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Socialized Credit and the Working Class Family Economy: A Comparative History of France and Britain, 1900-2000

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This paper provides a comparative analysis of working-class consumer credit in Britain and France in the twentieth century. It indicates a number of similarities between the two nations in the earlier part of the period: in particular, in the operation of doorstep credit systems. For the British case study, we explore consumer finance offered by credit drapers (sometimes known as tallymen) whilst in France the paper explores a similar system that functioned in the coalmining communities around the city of Lens.

Both methods operated on highly socialized relationships that established the trust on which credit was offered and long-term creditor/borrower relationships established. In the second part of the paper, we analyze the different trajectories taken in post-war France and Britain in this area of working-class credit. In France this form of socialized credit gradually dwindled due to factors such as "Bancarisation," which saw the major banks emerge as modern bureaucratized providers of credit for workers and their families. In contrast, in Britain, the tallymen (and other related forms of doorstep credit providers) were offered a new lease of life in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a period during which British credit providers utilized multiple methods to evade the hire purchase controls put in place by post-war governments. Thus, whilst the British experience was one of

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fragmented consumer loan types (including the continuation of doorstep credit), the French experience (like elsewhere in Europe) was one of greater consolidation. The paper concludes by reflecting on the role of these developments in the creation of differential experiences of credit inclusion/exclusion in the two nations and the impact of this on financial inequality.

Introduction

This paper provides a comparative analysis of working-class consumer credit in twentieth-century Britain and France that is based on the collaboration of a French sociologist and a British historian. Working to overcome the potential mistranslations that arise from two academic and national languages, this represents our first attempt to outline the ideas that are emerging from our collaboration. It indicates a number of similarities between the two nations in the earlier part of the century. In particular, this will be seen in the development of doorstep credit systems. In the British case, credit drapers, sometimes known as tallymen, were amongst those involved; in France, the paper explores a similar scheme that functioned in the coalmining communities around the city of Lens. Both methods operated on highly socialized relationships that established an economy of obligation on which credit was forwarded and long term business established. The British case draws on government files, business records and oral history interviews with some of those involved in this field of consumer credit. The evidence for Lens employs a number of sources. At their forefront is an archive representing a very rare discovery; one which enables an innovative historical analysis of a previously unexplored aspect of French history. The records are from a clothing business run by Sosche S., and her family of Polish-Jewish migrants. The business began in the 1930s, entered decline in the 1970s, and met its demise in 1996. Oral interviews are also used in probing this history.

Presenting these parallel stories is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, France has a comparatively limited historical literature on this aspect of consumer credit. Placing the history of the Lens scheme alongside evidence from Britain establishes valuable comparative analysis and suggests further questions for French historians. Britain has been served better in this respect, a number of historians have examined the tallyman. However, placing some of those insights in a comparative context enables a fresh perspective to be brought to the British case. Commonalities in the two stories include the development of simple credit systems for the sale of clothing to working-class customers. The method was not cheap because it involved significant administrative costs and was carried out by small companies who could not develop economies of scale. The authorities in both countries often viewed the system as evidence of working class irrationality and lack of thrift. Businesses involved were viewed as being on the fringe of commercial respectability. This is one factor that explains the significant involvement of immigrant groups. In both France and Britain, Jewish entrepreneurs were involved.[1] In England and

[1] For the background to legal and historical factors explaining the Jewish role within this form of consumer credit, see Daniel Tollet, *Histoire des Juifs en Pologne: du XVIe siecle a nos jours.* (Paris, 1992), 175-189; Rowena Olegario,"'Mysterious People': Jewish

Wales, Scots were also associated with credit drapery and the term Scotch drapers was used to describe those involved.

After World War Two, British and French credit drapers took diverging pathways, as the former experienced the "affluent society" and the latter "les Trent Glorieuses." The paper indicates some of the factors that lay behind the divergence and explores the elements of path-dependency, contingency, and state and institutional interests that shaped developments in both nations. By the end of the century, the two nations had markedly different consumer credit markets and regulations. The paper also addresses debates about the different models of consumer credit regulation developed in each nation. Whereas twenty-first-century Britain has a large sub-prime credit industry, France does not. Major elements of the British subprime sector operate along lines very similar to those operated in early twentieth-century Britain and France. The paper explores how the two nations reached different destinations, focusing on the legislative measures taken in the two countries and their approaches to consumer protection. Although Britain's 1938 Hire Purchase Act was viewed as a model of consumer protection and the 1974 Consumer Credit Act was also a pioneer in terms of European consumer protection, anti-debt campaigners view the British pathway more negatively than the French one. French governments are viewed as having been more interventionist, as having used interest rate ceilings effectively, and as having reacted firmly to attempts to import high-cost credit businesses from Britain to France. Of significance in the French story was Bancarisation: the process through which the nation became "banked" in the 1960s. Large sections of the British working class remained "unbanked" into the 1980s and 1990s, limiting their access to loans from mainstream financial operators: 25 percent of adults had no accounts in the early 1980s and the figure was still 15 percent at the start of the twenty-first century.[2] The comparable French proportions were 89 percent and 100 percent.

The paper begins by outlining the history of the British credit drapers (or tallymen), explaining the similarities between their system and the one operated in the Lens area. Both operations emerged for analogous reasons based on comparable cultural and economic circumstances and both, eventually, experienced challenges from more modern competition. However, whereas the French credit drapers died away beginning in the 1970s, the British system was renewed as part of the country's controversial sub-prime lending sector. This was linked to greater rates of financial exclusion from mainstream financial services and the UK's tolerance for interest rate levels viewed as usurious in France. The second half of the paper delineates these developments and offers a historical perspective on the background to contemporary discussion about consumer credit, consumer protection, and interest rates that often suggest that Britain and France represent opposite sides of the coin.

Merchants Transparency, and Community in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *Business History Review* 73 (1999): 161-89.

[2] R. Berthoud and E. Kempson, *Credit and debt: the PSI report* (London, 1992), 14; Udo et. Al., *Consumer overindebtedness and consumer law in the European Union* (Report to the Commission of the European Communities, Health and Consumer Protection, Directorate-General, September 2003)]. Available at http://www.ecri.eu/new/system/files/26+consumer_overindebtedness_consumer_law_eu.pdf.

The Tallyman in Great Britain Before 1945

From the nineteenth century through to the second half of the twentieth century, tallymen were familiar figures in British working-class districts, supplying clothing on credit. Their activities were controversial at the time and have prompted the interest of historians of class, gender, consumerism and the law, providing a rich understanding of the workings of this credit market. Tallymen existed alongside other creditors in working-class communities: most notably the check trading firms (led from 1880 by Provident Clothing and Supply Company) and a credit mail order industry which developed rapidly from the 1930s onwards.[3] Like tallymen, the Provident and mail order companies extended credit on the basis of highly personalized relationships by which creditworthiness was assessed and an economy of obligation established between a creditor (or agents) and customers. Tallymen serve as a prime example of the provision of consumer credit outside the modernized and bureaucratic forms most commonly associated with twentieth-century consumerism. The system was based on regular personal interactions between trader and customer. The tallyman promoted customer loyalty via personalized home delivery and collection, which was vital to a system that was unattractive if viewed on price alone.[4] Whilst this led tallymen to engage in an element of "performance" and "emotional manipulation," it is also recognized that "poor families with many unfulfilled wants will not waste money on some type of saving or borrowing repeated week by week if they derive little or no advantage from it."[5] However, it was the first view that was often shared by contemporary critics of tallymen.

The numbers of tallymen rose with climbing demand for clothing and drapery. Between 1845 and 1904, working-class households doubled their expenditure on clothing.[6] At the end of that period, 3,000 tallymen were in business, employing 21,000 assistants, and with a combined annual turnover estimated at £13m. Trusted customers bought merchandise valued at up to £7 (one-tenth of the annual manual worker's wage in 1904), making payment by instalment for which there was no explicit interest charge.[7] Instead, this cost was bundled into a total cost price higher than that offered by cash retailers.[8] Tallymen operated across Britain, although by the 1950s they were most associated with "Scotland, the North-East, the Liverpool area, South Wales and London." Small-scale entrepreneurs predominated. The frequent use of the term "Jew man" to describe credit drapers reflected significant Jewish participation in the trade.[9] An undercurrent of anti-Semitism ensured that such a term also indicated the sense in which

[3] R. Coopey, S. O'Connell and Porter, *Mail order retailing in Britain* (London, 2005).
[4] Margot Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914*, (Cambridge, 2003); Taylor, Avram, *Working class credit and community since 1918* (Basingstoke: 2002).
[5] Taylor, *Working class credit*, 35; Paul Johnson, *Saving and spending: The working class economy in Britain 1870-1939*, (Oxford, 1985), 5.
[6] Margot Finn, "Scotch drapers and the politics of modernity: gender, class and national identity in the Victorian tally trade" in M. Daunton, M., M. Hilton, (eds.), *The politics of consumption: citizenship and material culture in Europe and America*, (Oxford, 2001), 89-107.
[7] *House of Commons Debates*, 21 April 1904 (Volume 133, Column 839).
[8] Johnson, *Saving and spending*, 153; Taylor, *Working class credit*, 130.
[9] M. Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London, 1958), 92.

credit deals were viewed as potentially manipulative. It was alleged that female desire for cheap fineries was exploited, leaving working men indebted. In 1906, one journalist opined that the tallyman "brings his show of finery and insidiously points out how easy it is to pay for the goods at a trifle every week".[10] Historians have offered more nuanced assessments. Men's clothing made up around 50 percent of sales, undermining the female vanity argument.[11] Historians have concluded that tallymen offered a "much needed retailing function," even though they offered "over-priced commodities."[12] The weekly visits to collect payments also provided an external financial discipline on working class wives that was not unwelcomed by hard pressed consumers.[13] This discipline was reflected in the fact that fewer than five percent of customers ran up bad debts.[14]

Start-up costs were modest. If a tallyman obtained sample merchandise from a wholesaler, he was ready to seek customers. This led many in the trade to share concerns about exploitative practices. At times, this caused fissures amongst different groups. In 1898, the *Credit Drapers' Gazette* attempted to deflect what it felt were anti-Scottish attacks with a lurch into anti-Semitism, when it suggested that "members of the Hebraic race", such as "Mr. Israel Isaacs" were carrying out questionable commercial practices whilst trading under Scottish names. In 1900, the same journal noted, more coolly, that practices such as selling to married women without their husband's authority was a likely outcome of pressure on young salesmen to secure business.[15] Half a century later, the National Federation of Credit Traders" president admitted that the "line between sound and undesirable canvassing was a thin one."[16] However, the key to long-term business success was to nurture habitual custom. In 1910, a Manchester newspaper outlined how one tallyman functioned. Weekly visits established empathy with many customers. Entering each house, he would ask about "William and Jane, and Tom's little girl who was ailing a fortnight ago." Such familiarity eased the task of those customers who "begged to be excused," a repayment because of illness or unemployment. Such applicants "were decent folks, and they looked ashamed, but not afraid." A flexible response by tallymen in such cases elicited a debt of gratitude that was indicated by the fact that business was often conducted "with the children and grandchildren of his older customers." Customers repaid financially as well as with their loyalty: merchandise prices were swollen in anticipation of delayed repayments as well as the home collection and administrative costs. One Manchester firm marked up its prices by 75 percent during this period, compared to the 50 percent that was common amongst cash retailers.[17]

Allowing families to miss a payment was a difficult balancing act. Tallymen were aware that the weekly payment to them was one of many that included those to milkmen, insurance collectors, as well as other forms of credit sellers. Some tallymen adopted

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[10] *Reynold News*, 20 October 1906.

[11] Rubin, "From packmen, tallymen and 'perambulating Scotchmen' to credit drapers' associations, c. 1840-1914," *Business History*, 28/2 (1986): 213-214.

[12] J. Benson, *The penny capitalists: a study of nineteenth century entrepreneurs*, (London, 1983), 64; Rubin, "From packmen," 220.

[13] Johnson, *Saving and spending*, 38-9.

[14] Tebbutt, *Making ends meet*, 184.

[15] *Credit Drapers' Gazette*, 29 October 1898; 31 March 1900.

[16] *Credit Trader*, 10 March 1956.

[17] *Credit Trader*, 29 April 1950.

strategies to establish a higher rating in the family's regard. One "used to take a packet of sweets round... [and] always the gate was opened for him by a child," who was rewarded with a sweet, because "if you pleased the kids, you pleased the mum."[18] This technique established a ceremonial aspect to the visit that culminated in the weekly payment. Timing was also critical. Late arrival provided the customer with an opportunity for non-payment and those with a record of missed payments were visited on the day that the breadwinner's wage entered the household. Tallymen also utilized the highly socialized nature of their encounters with customers to create further business. Tom Chirnside, who joined his family firm in the 1930s, recalled asking potential customers "Who recommended you?" If it was a relative and existing customer, it was felt that "if the family is good, they're good." For the tallyman, the kinship link between new and old customers provided an element of informal credit policing. The new customer would not wish to lose face with a family member by being identified as a bad payer. If potential customers did not have family members already on its books, Chirnside's approach was to "look at the curtains, look at the woman's shoes, look at the garden; if the garden is well cared for the chances are they're good payers."[19]

Repayment periods ran from 13 weeks to over a year, depending on the merchandise purchased. Often there was no written agreement. A strong social contract was negotiated with customers instead. This was most obviously the case when long-term customers arranged the terms on which a trader was to carry out business with a son or daughter. Michael Lilley, who became a tallyman in the 1950s, recalled typical instructions received from the mother of a new customer: "There's your customer.... They are going out into the wide world, but you look after them – control their credit."[20] In these circumstances an attempt to over-sell to the new customer undermined the trust relationship with the entire family. It was vital to avoid this pitfall because an estimated 80 percent of sales were to regular customers.[21] Lilley remembered occasions when he turned down customers' requests for higher credit levels as particularly delicate moments in the relationship. However, it was more regular to encourage further consumption and to endeavor to always leave an account open and never let a customer "settle up" and end the relationship. As Clifford Geertz explained, the power in credit relationships moves from creditor to debtor as the latter comes close to ending repayments. The former must negotiate a new credit sale to keep the customer in dependence.[22] Due to their frequent home calls, tallymen had "advance knowledge of impending marriages, births and suchlike so that potential orders" could be secured.[23] Tom Chirnside reminded male customers that "it's a year since you had your last suit: aren't you ready for another one?" A made to measure suit was an expected purchase by any respectable working class man. The interaction was lubricated by the intimate relationship tallymen had with customers, making it more difficult for dealings to be terminated than was the case with high street

[18] Michael Lilley, veteran credit trader; interview with Sean O'Connell, 18 November 2000.
[19] Tom Chirnside, retired credit trader; interview with Sean O'Connell, 16 August 2002.
[20] Lilley interview.
[21] L.C. Wright, "Consumer credit and the tallyman," *Three Banks Review* (1959): 21.
[22] C. Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes. Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns*, (Chicago, Illinois, 1963), 37.
[23] Taylor, *Working class credit*, 120–122.

retailers. As Chirnside explained it, "if you're calling on somebody fifty times a year, you get a relationship which has very little to do with business." The social nature of the credit being provided was redolent of the routine obligatory gifting patterns of traditional societies where, as Pierre Bourdieu noted credit "creates obligations... by creating people obliged to reciprocate."[24]

The Trader in France Before 1945

Our Lens case study centers on the archives of the clothing business run by Sosche S. Exploring its history enables investigation of a form of working-class consumer credit that is under-explored by French historians. A Polish-Jewish émigré, Sosche's family operated the company from the 1930s until 1996. Merchandise was provided on credit terms from a store in Lens, via a network of travelers who identified customers in surrounding villages. Head of household analysis of this customer base reveals that 79 percent were manual workers (50 percent miners), 11 percent were widows or pensioners, 10 percent were employed in clerical or intermediate occupations, with the remainder in miscellaneous or non-defined categories. Sosche's business files are supplemented by a variety of institutional records. Local materials includes the Pas-de-Calais Prefecture and Chamber of Commerce trade registers, trading permits, foreign residents' records, and censuses of Jews for the Second World War. Evidence from the national level is provided by Banque de France files on consumer credit. A further, vital, perspective is offered via an ethnographic investigation conducted amongst the last surviving representatives of the Lens' Jewish community and of Sosche's customers. The evidence enables a number of tasks to be carried out. It can be used to compare and contrast the French case with that of the British tallymen. Probing the Lens material also presents the opportunity to investigate local credit practices in the context of developing French government policies on credit. It can also be juxtaposed with the growing literature on the economic history and sociology of credit, which has highlighted the formalization of credit economies and identified a shift from socialized face-to-face transactions to highly bureaucratized systems. In France, technology and credit referencing systems have replaced the personalized form of interactions that underwrote traditional credit giving.[25]

Historians of modern France have looked, in broad terms, at consumer credit. A number of monographs on the banking sector provide helpful insights, as does Gelpi and Labruyère's major overview of consumer credit from ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe.[26] More recently, Chatriot has mined social economic and legal reports and dissertations, from the 1920s to the 1950s, to produce a chronology of public statements

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[24] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, (Cambridge 1977), 193.

[25] B. Carruthers, "The sociology of money and credit," in *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. N.J. Smelser and R. Swedberg (Princeton, NJ, 2005); L. Fontaine, G. Postel-Vinay, J-L. Rosenthal, and P. Servais, (eds.), *Des Personnes aux Institutions: Réseaux et cultures du crédit du XVIe aux XXe siècle en Europe* (Louvaine-la-Neuve, 1997).

[26] H. Bonin, *Le Monde des Banquiers Français au Xxème Siècle* (Bruxelles, 2000); A. Gueslin, *Histoire du Crèdit Agricole: Vers la Banque Universal depuis 1960* (Paris 1984); P. Baubeau, A. Lavit d'Hautefort, and M. Lescure, *Le Crédit National, 1919-1994: Histoire Publique d'une Société Privée* (Paris, 1994); R-M. Gelpi and F.J. Labruyère, *Histoire du crédit á la consommation*, (Paris, 1994).

and legislation on consumer credit. The prime aim of legislation was to "protect consumers from themselves," and to locate the state at the heart of the matter.[27] Meanwhile, the opening of the Banque de France archives has stimulated a number of historians and economic sociologists.[28] This evidence provides rich material with which to write institutional histories of consumer credit. There is, however, a need to look outside institutional sources. Laurence Fontaine's work provides a detailed explanation of the development of peddling from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It demonstrates that deferred payments were at "the heart" of the relationship between peddlers and customers. Peddlers built up business relationships that were highly socialized and based on trust. It was in their interest to keep accounts open. To close them implied the termination of any business or social relationship.[29] The continuing importance of this type of socialized credit nexus in the evolving consumer economy of early twentieth-century France has not been probed in the way it has for Britain. What little that is known centers on the role of department stores, particularly the Grands Magasins Dufayel. The first store was founded in 1856, in the heart of working-class Paris, but others were opened subsequently in numerous cities. They existed until 1940. The stores employed travelers to sell *bon d'achat*, which customers could use at the Grand Magasins Dufayel or the four hundred other stores that accepted them. Clients paid around 20 percent of the value of their *bon d'achat* as a first instalment and the remainder in weekly sums, collected at their door by the traveler. The retailers involved paid Dufayel around 18 percent commission on the value of the merchandise sold. By 1907, three in every seven working-class Parisian families had utilized these vouchers. The full history of this enterprise is unknown, as is that of the various Unions Économiques that were set up by rival retailers.[30] It is known that by 1939 there were around 100 economic unions, mainly located in northern textile towns and in the Mediterranean area. Created in 1954,

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[27] A. Chatriot, "Protéger le consommamateur contre lui-même. La regulation du credit á la consommation," *Vingtième siècle revue d'histoire,* 91 July-September (2006): 95-109.
[28] Hélène Ducourant, "Du crédit à la consommation à la consommation de crédits, autonomisation d'une activité économique" (PhD thesis Université Lille 1, 2009); Jeanne Lazarus. "L'épreuve de l'argent. Une sociologie de la banque et de ses clients," (MA thesis. EHESS.; ROUX, Xavier, 2006) and "Vitrines et coulisses des relations bancaires, Enquête sur des professionnels de l'argent et leurs clients" (PhD thesis, Université de Versailles - Saint Quentin en Yvelines); Sabine Effosse, *Le credit á la consummation en France, 1947-1965: De la stigmatization á la réglementation* (Paris, 2014).
[29] L. Fontaine, *The pedlars of Europe* (Oxford, 1996), 91.
[30] J. G. Coffin, "Credit, consumption and images of women's desire: selling the sewing machine in nineteenth-century France," *French Historical Studies,* 18 (1994): 749-783; R. H. Williams, *Dream worlds: mass consumption in late nineteenth-century France* (Berkeley, 1991); T. Zeldin, *History of French passions. Volume 2: intellect, taste and anxiety* (Oxford, 1979); L.R. Berlanstein, *The working people of Paris, 1871-1914,* (Baltimore, 1984). See also C. Couture, "Des Différentes combinaisons de ventes á crédit dan leurs rapports avec la petite épargne" (PhD thesis, University of Paris, 1904). Anaïs Albert, "Émile Martin, employé Parisien, acheteur à crédit chez Dufayel, de 1902 à 1912", Hypothèses, 16/1 (2013): 125-136; Anais Albert, "Le crédit à la consommation des classes populaires à la Belle Époque", Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales 4/2012 (67e année): 1049-1082.

the National Council of Credit (NCC) regulated credit sales through a licensing system imposed on consumer credit companies. Those selling "consumption goods," such as clothes, furniture and radios, were excluded. These regulations created an unregulated market that included the Unions Économiques.[31] French retailers continued to offer credit independent of the publically regulated banking system until at least the 1980s. There is, therefore, a rich and largely unknown history of less formalized credit which was labelled *crédit noir*. This is despite the fact that this sector made up most of the consumer credit market in the inter-war years and still accounted for an estimated 25 percent of it during the late 1950s.[32] As French credit laws were designed primarily to deal with durable goods such as automobiles, household appliances, and furniture, sold by financial institutions recognized by the Banque de France, the state was unable to quantify the sale of clothing and drapery by *crédit noir*. Moreover, political difficulties and disagreement between industrialists and labor unions following *La Liberation* prevented any resolution of the situation.[33] Credit sales of textiles were subject to a set of decrees with no legal coercive force until at least the 1970s. Informal credit arrangements between individuals or direct credit between store owners and customers are a serious challenge for French historians because there is little source material. For this reason, the records of the Lens credit business are extremely valuable. They throw a shaft of light into the hidden history of *crédit noir* in the period before the explosion of highly bureaucratized financial services that monopolized the consumer credit market from the 1970s.

The Lens credit system was established in the 1920s amongst two separate Polish immigrant groups. The customers were mainly Roman Catholic coalminers' families in villages around Lens. Large numbers of Polish miners had arrived in a state program of recruitment as part of France's postwar reconstruction. A total of 120,000 Poles were recruited for this purpose in the Bethune district in the 1920s.[34] The traders were Jews fleeing the twin hardships of state anti-Semitism and poverty in interwar Poland. These Jewish traders lived in the city center, initially on the secondary streets off the main thoroughfares. Typically they frequently arrived in Lens following a number of stops on the way, in Germany, Belgium, or Holland, as well as within in France (often Paris or Lille). They had no direct social ties pre-dating their establishment in Lens and they had to establish economic and social relationships with their fellow Poles. The existing anthropological and historical literature on informal credit discusses the extent to which this economic relationship was founded on previously embedded social ties. However, it is clear that the credit nexus can itself establish both forms of relationship almost

[31] S. Effosse, "French consumer credit policy in the 1950s and 1960s: from opposition to control," in. J. Logemann (ed.), *The development of consumer credit in global perspective* (New York, 2012); Avanza Martina, Laferté Gilles, Penissat Etienne, "O crédito entre as classes populares francesas: o exemplo de uma loja em Lens," *Mana. Estudo de Antropologia Social*, vol. 12, n°1, (avril 2006): 7-38.

[32] J. Acquier, "Le credit á la consummation," *Annales du centre de recherches et de documentation sur la* consummation, No, 4, Octobre-Décembre (1958).

[33] M. Avanza, G. Laferté, and E. Penissat, "O Crédito entre as Classes Populares Francesas: O Exemplo de Uma Loja em Lens," *Mana: Estudo de Antropologia Social*, 12 (2006): 7-38.

[34] Janine Ponty. *Polonais méconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 1988).

simultaneously. As Fontaine explained in her analysis of peddlers, "deferred payment was at the heart of the relationship" they had with customers; "it was the guarantee that a relationship had been formed and it gradually opened up the village doors" to them.[35] Our earlier discussion of British tallymen is also evidence for this.

The Lens" creditors arrived in France with no work permits and converged on the few contacts they had, whether relatives, people from the same region, or other Polish Jews. A Polish-Jewish community was established in the Parisian textile trade in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the Sentier district.[36] Opportunities outside the textile industry were limited for Jewish migrants, especially during the 1930s.[37] However, the weak employment market in textiles provided another push towards a further migratory step into the Lens region. With textile suppliers already familiar to them and no major capital investment required, setting up as a traveling hawker presented economic opportunity. Credit, in the form of loaned merchandise, was available from within the Jewish community. Lens is 200km north of Paris and a two-hour train journey and, appropriately, the Jewish hawkers were first recorded, by local trade directories, as being based in rented accommodation near the central railway station.

In seeking to conquer their customer base, the Jewish traders had several advantages. First, they spoke Polish: 85.5 percent of Lens' Jews had Polish origins. They were also familiar with specific items in demand from Catholic Poles, which included feather bedding, household linen, and items for religious ceremonies. In their desire to establish an economic and social foothold for themselves in France, they were prepared to put in the hard labor involved in their selected trade. This included long working hours traveling on foot or by bicycle to mining villages that often lacked public transport. Moreover, *le Juif* (the Jew), as he was often referred to, was culturally a familiar figure among Polish customers. In Poland, customers buying textiles were familiar with the Jewish traders.[38] Moreover, many Jewish and Catholic-Poles around Lens had common origins in the textile area around Lodz. The Polish customers had experience with Jewish traders selling on credit either door to door or at street markets.[39] In this respect, the credit market that emerged in Lens was transplanted from Poland and it represented a niche market for the Jewish traders. Lens was in a highly specific position in immigrant networks in France, as trade there attracted only East European Jews and not the internationally diverse immigrant groups drawn to Paris.[40] Local competition from other traders was relatively limited also. The mining villages were some way from Lens' shops,

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[35] Fontaine, *The pedlars*, 91.
[36] N. Green, *Du sentier á la 7e Avenue: la confection et led immigrés, Paris-New York 1880-1980* (Paris, 1998).
[37] G. Noiriel, "L'identification des citoyens: naissance de le état-civil républicain," *Géneses* 13 (2001), 3-28.
[38] Daniel Tollett, *Histoire des Juifs en Pologne: du XVIe siecle à nos jours* (Paris, 1992), 273-285.
[39] N. Mariot and C. Zalc, *Face à la persecution. 991 juifs dans la guerre* (Paris, 2010).
[40] C. Zalc, *Melting shops: une histoire des commerç ants éstrangers en France* (Paris, 2010).

whilst merchandise offered by local workers' cooperatives or employer-operated stores had few textile goods and nothing specific for Polish customers.[41]

The Jewish entrepreneurs who arrived in the 1920s were followed by a second wave of traders, allowing the pioneers to develop their businesses by setting up as wholesalers to supply the new arrivals that travelled out to fresh geographical areas. These wholesalers generally had the largest familial resources, and were those who came as couples, with siblings, or who benefited from commercial relations with Paris or Lille because members of the household had spent time in these "supply" towns. The Jewish population of Lens grew to about a thousand by 1939. Around three-quarters of the two hundred whose occupations were recorded were engaged in the textile trade, with seventy listed as hawkers and twenty as tailors.[42]

Mass unemployment in the 1930s produced tensions which led to the exclusion of many foreign workers from waged labor. In 1935 the introduction of traders' permits, and later foreigner's permits, extended this protectionism to the self-employed. However, police reports from Lens indicated that the specific market of Jewish hawkers in the mining villages was generally not interfered with, as it was perceived as a new market that provided little competition for French traders. Although tension increased as Jewish traders settled on the main streets in Lens, it was not until the late 1930s that traders' cards began to be refused to Polish Jews. This administrative apparatus took a sinister turn after 1940, serving as the basis for the Aryanization of Jewish businesses. The market came to an abrupt halt during the war and after 11 September 1942 Lens' Jewish population was deported.[43] However, following *La Liberation*, Jewish traders who had managed to flee in 1940 returned and re-established their businesses, although the Jewish community was less than half its prewar size. By 1970, an estimated 50 Jewish-owned businesses were operating in Lens; all but one was in the textile trade.[44] The previous pattern of highly socialized relations was repeated. For example, customers of Sosche repaid the average debt over the course of five meetings with the traveler or store assistant: an average of eight purchases per customer meant a total of forty such meetings annually. Customers who kept accounts open for more than four years averaged 100 repayments, whilst those of six years standing averaged 143. The latter group made up 22 percent of customers and 60 percent of total sales. A total of 80 percent of sales were for accounts of more than four years' standing, which represented some 40 percent of customers. Conversely, 33 percent of customers totaled a mere 5 percent of sales. Of the

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[41] "Fonctionnement et rôle des coopératives de consommation dans le Bassin," 31 mai 1952. Fonds Charbonnage de France, liasse 2004 001 500 CAMT (French National Labour Archive).

[42] A number of sources were used in this survey. They included the Census of Jews, the Census of Population, and the Register of Trade. For more information, see N. Mariot and C. Zalc, *Face à la persecution*.

[43] N. Mariot and C. Zalc, "Identifier, s'identifier: rescensement, auto-declarations et persecution des Juifs de Lens (1940-1945)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 54-3 (2007), 90-117.

[44] Lens Business Register, 1970.

4000 customers the company dealt with in the period 1952–1971, it is estimated that a loyal core of 1500 to 2000 customers made most of the purchases.[45]

Although not all these interactions engendered lasting business dealings, the powerful social relations built into this informal credit relationship can be gauged by the extent of control over customers' budgets that traders obtained. Rather than set a straightforward price for merchandise, traders negotiated a fee for each item; customer by customer. Repayments were also customized and were renegotiable if difficulties arose. There were no extra charges for this, indicating that traders and customers were not operating with a notion of interest rates that could have been computed simply by the Banque de France. What was on sale was, in effect, a form of revolving credit, offering merchandise via a home sales service. The ceiling for revolving credit was set on an individual basis, by traders agreeing, or refusing, to increase a customer's debt. The traders' art was to maintain their customers' financial dependence by keeping them indebted but without them becoming insolvent. Cash-down prices were no different from instalment prices, although it appears that all customers paid on credit. The Banque de France and investigators from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, who were charged with overseeing consumer credit after *La Liberation* compared these nominal cash prices with those of other stores and concluded that interest rates regularly exceeded 100 percent.[46] Whilst this enabled these state agents to understand this market with traditional economic measurements, it misunderstood popular credit practices. In fact, the Banque de France archives for the early 1950s do not contain the phrase *crédit á la consommation*. The term had not, then, entered French parlance. Instead, terms such as *l'épargne d'avant* (savings from before) were employed to indicate the belief that working class thrift should generate funds for increased consumer spending. Civil servants believed that *credit noir* involved traders taking advantage of unthrifty workers who were unable to keep within a budget and to save for respectable, useful, and durable items. A report from the Economic Ministry castigated the home credit market:

> *Le démarchage à domicile apparaît comme une méthode antiéconomique au plus haut point, comportant de grands risques pour les entreprises, chères pour le vendeur comme pour le consommateur, sans qu'aucun avantage notable vienne contrebalancer ces inconvénients.*
>
> Doorstep selling appears to be the highpoint of uneconomic methods; it involves great risks for companies, is expensive for both the seller and the consumer, and is without significant advantage to offset these disadvantages. [47]

[45] Business records of Sosche's company (in process of being deposited at Archives de France).
[46] Archives de la Banque de France. Fonds Conseil National du Crédit, Direction Générale des Prix et des Enquêtes Economiques, Carton: 1427200301/111: Service des Enquêtes Economiques, Enquête 54 17, *Note sur le crédit à la consommation*, (1954).
[47] Direction Générale des Prix et des Enquêtes Economiques, Service des Enquêtes Economiques, Enquête 54 17, *Note sur le crédit à la consommation*, (1954), 19.

A trade union representative on the Conseil National du Crédit also offered a critical perspective on *crédit noir*.[48]Labor and capital were at one on this point, as the director of the mining company, Les Houlliérres, operating in the north of France (including Lens), described workers buying on credit as *milieu de poires* (a circle of suckers).[49] Adding to the sense of unease surrounding working-class credit was the fact that transactions were usually carried out by the wives whilst their husbands were out at work. The fact that many agreements were not formally recorded assisted this. French women did not have the formal right to open a bank account until 1942. Thereafter, if they were married they needed their husbands' permission to do so. Despite holding the view that workers were not competent to run their own budgets, Les Houlliérres resisted a paternalistic urge to offer any form of substitute credit service for workers. To do so was viewed as risky and morally questionable. Although there was broad concern about *credit noir* and a view that usury was a huge problem for the working class across France, no agreement was reached on legislation to identify what interest rates should be labelled "usury". This was partly due to the refusal of automobile and household appliance manufacturers to discuss a redefinition of the concept of usury. In any case, understanding the charges incurred by Lens' customers solely around an interest rate category proves misleading. The majority of charges incurred were for the costs of expensive system of travelers' visits. The traders involved did not make exorbitant profits. Moreover, the items that were purchased, such as men's suits, raincoats and overcoats, and ladies' suits, had a special place in terms of working-class respectability. Most purchases from Sosche's business were for these signifiers of respectability. Sosche and the other Jewish credit traders were attuned to their Polish-Catholic customers' desire to clothe themselves in their Sunday best for attendance at mass. The average amount per purchase came to four or five days' wages for a miner, the equivalent of a woman's suit or a man's overcoat, or ten shirts. From the customers' perspective, the purchases of such items justified the use of credit. This was far from what the authorities judged as an irrational commercial system.

Customers regularly demonstrated loyalty to the hawkers who had trusted them with credit. Oral interviews with former customers reveal how they interacted with their credit trader, mostly on a family basis:

> It was not bad I would say for guys who did not have too much dough; it was the fact we were paying on credit.... The whole family left there with plastic bags full of clothes, because payments went on for 3-4 months at a time. And an advantage was that Sosche would ask "You have the dough or not?" Then they said "some;" so we paid what we could. We had a small card and it noted (for the family) how much you pay this month. In fact, we gave what we could, broadly speaking, it was a little Ms. Sosche technique.[50]

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[48] Archives Banques de France. Carton 1331200301/53: Comité du Crédit à Court Terme du 24 décembre 1953 employée par le représentant du monde syndical, 5.

[49] Fonds Charbonnage de France, liasse Coopératives, Centre des Archives de Monde du Travail, Roubaix, Archives Nationales: Note interne sur le crédit social (vente à tempérament) préparée par le directeur général des Houillères, J. Aubel, citant un directeur d'un magasin de vente à crédit, Juin 1957.

[50] Mr Poukalo, former customer; interview with Gilles Lafertée, 10 December 2003.

Once the first transaction between customer and creditor had been honored the economy of obligation was established and the business could become routinized. Customers rarely changed their trader, as this meant the task of re-establishing trust had to recommence. It also suggested a lack of gratitude to the trader who had facilitated their engagement with the world of consumption. Satisfied customers regularly recommended relatives, friends or neighbors to the trader, creating a powerful network of trust that was embedded within local social networks. The trader placed a great deal of faith in these recommendations and on the new customers' desire not to lose face with those who had recommended them by failing to remake payments. The majority of accounts (61 percent) did not include a record of the occupation of the customer. Their name, address, and a recommendation were enough to open up a line of credit. New customers faced no formal interview, or screening process, and were not asked to sign any formal credit agreement. All of this bares a very strong relationship to the tallyman trade in Britain. There too, informality and socialized credit were key factors in the long-term relationships that sustained the relatively small businesses that operated in this credit market. However, following World War Two, the French and British traders faced major new challenges that launched them on diverging trajectories.

Britain and Tallymen after 1945

In the immediate postwar years, Britain's tallyman experienced continuing success. In 1950, one trade journal claimed that the trade's "status is higher than ever before" and that it was "serving a community which has a standard of living above that of its predecessors. Poorly dressed people… are things of the past." Moreover, customers were "more credit-minded" and "dependable than ever before."[51] Tallymen remained prominent in their traditional areas, even though the "low income" label no longer applied in many of them; "particularly in mining districts." Demand, it argued "has been maintained largely through custom and goodwill, reflecting the personal element involved in credit trading."[52] The sociological study, *Coal is our life* (1956) noted the continuing importance of tallymen in one Yorkshire town of 14,000, where "paying 'on tick' is the traditional way of supporting a family." It reported that mining towns were fertile territory for tallymen. The trade flourished there by asking "housewives to buy in a way in which they are accustomed and which they find more convenient than cash purchase under the conditions of a weekly wage." Most sales were reported to be to the lowest paid families in the community.[53] Many tallymen, such as Locherby Bros of Newcastle, established "the majority of trade" in "supplying made-to-measure suits for miners" in colliery villages. Significantly, custom had been built up in these communities before they became accessible by public transport.[54] According to one tallyman, by the late 1950s, half the trade's customers used it out of financial necessity, the rest because of habit.[55]

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[51] *Credit Trader*, 16 September 1950.
[52] Wright, "Consumer credit and the tallymen," 20.
[53] N. Dennis and F. Henriques, *Coal is our life*, (1956) 197; 200-1.
[54] Taylor, *Working class credit*, 129.
[55] M. Tebbutt, *Making ends meet*, 197.

Thus, habit and the obligation felt by customers were important sources of repeat business in an era of expanding competition. The numbers using credit offered by mail order catalogues rose substantially in the 1950s, as it became the fastest growing retail sector.[56] A growing range of branded goods, not available via tallymen, filled the 1,000 page catalogues of the mail order giants. Their enormous sales figures enabled them to buy in bulk and offer lower prices than the tallymen whose small-scale operations were reflected by the fact that, typically, they employed between one and ten travelers. The five major mail order companies had annual sales of around £374m by 1966 compared to a figure of £128m for the 3,464 tallymen.[57] Consumers were also increasingly aware of the attractions of high street retailers in comparison with credit drapers. One Liverpool woman remarked that clothes purchased from "the Jew man" for over £7 could be acquired, for cash, from C&A department store for £4[58].

Long-existing concerns about doorstep selling resurfaced; also in modern form. In 1965, ten million viewers watched the drama *Up the Junction* on BBC TV. Its shocking content included casual sex, abortion, and a tallyman delighting in his sexual and financial exploits with customers. Meanwhile, the Consumer Council voiced fears that "an infusion of shady operators" had brought "selling goods over the doorstep into disrepute." A government investigation of consumer credit concluded that when "an experienced salesman, dependent on commission, is facing an inexperienced housewife on her doorstep... there is hardly an equality of bargaining power." A suggestion that doorstep sellers be subjected to a licensing system was, however, rejected.[59] At this point, there was an increasing emphasis on consumer empowerment through education rather than greater state regulation.[60] In any case, tallymen were a declining force. Historian Avram Taylor cites a number of reasons for this: rising prices made it harder for credit drapers to carry a large range of merchandise; men became less reluctant to shop for themselves in the high street; improved wages in mining communities; the increasing employment of married women; and traditional working-class neighborhoods were replaced due to council re-housing schemes.[61]

Thus Tom Chirnside discussed the demise of his company's business in the 1970s: "[it] gradually went away.... the standard of living of the working man and his wife – there's no comparison whatsoever to what it used to be. I mean everybody went to Blackpool for their holiday, now they go to Florida."[62] The services offered by the credit

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[56] R. Coopey, S. O'Connell and D. Porter, *Mail order retailing in Britain*. Mail order retailers also became competitors for the French doorstep credit industry. Companies such as La Redoute began life in the same region as our Lens case study. Emmanuel Chadeau, "Mass Retailing: A Last Chance for the Family Firm in France, 1945-90?" in Y Cassis, F Crouzet and T Gourvish (eds.), *Management and Business in Britain and France: The Age of the Corporate Economy*, (Oxford, 1995).

[57] *Report of the Committee on Consumer Credit* (London, 1971).

[58] Kerr: *Ship* Street, 92.

[59] Sean O'Connell, *Credit and community*: working class debt in the UK since 1880 (London, 2009), 49.

[60] M. Hilton, *Consumerism in C20th Britain*: the search for a historical movement (Cambridge, 2003), 228-241.

[61] Taylor, *Working class* credit, 157-166.

[62] Tom Chirnside (retired credit trader): interview with Sean O'Connell.

drapers were the financial equivalent of Blackpool, the old-fashioned, tacky, coastal resort where rain was experienced more often than sunshine. The service offered by credit traders was expensive and not attractive to most consumers, but its comparatively slow decline in the 1950s and 1960s indicates many working class families still had a use for it. Once a line of credit had been established, consumers with few other options were loath to give it up. Moreover, they were content to deal with a familiar form of provisioning the family home and credit traders worked hard on establishing themselves as part of the housewife's weekly routine. Thus, as Paul Johnson noted, the post-war money management practices of working-class consumers were not rapidly transformed. There was a strong degree of cultural inertia surrounding them that saw a time lag between economic and cultural change. In this example, this was buttressed by the personal relationship that existed with tallymen, involving circularized elements of reciprocity and obligation. However, these practices were not immutable. When modification of habit did arrive, it often took place between, rather than within, generational groups.[63] A new generation of working-class consumers, weaned on postwar affluence took advantage of a wide range of credit opportunities. These included the increased take up of bank loans and credit cards made possible by the extension of bank accounts.

However, bank accounts did not become universal in the UK and this was one reason for the survival of many tallymen in a new guise as doorstep moneylenders. Many were amongst the 2,500 licensed moneylenders in operation by the 1960s: 80 percent of whom had acquired their licenses in the previous decade.[64] Some tallymen, like Liverpool's Gerry Dunn, combined the old form of doorstep credit with the new one. By 1993, over 90 percent his company's turnover was in personal loans and he remarked that "customers never complain that a £5 note is the wrong size or colour."[65] This shift from merchandising to direct moneylending ensured former tallymen a place in renewed debates about credit and low-income consumers. This controversy often contrasted what is viewed as the UK's neoliberal credit market with the social market alternative offered in France. By the 1980s Britain had Europe's most diverse and innovative consumer credit market. Its origins lay in a number of factors. The first was the methods employed to evade the government's controls on hire purchase in the 1950s and 1960s. This promoted a number of forms of credit that might otherwise have been expected to wither away. Tallymen were an indirect beneficiary of this, but more central was the closely related check trading industry: particular Provident Financial Ltd (which became Britain's biggest doorstep moneylender). The growth of this new moneylending sector was assisted by a lack of enforcement of the 48 percent interest rate ceiling in the Moneylenders Act, 1927. This was, in fact, removed by the Conservative government in the 1974 Consumer Credit Act. This legislation placed its faith in consumer education, cooling off periods, and clearer documentation. The next Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher completed the neo-liberal jigsaw by deregulating financial services in the early 1980s.

France after WW2

Unlike the British tallymen, the Lens credit providers discovered the institutional fragility of their credit system during the 1950s. At this point, one in four of Sosche's customers

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[63] P. Johnson, *Saving and spending*, 215.
[64] O'Connell: *Credit and community*, 176.
[65] *Consumer Credit Association News*, May/June 1991.

became bad debtors. The Ministry of Economic Affairs reported that the percentage of legal claims in the *credit noir* sector was very high, often standing at 5–10 percent, and sometimes 20 percent, of total sales. In Sosche's business, the problem accounts included those marked PSA (*partis sans laisser d'adresse/*left without leaving an address) and those where the bailiffs had to be called in. The PSA wording was indicative of the growing mobility of the working classes and the erosion of the initial captive customer base that was pivotal to this form of credit in places like the Lens mining villages. By comparison, credit sales in department stores like Le Printemps, in Paris, produced legal claims in 3 percent of accounts in 1954. The figure for credit companies selling durable goods was 1 percent.[66] A further significant factor in the Lens region was the contraction of employment in mining. Immediately after *La Liberation*, 145,000 were employed in the area's coalmines, a figure that had been reduced to 95,000 in 1955. As a result of higher levels of bad debt, Sosche was compelled to improve her credit control and call upon legal sanctions and resort to bailiffs. The modest sums involved meant that the costs of taking legal actions were frequently higher than the claims recovered, but the rising financial pressure of bad debt led to a greater use of the courts. Taking legal action required alterations to Sosche's business model. During 1958 and 1959, court officials had complained of a lack of information about precise levels of debts and even the absence of customers' correct names and addresses in company records. Moreover, if there were no signatures on agreements, no legal action could be undertaken.[67] Sosche began to compile more systematic customer records. Whereas between 1954 and 1959, detailed information about customers and agreements was kept in only 15 percent of cases, by the late 1960s she held this data in around 75 percent of transactions. The remaining customers, for whom she kept limited data, appear to have been those who were at the core of the acquaintance networks and/or the most highly recommended customers. Sosche used the French national identity card, which was re-launched in 1955, as an administrative and impersonal instrument to buttress the informal guarantees against moral hazard that were offered by the socialized context of her collections system.[68] This more cautious approach appears to have assisted business; the number of problem accounts fell back to virtually nil during the 1960s.

In the following two decades the credit drapery system entered a terminal phase. The commercial advantages that the Jewish traders had enjoyed disappeared. As public and private transport improved in the Lens mining villages, their customers were no longer a captive market. Meanwhile the children of the Polish miners displayed no specific taste in clothing and spoke French perfectly. They developed a taste for branded and off-the-peg clothing, just as other French consumers did: a taste that was met by mail order catalogues and the leading retail stores that opened branches in Lens. In addition, the working class became considerably better off in the post-war decades of the *trente glorieuses*, loosening household budget constraints and the need to buy textiles on credit. Finally, due to educational success, many children of the Jewish entrepreneurs declined the opportunity to enter their parents' low-status business and opted for other career paths.

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[66] M. Avanza, G. Laferté and E. Penissat, "O crédito entre as classes populaire," 28.
[67] Business records of Sosche's company.
[68] P. Piazza, *Histoire de la carte nationale d'identité* (Paris, 2004).

Significant changes in the financial sector also fueled the demise of informal doorstep credit in Lens. During the 1960s and 1970s, wages began to be paid into workers' newly acquired bank accounts, significantly increasing deposits in regional banks.[69] The mining companies began paying their workers in this way from 1966-1967. Banks such as CCP (now La Poste) and Caisse d'Epargne were involved, thereafter, in the extension of banking services to 89 percent of the population by 1980 and 100 percent by the late 1990s. They also entered the consumer credit market and, along with finance houses, came to hold a virtual monopoly over it.[70] Personal loans – p*réts personnels* – were offered by banks from the 1970s and are one-off agreements. From the 1960s, *credit renouvelable* (revolving credit) was offered by large stores and l*es éstablissements de crédit* (dedicated consumer credit providers such as CETELEM, SOFINCO or FINAREF).[71] This form of credit was not directly related to any particular merchandise and broke the connection between credit and durable goods. Unlike the UK, France operated interest rate ceilings based on legislation passed in 1966 and updated in 1989. For each category of lending, a ceiling was set at one third above the average interest rate. For many critics of the UK's sub-prime credit sector, the French model is highly commendable and one from which British governments should learn.[72] The UK's tolerance of its sub-prime market is viewed as evidence of the failure of the neoliberal model to protect the poor from usurious business models.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a comparative history of doorstep credit traditions in France and Britain. In doing so, it offers fresh perspectives on both national cases. In historical terms, it explains the factors that lay behind the separate pathways followed in the two nations. A mixture of institutional factors, path dependency, the influence of interest groups, and contingency, all has a role to play in this. The doorstep credit systems that operated in such similar contexts in working-class communities in France and Britain underwent decline for related reasons, such as rising affluence, and competition from more modern forms of retailing and personal finance. Thereafter, decisions made by the two nation states – often with no direct consideration of *credit noir* or sub-prime markets – ensured that they followed different trajectories. Moreover, it was not simply a case of the British making political choices to opt for a neo-liberal approach that favored consumer choice and competition, whilst the French chose tighter controls on personal lending in taking a more paternalistic approach to the matter. In this context, it is interesting to note the cross-party criticism in Britain of a proposed European Community directive, in the mid-1970s, on doorstep selling. The directive proposed that customers could cancel any agreement that was not arranged in the company's office. The House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities, argued that this was "unacceptable in the light

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[69] Archives Banque de France. Tableau régional des opérations bancaires, 31 mars 1968, Carton Réunions régionales des Directeurs, Notes de conjonctures, Région Nord-Pas de Calais, Succursale Lille 1964-1974.

[70] F. Cusin, "Du mont-de-pieté á la carte de credit: evolution du crédit á la consummation," *Informations Sociales,* 6 (1996): 656-673.

[71] H. Ducourant, "Vendre la carte du magasin introduction au marquage social de l'argent dématérialisé," *Annales des Mines - Gérer et comprendre* 3/2014 (N° 117): 30.

[72] Ramsay in Wilson, 98.

of current trading practice in the United Kingdom" and that the proposal was "designed less for the protection of the general consumer than for the competitiveness of the Continental shopkeeper." Representatives of the British Co-operative movement noted that whilst doorstep selling was banned in many European countries, in Britain it was "traditional to sell many things on a house to house basis – from religion to sliced bread!"[73] Lord Oram, a Labour politician with a background in the Co-operative movement, argued that "we must be on our guard against measures which purport to protect the consumer but in fact merely restrict competition."[74] Three years later it was reported that staff of the European Commission's consumer protection service were "almost in despair" at the legal challenges in the European Parliament, "almost always by British members" who were concerned about questions of sovereignty and issues of doorstep selling and consumer credit."[75] This one example hints at just some of the complex factors in this history: on this occasion these included the more powerful role of small-to-medium-sized retailers in Continental Europe and British unease about the European Commission's growing influence.

This uneasy relationship has continued and it is interesting to consider the extent to which sub-prime doorstep lending has become a signifier of "Anglo-Saxon" model in the consumer choice/consumer protection dichotomy. In 2006, the British government opted not to introduce interest rate ceilings on the loans offered by companies active in the controversial sub-prime credit market. It reasoned that if it were to place caps on high-cost legal lenders, demand would be moved to loan sharks (unlicensed moneylenders). Controversial research carried out on its behalf suggested that the illegal lending sector in France and Germany was greater because both countries had caps. Whilst many French and German scholars reject these claims, the fact that they could be made suggests that further research is required. Did Bancarisation and the less diverse range of credit options available in France provide French low-income consumers with better options than were available to their British counterparts? Is it possible that some form of *crédit noir* continued to operate at a subterranean level after Bancarisation? Many questions remain to be explored: in France in particular. One particularly intriguing issue is the absence of a sub-prime credit market in France, although it is recognized that there is what is dubbed a sub-sub-prime market represented by the *Crédit Municipaux* (municipal pawnbrokers) that offers loans between 100 and 2000 euro to a customer base that is two-thirds female and predominantly made up of the nation's ethnic minority communities.[76] Those groups often imported their own rotating credit systems as was also the case for British immigrant communities.[77] Exploration of both of these issues would provide further

[73] *The Times*, 26 October 1977.
[74] *The Times*, 23 November 1977.
[75] *The Times*, 9 September 1980.
[76] For a critique of this research see I. Ramsay, "To heap distress upon distress? Comparative reflections on interest rate ceilings," *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 60/ 2 (2010): 85.
[77] J. Semin, "L'argent, la famille, les amies: ethnographie contemporaine des tontines africaines en context migratoire," *Civilisiations*, 56 (2007): 183-199; N. Alexander, "Capital social ethnique et entrepreneuriat. Le cas des commercants chinois de Paris, Bruxelles et Montréal," *Sociologie*, 4/3 (2012): 395-411. For Britain, see O'Connell, *Credit and Community*, 223-235.

information through which to enhance the two comparative exercises undertaken in this paper. The first being the comparative analysis of two nation's experiences of working class consumer credit. The second comparison is between past and contemporary experiences of what has been labelled the sub-prime credit market. Both these tasks have become even more important in the wake of the credit crunch and financial meltdown of 2008. This paper has offered a taster of what the final analysis might offer for historians of France and Britain. The findings will also offer, ultimately, material for the significant debate about consumer protection, over-indebtedness and responsible credit regimes in modern society.