The Rise and Decline of *Doux Commerce*: Change of Experience and Change of Perception

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In his book *The Passions and the Interests*, the American economist Albert O. Hirschman reconstructed a figure of thought from the late 17th and 18th centuries based on the idea that a commercial society is a polite, civilised society (Hirschman, *The Passions*; see also Hirschman, “Rival Interpretations”). The key words *commerce* and *doux commerce* fit into an enlightened intellectual discourse on manners and behaviour that had some nationally specific accentuations. While French and German participants were accustomed to using the term *commerce* primarily in the sense of sociability, communication and social intercourse (also between the sexes) the British also included the economic relations between market participants. For thinkers like John Locke, David Hume and Sir James Steuart, to name but a few, this was exactly what made the figure of thought so attractive. This special accentuation was also noted by foreign observers of British relations (for France and Germany: Terjanian; Köhnke; Lichtblau; for England and Scotland: Pocock; Hont; from a comparative perspective: Oz-Salzberger). Two good examples are the French Baron de Montesquieu and the London-based Dutch physician Bernard de Mandeville, both of whom readily appropriated the idea.

In its specifically British use, the term *doux commerce* expressed the conviction that the activities of buying, selling, bargaining and contracting caused individuals to engage with each other, even and especially in the presence of divergences of interest. Since mutual trust, respect, self-control and, of course, the renunciation of violence are elementary prerequisites of trade, it could be expected that an expansion of such relationships would put an end to arbitrary power relations. The generalisation of *commerce* would interest individuals in each other and cause them to treat each other with consideration and empathy. As a result, society as a whole would benefit. This view was brought to a wider audience when Joseph Addison, co-editor of the magazine *The Spectator* (1711-12, 1714), published a series of articles linking the argument of the beneficial effect of the market with an older discourse on *politeness* and *civility* conducted by aristocrats and wealthy citizens (cf. Knight 1993).

Journalistic support, however, does not explain the lasting acceptance of the figure of thought that remained dominant in England and – after the accession of Scotland in 1707 – the United Kingdom of Great Britain throughout the 18th century and, at most, faded slightly with the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), the 'Bible' of future economists. As Hirschman shows, as a description of the function and condition of civil society the ideal only went out of fashion around 1800 at the earliest. Only then did decidedly market-critical positions become more pronounced and a few decades later *doux commerce* at best enjoyed the attention of those who – like Herbert Spencer, one of the founding fathers of British sociology – specialised in researching exchange processes in social life (cf. Gray 171). The general acceptance of this market discourse in 18th-century Britain is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that foreign observers (with the exception of Montesquieu) mostly took a more critical attitude, and that the idea did not meet with the same broad approval as in the United Kingdom. While Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel remained sceptical from the outset, Karl Marx ridiculed the whole idea of *doux commerce* (cf. Hirschman, *The Passions* 62; Rosanvallon 64).

For historians, as well as social scientists and scholars of cultural studies, Albert O. Hirschman's works on *commerce* and *doux commerce* are extraordinarily stimulating. This is because the author brought to life the common word used by contemporaries to describe the early modern market economy, *commerce*. Early modern economics in Britain cannot be sufficiently understood with contemporary, socio-scientifically constructed terms like "market" and "economy", which we use today and which are also in the title of this anthology. Although "market" was known as a noun and verb since the Middle Ages, it was used very unspecifically, and use of the term "economy" was still extremely rare. When Sir James Steuart published his pioneering work *Principles of Political Economy* (1767), he first had to laboriously remove the word from the context of the Greek word *oikos* (household), which was detrimental to the market success of his work. Seen in this light, Hirschman cut a path into the jungle of early modern economic history.

On the other hand, Hirschman's explanation for the ups and downs of *doux commerce* is too simple because, as can often be observed with economists, he drew conclusions from the theory of contemporary economists as evidence for what happened in practice. In this specific case, it amounts to saying that he attributed the turn away from *doux commerce* to the breakthrough of the Industrial Revolution and the triumph of capitalism. From a historical point of view, this is not convincing. The English economy had been a market economy long before 1800 and in this capacity had also developed capitalist elements. Tellingly, the time when the Enlightenment thinkers first put the idea of *doux commerce* down on paper was the period after the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89, when a genuinely capitalist institution like the Bank of England (1694) was founded and the financial markets of the City of London transformed the pound sterling into the capital that gave capitalism its name. Hirschman also relies on an outdated state of research with regard to the Industrial Revolution. In the 1970s, when he wrote *The Passions and the Interests*, economic historians did indeed still date the breakthrough to the 1780s. According to the current state of research, this can only be said for the period after about 1830; only then was commercial mass production, which had previously been decentralised and mostly rural (so-called proto-industry) production, moved to centralised factories on a large scale (cf., for example, King and Timmins). Thus, there is an unexplained chronological gap of around half a century in Hirschman's explanation, which must be bridged by other arguments.

This article attempts to bring the rise and fall of *doux commerce* into line with chronology. To this end it considers not only the history of markets and the market economy in Britain, but also the change of power relations in the social, political and media context in which they were embedded. In accordance with the focus of this volume, this article is limited to the British case. Following Albert O. Hirschman, this discussion aims to capture the complexity of civil society as a market society and thus raise the level of debate. In the context of this volume, this means at least alluding to the bridge to the "real fictions" of contemporary imagined economies.

THE RISE OF *COMMERCE* AND *DOUX COMMERCE*: BRITISH PECULIARITIES[1]

Early Start and Slow Pace of the Market Economy

Market relations, and by that I mean the exchange of goods and services for money, are probably as old as humanity. The prerequisite for their generalisation, however, is an institutional framework. In the case of England this framework was set up in 1066 when William the Conqueror defeated King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings. William liquidated almost the whole of the Anglo-Saxon nobility and declared himself lord

1 The explanations in the following chapter are based on the results of the research in Eisenberg, *The Rise of Market Society in England, 1066-1800*, unless otherwise stated. Therefore, I refrain from providing any further references.

of the territory which thereby became a unified state. The state was conducted on the basis of Common Law, a part continuation of Anglo-Saxon law. It was organised centrally, as far as that was possible with medieval means. The upshot was an economically and legally integrated territory with next to no internal customs control worth mentioning. Free persons, with the help of royal justice, were able to bring cases against fraudsters and bankrupt persons, lazy debtors and defaulting contractors. From 1362 at the latest they could even do so in the vernacular, because that was when English became the official language of administration. As currency the pound sterling was used as a continuation of Anglo-Saxon conventions. The old penny coins of the Anglo-Saxons were gradually replaced by new ones made of sterling silver.

In the early modern period, market relations continued to intensify. Agricultural labour markets became widespread after the plague wave of the 15th century, because the landlords were forced by the high demand for labour to relax feudal dependencies and accept freedom of movement. With the decline of the guilds in the 16th and 17th centuries free labour markets formed in many trades; sometimes even rudimentary trade unions sprang up to compensate for the structural disadvantages suffered by suppliers of labour. At about the same time, long-distance trade was intensified, equipping the consumer goods markets, which then assumed mass character in the 18th century, with the expansion of the proto-industrial mode of production in the countryside. A certain degree of underdevelopment in the banking sector was compensated for in 1694 by the founding of the Bank of England, which at the same time issued banknotes covered by tax revenues thus establishing a modern money market. The now flourishing financial markets favoured the financing of corporations and other larger enterprises, including the state, and with the South Sea Bubble in 1719/20, a first speculative crisis on a pan-European scale developed. Even in the longer term, individuals and collective financiers made substantial investments in the expansion of long-distance and domestic trade and infrastructure; wholesale and retail trade flourished, as did the press, entertainment and other service industries, both in urban and rural areas. Around 1800 market relationships in

England were so common that only minors and the inhabitants of poorhouses and other institutions were able to avoid the concomitant opportunities and demands. Every household made up at least one consumption unit (and quite often one production unit). In order to survive they were forced to deal with money. The simple exchange of natural goods and bartering was, if at all, widespread only among the inhabitants of far-flung villages.

Seen from such a long-term historical perspective, marketisation in England was characterised by several specific features. Firstly, the process began at an extraordinarily early date, at the end of the Middle Ages, and thence proceeded steadily without setbacks. If the individual stages of development created new social problems, they were rectified over time. Similarly, there was no accumulation of problems as a result of overlapping by other stages of modernisation. The nation state was in place before the domestic market took shape. The Industrial Revolution only began 750 years afterwards, when the market economy had already penetrated the entire British Isles. The fact that a brake was put on the dynamics of the English market society as a result of its early start and the gradual networking of business and society might be regarded as a problematic side-effect of the process. However, contemporaries did not regard this as a problem. As pioneers in the area they knew no other standards than their own. Thus the slow pace of development supported the perception of *commerce* as *doux commerce*.

Power Relations and Exchange Relations

In the process outlined, the Crown played a dual role. It guaranteed the framework conditions for free exchange, in which it was itself involved as an actor, and in the functioning of which it had a high degree of self-interest as it financed itself through tax revenues dependent on a flourishing community. To the extent that this dual role entailed contradictory requirements the Crown usually subordinated the ostentatious demonstration of its instruments of power to economic interests. Ever since the Magna Carta this priority has been evident in the recurrent negotiations between monarchs and parliament, which have always been occupied with the modalities of day-to-day market dealings. The extent of the willingness to renounce direct rule was evident not least in the military sphere. As early as the 12th century, the kings began to do without the active military service of the barons and instead imposed on them the costs of a mercenary army – a measure which in the long term meant that the English nobility no longer carried weapons but instead developed into a purely civilian landowning class. Especially in this measure medievalists recognise the basis of a specifically English "Bastard Feudalism" (McFarlane). A decisive mechanism for the early dissolution of personal dependencies was the fact that, unlike on the European continent, military service and other feudal services could, in principle, be performed in monetary form.

Another specific feature of the English feudal system was the lack of a graded hierarchy between king and subjects. In the interests of *divide et impera*, since William the Conqueror, the Crown took care to distribute baronial property throughout the land to prevent dynasties and conspiracies from developing. In their role as subjects of the Crown, the barons were on a par with the commoners, and when the Crown had monopolies to grant – and these included not only special rights of long-distance trading companies, but also e.g. entrepreneurs who acquired the right to hold markets in specific places – it awarded the contract to those who paid the highest price. Because of their formal equality as subjects, the English population was largely spared the negative experience of their contemporaries in early modern Central Europe, namely that in certain situations they became the object of power games of selfish intermediate instances of the ruling system, which – like city councils and guilds – were endowed with the authority of princes and local authorities and were able to enforce their particular interests at the expense of third parties (cf. Ogilvie, "The State in Germany" and *Institutions and European Trade*). In particular, they were spared from arbitrarily fixed feudal levies, bans on luxury and other restrictions on their economic activities, from restrictions on their rights as residents and citizens, from trading bans on certain population groups (e.g. foreigners and Jews) and finally from restrictions on their consumer behaviour. What that meant in everyday life becomes clear when we consider that Central European conventions of this kind also included the obligation of husbands to supervise the business of their wives and of master craftsmen to discipline apprentices and journeymen (cf. Ogilvie, "Consumption"; Kocka 329-34).

Insofar as English market actors coordinated themselves with the help of group action, organisation and consolidation of their capital in order to create a special basis of power in their respective economic environment, this was done on a voluntary and reciprocal basis. In this context it is worth mentioning the professionalisation efforts of insurance experts and stockbrokers, which during the course of the 18th century led to the creation of Lloyds of London and the London Stock Exchange; the turnpike societies and the private development companies to boost construction activity in the cities; the strikes and organisational efforts of journeymen; and finally, the countless friendly societies for mutual assistance in the event of illness and other dangers in a market society, which existed in all classes and strata of society. These coordinated activities not only yielded individual benefits, but also a number of welfare effects for society as a whole. All these features seemed to confirm the notion of *doux commerce*. Last but not least, one should mention popular culture with its sports competitions, games, theatre performances and concerts. The latter were extraordinarily lively and creative not least because voluntary associations and commercial initiatives were largely unaffected by interventions from the authorities and were therefore able to work together without hindrance.

Empathy as a Market Strategy

So far this article has attributed the experience of *doux commerce* in medieval and early modern England – firstly – to the guarantee of institutional framework conditions by the state and – secondly – to the weakness of feudal power structures, which might have impaired free market exchange. A third observation, which I would now like to elaborate on, refers to the necessity for market players in Britain to pay a great deal of attention to each other. This peculiarity was not, say, due to the fact that they only traded on a face-to-face basis or only with acquaintances, because even in the early modern era market relations were generally mediated by long chains of dealings and were therefore faced with all kinds of uncertainties. The decisive factor was rather that most transactions were not paid in cash, but with bills of exchange and promissory notes, i.e. written and personally signed orders. This convention had social consequences: because the inevitability of credit on a "good name" led to the fact that everyone was simultaneously a debtor and creditor, this made it necessary to have a high measure of self-promotion and sensitive external perception. The exchange economy was a reaction to the fact that the general shortage of coins in Europe was particularly pronounced in England, because, in order to preserve their autonomy externally, the monarchs had foreign coins rigorously confiscated and converted into pounds sterling. When Englishmen traded with each other they not only needed a good reputation, but were inevitably interested in the specific situation of their counterparts, which had to be investigated. Anyone who failed to submit to this effort – for example by insensitive haggling – ran the risk of harming his own reputation and cast doubt on his own creditworthiness. (cf. Muldrew).

Strategic *doux commerce* of this kind was particularly noticeable in the everyday dealings of the so-called "commercial classes", that is to say of the people who were professionally involved in shaping and coordinating market relationships. Contemporary statisticians counted the following among these: merchants, traders, agents and other so-called middlemen, exchange and share dealers, moneylenders, bankers and stock exchange workers. Then there was the so-called itinerant class by which I mean the armies of hauliers, mobile traders and representatives. And finally, there were also the hundreds of thousands of shopkeepers, whose influence on market activities reached a peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. We can include government civil servants involved in collecting taxes, members of professions like lawyers and notaries, publishers, journalists and those involved in the arts and entertainment. Many of these service people lived in growing towns which, in turn, created an additional need for coordination because of their complex social relationships. But one of the main features of English market society was that the thoroughly commercialised and regionally specialised agricultural business, which sold its produce at home and abroad, also relied heavily on go-between services.

Starting at the end of the 17th century, the number of connecting people of this kind grew rapidly and exchange relationships intensified. This was a further feature that motivated individuals to take an interest in each other; it also promoted the impression that commerce was a civilizing force. The growth had increased since the Middle Ages but received an above-average boost towards the start of the 18th century. Whereas between 1688 and 1750 the population grew by around 10%, the increase in the number of the above-mentioned professions – i.e. long before the start of industrialisation – was between 32 and 63% (de Vries and van der Woude 528-29).

Another measure of the outstanding importance of empathy as a market strategy of the "commercial classes" in early-modern England was the proportion of the service sector to the labour force. According to the 1801 census this comprised 34% of the economically active population, more than twice the figure in other countries in Western and Central Europe. Contemporaries regarded this as a problem of surplus supply, and their perception was clearly correct. For the order of magnitude of 34% was equivalent to the service sector of the USA around 1900 (32%), of the German Reich in 1936 (36%) and of France in 1937 (37%) (Buchheim 33). Anyone who offered services had to make an effort to ensnare his customers and clients, accommodate their interests and anticipate their expectations – features which were particularly relevant for personal services which comprised by far the largest sub-category.

Regarded in these terms, "doux commerce" in early-modern England was an expression and an effect of the existential competitive experiences of a surplus population which had been relieved of feudal duties and released into the duties and necessities of surviving in a market society. Anyone arriving from the countryside in search of a job naturally tended to head in the direction of trading, transport and other activities in the service sector. And anyone either devoid of a viable business idea or sufficient financial or social capital tried to get him- or herself a paid job in one of these branches. Seen in this light, market actors in early-modern England felt compelled to conduct their activities in the sense of *doux commerce* particularly because their conditions of market activities were anything but *doux*.

THE DECLINE OF *DOUX COMMERCE*

That concludes my argument that the idea of *doux commerce* had a real basis in experience in early-modern England from which it drew its plausibility. How do we now explain the fact that it waned in the 19th century? I ask this question because there was, as mentioned previously, not only no change in direction or qualitative renewal of the process of marketisation in the decisive years around 1800, but also because one can observe a large number of negative concomitants of the market society before 1800 without, however, these facts taking centre-stage in the discourse. These include: speculation crises and irrational mass behaviour; alienation; the accumulation of capital resources with its concomitant accumulation of social power; and an increase in social inequality. I would therefore like to propose explanations for the change in market discourse that refer less to the economy itself than to the political and social context it helped to shape.

One development which might contribute to explaining the decline in the persuasive power of *doux commerce* is the structural change to British public life between 1800 and 1830. The advance of a consumer society in the 18th century had created new fashions at an ever increasing rate, in clothing, household goods and other everyday objects; the act of purchasing had been culturally inflated by the functional architecture of businesses and commercial buildings and the attentive behaviour of salespersons; and a commercial entertainment culture had reinvented and perfected playful forms of expressions of market exchange in sport, theatre, music and other social activities. Fashion-makers, the advertising business and the enlightened press who mediated these attractions to an interested audience had first addressed the upper and middle classes, but the market principle extended beyond social boundaries. As far as consumption was concerned the lower strata of society and their interests were involved following the entanglement of luxury and second-hand markets as early as the 18th century (cf. Lemire), but these classes were scarcely taken into consideration in any debates on consumption.

As paying customers the lower classes were not regarded by journalists and public-relations experts as being sufficiently attractive to be a target group, because for many years they did not belong to the groups of buyers of newspapers, whose prices had been artificially increased by stamp duties, duties on paper and other taxes. These duties were, however, removed in the early 1830s and the first to profit were Chartist papers and the popular Penny Press. When wages began to increase as a result of the mid-Victorian boom, new types of newspapers aimed at a mass audience were launched onto the market. These competed for new classes of readers and therefore cooperated closely with other branches of the advertising industry (cf. Wiener). In this new competitive struggle journalists were unable to survive with *doux commerce* rhetoric. Much higher sales could be achieved by sensational stories about exploitation, blatant fraud and the negative effects of market failure (cf. Johnson; Taylor). A certain exception from the rule was the genre of "business journalism", represented for example by the *Economist;* as this was developed under the premise that it would be better to withhold certain details and practices of market exchange from public attention. This too was a contemporary adaptation of *doux commerce* to changed circumstances (cf. Poovey).

A second change in 19th century Britain, which I should like to put forward as an explanation for the waning of this idea, was the successful process of democratisation in Great Britain. In order to make this connection understandable it is helpful to recall a general difficulty when observing market exchange: the fact that the actors mostly administer their exit option tacitly. On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that failed actors who leave the market do so tacitly. On the other hand, an alternative way of reacting, which might be described by Albert O. Hirschman as "voice", i.e. as "the act of complaining or organising oneself … with the intention of achieving a direct improvement of quality," presupposes a concrete addressee, and such a person or group of persons cannot be identified in markets – in contrast to organisations or other hierarchical settings (Hirschman, "Abwanderung" 332-33, trans. by Eisenberg; cf. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* 22-25). In the 17th and 18th centuries, this frustration often led to collective protests, say, against a rise in prices often being aimed at the nearest addressees, which at the time were mostly local political authorities. Edward P. Thompson has described this vividly in his work on the "moral economy" of the crowd. When, in the wake of the French Revolution, radical politics discovered Parliament as the place to address demands and protests, this created a new sounding board for "voice": one whose comprehensive scope corresponded to the nationwide dimension of commercial society. The political movements in the 19th century, from the London Corresponding Society via Chartism, the trade union and cooperative movements all the way to the Reform Movement, then took the next step by feeding concepts like 'exploitation', 'inequality' and 'class' into market discourse. It is irrelevant whether these concepts alone were new or described the situation at hand correctly. It is much more important to realise that these new public emphases were highly appropriate to express doubts about the integrating capacity of markets in civil society (cf. Noel Thompson; Hobsbawm; Stedman Jones).

This effect was bolstered by concrete experiences which also extended beyond local levels. With the help of strikes and the collective use of economies of scale, trade unions and consumer cooperatives, which operated at national levels from the 1860s onward, succeeded in intervening in the power relationships of labour and consumer markets. This changed public perceptions to such an extent that they were now seen as representatives of the interests of market victims. The foundation of the Labour Party at the turn of the 20th century finally brought the social question onto the main political stage. As a result, the negotiation of explicit rules of interaction between market actors was subjected more than ever to the imperatives of political elections and political parties, which sought to create a mass appendage under the impression of the ever-expanding right to vote. However, the pioneer of this type of mass party, which included this in their calculations, was the Chartist Movement of the 1830s, which was the first to make free and universal (male) suffrage its banner and thus set the standards for others to come. Although the Chartists failed, they greatly accelerated the transformation of the old Whig Party into the Liberal Party and the Tories into the Conservative Party, as well as the demand for participation in the general press. The rules and expectations of conduct that specific social groups wanted to generalise were now the subject of controversial discussion and made the potential for social conflict more apparent than before (cf. Searle; Johnson).

The more these processes of democratisation progressed, the paler the idea of *doux commerce* became and soon it disappeared completely from public discourse. On the one hand, it was hardly possible to convey to the general public that the market that gave rise to such disputes could prompt members of civil society to conduct themselves with self-control, respect and mutual trust. Towards the end of the 19th century, the central question of market discourse to the British public was therefore no longer "How can markets, how can commerce contribute to fending off arbitrary claims to power brought to society from outside", but "Why do markets threaten civil society from within?" (Keane 30). On the other hand, the market became the subject of an expert discourse. Parliamentary and journalistic debates on stock speculation, liability obligations of partnerships, employee profit-sharing and the right of coalition led to a number of new laws, and some industrialists adopted high-profile initiatives on company social policy. This development profiled the opportunities of corporate market actors and took the experience-based perspectives of individuals off the agenda. This was not least at the expense of consumers, who had always experienced *doux commerce* to a special degree and were now moved to the margins of public discourse (this is the argument of Parry 164-86, especially 185; see also Searle 264-68; and Johnson).

COMMERCE AND *DOUX COMMERCE* IN THE LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

The market was traditionally seen as a place where real people met to exchange and do business – a place for *commerce* and *doux commerce* alike. This interactive, sociable dimension of the market had been particularly pronounced in Britain since the Middle Ages, probably stronger than in continental European countries that I have not examined further in this paper. But in Britain, too, it increasingly faded into the background over the course of the 19th century, with the result that *doux commerce* as a figure of thought became obsolete. At least when Hirschman reintroduced it into economic discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, it had been widely forgotten, and it has remained so. Even the collapse of Soviet-style socialism, which gave the market economy an unexpected boost and legitimacy, did not change this state of affairs. When the political scientist and philosopher John Keane, a proven leftist, introduced the first issue of the *Journal of Civil Society* at the beginning of the 21st century with an homage to this old idea, he did so as a deliberate provocation to ignite a controversy. But some of the contributors from other European countries reacted so sharply that the debate was nipped in the bud.

The historical processes underlying this development are obvious: when it is not a question of selling a highly specialised workforce or buying houses or used cars, today's market players are confronted with fixed prices that make bargaining superfluous. The legislator has standardised contracting, and the interactions required for transactions are increasingly carried out through computers and other vending machines. This has further weakened the imagination of the commercial society and the possibilities for shaping it. *Commerce* has definitely disappeared from the scientific as well as the general political discourse. The substitute term "market", on the other hand, is in its typical uses an empty abstraction, even a phantom, which can be imagined at will.

Accordingly, current research in this field is largely limited to technical questions like examining the market pricing mechanism or individual responses to the challenge of uncertainty. It is mostly about the efficiency of either "the economy" or "capitalism". The cultural-studies correlate of this type of 'market research' are analyses of "fictions" and "real fictions" of the market, as collected in this volume. This opens up a new, original field of experimentation for critical researchers. However, in most research of this kind the term "market" typically refers to an abstraction, indeed a phantom, whose quality and scope are time-spanning. What is missing is a historicisation of the modes of linking "reality" and "fiction" of the market. It is difficult to imagine how the gap between economics and economic life could be overcome without such an analysis.

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