | 894 | 984 | -24.1 | -13.2 |
| 2nd | 122 | 86 | 54 | 669 | 813 | 1118 | -14.3 | -13.6 |
| 3rd | 174 | 113 | 92 | 570 | 785 | 944 | -10.5 | -2.1 |
| 4th | 183 | 165 | 120 | 593 | 598 | 944 | -9.1 | 1.7 |
| 5th | 202 | 226 | 184 | 533 | 515 | 660 | 8.1 | 4.2 |
| 6th | 168 | 142 | 78 | 571 | 697 | 1320 | 3.2 | 3.9 |
| 7th | 121 | 146 | 90 | 603 | 655 | 1181 | 31.1 | 11.0 |
| 8th | 119 | 102 | 54 | 587 | 1046 | 1938 | 52.9 | -2.0 |
| 9th | 182 | 105 | 122 | 590 | 1149 | 981 | 12.4 | -0.9 |
| 10th | 177 | 223 | 152 | 642 | 693 | 995 | 36.0 | -2.2 |
| 11th | 252 | 427 | 378 | 499 | 500 | 641 | 69.8 | 13.4 |
| 12th | 166 | 287 | 310 | 396 | 394 | 488 | 224.8 | 34.0 |
| 13th | 127 | 275 | 306 | 447 | 396 | 466 | 98.3 | 30.6 |
| 14th | 133 | 279 | 370 | 395 | 402 | 442 | 113.3 | 45.7 |
| 15th | 138 | 332 | 412 | 406 | 354 | 484 | 109.6 | 69.4 |
| 16th | 86 | 135 | 98 | 427 | 653 | 1532 | 140.1 | 70.2 |
| 17th | 174 | 306 | 272 | 432 | 564 | 794 | 129.3 | 25.1 |
| 18th | 288 | 374 | 434 | 369 | 508 | 633 | 99.7 | 29.3 |
| 19th | 231 | 304 | 292 | 331 | 418 | 534 | 66.3 | 22.5 |
| 20th | 196 | 392 | 456 | 357 | 358 | 396 | 100.1 | 28.9 |
| Paris | 3370 | 4495 | 4334 | | | | | |

saw the number of shops increasing by leaps and bounds: 955 new ones. This increase was proportional to population growth, and, in two of the left bank *arrondissements*, the 13th and the 15th, even overtook it. During the second phase, after the mid-1890s,

however, the rate of growth levelled off. The number of inhabitants per shop went up everywhere, and here and there (in the 11th and the 19th) the total number of shops went down. The dynamic growth in the outer *arrondissements* did not in the end compensate for the number of disappearances from the city centre, and this explains the net decrease for the whole period. But the drop was only slight, and the total number of grocer's shops in Paris remained remarkably high.

The massive elimination of grocers from the city centre, this decentralization of the trade, is further evidence of the erosion of traditional grocery. The principal victim of this erosion was the old élite, implanted in the commercial quarters and the established bourgeois residential neighbourhoods of the centre. Was this a result of the destruction wrought by the Prefect Haussmann, and a repercussion of the concomitant demographic decline of these districts? Doubtless, although this explanation does not give the whole picture, and is not valid for the whole of the centre of Paris. [162] It was here, after all in the historic centre, mainly along Haussmann's broad new thoroughfares, that the new, large-scale grocery stores opened up and prospered. There were not many such stores, but each one drew customers from a vast area, gradually squeezing out the small traditional shops which had survived in the old back streets. According to a retired grocer, writing in 1906, this new grocery trade in the centre 'monopolized food sales'.¹⁰ Around 1900 it comprised a group of seventy to eighty firms, ten of which employed more than fifty shop assistants each, and ten more of which over a hundred. In 1910, forty of these grocery firms had turnovers of more than a million francs a year, and together employed over a third of the total number of shop assistants. With the exception of the giants, such as Potin, with his four main branches in 1905, or Damoy, whose store in the Boulevard de Sébastopol had a staff of 300, the firms were still family concerns, both in terms of who managed them and who put up the capital. Although it is quite possible that there were cases of family links between the old élite and the new, the top of the trade as a whole had been taken over by a new generation. This generation enjoyed economic power far greater than that of the older one, and applied commercial methods which were very different.

In striking contrast with this situation was the commercial proliferation in the former suburbs annexed in 1860. As these working-class districts grew, small retail traders set up shop. Grocers appeared not only along the high streets of what had been, until quite recently, the villages surrounding Paris, but sprang up in the interstices, in the wake of new populations moving in. For many small communities of the working-class city, the grocer's shop, along with the wine merchant (cum-tavern), and perhaps a butcher's and a baker's, were the only shops. The social division of the space of the capital opened up a kind of California for small retailers, an immense and neglected market ripe for colonization.

The shops were in the image of their customers. The large-scale retailing sector made no effort to go into the outlying areas of Paris, and the newfangled modes of consumption did not concern the workers. From which strata of society, then, did the large stores attract their customers? Neither from the lowest nor from the highest. For the comfortable paunches of the latter there was a distinct sector of high-class purveyors. No, the food stores catered essentially to the middling ranks of the middle class and to the upper echelons of wage-earners, non-manual employees and minor civil servants. When, in 1905, Potin ventured to open up a new store in the working-class Saint-Antoine neighbourhood, he located it carefully on the corner of the Avenue Ledru-Rollin, one of the major new bourgeois thoroughfares being driven

¹⁰ L. Arnou, in *L'Épicerie française* of 20 April 1906. This was the organ of the Grocers' Association.

through the district and contributing to its rapid social transformation. Conversely, wherever relatively important working-class populations continued to live within the city centre, little grocery shops continued to exist alongside the large new food stores, and this without the slightest clash of interests. Thus, in the 3rd *arrondissement*, for example, the rolls for the professional tax indicate that between 1895 and 1905 the total number of grocery businesses declined. But this decline only affected the ordinary shops. Fifty-three of these disappeared. The number of [163] tiny retailers, or hucksters, remained constant, and even rose slightly in the Arts et Métiers *quartier* (neighbourhood) of this *arrondissement*.¹¹ The workers, and domestic out-workers of the traditional industries of this *quartier* continued to frequent these tiny dealers, ignoring the vast food emporia but a short walk away on the Boulevard de Sébastopol or in the Place de la République. In a ward, 'the worker didn't give a damn for Potin'¹².

Potin, in return, did not care that much about the workers. For the capitalists of the food industry the working class was not yet a market. Its purchasing power was too slight and too intermittent to be worthy of their attention. The advertisements for the leading brands of food products were not aimed at the workers. Even had they been, would these advertisements have had any effect? It is unlikely, since the people clung to their traditional habits of consumption. They had no intention of relinquishing their direct control over the products they were buying. Bills and catalogues were not going to tell them what they needed. They continued to buy on tick, and in the same tiny quantities. 'We had customers coming in every day just for half a pound of sugar and sixty grammes of coffee.' These characteristics explain one of the most surprising aspects of the grocery trade in Paris prior to the First World War, the complete absence of companies with numerous branch stores. Elsewhere in France such chain-stores were developing with remarkable success, and leading to hard times for many traditional grocers. But in Paris the small, independent shops still held their own. Between the small retailers and the large ones what evolved was not so much direct competition as a sharing out of clientele. The prosperity of the small grocers was a consequence of nothing other than class divisions. Thus emerged a situation in which the grocery trade of the peripheral zones of the capital was a replica of the traditional grocery of the centre, but displaced in time and space. The pioneers setting up shop in the 1860s were the successors to the mass of small grocers of the July Monarchy. Although it had lost its leading lights, the old corporation of that period came to life again.

THE SHOP'S PASSENGERS

Who were the members of this new young generation of small-scale grocery? Amongst all the sources which have survived, the records of bankruptcies give the clearest answer to this question. This is not as paradoxical as it may appear. With a little common sense and some background knowledge of the trade, it is not difficult to discriminate between elements which give evidence of what was normal and those which only reflect the particular features of a commercial downfall. The source none the less remains silent on many points. The official receivers who dealt with the bankruptcy cases did not make lengthy enquiries or prepare defences. All that

¹¹ This conclusion results from an investigation of the roll for the *patente* tax in the 3rd *arrondissement*, carried out in 1976 by Melles J. Fedenci and C. Vroelant (Archives de la Seine D2P9).

¹² Extract from a long and fascinating conversation with M René R. recorded in June 1978. Monsieur R. was a grocer's assistant in Paris before 1914, working at one stage in a Potin store. After a spell as a travelling salesman, he ran his own grocery shop in Belleville between 1922 and 1960. Other extracts from this same conversation are quoted in the text.

interested them in the history of the bankrupt business were the facts which might be of use in judging the claims of creditors. Thus the only documents which bear directly on the business, that is to say its inventory and its list of creditors, give a distorted and fixed image of it. All too often, for example, the file gives no clues [164] as to the origins of the initial capital. The prime interest of these bankruptcy documents lies elsewhere, in the biographical details which they contain. In a few words and a few dates the contours of a private destiny are revealed. Vital lacunae in the documentation make it impossible to situate the grocery group precisely in its larger social context, but we can at least explore in some detail the manner in which these small employers reached their position, and analyse the systems of selection through which they had passed.

The bankruptcy records of course concern only a small proportion of businesses in relation to the total number of shops. Thus in no way do they constitute a cross-section of the trade at a given date, such as a record of inheritances might furnish for the study of fortunes. Nor do these documents provide any basis for a serious economic analysis, such as might be possible with figures on the value of the businesses over a long period. The usefulness of these records becomes apparent only after a large number of cases have been studied comparatively. The conclusions here are based on the examination of a total of 983 cases. Going through the files was a time-consuming and complicated process, and partly for that reason was limited to the years 1880 to 1895. This period, it will be recalled, was one of expansion for the grocery trade of the outer arrondissements.¹³

Within the total number of cases studied a large proportion obviously concerns the grocers of the working-class districts of Paris. As evidence of this we can look at the cost of the grocery business, which was already amongst the lowest for retailing businesses as a whole (only a few shops, such as greengrocer's or stationer's generally cost less)

Table 5 *Price of grocery businesses, 1880-95*

| | % |
|----------------------------------|------|
| Less than 5000 francs | 21.1 |
| Between 5000 and 10,000 francs | 26.8 |
| Between 10,000 and 20,000 francs | 28.6 |
| Between 20,000 and 40,000 francs | 17.6 |
| More than 40,000 francs | 6.3 |

Table based on 142 cases for which this information is given.

Source: Bankruptcy files (see note 13).

At about this period the authors of a professional handbook for grocers¹⁴ were writing that a capital of at least 10,000-15,000 francs was necessary for setting up a grocery shop, one at least where business would not simply 'vegetate'. In the cases we have seen in the table above, however, nearly one shop in two had cost less than 10,000 francs. The more expensive ones were located almost exclusively in the city

¹³ The task of extracting information from the records (Archives de Paris D11U3) was carried out by Mlle J. Fedenci, and paid for from university credits for research projects. The work was divided into two stages. First the information contained in the records was transcribed onto prepared file cards. The different elements were then collated, year by year. As it turned out, many of the elements could not be fitted into the categories selected, at least not without missing much of the valuable documentary evidence contained in the dossiers. Moreover, only a small number (thirty) of the possible correlations was attempted. Consequently our research by no means exhausts the potential of the source. A meticulous qualitative analysis, and a more elaborate statistical processing could certainly extract more from it.

¹⁴ Demonceaux and Savigny, *Comptabilité des épiciers*, Paris, n.d., 22,

centre. These were big bankruptcies of big concerns, illustrative of the crisis which traditional grocery was going through. 'Competition from the large firms' and 'discounts offered by their competitors' are the kind of remarks that the official receivers noted to account for these failures. Moreover, regardless of the size [165] of the concern, the number of grocers going bankrupt in the city centre was higher than the average. In 1891 these grocers represented 30.8 per cent of the trade as a whole, but suffered 34.3 per cent of the bankruptcies. The divergence, which is suggestive of the greater fragility of these city centre businesses, was even larger in certain *arrondissements* (the 4th and the 6th) and at certain dates. Thus during the years of commercial crisis, from 1884 to 1887, the percentage of bankruptcies from the ten central *arrondissements* rose to 35.6. The small shops survived the slump better than the larger ones, and the cyclical crisis reinforced the effects of structural changes.

For the majority of bankruptcies, however, it is impossible to ascertain what had happened. For lack of assets 613 cases were dropped. In three cases out of five the remnants of the shopkeeper's fortune were so insignificant that it was pointless bothering the holders of debt claims. The files on these cases are just empty folders. These grocers, condemned to commercial oblivion, were not on the whole in massive debt, scarcely more than 11,000 francs on average. But all their wealth lay within the four walls of their shop; a few bills protested, the loss of value of the business after the bankruptcy, and the concern disappeared without more ado. So it is important to bear in mind that the visible proportion of these bankruptcy cases was made up, so to speak, of the ones who were lucky in their bad luck.

What were the personal antecedents of those who 'survive' in the archives? They are known in 252 cases :

Table 6 *Origins of bankrupt grocers, 1880-95*

| | | |
|---|----|-----|
| Bankruptcy of a first grocery shop | | |
| – grocer's shop assistants | | 120 |
| – wage-earners | | 35 |
| – shop owners | | 8 |
| Bankruptcy after one or several previous grocery businesses | | |
| – grocer's shop assistants | | 48 |
| – others | | 41 |
| wage-earners | 9 | |
| shop owners | 13 | |
| unknown | 19 | |

Source: Bankruptcy files (see note 13).

Apprenticeship emerges as the principal route to owning a business. But alongside this classic itinerary, other channels appear: from shops and from the proletariat. As former greengrocers, florists, corn chandlers or bakers, some of these grocers had already tried their hand at retailing, more often than not with conspicuous lack of success. For them grocery was a last refuge, a final chance of paying off their debts. Became the shops cast so little, the trade tended to collect the leftovers of all the retail trades. The crisis had doubtless increased the number of these transfers over to the grocery trade. A higher proportion of grocers were recruited [166] from the ranks of wage-earners, although these included a certain number of servants or lower employees. It was not infrequent for the grocery shop to be opened after marriage with a grocer's widow, and in these cases the bankruptcy was generally caused by the heavy investments made by the husband, anxious to expand the business. The ambition was generally misplaced. The bankruptcies of shops set up by former wage-earners were usually put down to 'bad management'

or 'incompetence' by the official receivers. It was wage-earners who were the most easily beguiled by the seller's promises, and the most easily misled as to the value of the business. The worker was ill at ease in the world of tradesmen: the knowledge required, the contacts and the *savoir-faire* were all foreign to him. Above all, the idea of becoming his own boss by entering a retail trade did not have at all the same meaning for him as setting up as a self-employed worker at home, or as an independent artisan; rather it meant joining the ranks of those who exploited his comrades, and repudiating his class.

Whether they were old hands or newcomers to the trade, three grocers out of five had, at some time or another in their career, worn a shop assistant's apron. Grocering clearly remained a profession. True, the processing work carried out on the premises seems to have been in slight decline, except for the roasting of coffee beans. But otherwise nothing had changed in the retailer's other individual tasks. The shop assistants continued to learn on the job, picking up the numerous technical details and tricks of the trade necessary for the handling of loose goods, and for their arrangement. 'You had a lot of lugging about to do, it wasn't simply a question of serving madame.' Henceforth, only the grocers of the working-class districts demanded any kind of qualification for the job. 'A shop assistant who had worked in small grocery shops knew his wares. One who had worked only for Potin didn't know anything; he recognized the packets, that's all.' By observation and by practice the assistant gradually mastered the empirical science of dealing with the public; adapting stocks and profit margins to the sort of customers he had; deciding just how much honesty was needed to keep them coming back; learning how to cope with complaints¹⁵ and how to converse with each customer, how to reply to their questions about such and such a new product. A grocer worth his salt had to be capable of doing market research.

In reality, internal promotion within the trade was highly selective. At the very least there were 6200 shop assistants working in Parisian grocery shops in 1890. Only a tiny minority of them could hope to find a place in the ranks of the employers. The labour force in no way gives the impression of a younger generation studiously preparing to take over, of apprentices slowly gaining instruction in their chosen career. The image is one rather of a jostling mass of young men, constantly joined by new recruits from the provinces, shifting endlessly from job to job, and mainly attracted to the trade by the prospect of free board and lodging, partial compensation for the meagre earnings. The working conditions were every bit as tough as those in industry. The day passed by without any break, and always under the watchful eye of the boss, on the look out for pilfering. The only time off was on [167] Sunday afternoons, and this in winter only before 1905. Moreover, being a shop assistant was not a lifetime career. Married shop assistants were slightly suspect, and over the age of thirty it became difficult to find a place. Around 1900 revolutionary syndicalism consistently failed to win recruits in the grocery trade. According to one of the threadbare clichés of social historiography, the reason for this would be that grocers' shop assistants had already acquired the dominant mentality of future employers. Certainly, being a shop assistant was a temporary occupation, but most embarked upon it with little hope of promotion, as a simple interlude before going into a factory or an office.

¹⁵ 'You get fussy customers coming in to bring back a tin of food... you can always really insist, and then she'll keep her tin, go home and eat it, thinking all the while that it's not any good, that it won't do. So its better to say "Yes, Madame, you're perfectly nght," and give her another tin. The tin she's brought back, you can always eat yourself later. You can't send it back to the makers.'

Since this was the case, what social mechanisms were at work behind selection? It would be very useful here to know more about the backgrounds from which our bankrupt grocers originated. But if the records provide abundant details on their individual antecedents, they remain practically silent on this fundamental point. The only clues they give emerge from the different ways in which the business had been financed.

Table 7 *Sources of capital for Paris grocery businesses*

| <i>Antecedents</i> | <i>Wife's fortune alone</i> | <i>Wife's fortune plus loans</i> | <i>Inheritance (or wife's dowry at marriage)</i> | <i>Personal savings</i> | <i>Loans</i> | <i>Personal savings plus loans</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------|--------------|--|--------------|
| Wage-earners | 3 | | 1 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 12 |
| Shop assistants | 9 | 3 | 11 | 6 | 16 | 6 | 51 |
| Former grocery shop owners | 1 | | 1 | 10 | 8 | 4 | 24 |
| Total | 13 | 3 | 13 | 21 | 25 | 12 | 87 |

Source: Bankruptcy files (see note 13).

The examples, granted, are not very numerous, but they suffice none the less to draw some conclusions about the relationships between personal antecedents and the source of capital for the business: family, savings or loans. Amongst the grocers setting up shop for the first time, it was only for the former wage-earners that personal capital played a decisive part. In these cases marriage usually came first, nine years on average before the shop was opened. In general, at this time, the very notion of savings was out of the question for most workers, who had none. So for these couples, setting enough aside to buy their own business was a long and laborious process. Such social ascent from the working classes was quite exceptional, however, and it is significant here that most of the wage-earners who managed to buy their own businesses with their own savings were Parisians by birth, and came from the labour aristocracy of the traditional Parisian industries, or from machine shops. Otherwise, for a wage-earner, there remained the possibility of marrying the capital, of finding either a widow or an heiress. This was a hotly [168] disputed 'market', but it seems that wage-earners had as much success in it as any. The constant pressure from men explains another unusual feature of the Parisian grocery trade, namely the rarity of grocer's shops run by women on their own (11 per cent of the businesses in 1901, and 6 per cent of the bankruptcies). Elsewhere in France very nearly half of the grocery shops were run by women (45.6 per cent). It is fair to say that for wage-earners-turned-grocers, the happy few were those who put their aspirations to a higher social status before all else in their lives? One did not rise into the ranks of the petite bourgeoisie without making some sacrifices.

The shop assistant's nest egg, built up during the years of his employment by another grocer, was very rarely sufficient to buy a business. For the shop assistant group, it was the wife's dowry, with or without loans, which served to buy the shop in almost a quarter of the cases. If we include inheritances, this proportion becomes more than 40 per cent. Here, precisely, however, it is important to make a distinction. Out of twenty-three examples, only nine former shop assistants came into their businesses by either marrying a woman who had inherited one, or by directly inheriting one themselves. It is not particularly surprising that relatively few of the businesses were directly inherited from a father (six cases), since the milieu as a whole was largely dominated by provincials (77 per cent of the grocers who went bankrupt). Furthermore, with only one exception, the shops handed down to a son,

like those taken over by a son-in-law, were ones located in the city centre, and always amongst the more valuable (over 30,000 francs). Is it possible that because of its attention to failures, the source tends to underestimate the number of grocer's shops which were inherited? We have already seen that it was the grocery trade of the centre of Paris, the only part of the trade where dynasties sometimes existed, which was the hardest hit by commercial transformations. But that is here beside the point, and the source confirms that continuity or family stability inside the grocery trade was restricted to its upper echelons. True, marriage was a frequent means of setting up in business for the smaller grocer, but marriages of this sort were of a financial, rather than dynastic significance. The grocer's shop of the working-class neighbourhoods of Paris did not stay in the same family from one generation to the next. Moreover, taking the shop assistant group as a whole, their marriages, more often than not, were simple working partnerships. This is suggested by the typical profile of their career: after eight years working behind a counter as a shop assistant, they got married and set up shop at the same time, around the age of twenty-eight.¹⁶ Grocery was an occupation for couples, and a certain understanding between the husband and wife was one of the principal conditions for a smooth running business. Many of the bankruptcy cases prove this point by their evidence of what could happen when this understanding was lacking.

A marriage for money enabled only a lucky minority to set up in business. What of the others? Here the source of capital was quite simply the family, or more widely, a network of friends and relations. Legacies and loans were really only two forms of the same mode of financing a business, that is to say assistance of all kinds provided by the milieu from which the grocer came. When the shop was paid for with the [169] dowry that the husband received with the wedding presents, or with the product of mortgage taken out on property left by the parents, then the capital came directly from the family. When there were loans, they came from the place in the province where the grocer was born, from the locality to which, in many cases, he returned to celebrate his wedding. It is clear that family connections played a vital role here, but the official receivers' remarks are too cursory to allow us to go into greater detail. Nor do we have a clear idea of the exact nature of the relationships with these 'relations', or what kind of friendship existed with these 'friends', who, in the case of the grocers of Parisian extraction, made funds available. But whatever the precise identity of their financial backers, the former shop assistants who set up on their own, with no contribution from a widow or an heiress, always did so with an inheritance, both broadly and strictly speaking. The bankrupt grocers were born mainly in the Paris basin, and the departments around it. This geographical distribution is evidence of a migratory flow of young men, going up to the city to try their luck. Such migration had always been important, and was a typical pattern for men who became employers.¹⁷ So land, in the end, was the main source of shopkeeping capital, via the sons, modest peasant fortunes were reinvested in the urban retail trades. This period, after all, was one in which rural crafts, intimately bound up with agriculture, went into decline. This not only made hands available for the factories, it also released capital for the city. It would be most instructive to be able to analyse in greater depth the habitual methods used for financing small-scale businesses, and to examine how these fit into the general evolution of the economy.

The maintenance and reliability of these traditional methods of financing saved many a small shopkeeper from becoming tied to a wholesale wine merchant. This

¹⁶ Out of 135 cases where these details are given, 93 grocers setting up in business for the first time did so in the year of their marriage.

¹⁷ See L. Chevallier, *La formation de la population parisienne au XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1949, 173-85

was certainly one of the hazards of the grocery trade, although Martin Saint-Léon overstated its importance.¹⁸ Thus, in the bankruptcy records, only a handful of grocers, and all of them amongst the larger ones, had benefited from credit made available by wine merchants. Such loans, though considerable, were always accompanied by an obligation to purchase supplies from the company belonging to the backer. The grocers dealt almost exclusively with the grocery wholesalers, and hardly at all with the food producers. A careful examination of some of the lists of creditors shows that grocers remained very diffident in their direct buying from the manufacturers, purchasing only jams and pasta in this manner. The dealings with the wholesalers kept the same hallmark of mutual interest that we have already noted for the period of the July Monarchy. For the retailers these relationships offered a convenient way of obtaining the wares, along with easy terms for their payment. For the wholesalers they guaranteed the existence of a large number of outlets, and meant that they could continue to control prices. Thus although they were now excluded from the supply contracts for the large-scale grocery stores, the development of small-scale groceries in the outlying working-class districts meant that the wholesalers had lost none of their former power.

For the third group of grocers in Table 7 – those who went bankrupt after one or several previous commercial ventures – their last business, the one that leaves [170] its trace in the records examined, was usually financed by personal capital. This consisted, of course, of the money raised on the sale of the stocks of the preceding concern. We come here to one of the most striking features of the Parisian grocery trade at this time, its mobility. Before setting up their itinerant grocery stall, the H. couple, for example, had run two greengrocery shops, one in Bagneux, and the other in the rue Mazarine, and then a wine shop in the rue de Clignancourt. An itinerary such as this one, zig-zagging from one shop and one neighbourhood to another, was the typical lot for almost all Parisian grocers. Another example is provided by a grocer who, after starting out as a grocer's shop assistant, opened up his own shop in Belleville, thanks to his wife's dowry, at the age of twenty-five. Three years later he sold this shop, losing 6000 francs. His next little shop in the rue Geoffroy-l'Angevin did better. Four years later he left this one for a larger grocery shop in the Avenue Saint-Ouen. Of course, sometimes, a grocer spent the whole of his life in the same place. In 1873, François F., for example, took out a lease on some land in one of the countless private streets where slums were being built, in this case at La Villette. He built a grocery shop on his plot, adding a wine shop to it soon after. A major step followed in 1882 when he opened up a lodging-house, with twenty beds. This was a classic social climb for a small retailer in an area of poor working-class dwellings. The tiny dealer in groceries gradually became the proprietor of cheap lodgings, what the French call a 'sleep merchant' (*marchand de sommeil*). As such he was a personage of some note in his miserable neighbourhood.

Such stability was rare, however. After 1900 one Parisian grocery business in five changed hands every year.¹⁹ This sort of mobility was in no way peculiar to the grocery trade. The whole of the small retailing sector was marked by a similar instability. Land registers, or personal recollections²⁰ all bear witness to it. Success in the trade did not come from enlarging the shop, nor result from a well-known name

¹⁸ Etienne Martin Saint-Léon, *Le petit commerce français. Sa lutte pour la vie*, Paris, 1911. 43-4.

¹⁹ According to the *Annuaire statistique de la ville de Paris* (product of substitution taxes for town dues)

²⁰ Madame A, a butcher's wife at Maison-Blanche, in the 13th *arrondissement*: 'In those days people didn't like to see a shopkeeper staying a long time. Customers got tired of always dealing with the same person. It was well known that it was better to sell a business after five or six years... You never saw a shopkeeper staying in the the same shop for forty years' (interview recorded in August 1978).

or a good reputation. Rather, it came at the end of an uninterrupted succession of successful shops, each one being sold at a profit. Frequent expenses for refitting or improving the shop did not interfere with such a progress. Of course they made for a difficult moment, the credit being used up before the higher takings began to materialize, but once the charges had been assimilated, the shop had acquired greater value for when it was sold again. Thus a small shop in no way constituted the basis of a patrimony. Only really large shops were passed on from one generation to the next. The small grocers of the outlying working-class neighbourhoods would not have dreamt of coming in to the city centre, there to compete with the Potins, the Coutés or the Lucés. Just as the capital put up for the small shop came from elsewhere, so also the money made in the trade was used to help out sons and daughters on their way to other social destinations. Small retail trading was a sound economic sector, rooted in well-established consumer habits. As a social category, however, it was one of passage, precarious and anonymous. At this period the *grande bourgeoisie*, the fairy godmother of the emerging middle classes, was elaborating an ideological discourse which said just the opposite. [171]

Thus, along the way, the study of the Parisian grocery trade of the nineteenth century has brought us up against a number of historical problems. The conclusions, granted, are modest, and it would of course be unwise to generalize from them. The aim of this essay, in any case, was to use the example of the grocery trade in order to try to define a problematic, and to propose an analytical approach for the study of the retail trades in general.

First of all there is the question of the retail trades in relation to social modes of consumption. And here we mean the retail trades in their entirety. To ignore the competition from the large-scale stores is to misunderstand the general evolution of a trade. We have seen that in grocery the large stores and the small ones gradually effected a sharing out, both of geographical space and of clientèles. The losers in this process were the traditional grocers of the city centre. This state of non-competition was reached because of the total contrast between the different 'clientèles' purchasing powers, between their purchasing habits, and between their attitudes towards the grocer and his merchandise. It is banal today to talk about revolutions in distribution, brought about by authoritarian town planning, and the imposition of new styles of social consumption. But the archaeology of selling itself has yet to be explored.

The next point concerns the formation and the selection of the members of the trade who made it into the ranks of the employers. It is important here not to overlook the facts that shops were places in which salaried work was done, and that the renewal of the managerial ranks was as much a question of selection as of promotion. The parallel with the productive industries is dear, and by no means fortuitous, considering that processing remained for a long time an essential part of the work carried out in the shops themselves. So, how did one become an employer? It is a good question, but a better one would be how did one not become an employer? In other words, in what ways did money dictate the selection of employers? It is not enough here simply to remark upon the non-intervention of capitalist forms of credit. It is necessary to go further and to bring to light all the importance of the traditional and customary modes of financing a business: small or extended family networks, friends, relations, provincial and ethnic communities. If the small employers of the retail trades remained so long an autonomous group – 'archaic' even, some might be tempted to say – this privilege resulted less from the disdain in which banking and trading capital held the small grocers' customers, than from the vitality of parallel credit channels.

Finally - and this theme is linked to the preceding one - what role did the retail trades play in social reproduction? This question raises that of family inheritances, and social mobility within the world of shopkeepers. There are two extreme versions, two contradictory hypotheses, on this point. One version has the trade to the hands of a precise group of dynasties, with direct descent of the businesses, and a controlled policy of matrimonial alliances. The trade is thus a reserved domain, dosed off to outsiders. In the other version, the employers of the trade are constantly being replaced, with no family continuity. They are individuals who benefit [172] from pre-existing networks of financial backing, and the trade is thus an open milieu, a free zone. We have seen that both models apply to the Parisian grocers of the last century. A small fringe of large businesses, originally in the hands of a few families, gradually passes out of their control, and, as a result of commercial mutations, falls under that of large-scale joint-stock capital. On the other side there is a plethora of small businesses, run by sons who have come up to the big city, and which draw the savings from beneath innumerable provincial mattresses. But buying a shop was not like buying a plot of land. Succeeding generations of small grocers have always consisted of families on the move, never taking root.

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