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***How self-service happened: the vision and reality of changing market practices in Britain***

**Abstract**: Self-service has become a normative practice – in most UK shops and wider society and attitudes. Self-service was the heartbeat of a liberal economy and consumer society. Yet before 1942 self-service did not exist in the UK. How did it become such a routine part of market activity? This chapter explores the role of distribution and the public reception of self-service. Drawing on a range of sources, it complicates the assumptions in the existing literature that the concept was an American import and model, and naturally popular with shoppers. It offers a more integrated account of how markets operated and were perceived – from the supply chain to retailers to consumers and from structural and logistical issues to the emotions and instincts of the shopping public.

The causes and consequences of self-service offer historians multiple sources for interrogating how markets work, are understood, and change. It offers insights at the micro or shopfloor level of individual consumer interactions as well as the macro level of corporate, national and international commerce. Self-service was a lynchpin of the Cold War – its values of choice and freedom were the essence of western liberal democracies ideological battle with state Communism.

As much as later market ideologues celebrated individual consumerism, the earlier New Right readily saw shopping as a microcosm, model or metaphor for popular choice exercised as marketplace democracy. In 1966 ArthurSeldon, one of the founders of the free market Institute of Economic Affairs, saw self-service and choice as the essence of ‘freedom in consumption’ that could transform the expert-knows-best welfare state ethos in the UK. This would come less ‘as voters in the ballot box, but as consumers in the marketplace.’ ‘The common man and his wife from Leeds and Preston… are treated like Lords and Ladies at the grocer’s, the hairdresser’s… For twenty years they have had increasing freedom of choice for their food and drinks, their clothes, their furniture’, so Seldon speculated they were not going to put up with ‘being treated as servile, cap-in-hand supplicants’ by state authorities. For Seldon, this ethos would undermine what he saw as the related state paternalism of the Soviet Union. The equation was, in Seldon’s mind, clear: the people under Soviet dictatorship ‘will not be denied cultural expression. They are demanding economic choice. In time they will expect political freedom.’ By the 1980s many shared this belief. As one Tory peer put it, in support of relaxing Sunday trading laws in 1986 (the Thatcher government’s only parliamentary defeat): ‘every shop is a polling booth. Every penny laid down… a vote for various candidates that are produced for the favour of the shopper. That is day-to-day immediate democracy’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So did those who saw the potential for consumer power in the marketplace to established social hierarchies, moralities, sensibilities; a popular response to commercial power, offering freedom, creativity and diversity. This was true of liberal-social democratic thinkers like Michael Young (founder of the Consumers’ Association in 1957) and more recently, the guru of Blue Labour, Maurice Glasman acknowledging the ‘liberating force’ that ‘over-the-counter culture exerted.’ Asa Briggs – Young’s biographer - closed his history of Lewis’s department stores in 1956 by noting, ‘choice and service… have made the department store a social institution. Diversity is one of the elements in retailing which makes shopping a pleasure…taste and preference are vital constituents of a free society.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Choice – the essence, the USP, of self-service - was ideologically charged. The everyday practice of market values was of global import – self-service was lived and influential beyond just the marketplace. As Trentmann presents Free Trade, self-service was both an international regime, involving commercial application and popular shopfloor activity and understanding of markets. It was not as divisive as Free Trade, but not uncontested either.[[3]](#footnote-3) Self-service embodied popular capitalism, even neoliberal culture as everyday practice, and has spilled into the marketization of society. There were no self-service stores in the UK before 1942, but it has become normative, a sort of inescapable, natural, organic development. This chapter de-centres and disturbs that idea, exploring self-service’s advent rather than assuming it – assessing restraints on it, and the claims of Americanisation that more singular narratives attach to it.

Much has been written on self-service, especially in food retail, but little attention has been paid to its reception amongst shoppers or to the role that changes in distribution played.[[4]](#footnote-4) Despite the abundance of consumer histories in recent decades, distribution has largely been taken for granted. [[5]](#footnote-5) As De Grazia noted in 1998, ‘the evolution of modern systems of distribution is astonishingly under-studied’.[[6]](#footnote-6) A sociological and cultural historiography predominates – any significance in the structures of markets is implicit, with the focus on meaning of goods, acts of consumption, its performativity. Nor do the visits by UK retailers to observe American self-service in action feature much in the literature.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This partial coverage is surprising given that historians have also adjudged self-service to be ‘the most significant change in sales methods since medieval times’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Its novelty was not absolute. In 1967 Mathias argued that self-service and the supermarket constituted a ‘second revolution’, developing that started by the multiples and 19th century department stores – refining the efficiencies of rapid and high turnover of cash, not credit, sales, with labour-savings too.[[9]](#footnote-9) Stores like Woolworth’s and Marks and Spencer’s had encouraged mass audiences to browse by ending price negotiation. Nevertheless it seemed novel. For Bowlby, self-service, in cahoots with the supermarket, was ‘the shopping revolution of the century… the least remarked but most ubiquitous American cultural export of the 20th century.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

To plug these historiographical gaps, we describe a more contested, local and contingent process. This chapter also unpacks the (assumed) linkage of supermarkets and self-service, which was neither automatic nor simultaneous at eithers outset. It sees markets as relational and this entails not only a history of economic relationships and the shifting power between manufacturers, retailers and consumers, but of social and emotional transactions too. What did self-service feel like, how was it experienced on the shopfloor? What was lost or resisted - or the inconvenience of ‘convenience’ from the customer’s point-of-view at its invention, even as self-service prevailed.

**Self-Service Emergent**

Self-service emerged in Britain, as in the US, as a response to straitened economic times, not abundance. Self-service’s precise point of origin is debatable, but most accounts of its modern form point to the Piggly-Wiggly (so-named as customers negotiated the aisles) stores from 1916 and the discount warehouses, most famously Michael Cullen’s ‘Price Wrecker’ super market in 1930. Britain’s first self-service shop opened in 1942 and wartime labour shortages were the spur. Whilst low demand and plentiful goods bred price competition in the US, the UK’s experience was of a shortage of goods not demand. Rationing and resale price maintenance (RPM) constrained price elasticity, which gave self-service’s labour-saving attributes an impetus amongst retailers (if less so for shoppers). Other checks on the development of UK self-service were the limitations of urban space, land and capital. Building materials were in short supply and when the Ministry of Food and Works offered 100 licences for up to £3000 conversions in 1949, just 68 were taken-up. Early self-service stores tended to be small-scale, quickfire re-fits.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In both the US and UK the main multiple chain retailers were slower to innovate, copying the first wave of discounters and entrepreneurs. In the US Atlantic and Pacific (A&P) and Kroger (Cullen’s two previous employers) closed their smaller corner stores to emulate the price-slashers; in the UK the initial process involved chains converting smaller stores.[[12]](#footnote-12) Parallels and differences with the US were numerous. Car and refrigerator ownership was much higher in the US, which accounted for self-service’s slower, later development in the UK. This also accounts for differences in the minutiae of self-service – the persistence of packers in the US, less a remnant of counter service, than a necessity to carry goods to the car. Cars (and parking) were less common in the UK, packers too – in a sense a purer form of transferring labour to the shopper. The US comparison is not without its uses, but it too should be interrogated not assumed.

Many structural constraints fell away by the mid-1960s. Others persisted – such as space, eventually prompting larger out-of-town developments. Cultural constraints also curbed the pace, if not direction, of change. That these constraints were overcome suggests the agency here was commercial choice more than popular demand. De Grazia’s *Irresistible Empire* has detailed the complexities of American cultural and commercial conquest of Europe, and how new world norms – supermarkets, self-service, service, the standard of living - contested and were confronted by embedded class and national norms from a bourgeois realm. Max Zimmerman, assiduous documenter of retail developments and proponent of the American retail way and a regular visitor to post-war Europe (he helped found the International Association of Food Distribution in Paris in 1950), was also struck by ‘the force of deep-rooted traditions… prevalent in Europe’. By contrast the US was ‘a new country… hence we accept new ways more readily’. However, relentlessly upbeat, Zimmerman asserted there was ‘little or no difference’ between ‘Europe’s Housewife’ and ‘her American sister’ - ‘shoppers are the same the world over.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

Much time was expended on surveys into self-service, since much as it left the customer to their own devices, so it left the retailer uncertain what the customer might want. The two became more remote, less well known to each other, much as the mass market and self-service promised to fulfill and liberate. This loss of direct contact concerned both. In part because the British market was not as well investigated and categorized as the US.[[14]](#footnote-14) Surveys of shoppers flourished: Alfred Bird 1957 & 1960 (Bird was owned by US General Foods); British Market Research Bureau (BMRB, UK research wing of the US advertisers J Walter Thompson) in 1950 and 1963; Mass Observation 1962; Robert Millar (commissioned by the Consumers’ Association) 1960; Ralph Towsey 1962.[[15]](#footnote-15) Besides the evidence such surveys supply, they themselves evince market uncertainties. The shopper as an unknown quantity, the ‘invisible customer’ as *Buyer’s Market* put it, accounted for the need to surveil them. Usherwood contends open baskets were one way of doing this, rendering individual private choice, more public - a form of control, not just to prevent pilfering.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**America**

The key point about self-service’s implementation was that whilst retailers looked to and many visited the USA to observe self-service, they did not view it uncritically or apply it uniformly. If this was Americanization, it was mediated by not only the structural differences of the UK context, but by experience and knowledge of the specifics of UK market conditions and perceptions of shoppers.

The US was in retailers’ minds as an imagined model for innovation to judge from how many retailers visited the US. But it was not always judged positively. Jack Cohen, the founder of Tesco, was invited by US suppliers to the US as early as 1935. He visited again in 1939, viewing warehouse discounters. And again after the war seeking to cut labour costs and in the early 1950s, confessing himself ‘flabbergasted’ by shops that seemed like ‘gleaming palaces’. He noted how the discounters had forced self-service (or ‘help yourself’) shopping upon the more established chains like A&P.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Co-op visited under the auspices of the National Productivity Council in 1947. Harold Wicker who had set the Co-op’s experimental semi-self-service store (the UK’s first) in Romford in 1942, became General food trades manager of the London Co-operative Society and John Corina, deputy chair of the Co-op Union, toured stores and a Hausmann refrigeration factory in New York, Chicago and St. Louis. Enthusing about how brightly lit and lively the US shopping experience was, they reported: ‘There was an air of pleasantness and freedom… in short, self-service made food shopping almost as entertaining as the departmental store’. Many stores retained some counter service and there were concerns about shoplifting, but many stores were converting in response to consumer demand as much as to enhance productivity. Wicker and Corina reckoned self-service enhanced service quality in signage, variety, and pricing. But whilst they concluded its application was advantageous, they recognized the resistance to it from entrenched management culture, shoppers’ tradition, staff fearful of job cuts and the widespread perception, misplaced they held, that ‘the personal touch between proprietor, staff and the customer is lost.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

Others were slower to visit the US and wary of a rote application of its methods. Alan Sainsbury and Director Fred Salisbury visited in 1949 ostensibly to view refrigeration methods and marketing, but were impressed more by self-service and the scale of US supermarkets. But Salisbury knew that scale would not easily translate to the UK and that self-service required careful attention. The US, Salisbury argued, had only overtaken British retailers since the war, and he put great store by Sainsbury’s own nous.[[19]](#footnote-19) John Lewis were less impressed with the US – Bloomingdales ‘restful spaciousness’ and ‘feminine atmosphere’ aside. A New Orleans supermarket was scruffy, the warnings for shoplifters off-putting and the service poor on a 1954 trip. Regular trips to Scandinavia, sponsored by SSDA and Sweda cash registers, impressed little either.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The main chains then tended to set up small, experimental self-service stores, usually converted over a weekend, closed whilst re-fitters installed gondolas, new shelving, signage and checkouts. Marks and Spencer’s converted Wood Green in 1948. John Lewis converted the John Barnes Food Hall in 1952 and its first Waitrose self-service store in Wimbledon a year later. [[21]](#footnote-21) Tesco trialed self-service at its St.Albans store in 1947, but despite increased turnover reverted to counter-service in 1948 – believing mobile stores were the future – and back to self-service in 1949. Sainsbury’s converted its small (4,500 sq.ft) London Road, Croydon branch in 1950 (its first outside London and from 1969 its trial store for decimal coinage).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Where in the US brash entrepreneurs lead the way, in Britain it was the Co-op. Why? Partly because they ran most stores, rationing helped tie in a large secure customer base (on average Co-op stores had six times as many registered customers as independent stores), rationing and RPM meant labour savings were hard to pass on for regular customers but the divi did enable this, partly because they were innovators. As in the US, more established UK retailers like Sainsbury’s and Allied Suppliers were slower to innovate than the more consciously market trader-style, value discounters – Tesco, Victor Value and Fine Fare. Allied started closing small counter-service Lipton’s and Home & Colonial stores only in 1958 - shuttering 1000 stores by 1965, but doubling the average turnover. [[23]](#footnote-23) Sainsbury’s had only converted three stores by 1954. In 1955 it seemed to embrace modernization, ending the provision of credit and home delivery by horse and cart. When it re-designed its 7500 sq.ft Lewisham branch, it was operating Western Europe’s largest ‘q-less’ (as the handbills explaining how to self-service shop, the function of baskets and checkouts, termed it) store. But again the story was of faltering change. The original Drury Lane Sainsbury’s converted to self-service in November 1958. It maintained stores of both types in Eastbourne and counter-service survived until 1982 in its Peckham branch.[[24]](#footnote-24) Subtly symptomatic of the uneven traction self-service obtained was that the London office of advertisers J Walter Thompson only set up an in-house self-service store, partly to trial marketing campaigns, Forty-Fare – emulating its parent office in New York, and London’s smallest self-service outlet – in 1964.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Co-op had been the first to experiment with self-service. It ran 90% of the UK’s self-service stores by 1950 and still more than half the total in 1958, but the multiples were converting more rapidly (half Tesco’s smaller number of stores were self-service by 1951) and building newly designed, larger stores. By the end of the 1950s the Co-op was perceived to be trailing behind the multiples. It lead in terms of mobile stores (3% of the national market at the end of the 1950s) – running half the UK’s, some self-service. Resistance from smaller local societies, unease with modern marketing and lifestyles, a sense that the Co-op knew what was best for its customers, all dragged on modernization. The potential of vertically integrating its manufacturing, distribution, wholesaling and retail activities was impeded by the politics of its federal structure. As early as 1951 the Co-op warned that its pioneering role in self-service was flagging. And it is important to recognize that Romford was less tribute to America than wartime expediency. Symptomatic was that Wicker left to form the Self-Service Development Association (SSDA) in 1950 to work beyond just the Co-op. [[26]](#footnote-26)

**Distribution**

Transport and distribution have been ‘unimagined’ in the history of retail, an unsatisfactory situation given its integral role in the development of self-service. There are historiographical reasons for focusing upon consumption rather than production or distribution, but it also echoes one of the effects of self-service, which was to make the origin of goods and the logistics of how they made it to the shelf, nebulous to shoppers. Self-service saw the balance of power in the supply chain re-configured as retailers gained ascendancy (and claimed to speak for consumer demands rather than just sell manufacturer’s goods). Rather than manufacturers controlling price and operating their own distribution systems, the larger multiple chains in particular began using their own fleets and regional warehouses, or like Marks & Spencer, outsourcing this to professional hauliers. The use of the contractor ‘de-personalised’ the transport operation in a related way to self-service ‘de-personalising’ the shopping experience.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, the horse remained fundamental to urban distribution as motor transport carried riskier start-up costs. So retail was not always driving change. Furthermore, smaller retailers often depended on the same wholesale-based supply chains. [[28]](#footnote-28)

Retailers had long been interested in road transport. Mobile stores were not uncommon after the war and home delivery (and credit) was one of the ways they sought competitive advantage, particularly in the 1930s whilst RPM restricted price competition. Delivery as non-price, service-based competition was a marketing tool for retailers, a means to expand the customer base for independent grocers. [[29]](#footnote-29) The Co-op was an early innovator, but as with self-service, did not press this advantage home.[[30]](#footnote-30) Home delivery was discouraged in wartime, stimulating the idea of self-service as another way to gain competitive advantage. The end of rationing and the de-nationalisation of road haulage in 1953-54, progress in vehicle technology and transport infrastructure, developments in wholesaling (particularly food) were all pre-conditions for self-service. [[31]](#footnote-31) They did not create self-service, but it could not have emerged without them. And the choices made by the multiples in this new landscape were decisive, fixing the path to self-service.

The shift to road and motor distribution, as well as by the shopper, might sound another instance of Americanisation.[[32]](#footnote-32) There is more compelling evidence that self-service was as much a product of intensifying intra-retail competition as American influence, as multiple retailers recognised that the cost-efficiencies provided by self-service operations could support ‘loss-leaders’ to entice custom, which undermined and ultimately eliminated RPM in 1964.[[33]](#footnote-33) The tipping point was the mid-1950s, when retail gained momentum in the battle for a dominant position in the supply chain.[[34]](#footnote-34) This secured retailer ascendancy in product price-setting. Retailers (not shoppers, not producers) were driving changes in the market. However, logistical constraints persisted, impeding the growth of self-service.[[35]](#footnote-35) Packaging and direct co-ordination with manufacturers remained an issue until RPM was ended in 1964.[[36]](#footnote-36) The motorway network only developed after 1959. The 1970s was the era of post-Fordist systems of electronic stock control and ‘just in time’ delivery. Retailer victory in the battle for position was neither total nor forever.

**Reception**

Self-service’s reception from shoppers and retailers was a mixed bag. When the BMRB surveyed 200 shoppers (94% women) in 1950, 18% preferred counter-service to ‘American methods’ and because it was less likely to induce impulse spending (52% had fallen foul of this). Cleanliness and overcoming the ‘shortcomings of assistants’, not just time-saving, were reasons in favour of self-service. This might read as a positive take on self-service as early as 1950, but this was a survey only of the small minority of shoppers who had used the new system. By 1963, when the majority of shoppers had experienced self-service, BMRB found: The ‘freedom from embarrassment’ for the shopper to look at goods ‘without displaying her ignorance and… under no pressure to buy’ was an appeal. But ‘the homeliness and security of smaller shops is missing: the feeling of personal friendliness is often absent’ and self-service could be ‘exhausting… physically… psychologically because so much variety is confusing.’ Self-service stores ‘mean *learning*’ how to decipher labels. So for every 28% that found it ‘fun’, 22% felt ‘lost in the supermarket’. For the 80% that were relived that ‘you don’t have to bother with assistants’; 15% were anxious that ‘nobody knows who you are.’ 52% found them ‘not very friendly places’ where ‘nobody talks to you’, 56% complained that you had to queue to get out, but 80% were impressed by their hygiene. To some shoppers they offered economy, to others temptation. Self-service shopping was both ‘an art which must be learned’ and ‘a threat to the housewife who is certain of her judgment.’[[37]](#footnote-37)

This sense of a de-personalized experience, lost familiarity with shopkeepers and changes to routine, discloses the extent to which shopping was a social and cultural, not just economic, activity. So too the evidence from those who relished the diminished presence of overbearing or ill-informed clerks or half-trusted grocers. Self-service could relieve the chore and time pressures of shopping, much as it could speed the process. Tesco’s Cohen noted the importance of a neighbourly chat and the provision of seating in Durbin’s of Ealing. If shopping entailed a measure of social capital, then shopping alone – the self-service way – was not necessarily corrosive, but the perception was that it might be. BMRB found decreased loyalty to particular butchers, bakers or tailors and greater willingness to shop around were cause and effect of self-service. But with more women in the labour market, time pressure on shopping (manifest in demand for longer opening hours) was decreasing the frequency of shopping trips, restrained shopping around and cemented the appeal of larger one-stop stores.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The customer response was uncertain at first, if effusive judged by sales. There was internal unease when the self-service conversion of the Food Hall in the basement of the John Barnes department store on Finchley Road was touted. ‘The average British housewife mistrusted ‘new’ ideas’’ the *John Barnes Chronicle* warned at the prospect of ‘goods lying about in purposely disarranged piles which, although tempting, frequently gives one the feeling that there is something cheap and nasty about them… coupled with hundreds of wire baskets and trolleys all fighting for places in narrow aisles between… undecided feet.’ The manager, C.W. Hennessey, had been tentative in 1950: ‘I have always felt a certain type of customer will always want personnel service… I still felt dubious about the permanency of this innovation.’ But it turned out to have ‘beautifully organized rows and well labelled’ goods and was ‘clinically clean’. The re-fit took place over Easter weekend 1952. Customers were informed of the ending of phone ordering and delivery service and ration books returned to customers who had deposited them. There were teething troubles, delays at the check-out, but by May Hennessey reported: ‘The customer can browse… and not feel she has got to order quickly because there is another customer queuing behind her waiting for the assistant.’ Indeed by June he contended that: ‘we appear to have overcome the usual complaint that self-service is liable to become impersonal. I think that if, if anything, we have improved our relations with our customers.’ One US customer described the new layout as ‘real homey’. There was a 25% dip in trade in the first week, as phone accounts and credit ceased and delivery customers were lost. ‘I have never carried a parcel out of a shop in my life’ one regular complained, ‘and I’m not beginning now.’ But turnover trebled in the next decade and Hennessey concluded ‘self-service has become second nature to all of us who live busy lives’.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In other John Lewis conversions, like Waitrose in Wimbledon, the line was very much that, ‘self-service simplifies shopping’ and enhanced older qualities rather than replaced them, anxious to reassure those unhappy about change. As a pamphlet issued by Jessop’s in Nottingham put it, its conversion to self-service ‘in no way affect the services that will continue to be given by our personal sales assistants. It will, however, enable the waiting customer to handle much of the merchandise.’ But resistance remained. When the Southend Waitrose converted to self-service in 1955, the manager reported ‘all the local traders scoffed at us, said the customers would pinch everything,’ but ‘in no time we’d halved the staff numbers and trade absolutely took off.’[[40]](#footnote-40) ‘Exciting times’, the first Sainsbury’s self-service checkout assistant in Croydon in 1950, recalled. But some shoppers were more uneasy. In what has become a piece of Sainsbury’s lore, one threw a wire basket at Chairman, Alan Sainsbury at the Croydon opening, resenting having to take on the labour of shopping.[[41]](#footnote-41)

‘Not all women’, Mass Observation’s 1962 survey reported with barely-contained surprise, ‘like shopping.’ In self-service shops, checkout queuing was a recurrent bugbear (‘checkouts are a problem on both sides of the Atlantic’, BRMB noted in 1963 and the ‘checkout snarl’, was a concern of the *Progressive Grocer*).[[42]](#footnote-42) The self-service checkout was technologically several years away.Also off-putting (for middle-class shoppers) were poor service and carting a basket around. Given self-service covered just 17% of grocery trade volume in 1958, Towsey felt it was as if ‘the public… still hankers after something not provided by them.’ In Wicker’s case for self-service, a pioneer of the Shop Assistants Union, Philip Hoffman, asked, why it was that most UK sales were in independent stores: ‘small businesses persisted because they gave the public what it wanted: that was *service*’. In reasons in Mass Observation’s survey for enjoying a particular grocery store, ‘personal touch, friendly assistants’ ranked at 35%, well above choice, price or convenient location.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**Conservatism**

Indifference, more than opposition, was common, and there was much complaint about the conservatism of shoppers’ behavior and tastes. In 1957 *The Times* reported on how the retailer found that ‘the demands of most of his customers are strictly limited… not so much by income as by a kind of general disinterest in and apathy about food.’ ‘Bewildered by the amount of choice that faces them… huge numbers of Englishwomen still plod on in a rut, buying ‘the usual’. Partly this was – amongst the better-off – a Victorian legacy of women avoiding daily chores (a comparison was drawn with French culinary engagement) and ‘the habit of telephoning orders for food.’ The persistence of such attitudes and of domestic service and its ethos, accounted (in part) for the slow take-up of technologies like refrigerators. ‘Unenterprising Shoppers’ concerned self-service’s advocates. Since most shoppers, a 1958 survey found, stuck with the same greengrocer or fishmonger, the potential for cost savings at the multiples was missed. Most shoppers agreed with RPM and felt ‘individual attention is missed’ in self-service. This ‘docile majority’ were urged that without consumer pressure, price cuts were unlikely - ‘if we want the fruits of competition we must pick them.’The point was that for many shoppers, price was not the only quality they valued.[[44]](#footnote-44) Even shop assistants reported they missed a chat with customers, a perk of the job, as much as something shoppers craved.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This sense of loss was about a change imposed, a sacrifice of skill or conviviality whose logic many could see, but still resented – just as women reputedly did the technologies of baking powder and dishwasher in the US dishwashers and in the UK refrigeration.[[46]](#footnote-46) Domestic and retail use of refrigeration lagged behind countries like West Germany and Sweden as well as the US, having been second only to the US in 1954. Besides cultural drag, small stores made it costlier to introduce. Domestic and retail use went hand-in-hand, so like limited car ownership, this was a restraint on the expansion of scale of self-service retail. But not intrinsically – Bentall’s in Kingston had an extensive range of frozen produce, but not self-service.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Millar’s 1960 survey (a ‘Kinsey Report on the shopping habits of the British’) took shoppers and retailers to task. Shoppers were ‘slaves to tradition, rooted in shopping habits handed down to them by their parents’. Many were ‘confused and bewildered’ by new goods, technologies, shopping methods and exhibited a ‘stubborn preference’ for the status quo. Their attitude to self-service was one of ‘sober receptiveness’. Since there was not ‘immovable opposition’, but ‘no great enthusiasm for self-service’ it developed with shoppers following in its wake, ‘affluent sheep’ as Millar’s study was titled. He was no less critical of retailers and their staff. ‘The most Victorian trade in Britain’, of conservative, smallscale, family-based ‘obsequious’ shopkeepers, damned by the fact that the first Alfred Bird Survey (1957) reported ‘cleanliness’ as shopper’s chief concern. The growth of self-service, but also of vending machines and mail order catalog sales, alas spoke volumes about the lack of knowledgeable, courteous, friendly shop assistants.[[48]](#footnote-48) A paradox of shopper interactions with self-service was that they often liked the new (e.g. cleanliness) and simultaneously craved the old (friendliness). The perception of and anxiety about change notwithstanding, historians have to acknowledge the evidence that the old was not always communal or good (often a battle of wills), the new not always alienating.

Richard Hoggart’s ethnography of the English working class in the later 1950s, *The Uses of Literacy,* lamented the displacement of local, oral cultures, by mass Americanised ones. The loss of chat and gossip involved in self-service was precisely because the uses of literacy were on the rise, one study of shopping concluded, with shoppers reading labels, assessing goods silently, not necessarily duped by the new marketing. By the 1990s Hoggart was trawling the chain stores of Farnham High Street and reflecting on the ongoing communal networks of shopping. [[49]](#footnote-49) What had seemed threatening, disruptive and corrosive of social capital and the skills of housewifery, remained an asset of community capital.

A related conservatism was evident among managers and staff – counter-culture lingered in the impulse to engage customers, rather than leave them free in the aisles. *The Times* also noted ‘the lethargy or indifference of shoppers is… matched by similar traits in salesman.’[[50]](#footnote-50) Like the Co-op’s conservatism, Mathias’s history of Allied Suppliers, noted ‘commercial traditions created an inertia of their own.’ Allied managers advised ‘that shopping customs were not yet ready… their local public was more resistant to changes in shopping habits than the North American.’ This meant that any ‘centralisation of buying could prejudice custom in the shops’ – regional tastes, cuts of bacon, butter flavours - ‘if these demands were ignored.’ Centralized buying, which denuded the autonomy of local and regional managers and accompanied the economies of scale and distribution of the range of products self-service demanded, tended to replace local tastes with national brands – another conservatism. [[51]](#footnote-51)

**Unease**

The legacy of wartime rationing, which lasted until Summer 1954, was another complicating factor as self-service promised to supplant a more austere shopping experience. The two co-existed in the earliest days of SS, with rationed good located at the back of store, corralling shoppers to peruse un-rationed goods. Rationing had tightened, through the process of registering with a store, relations between shoppers and shops. But in other ways it uncoupled such loyalties – shortages encouraged shoppers to shop around, home delivery was ended and competition between stores on price was further suppressed. There was a wartime stand-off between shoppers and shops. Orwell wrote in 1944 of the ‘sadistic pleasure’ that shopkeepers took in telling shoppers they did not stock a good, and their exasperation at being unable to meet demand and at rationing bureaucracy. Equally he noted frantic lunchtime shoppers used to a ‘tune of the customer is always right tune’ encountering such ‘rudeness’. Both were frustrated, but the point about the mutual mistrust, a relationship that preceded and survived the war, is important. A 1958 Gallup survey noted shopper’s unease with butchers. ‘The prejudice goes back to the days of meat rationing and the ‘take it or leave it’ attitude.’ Although shoppers invariably returned to the same butcher, Gallup described shoppers in an ‘uneasy truce’ with them.[[52]](#footnote-52) So counter-service could be mistrusted, fraught or resented well after rationing queues and bureaucracy had passed, and this was a driver for supermarket and self-service expansion.

Shopper-shopkeeper relations were complex. In France complicity with Vichy, whilst politically and commercially delicate for the retailer, also meant small shopkeepers were vectors of popular sentiment in opposing fears of an overbearing state or creeping Americanization. Local stores persisted in the UK - and smaller independent stores whose costs of converting to self-service were proportionally higher, started to group together (e.g. Spar)[[53]](#footnote-53) - but were not as charged as Poujadism with invasion rhetoric.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Self-service induced a mini-moral panic, fanned by the press, about increased shoplifting in the later 1950s. Chiefly this concerned the alleged and gendered appeal of self-service’s open shelving - ‘are these shops too tempting to women?’ as the *Daily Sketch* put it in 1958. There were numerous tales of shoppers who ‘from a lifetime of habit - popped the things she picked up into her bag instead of the wire basket.’ In 1958 the Magistrates Association and Retail Distributors’ Association surveyed the problem. The Chairman of John Lewis, O.B.Miller, welcomed this - ‘self-service is here to stay… and the country has therefore to find some way of fitting it in to the reasonable requirements of a law-abiding society.’ The dilemma for most stores was clamping down on pilfering, without generating ‘adverse publicity’ that it was either rife, that the method of trading was to blame or that in employing store detectives they were policing it harshly or detrimentally to prices. The Chairman was adamant the message to customers should be, ‘some people say that these shops put temptation in people’s way… but it is your duty to resist temptation.’ The approach John Lewis ultimately settled on was of ‘quietly’ resisting any spread of shoplifting prosecutions to keep ‘our good name’ with the local bench, media and Chambers of Commerce. The risk of impugning customers as ‘dishonest persons’ was offset by the prospect that Britain ‘becomes accustomed to this method of trading.’ [[55]](#footnote-55)

Shoppers were problematic – their unpredictability slowed self-service’s adoption and effective application. Their contradictory wants and behavior was a spur to behavioural analysis and the surveying business. The process was not seemless for shoppers or retailers. The slow spread of SS indicates this – not only that many had not tried self-service stores (20% as late as 1963), but that only just over 10% of grocery stores were self-service in 1962; the US crossed the 50% threshold in 1956.[[56]](#footnote-56) Equally this pace underlines how self-service was not notably controversial or rupturing. Were consumers demanding self-service? Not really - this was choice, whether they chose it or not.

That the inevitability of self-service had been long been predicted – the *Economist* in 1955 saw it as the UK’s destiny, despite just 2000 of the UK’s 530,000 stores (0.4%) then being self-service; the 1962 centenary edition of *The Grocer* painted a characteristically US vision of ‘The Grocery shop of the future?’ with automated displays of commodities presenting themselves to shoppers - eased its introduction.[[57]](#footnote-57) Still it was instigated and promoted by certain actors: retailer reformers, encouraged by the state and lobbied for by the Self-Service Development Association (which arranged trips, put on displays and published a journal); and the Domestic Refrigeration Development Corporation (a manufacturer’s combine, led by Hausmann refrigerators). Zimmerman noted the role played by private companies like the National Cash Register Company’s overseas division and self-service advisory bureau (who, along with the US-based Super Market Institute helped BMRB’s 1950 survey), who he described as a ‘merchant missionary’. Zimmerman himself qualifies for such a title.[[58]](#footnote-58)

For Towsey, self-service was ‘‘inflicted’ on the purchasing public’; BMRB’s 1963 survey saw it as ‘superimposed’, noting how the likes of WH Smith felt peer-pressured by food retailers to adopt ‘simplified shopping’ techniques. And yet, Towsey continued, ‘to present a form of retailing contrary to the accepted traditional forms, with opposition form the majority of traditional retailers and yet gain the willing acceptance of a large proportion of housewives, must be considered a successful achievement.’[[59]](#footnote-59)

**Consequences**

Self-service re-configured the relationships between manufacturers, retailers, consumers and commodities. Ostensibly, it empowered the shopper, but they were not actively demanding self-service. Some retailers were also resistant. The commodity’s profile was raised through packaging and advertising to communicate with the shopper. RPM’s abolition suggested retailers had gained at manufacturer’s expense, though distribution was also a factor here. Choice and range were extended, but above all, relationships between the retailer and shopper and shopper and manufacturer were more distant and atomized. There was an analogy here with mass democracy - as mass enfranchisement and media politics made voters and politicians more remote, so mass consumerism and free choice produced the same paradox for shoppers and retailers.[[60]](#footnote-60)

As intermediaries, the silent sales of packaging and advertising did not always promote trust, much less replace it in shopkeepers or counter staff. Labels too required knowledge and skill on the part of the shopper, as not only self-service but the range of goods to choose between widened. Into this knowledge gap emerged consumer testing like the Consumers’ Association and its magazine, *Which?* in 1957. Again, modelled in part on the US *Consumer Reports*, they saw consumer democracy and empowerment in a different way from the more individualized (and later neo-liberal) paradigm. Choice and consumer power could help make markets more transparent and fairer. [[61]](#footnote-61) Just as shopping malls, now icons of neo-liberal culture, were conceived as radical solutions to urban access, so a self-service system – removing the awkward or untrustworthy as well as inefficient presence of counter-service – had long been a socialist fantasy, as Edward Bellamy’s utopian vision of a technologically advanced distribution system in industrial society, *Looking Backward*, expounded in the 1890s.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Other consequences of self-service included trading stamps – a chiefly US import which became popular in the dog-days of RPM as a means for retailers to encourage loyalty (offsetting self-service’s values of shopping around) and a proxy price cut. Chains’ own brands also subverted RPM, undercutting the way name brands passed their marketing costs onto the customer. RPM was under pressure as multiples looked to translate self-service into competition on price. Stamps and RPM were sharply and politically contested in the mid-1960s – not just between manufacturers and retailers, but between large and small stores and different market sectors.[[63]](#footnote-63) One might add a variety of other appurtenances of mass consumerism that self-service bequeathed: plastic wrapping technology, Muzak (filling the silence), central buying, trolleys, vending machines (pilfer-free), freezers, security cameras.

The politics and meaning of self-service were not singularly a narrative of individualization. Nor is this history all one-way travel towards the endpoint of hegemonic self-service and supermarkets. Its achievement did not equate to rational shopping, with the shopper-retailer-commodity struggle resolved. And sixties Britain was the heyday of mail order catalogues (whose sales quintupled, Millar estimates), networked by working-class community agents, offering generous credit and Harris, Hyde and Smith contend, ‘a reaction to the rise of impersonalized shopping’ and of small, specialist boutiques, both pushing back against the anomie of retail trends like self-service.[[64]](#footnote-64)

**Conclusions**

What then does the advent of self-service tell us about markets? Firstly, this was not a consumer-driven development. Self-service was pressed for by certain economic risk-takers or those seeking to press home a market opportunity. But it was not popular and won more consent than enthusiasm. It became embedded as a norm of everyday practice slowly and unevenly. In the absence of a reproduction of American models or of avid popular support for self-service, it is evident that retailer’s initiative was the decisive agency. Secondly, markets are fluid, stability is short-lived – markets are relationships as much as structures, there is no end game, ideal balance, each process and development shifts the balance of forces. For instance, home delivery service, which was largely gotten rid of by self-service, but has now come back, in tandem with online shopping.

Thirdly, this was not unalloyed Americanisation. De Grazia’s case was not that US models shifted how markets were measured, described, understood and functioned. This was a complex, variegated process – a triumph of market contestation through values and practices, soft power, as much as sheer economic power. So too the advent of self-service. Britain appears a sort of mid-Atlantic outlier in how it mediated American methods[[65]](#footnote-65) - its class service ethos lingered amongst resolutely traditional shoppers. Its distribution networks were comparatively developed (rail more than road), and its own multiples had developed such that it was not as targeted by US chains. Self-service (and the supermarket) were more of a culture shock on the continent. If Britain was less American than France, it was not thoroughly American. But put in such stark terms, raises queries about how useful the American model is.

Local market conditions, fashioned by national specifics (structural and cultural) still mattered. Our case is not an insular one, UK retail was already very (colonial and) international, but for looking at intra-market competition and evidence as well. In terms of *Imagining Markets*, self-service provides then evidence of a market which did ‘not precisely coalesce into a global totality’. We have underlined the need to analyze the domestic retail market before or as well as, but not instead of, assessing its relationship with world markets. We have also stressed looking at the market technologies and support networks behind the public face of retail. But also how that public face was contested, was more than simply an economic market and as much a social realm. Practices like self-service were less the result of popular demand than of the power of retailers in the market.

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