



Changing European retail landscapes: New trends and challenges

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Abstract

During the second half of the 20th century, consumption patterns in the developed market economies have stabilised, while in the transition/EU-accession countries these patterns were accepted with unusual speed and dynamics. Differences, changes and current trends in Western Europe and post-socialist countries in the quantity and concentration of retailing activities have been minimised, whereas some distinctions in the quality of retail environments have remained. Changes have occurred in buying habits, shopping behaviour and consumer preferences basically for all population groups across the generations. This article is a theoretical and conceptual introduction to a Special Issue of the Moravian Geographical Reports (Volume 26, No. 3) on “The contemporary retail environment: shopping behaviour, consumers’ preferences, retailing and geomarketing”. The basic features which have occurred in European retailing environments are presented, together with a comparison (and confrontation) between Western and Eastern Europe. The multidisciplinary nature of retailing opens the discussion not only from a geographical perspective but also from the point of view of other social science disciplines that naturally interconnect in the retail environments.

Keywords: retail landscapes, retailing, shopping behaviour, consumer preferences, resilience, Western Europe, Eastern Europe

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1. Introduction

Since the post-war era of the 1950s, the retail sector in Western Europe experienced a similar revolution to the industrial sector one hundred years earlier. The phenomenon of the ‘industrialisation of retail’ was thus replicated in the form of the internationalisation tendencies of multinational corporations and chains, resulting in the giant concerns such as the American Wal-Mart, French Carrefour, German Metro, Dutch Ahold and even Swedish IKEA. Despite all of these tendencies, the retail sector has never become as globalised as industry, which can be attributed to specific consumer cultural habits (Cliquet, 2006).

The top ten retail companies according to sales in the fiscal year 2016 are presented in Table 1. The dominant chains are still the ones with origins in the USA (with an unbeatable Wal-Mart and Internet Amazon with the highest year-on-year growth), with only three European companies that specialise in food and fast-moving goods.

Retailing and its activities, together with services, are in the long term the most significant vehicles for change, new trends and innovations in the tertiary sector. At the

same time, however, in its breadth the retail sector is one of the most distinctive parts of worldwide globalisation and internationalisation trends of recent decades, and also one of the most visible features of the economic transformations in post-socialist and developing countries, where the dynamics of change have been extraordinary and relatively unique (Nagy, 2001; Burt, 2006; Szczyrba, 2005; Machek, 2012). The new dimension of large-format chain stores and shopping centres gradually overshadowed the traditional forms of retail. The shopping centres, in particular, became a phenomenon with both commercial and non-commercial purposes, and substituted as a function of public space to some extent (Crosby et al., 2005; Coleman, 2012; Pospěch, 2015).

2. Changes, differences and trends in European retail landscapes

The structure of the retail sector has been transformed considerably across Europe in recent decades. During the second half of the twentieth century, consumption patterns in the developed market economies stabilised, while in

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