



Giving Consumers a Political Voice

Organized Consumerism and the Belgian Welfare State, 1957-1981

GISELLE NATH

Immediately after the Second World War, the word ‘consumer’ was an ill-defined signifier. By the early eighties, citizens’ interests were often routinely equated with consumer interests. We can attribute this in no small amount to the rise of consumer movements, who published comparative tests in monthly periodicals. These private organizations became the proverbial ‘consumer trade unions’: they drew attention to the producer consumer-cleavage and raised consumer awareness. In Belgium there were two separate consumer movements. Test-Achats (1957-present) promoted individual foresight as the best strategy for consumer protection. The working-class *Union Féminine pour l’Information et la Défense du Consommateur* (hereafter UFIDEC, 1959-1984) was an organization led by social-democratic women. UFIDEC demanded more legal solutions from consumers and believed in strong collective action. This article investigates how and why consumer organizations gained influence and legitimacy within the welfare state. The government initially rebuffed organized consumerism, only to accommodate it somewhat after the oil crisis in 1973. However, if institutions (or proposed institutions) for consumer politics in Belgium remained relatively weak or ineffective, it was because they represented a compromise between a civil society intent upon its own survival, and a government more than willing to let consumers fend for themselves.

Een politieke stem voor de consument: consumentenbewegingen en de Belgische welvaartsstaat, 1957-1981

Hoewel het woord consument (of verbruiker) onmiddellijk na de Tweede Wereldoorlog een neologisme was, werd het tegen het einde van de jaren

tachtig een stevig ingeburgerde term. Dit is onder andere te danken aan de opkomst van de consumentenbeweging. Deze private organisaties, die vooral vergelijkende warentesten publiceerden, fungeerden als consumentenvakbonden. Ze wezen op de tegengestelde belangen van producenten en consumenten en zorgden voor een groter consumentenbewustzijn. België kende zelfs twee verbruikersorganisaties: terwijl Test-Aankoop (1957-heden) individuele voorzorg promootte als de beste vorm van consumentenbescherming, bepleitte de *Union Féminine pour l'Information et la Défense du Consommateur* (UFIDEC, 1959-1984) meer wettelijke bescherming. UFIDEC profileerde zichzelf duidelijk als een organisatie voor en door de arbeidersklasse. De sociaal-democratische vrouwengroepen die UFIDEC ondersteunden, geloofden dan ook in sterke collectieve actie. Dit artikel onderzoekt hoe en waarom deze bewegingen in de welvaartsstaat invloed en legitimiteit verkregen. De Belgische overheid was aanvankelijk sceptisch ten opzichte van de georganiseerde consumentenbeweging, maar kwam deze na de oliecrisis in 1973 wel enigszins tegemoet. Toch bleven de instellingen die het consumentenbelang moesten verdedigen relatief zwak. Dit is te wijten aan een moeizaam compromis tussen sociale bewegingen die zichzelf in stand wilden houden, en een overheid die liever niet te veel intervenieerde.

The study of welfare state policies, much indebted to Esping-Anderson's notion of the *decommodification of labour*, has not given much attention to organizations focusing on the quality and price of *commodified goods*. Consequently, the historiography of the welfare state in the Low Countries focuses mostly on the negotiations about social security and industrial relations.¹ Even when it comes to consumerist themes like the cost-of-living index, trade unions and employer federations are regarded as the main actors.²

This scholarly bias is all the more odd because the birth of mass consumer movements coincided with the establishment of strong Keynesian welfare states. Most Western consumer movements were set up in the fifties. At their peak in the late sixties, it is estimated that one in three Belgian households had a subscription to a consumer advice periodical.³ Much

1 D. Luyten and G. Vanthemsche, *Het sociaal pact van 1944: oorsprong, betekenis en gevolgen* (Brussels 1995); D. Luyten, *Sociaal-economisch overleg in België sedert 1918* (Brussels 1995) and A. Meynen, 'De economische en sociale problematiek sinds de jaren vijftig', in: E. Witte e.a., *Politieke geschiedenis van België van 1830 tot heden* (Antwerpen 1997) 285-354.

2 P. Scholliers, *Loonindexering en sociale vrede. Koopkracht en klassenstrijd in België tijdens het interbellum* (Brussels 1985). On the role of

government, see G. Vercauteren, *In naam van de sociale vooruitgang: de rol van de overheid in het sociaal overleg in België, 1944-1981* (Leuven 2007).

3 P. Claeys, *Groupes de pression en Belgique: les groupes intermédiaires socio-économiques. Contribution à l'analyse comparative* (Brussels 1973) 259. This figure was a combination of subscribers to Test-Achats, UFIDEC and the older Family League, which had gradually begun to define family interests as consumer interests.

like the architects of welfare states, consumer activists were committed to stable mass markets that offered all citizens a comfortable standard of living and qualitative household durables. These private publishers became the proverbial ‘consumer trade unions’. A study of their political heritage is long overdue.⁴ Organized consumerism drew attention to the diverging interests of consumers and producers, thereby creating a new political cleavage. Among their readers, consumer magazines also helped to shape consumer attitudes and reinforce certain product standards. Researching their impact can enrich our understanding of the welfare state beyond the traditional scopes of labour market regulation, social security and so forth. How were *new* demands for risk protection institutionalized? Which groups gained access to and bargaining power within the welfare state?

Recent works by Daunton and Hilton, Cohen and Black have begun to explore the connection between mass consumption and postwar political culture.⁵ Specifically, Hilton and Cohen have argued that a period of intense ‘consumer democracy’ was followed by a more neoliberal regime that reduced the consumer interest to individual choice.⁶ This article wants to go one step further by looking not so much at political *culture*, but at specific welfare state *institutions* that gave consumers a political voice. By doing so, it will become clear that there were a number of turning points, rather than one abrupt transition towards neoliberalism. Moreover, in some respects, this turn towards individualism was already present within the consumer movement itself.

In Belgium, a delicate mix of public and private strategies was used to protect consumers from the excesses of the free market. Private organizations basically provided education, presented themselves as an insurance against bad purchases, and served as gatekeepers for consumer complaints. Public authorities usually only took measures if and when lobbied by consumer organizations. Economic crises often provided political opportunities for advancing the consumer cause.

4 Research on the political impact of consumer movements in Belgium has up until now only been undertaken by master students, or results from commemorative efforts by the consumer movement itself. See for instance M. Driesen *Vivec, 1959-1984* (unpublished MA-thesis Vrije Universiteit Brussels 2014) and G. Vanwichelen, *Kritische doorlichting en evaluatie van de consumentenbeweging* (unpublished MA-thesis University of Leuven 1987). For the Netherlands, see J. Van Merriënboer “De moeizame start van de Consumentenbond.” *Politieke Opstellen Centrum voor Parlementaire Geschiedenis* 18 (1998) 53-69.

5 M. Hilton and M. Daunton (eds.) *The Politics of Consumption. Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*. (Oxford 2001); L. Cohen, *A Consumers Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York 2003) and L. Black *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation* (Basingstoke 2010).

6 M. Hilton ‘Consumers and the State since the Second World War’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611:1 (May 2007) 78 and L. Cohen, *A Consumers Republic*.

While measures of consumer protection have indeed multiplied and continue to do so at a European level, it seems that the momentum for involving consumers within economic planning was soon squashed in Belgium.⁷ During the golden sixties, many activists and subscribers believed in a tight nexus between consumer and citizen: the consumer interest *was* the citizen interest. By the late seventies and eighties, the consumer interest was just another *special* interest. The political voice of the consumer was by then relevant to the process of shopping in the *market*, but no longer to the regulation of the *political economy*.⁸

How can this be explained? One could argue that in a neo-corporatist welfare state such as Belgium, there was too little room left for consumer activists. Unions and employers had already carved out a central position for themselves, which consumer movements have never had.⁹ There is some empirical evidence for this argument, evidence which I will discuss more in depth below. However, I would also argue that the privatization of consumer action was a deliberate strategy of one specific type of consumer movement.

Especially when subscribing to the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon model' of the non-political comparative testing movement, some consumer activists did not seem to expect much from the state on ideological grounds. Their main angle was facilitating a truly informed *individual* choice, which in turn strengthened the invisible hand of the market. Later on, public measures were seen by these activists as a form of competition, and hence as a potential deadly blow to the sale of consumer periodicals. The comparative testing movement depends on subscriptions, not only to sustain the organization but also to afford lobby activities and wages for an increasing number of technically educated staff. While they are formally non-profit organizations, they are not free from commercial motives.

Ultimately, consumer protection is a political and not a strictly technical issue. In Belgium, both ideological motives and profit incentives were particularly strong in the consumer scene. Consumerism became locked in an already fierce competition between different political movements (or 'pillars'). This intense competition further threatened the financial basis of these organizations, which was initially quite precarious.

This unique character of Belgian consumerism becomes all the more obvious when we make the comparison to other Western countries. Norway and Sweden, where public consumer bodies were active, have had consistent

7 This shift from the national to the European level was also analyzed by contemporaries. See for instance J. Poelmans *L'Europe et les consommateurs* (Paris 1978).

8 On the regulation concept see R. Boyer, *La théorie de la régulation: une analyse critique* (Paris 1986).

9 A. Siaroff, 'Corporatism in 24 industrial democracies: meaning and measurement', *European Journal of Political Research* 36 (1999) 166. DOI:10.1023/A:1007048820297.

consumerist policies and high levels of consumer protection. In Germany, consumerist groups coexisted rather harmoniously with a public foundation that publishes tests (the so-called *Stiftung Warentest*). Achievements in for instance the USA, France, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom were more modest and often fleeting in nature.¹⁰ However, in most of these countries as well, large private comparative testing movements supported interventionist policies. They were prepared to collaborate with governments from an early phase. The Belgian approach to consumer protection was quite different due to the intense politicization of the issue.

This article first discusses the foundation of two opposing consumer movements and the political context in which this happened. It then goes on to give a chronological overview of organized consumerism within the welfare state. During the sixties, the Belgian government first took note of the consumer interest. However, the newly established Council for Consumer Affairs paid little more than lip service. The energy crisis of 1973 led to a second phase, during which consumer movements became more self-conscious and the authorities more involved. However, a new public institution called the *Centre de Recherche et d'Information pour les Organisations des Consommateurs* (hereafter CRIOC) soon found itself paralyzed by the mutual fear among the technocratic consumerists. In a final phase, starting in the mid-seventies, the Belgian consumer movement *Test-Achats* (hereafter TA) launched some ambitious ideas for consumer welfare, which sidestepped their traditional action repertoire. The final turn towards privatization of consumer defense should be understood as a result of the failure of these new proposals. Above all, the Belgian case illustrates the crucial role of *ideology* in defining the outcomes of welfare state policies, even in matters that seem purely technical.

Children of the cold war: Belgian consumer movements between market and state

The postwar market was initially very much a sellers' market, controlled by producers. Government regulations were limited, and pertained mostly to basic food staples. This brought new risks for consumers, such as unlabeled or unhealthy pre-packaged foodstuffs, new medicines marketed through new forms of 'scientific' advertising and consumer credit rackets. Protective goggles for so-called harmful television beams were on sale and the indoor sunbed was presented as a good way to enjoy family time *with the children*.¹¹ Moreover, purchasing power in Western Europe was in general still quite low. This was perceived by the American diplomacy as a threat to Europe's political

10 G. Trumbull, *Consumer capitalism: politics, product markets and firm strategy in France and Germany* (New York 2006).

11 Test-Achats (May 1966).

stability. American Marshall aid provided a window of opportunity to address some of these issues.

US diplomats hoped to transform Europe into a more productive buyers' market – and a *common* market for consumer goods at that. US diplomacy also had the example of the American Consumers Union (hereafter CU) back home. They enthusiastically began to diffuse what they called 'the CU model' across Europe. While European consumer co-operatives had always stressed that consumption could be used to advance the working-class interest, the Americans launched a more technocratic solution: buying responsibly and intelligently. Engineers and laboratory staff were seen as the ideal consumer defenders.

In 1954, the Dutch were the first Europeans to undertake a so-called productivity mission to the United States devoted to the consumer interest. Benjamin Buitendijk of the newly formed *Consumentenbond* participated, as did members of the co-operatives and the Dutch Household Council.¹² In Belgium, family organizations and the female branches of the social-democratic movement had interest in the topic too. When the Belgians organized a study mission on consumerism to the Netherlands in 1958, all stakeholders agreed that a public umbrella organization for consumers, with the private organizations as board members, would be the best solution.¹³

However, resistance by the retail sector was particularly strong. The projected National Center for the Consumer, which would have been sponsored by the Belgian government for up to one million Francs, never became a reality.¹⁴ Those interested in organized consumerism soon set up their own organizations. *Test-Achats* and the *Union Féminine pour la Défense et l'Information du Consommateur* (hereafter UFIDEC) were founded respectively in 1957 and 1959.

TA's founder, Louis Darms, was an advertiser with good connections among the conservative wing of the Catholic Party. TA consistently promoted individual foresight as the best strategy for consumer protection, and there was even a hint of anti-communism in its insistence that co-operatives, working-class organizations or progressives could never be 'neutral' consumer defenders. However, TA's founder succeeded in attracting broad layers of the establishment, academics and the upper middle class to his project. TA published a high-brow magazine which initially featured complicated technical jargon rather than radical political demands. TA also took pride

12 Contactgroep Opvoering Productiviteit, *Welvaart en Konsumptie. Rapport Consumer Interest Team* (The Hague 1954) 11.

13 Office Belge pour l'accroissement de la Productivité, *Verdediging der verbruikersbelangen*.

Belgische zending naar Nederland 18-21 Februari 1958 (Brussels 1958), 19-35.

14 Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussel (hereafter ARA), *Office Belge pour l'accroissement de la Productivité* (hereafter OBAP), 169, *Productivité commerciale: programme 14 mars 1959*, 2.

in following the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which they defined as liberal, non-political and individualist.¹⁵

UFIDEC was an organization of social-democratic women. UFIDEC demanded more legal solutions for consumers and believed in strong collective action. UFIDEC felt that while CU did good work, a comparative testing organization had to be a *movement* rather than a *company*. UFIDEC recruited its rank-and-file by conviction, strong local networks and through artisanal propaganda. Rather than advertising the savings that *subscribers* could make, UFIDEC attracted *members* on the promise of political emancipation and social justice. A subscription to UFIDEC's magazine was also significantly cheaper than one for TA.

While the trivialities of testing peanut butter do not suggest it, consumer activists faced fundamental questions. Were commodification and commercialization neutral processes, which only had consequences on the micro-level of the household? Or could they cause inequalities, which had to be kept in check by public authorities? TA chose the former position, thereby continuing the catholic preference for individual responsibility, market-based solutions and a non-interventionist state.¹⁶ Its choice for education over protest was remarkably coherent with the Catholic and liberal approaches to social politics. In contrast, UFIDEC of course saw the world according to the latter paradigm. It was more interested in mobilizing the state for consumer protection, if need be by boycotts and collective action.¹⁷

For instance, UFIDEC's first media scoop was a law proposal on food safety. Shortly after that, TA made headlines by revealing that the 'Russian' SECA brand of gasoline offered the same quality as other brands but at a significantly lower price.¹⁸ TA thus stressed the individual gains that could be made from following their advices, rather than collective solutions to the failures of the market. Later on, UFIDEC advanced the Swedish legislation on product labeling as an example, while TA believed that assertive consumers could defend their own interests.¹⁹ After simultaneously revealing mass fraud with bread weights in 1977, UFIDEC filed a complaint in court whereas TA stated that it was skeptical about the efficiency of controls by a public administration. TA consistently advocated self-defense:

15 Test-Achats (September 1968, editorial).

16 Test-Achats (January 1966, Les associations des consommateurs refusent l'étatisation): 'we hold this principal as essential, that consumer action must come spontaneous'.

17 G. Vanwichelen, *Kritische doorlichting en evaluatie van de consumentenbeweging*, 28.

18 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L'histoire de Test-Achats. D'une revue de consommateurs à une multinationale* (Brussels 2005) 44.

19 Amsab-Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (hereafter Amsab), Archives of the Cooperative Women, board meeting 25 January 1963 and 4 December 1961 and C. Matton, *La défense des consommateurs en Belgique de 1957 à 1984: UFIDEC et Test-Achats* (unpublished MA-thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussels 2005) 140.

the consumer must be very specific about which type of bread he wants to buy, he must be attentive to the price and weight. If he determines abuse, he must alert the baker. If the bakers repeat the offense, TA recommends finding a new baker.²⁰

If UFIDEC was quite open about its social-democratic inspiration (which should not be mistaken for blind allegiance), TA was less transparent. TA consistently couched its ideological choices in a discourse of scientific objectivity and efficiency. By presenting itself as a neutral guardian of the marketplace, its preference for private as opposed to public solutions remained somewhat veiled. TA rarely reflected on the consequences of its political message or its limited social impact. Nor could it clarify how the different parameters of the consumer interest (safety, labour conditions, sustainability and so forth) could be calculated ‘objectively’.

Initially, both movements had ambitious plans. They hoped to set up local clubs (which, in the case of UFIDEC were already in place), deliver education in schools, negotiate with governments over legislation and offer customized judicial assistance.²¹ Lack of resources soon forced them to limit themselves to publishing a (bi-)monthly publication. The magazines discussed good and bad shopping habits, results of comparative tests and the general consumer interest.

Still, getting the financial resources to pay for the expensive testing procedures was a perennial problem that plagued TA during its first decade and eventually led to the dissolution of UFIDEC in 1984, when the social-democratic womens’ organizations no longer had enough money to support it. UFIDEC’s definition of the consumer interest was predominantly informed by the everyday experience of poverty and more austere in tone. Underfinanced, understaffed, often cautionary and repetitive, UFIDEC struggled to accept that postwar consumer society comprised more than food safety. While calling for legal injunctions and contrasting Western affluence to the poverty of the Third World, UFIDEC lacked the means to expand its message.

One of the most important factors in UFIDEC’s decline however, was the lack of human capital. TA was led by higher educated, male technicians, mostly from a well-heeled background. As economists, professors or engineers, their voices were perceived as more authoritative than those of the stagnating social-democratic womens’ associations. As working-class women who ideologically opposed commercialism, UFIDEC’s rank-and-file lacked the connections or means to launch certain political proposals or sell the organization in a fashionable way. Moreover, marginalizing UFIDEC’s political

20 ‘Mouvements des consommateurs’. In *Courrier Hebdomadaire du Centre de Recherche et d’information socio-politiques* [hereafter CRISP] 33 (1977) 15.

21 Test-Achats (January 1977, republishing of the original Bulletin de Liaison de Test-Achats).

project had literally become a matter of life and death for TA. It accrued profits to hire new, professionally trained staff while UFIDEC had a small staff and a lot of volunteers. This imbalance will emerge clearly in the proposals for giving consumers a political voice. TA, much more vocal and dynamic than UFIDEC, usually played the dominant part in these negotiations.

The Belgian council for consumer affairs (1964-1973): containing the consumer

While organized consumerism was struggling to collect resources, it was easy to ignore it. But by 1963, consumer movements had gained some public legitimacy. The country was moreover troubled by a rising cost-of-living index and tensions between labour and capital.²² One of the solutions proposed by social-democrat minister of Economy Antoon Spinoy was to reform and broaden the process of social-economic concertation. Spinoy envisioned a merger of the two main neo-corporatist bodies to discuss both social *and* economic aspects of regulations in the same arena.²³ His plans would also allow the incorporation of other stakeholders (e.g. farmers or consumers) in the regulation of the political economy.

Vercauteren and Wijnens have analyzed how Spinoy's proposals for a unified Social-Economic council met resistance and eventually failure.²⁴ The foundation of a separate Council for Consumer Affairs was a direct consequence of this failure. It kept the dream of broadened concertation alive without stepping on sensitive toes.

The Council for Consumer Affairs²⁵ was eventually established in February 1964 within the Ministry of Economic Affairs. This was the first public recognition of the consumer-producer cleavage as a phenomenon that deserved sustained political attention. Compared to other European countries, this recognition came fairly late.²⁶ By 1955, the Dutch government had for instance already united all stakeholders in the consultative Consumenten Contact Orgaan (CCO).

22 T. Luyckx, *Politieke geschiedenis van België* (Amsterdam 1978) 513.

23 I refer to the Central Economic Council (*Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven*) and the National Labour Council (*Nationale Arbeidsraad*).

24 The result was not a merger but a new separate council with less power. G. Vercauteren and I. Wijnens 'Een twee-eiige tweeling? De institutionele scheiding tussen het federale 'sociale' en het 'economische' overleg (1944-1983), *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 34 (2004) 231-287.

25 This is my own translation for what is known in Dutch as *Raad voor Verbruik*.

26 Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Austria, West-Germany and the United Kingdom all set up councils on household consumption and consumer defense, either ad hoc or structurally. Amsab, Archives of the Cooperative Women, report 18 March 1958 and M. Hilton *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain. The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge 2003) 220.

The Belgian Council was however not a direct channel between government and consumer representatives but rather a roundtable for oppositional groups. Consumer advocates were included alongside producers, retailers and ‘independent’ experts. Yet in contrast to other tri-partisan bodies, the council had no regulatory powers whatsoever apart from offering advices.²⁷ As a result, consumers gained a political voice in the side issues, not the essentials.

There was moreover a tremendous gap between the ideal and the practice of consultation. Since unanimous advices were almost never given, the Council lacked the credibility that discouraged ministers from ‘burying the advices in cardboard boxes within the ministry’.²⁸ The Council did not have any real funding or staff to investigate specific topics.²⁹ Cooperation with the department of Economic Affairs left much to be desired. To order books and documentation, Council members had to fill out several slips. It took three months to procure the large-sized envelopes to send out the first Council reports, while typing assignments were sloppily executed.³⁰

The weak status of the Council was attributed to sustained protest of trade unions and employers.³¹ But perhaps policy-makers were blaming others for hindering a job they were not really prepared to take up themselves.³² Public declarations on the need for consumer protection – even those by social-democratic politicians – always used commonplace arguments such as the haste of modern life or a broadening of consumer choice.³³ But the cases on which the Council worked basically dealt with the abuse of economic power and serious legislative gaps. Welfare state involvement meant hurting interests and possibly rethinking values that had only just been established as core of the welfare state: productivity, economic development and full employment policies. Consumer problems were not just the result of the ‘haste of modern life’: they were caused by producers and retailers.

Still, unions and employers clearly did not want to see their power dissipate in favour of another interest group. When consumer movements were founded in Belgium and the Netherlands, they created a scandal among

27 E.g. the commission that supervised prices or the tripartite Control Committee for Gas and Electricity. See E. Witte and A. Meynen, *België na 1945* (Antwerpen 2006) 379.

28 Amsab, Société Générale Coopérative (hereafter SGC) 9582 and 9584, *Le Conseil de la Consommation*, Council Meeting 2 June 1967 and 3 April 1968.

29 Amsab, SGC, 9584, 4 February 1970.

30 Amsab, SGC, 9580 Council meeting, 9 November 1967.

31 Amsab, SGC, 9580 Council meeting, 9 November 1967.

32 While the Belgian minister of Public Health condemned the use of citric acid in beer, he allowed the repletion of existing stocks. L. Darms ‘Le malaise consommateur’ *La Revue Nouvelle*, 15 September 1962.

33 Amsab, SGC, 9577, Parole de Simonet, cabinet of the Ministry of Economic Affairs 1964.

business communities. Companies sued them because they were given bad ratings or denied a right to answer – even if such a response consisted of barely concealed advertising.

Consumer organizations also posed a challenge to the trade unions. Especially the social-democratic white-collar trade union *BTTK* reacted stung. While *BTTK* recognized the legitimacy of consumer concerns, it expressed a low esteem for the new consumer *spokesmen*, particularly the more liberal-minded *TA* and its founder, the technocratic advertiser. In *BTTK*'s viewpoint, the 'non-political' Anglo-Saxon type of consumer organization was a hastily organized and improvising movement that stood powerless in the face of organized business:

Consumer defense is a fashionable theme, which lends itself as a springboard for ambitious [individuals] or ideological interests [...]. When the individual acts as producer, he can focus his efforts on one particular issue. The same cannot be done when acting as consumer, who has to get involved in many different battles of which the outcome is uncertain.³⁴

BTTK made a sharp analysis of the situation, but then threw away the baby with the bathwater. Consumer defense was a difficult matter in 1962. However, that did not make it an inconsequential form of social mobilization for the future. The treatise on consumers and economic power in the *BTTK* journal neglected the challenge that functional specialization posed for the unions. The interests of the consumer who was also a wage worker were potentially conflicting. Consumer movements were not interested in keeping companies afloat that produced an inferior product. Bad reviews in *TA* actually drove a lot of smaller Belgian companies into bankruptcy.³⁵ During the eighties, *TA* moreover challenged the rights of public service employees to strike.³⁶

A review of the first two terms of the Council shows that it never really became a powerful political arena for consumer interests. Producers and retailers easily dominated the other participants. The Council initially consisted of nine consumer representatives, three business representatives and four experts in distribution or product normalization.³⁷ However, the last group tended to side with the producer interest rather consistently. The expertise of *TA*, *UFIDEC*, the Family League and the other women's associations was moreover weak and disorganized compared to that of business, who sent out well-paid professional representatives. Divisiveness reigned in the consumer scene. Belgian politicians had recognized the two consumer

34 *De bediende: ledenblad Bond der Bedienden, Technici en Kaderleden* (May 1962).

35 Interview Willy Van Rijckeghem by the author, 2014.

36 Ghent University Archives (hereafter Ughent), Archives Willy Van Rijckeghem (hereafter *wvr*)

127, Conseil du Consommation 3 December 1980 and 120, board meeting *TA*, 3 June 1980, 28 October 1980; *Humo* (September 1980).

37 *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 2 April 1964, article 3.

movements strictu sensu as official consumer representatives, but they had also acknowledged the Christian-democratic and social-democratic co-operatives, the Family League, several women's groups and the three major Belgian trade unions as such. Because the powerful trade unions did not commit to consumer politics, the Council never gained an authoritative position.

Consumer representatives could not agree on a joint program, even though they were paradoxically united in a European contact group for consumers. Their input in the Belgian Council was described by a social-democrat as "neither active, competent nor coherent".³⁸ During the very first meeting of November 1964, the representative of the Federation of Industries attacked the "consumerist" discourse, arguing that producers and consumers had the same interests. He objected to the mere mention of the term "decision-making" in official records, but also to setting up subcommittees and to the possibility of making council reports public. These discussions all ended favourably for the Federation.³⁹

On top of that, TA and (parts of) the social-democratic pillar grew increasingly hostile. With different ideologies being defended by rather intransigent personalities, the Belgian consumer movements never overcame their differences. TA's anti-socialist director Gilbert Castelain scandalized the presence of the social-democratic co-operative more than he did that of the Belgian Federation of Industry. Meanwhile Roger Ramaekers, leader of the social-democratic co-operative and in control of the funding of the women's organizations, denounced TA's "limited vision" and called them ordinary paper salesmen.⁴⁰

The Council shows that those managing the welfare state during *les trentes glorieuses* recognized that they could not bypass this new interest group, but they were not prepared to fully include them. Economic growth was more important than a vocal consumer. In an age that coupled steady rises in purchasing power with a general optimism about the market, the disruptive potential of consumer movements was too limited to command real participation. One very important reason for this disconnect was the gender gap. During the sixties, organized consumerism was still considered something of a women's concern. The Belgian government, an all-male bastion, did not consult a council dealing with the "soft" matters of household consumption to inform its overall macro-economic policy.⁴¹ That only changed when economic downturn occurred.

38 Amsab, SGC, 9577, Note de synthèse relative au fonctionnement du Conseil, 5 March 1969.

39 Amsab, SGC, 9580, council meeting November 1964.

40 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L'histoire de Test-Achats*, 54 and interview Castelain, 46 and 60.

41 'Le conseil n'a pas pu nouer avec le gouvernement des rapports qui [...] auraient permis de dégager des grandes lignes de la politique à suivre. Les quelques avis rendus par le conseil n'ont pas reçu l'audience qu'ils méritent'. Amsab, SGC, 9577, Note de synthèse relative au fonctionnement du Conseil, 5 March 1969.

Energy crisis and the struggle for the CRIOC (1975-1981)

The oil crisis of 1973 shocked the Belgian economy. Paradoxically, this also engendered the break-through of consumerism in the political arena. Mounting inflation led the then minister of Economic Affairs Willy Claes, again a social-democrat, to start up the Mercator campaign. The campaign intended to make consumers aware of their economic influence.⁴² Claes was not convinced that the general rise in price levels was related only to the measures of the OPEC cartel.⁴³ It was indeed not uncommon for Belgian producers to use any world crisis to speculate with resources and prices.⁴⁴ But Claes found only weak partners in the consumer movement and began to believe that defending consumers was essentially the role of the state.⁴⁵

Measured by the number of participants who requested the ministerial brochure on consumer awareness, the Mercator campaign was a success. For the first time, Belgian business communities began to fear that consumers would find 'a potent partner in the state'. This potential public-private nexus was such a shock that the business community openly questioned the legitimacy of doing comparative testing without 'adequate' supervising. The Federation of Belgian Industries expressed its hopes for an 'organized dialogue' between consumer movements and their *partners*, 'the producers and retailers'.⁴⁶

In reality, global business communities had no intention whatsoever to befriend the consumer movement. With the rise of Ralph Nader and the consolidation of several strong national consumer movements across Europe, organized consumerism left its noncommittal 'toaster testing' phase behind. More fundamental values, such as waste and equality, were now being debated in a context of global economic crisis.

Criticized both by business and public authorities, the Belgian consumer movements decided to take unanimous action. In 1974, TA, UFIDEC and the Family League held their first joint press conference. They asked for participation in the commission for Control on gas and electricity and the newly founded Commission for control on the petroleum sector. The energy crisis was advanced as a reason to adjust the tripartite nature of (parts of) social-economic concertation.⁴⁷ And there were other new ideas. In April

42 'Mouvements des consommateurs.' CRISP, 31 (October 1975) 3.

43 H. Gaus (ed.) *Politiek-biografisch lexicon van de Belgische Ministers en Staatssecretarissen, 1960-1980* (Antwerpen 1989) 133.

44 National Archives and Records Administration Washington DC, Record Group 84, Foreign Service Posts, Belgian Embassy, 157, 'hoarding in Belgium', 17 July 1950.

45 'Mouvements des consommateurs.' CRISP, 31 (October 1975) 3.

46 P. Van den Abeele, 'Consumentenbeleid en consumentenonderzoek', *Tijdschrift voor Economie en Management* 20:4 (1975) 515-522.

47 Ughent WVR, 27, Joint Press Conference April 1974.

1975, the consumer group within the Council for Consumer Affairs issued an advice on the institutional tools for consumer politics in Belgium. It mentioned a unified and powerful administration for consumer protection, an economic magistracy, a technical research institute and a consumer ombudsman, as in Sweden.⁴⁸ Only one of these ambitious ideas would materialize during the seventies: the public institute for consumer affairs. But here again, ideological differences impacted the outcomes.

Public consumer institutions already existed in Northern Europe and France. Frans Van Mechelen, the influential president of the Family League who wanted more ambitious research on macro-economic policies for consumers, introduced the idea in Belgium. Van Mechelen also claimed that the energy crisis had made the consumer challenge insurmountable for private comparative testing organizations. Indoors, TA basically agreed with this analysis. In public however, it opposed such an institute because it could threaten their commercial survival.⁴⁹ Seen from a zero-sum perspective, such public institutes could indeed be perceived as competitors. However, TA's rejection of a public consumer institute was not based on evidence, but rather on an entrenched suspicion against public interference. TA ignored the fact that such centers could offer more sustained defense and information programs than they could, while also removing financial barriers to consumer education and perhaps strengthen the existing movements.⁵⁰

TA's connection to the Catholic establishment paid off when it began to lobby *against* a powerful public body for consumers. Gilbert Castelain (TA) recounted how his connections with minister André Oleffe (a Christian-democrat) eventually led to a center that served not the consumer-citizen, but the *organizations*:

I didn't like a [public] Center for Research and Information of the Consumer. And we in TA have done everything to make it into a Center for Research and Information of Consumer Organizations or CRIOC. The CRIOC could not directly address the consumer, being a publicly sponsored organism (sic), but it could address the public through the consumer movements.⁵¹

The Center for Research and Information for Consumer Organizations (hereafter CRIOC) was eventually inaugurated in 1975 with the goal to *aid* the consumer movements, promote the consumer interest and stimulate – but not take up – the defense of consumers. CRIOC's board consisted of representatives of all consumer movements, including co-operative movements and trade

48 'Mouvements des consommateurs.' CRISP 31 (1975), 5.

49 Frans Van Mechelen, 'Consumenteninstituut noodzakelijk', *De Standaard*, June 5 1973.

50 Ibidem, 6 and 'Mouvements des consommateurs.' CRISP 33 (1977) 4.

51 Interview Gilbert Castelain, 60.

unions. It received a yearly subsidy by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, who also had one representative.⁵²

CRIOC seems a successful example of a public-private mix for consumer welfare, perhaps even the typical result of the Belgian consociational democracy.⁵³ In reality, its delicate position warranted a lot of internal conflict. Where did communication with the public begin? What did the different consumer movements really expect from CRIOC? The commercial interests of the existing consumer movements meant that CRIOC's range of action, paid for by taxpayers' money, was severely curbed.

CRIOC was thus not a success for *consumers*. In 1980, the socialist pillar pressed for a new structure for CRIOC, including a scientific coordinator and more comprehensive support to the consumer groups.⁵⁴ TA was able to actually avert the reform. It also blocked a CRIOC publication on legal reform from the public. TA reported (internally) on CRIOC's activities in the following vein:

1980 was a turbulent year as far as the CRIOC is concerned. Some have basically tried to overhaul its current structure in order to completely seize it. This manoeuvre has failed: the current director remains employed, there will not be a scientific coordinator, the president of the board remains [...] a part-time controller and ad hoc study groups will continue to prepare and execute all research projects (in these groups we are present). Still, we remain convinced that some permanently try to turn CRIOC into a national Consumers' Institute and use public money to make our life difficult. We are envied for our success.⁵⁵

TA even requested a significant decrease in CRIOC's budgets. This budget cut was 'granted' by the governments Martens v and vi (headed by Prime Minister Wilfried Martens) in 1982 as part of a broader turn toward neoliberal accents.

In the end, CRIOC played an important role in battling tobacco advertising. It also collected valuable studies and documentation for the consumer movements during the nineties. But these achievements stopped short of the ambitions expressed in the early seventies, when Van Mechelen and the social-democrats wanted to model CRIOC to the powerful Swedish Konsumentverket (Consumer Council). CRIOC had very little public renown and gained little relevance for policy makers. This outcome reflected not the

52 CRIOC, *Aktiviteiten verslag dienstjaar 1976* (Brussels 1977) 5.

53 Considering that marketing specialist and retailers initially wanted to be included in the institute, CRIOC's final design was indeed a modest success.

See Van den Abeele, 'Consumentenbeleid en consumentenonderzoek', 522.

54 Amsab, Archives of the Cooperative Women, 144, meeting 3 March 1980.

55 Ughent, WVR, 13, note of Counye on TA's action repertoire, 1980.

inherent weakness of the consumer interest, but the ideological choices and conflicts of certain consumer activists. TA depended on sales and therefore feared creating a competitor, even if this competitor had the public interest in mind.

Experiments and privatization (1971-1982): TA's proposals for alternative social policies

After the golden sixties and with debates about the welfare state in full swing, the notion of the consumer interest had nonetheless become more disruptive. During a 1971 academic congress, several young economists had urged for more economic democracy by letting consumers and wage-workers jointly determine the goals of production in a planned economy.⁵⁶ Ralph Nader's visit to Belgium in 1973 was a widely mediatized event. The so-called countercultural critiques of May 1968 on the mass consumer society entered the mainstream as gloomy predictions on the economy became real after the oil crisis. Confronted with these challenges and in danger of losing their audience, comparative testing organizations had to re-invent themselves.

While non-interventionism had become the default position of the majority within TA's board, certain board members of TA did offer some unconventional social policy measures. Especially Willy Van Rijckeghem, a professor in economics, self-proclaimed neo-Keynesian, president of the International Organization of Consumer Unions and participant in several development missions by international organizations (e.g. the International Labour Organization and the Inter-American Development Bank) played a key role in this creative turn. Two of TA's proposals will be discussed in more detail: the basic needs economy and the idea of local consumer information centers.

These ideas had the potential of transforming consumer society, providing more collective forms of consumer protection. Their history presents a more balanced view of the postwar consumer movement and the challenges it faced. Although not every TA-member was a free-market fundamentalist, the ideology adopted by TA in the late fifties caused a deadlock during the seventies. TA co-opted more radical ideas, but was not powerful enough to bring them into practice. Its short-lived overture towards a more political path also illustrates the resilience of the organization.⁵⁷ During the same period, UFIDEC's main focus was the same it had always been: food safety. While its work in this field was valuable, UFIDEC lost the battle

56 ARA, OBAP, 678 Tenth Flemish Scientific Economic Conference: business in the service of the consumer; *De Standaard*, 26 April 1971 and *De Vlaamse Spektator*, 24 April 1971.

57 There was resistance within TA's board against participating in the public sphere with 'political' arguments. Ughent, WVR, 7, seminar 20 May 1974.

for mediagenic performances. By the early eighties, the once powerful mass movement for female consumers had become a small player with a modest, almost unfashionable periodical.

Basic needs economy

In 1976, TA organized a conference on macro-economic policy starring its director Willy Van Rijckeghem. Van Rijckeghem held a plea for a national economy that catered to the basic needs of its citizens while procuring sustainable domestic employment at the same time.⁵⁸ The plan showed similarities with the radical New Deal recipes advocated by Colston Warne, president of CU, during the thirties and late forties.⁵⁹ In this type of *planned* economy, consumer needs and production factors were matched more thoroughly.

Public health, public transport and housing were just a few of the sectors that Van Rijckeghem considered deficient, and in need of public investment. TA even temporarily renounced individual consumer sovereignty by suggesting that individual gains for the consumer (in the form of higher incomes) were not a priority. Instead, it suggested nudging demand towards sectors that created local employment and supported welfare state policies.⁶⁰ Van Rijckeghem's proposals, as advanced in name of TA, very much anticipated the future developments of the welfare state. Although Belgium had a decent model of social security in place since the late forties, it was not necessarily able to deliver all citizens a decent standard of living. Health care was one example. For a country in which the public sphere was according to Van Rijckeghem 'preoccupied with dieting', Belgium had a remarkably high account of deficiency diseases among children, especially those of poor families.⁶¹ The health of the Belgian working-class population was consistently lower than that of its Western-European neighbours. Van Rijckeghem thus urged for preventive, rather than curative health care. This even included better working conditions and less environmental pollution.

Housing was another field in which the consumer ideal did not necessarily match Belgian reality.⁶² The number of unsanitary homes had actually risen between 1961 and 1971. For almost a third of the Belgian population the ideal middle class home was unattainable. Four out of ten houses did not have an indoor toilet, half of all houses had neither a bath nor

58 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies face à la crise* (Brussels 1978) 30 and *Trends*, 15 October 1977.

59 *New York Times*, 8 February 1931.

60 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies*, 44.

61 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies*, 31.

62 P. De Decker 'Dismantling or Pragmatic Adaptation? On the Restyling of Welfare and Housing Policies in Belgium', *International Journal of Housing Policy* 4:3 (2001) 276.

a shower and 75 percent lacked central electric heating in 1977.⁶³ Belgian housing policy was an example of what sociologist Herman Deleeck had identified in 1975 as the Matthew effect. This means that social policy is designed in a non-inclusive way and hence benefits better-off groups more than weaker social groups. In practice, Belgium had not so much a housing policy as a policy of promoting home ownership while ignoring tenants. Van Rijckeghem hence advocated means-tested subsidies for home improvements. He also stressed the need for better education of the ‘often overlooked’ first-generation immigrants, many of whom were illiterate.⁶⁴ Finally, he urged governments to update their fiscal policy so that activities which fulfilled basic needs received more support than wasteful economic activities. One of the first examples he mentioned was recycling.

But who had to pay for such an ambitious project? To a limited extent, Van Rijckeghem wanted to nudge private capital into specific projects. To the dismay of insurance companies’ representatives, he counted on private savings and most of all on contributions from insurance companies. Yet the main source of funding lay elsewhere:

The rich Western countries [...] have obtained such a level of affluence that it becomes possible, if one really wishes it, to satisfy the fundamental needs of all individuals. But this would require a redistribution of the existing revenues which might encounter strong resistance. Without excluding such a redistribution, it seems nonetheless preferable to satisfy the fundamental choices by driving up the domestic product through a better utilization of underutilized means. A [...] solution which is no doubt more fundamental [than redistribution of the existing riches, GN], is the search for a new repartition of the fruits of higher productivity.⁶⁵

Van Rijckeghem wanted to reallocate future economic *growth* – as opposed to the ‘more radical’ solution of redistributing the existing wealth – by setting up a separate fund. The fund would be used to create jobs in the basic needs sectors he had identified. This plan owned something to the strategic social funds that were contemplated in Sweden around the same time by Gustav Meidner. The difference was that while Meidner specifically charged large companies and shareholders to line these public funds through a share levy⁶⁶, Van Rijckeghem suggested that the employees and capital owners of the most productive sectors gave up some of their gains.

The logic behind Van Rijckeghem’s proposal is particularly interesting, as it illustrates TA’s somewhat hostile attitude towards trade unions. Van Rijckeghem equalled higher productivity with lower prices for the consumer. He then reified this rather simple and contemporary observation into an

63 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies*, 34.

64 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies*, 35.

65 *Le chômage: interprétations et stratégies*, 40-41.

66 R. Blackburn ‘Economic Democracy: Meaningful, Desirable, Feasible?’, *Daedalus* 136:3 (2007) 43.

economic law; this certainly had to be the ‘normal situation’. Whether improving labour conditions, as he himself advocated, was compatible with cheaper products and services, remained unquestioned. Van Rijckeghem then stated that the Belgian model for social-economic concertation made the country deviate from this principle because increased productivity led *not* to lower consumer prices, but to higher *wages*. He claimed that the *general* wage rise of the past years did not necessarily coincide with increased productivity in *specific* sectors. Therefore – according to his analysis – the old system of concertation had to be completely readjusted. However, social-economic concertation was at the time a sectoral matter, rather than a national one. It was not necessarily true that less-productive workers received exaggerated wages because of the social-economic concertation. This argument on the warping effect of higher wages pertained to the discourse of employers.⁶⁷

TA’s proposal for a basic needs economy was nonetheless an ambitious attempt to surpass both the free market and the traditional recipes of deficit spending. The plan was also a controversial solicitation of the consumer movement to join macro-economic planning.⁶⁸ Van Rijckeghem’s consumerist proposals would have thoroughly modified the balance between capital and labour that had been negotiated in the Joint Declaration on Productivity (1954) and institutionalized within successive wage-bargaining rounds.⁶⁹ Hence, the plan was never adopted.

Local information centers

Around that same time, TA considered setting up local information centers for consumers. Similar initiatives had appeared in the United Kingdom, where small clubs of volunteers checked local prices, offered advice and denounced consumer scandals under the wings of the Consumer Association, another comparative testing organization.⁷⁰ This was very much a matter of spontaneous community organizing. But faithful to the Belgian recipe of subsidized liberty and its own habit of keeping tight control, Belgian TA saw local centers as a way to strengthen its own enterprise with support of public funding.

TA set up its first information center – located in a large Brussels shopping mall – in 1976 with a promise for financial support from the Brussels municipal government.⁷¹ In Van Rijckeghem’s words, ‘specialized

67 In itself, these rising wages do not explain the end of economic growth in the late seventies. See R. Savage, *Economie Belge, 1953-2000: ruptures et mutations*. (Louvain-La Neuve 2004) 34.

68 *Trends*, 1 November 1977.

69 D. Luyten, *Sociaal-economisch overleg in België sedert 1918, 166-173*.

70 This was the counterpart to the Dutch *Consumentenbond*, Belgian TA and American CU. See M. Hilton *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain. The Search for a Historical Movement*. (Cambridge 2003) 213.

71 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L’histoire de Test-Achats*, 123.

teams able to offer a wide range of services to the local communities, including advice on large purchases, budgetary planning and matters of housing' were an indispensable part of the basic needs approach.⁷²

This window of opportunity for TA was created by the reform of the local institutions for social assistance. A groundbreaking 1974 law redefined poverty aid as a right, rather than a favour. It led to an institutional reform of the local Commissions for Public Aid (the so-called COO's) into *Centres Publics d'Aide Sociale* or CPAS (legally in 1976, in practice only after 1978 after the fusion of municipalities). Theoretically, CPAS were broader in nature.⁷³ The welfare state had made the commitment to not only assist welfare recipients with *money*, but also to address the social and psychological dimensions of poverty. Social assistance now had to enable *every citizen* to live 'in conditions conforming to human dignity'.⁷⁴ Local authorities were faced with an imminent reform of which the limits and modalities were still unclear. They had to rethink the social services offered to their inhabitants. Although TA had stated in 1957 that the working-class was not its core audience, it now saw the benefits of offering 'community services' rather than just publishing an expensive magazine.⁷⁵ Plans were made to set up at least ten new centers in Ghent, Antwerp, Bruges, Waver, Liège, Namur, Mons and Charleroi. In all cases, support from the CPAS or city councils was vital for the financial survival of the project.⁷⁶

During the preparatory phase, TA's board discussed possible measures to make the centers accessible for a wide range of audiences. Staff members had to be higher educated, but preferably in the humanities. More than it had ever done before, TA wanted to attract public-minded individuals interested in human problems, rather than all-knowing technicians who judged commodities. TA was moreover acutely aware that high-profile university students might not be the best communicators towards '*Monsieur et Madame tout le monde*'. The centers should reach an audience that relied less frequently on the written word, as its director Castelain explained on TV.⁷⁷ To avoid scaring less-well-heeled housewives away, the centers would have specific opening hours, a display of household objects and a children's corner. The board meetings stated a preference for female staff members – even though the televised

72 *Le Chomage: interpretations et strategies*, 42.

73 J. Vranken 'Het OCMW: dertig jaar onderweg naar een recht op maatschappelijke dienstverlening', in: J. Vranken (ed.) *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting. Jaarboek 2005* (Leuven 2005) 152-163.

74 M. Bouverne-De Bie 'Laat ons de geschiedenis meenemen, 30 jaar OCMW', *OCMW-visie* 6 (2007) 8-13. This philosophy was somewhat adjusted in the 2002 law on Social Integration.

75 TA explicitly committed itself to serve only the 'intelligent middle class' and the male '*chef de*

famille'. Ughent, WVR, 111, Political charter of TA by Louis Darms (1958).

76 Ughent, WVR, 15, *note sur l'état des pourparlers concernant l'ouverture d'autres centres d'informations* (1979) and 123 *Rapport sur le développement des centres d'information* (1981).

77 Televised coverage by the Belgian Public Broadcasting Company on TA's information center on 22 January 1979, retrieved on <http://oldportal.euscreen.eu> (1 March 2015).

coverage of their first center in Brussels featured a reassuring gentleman in a tidy suit.⁷⁸ TA's plan was to give consumers pre-shopping information (it even used the uncharacteristic term of 'real needs'), legal advice and social-economic education. For those recently fired, those looking for the best conditions on a loan or for those duped consumers who wanted legal action, the centers had to give *free* guidance. An impressive brainstorm on possible activities took place within the board. In August, seminars on 'social climbing through alternative forms of education' were planned for college graduates who had failed their first term. For pensioners, guided tours in old-people's homes were projected. Seminars on how to save energy were considered particularly topical.⁷⁹ For children and families, there would be coloring games, quizzes and product demonstrations.⁸⁰ The centerpiece of all these efforts was TA's product database, which could be accessed freely in the center on a terminal. The Brussels center served as a test case for the whole endeavor. During its first year, it attracted the impressive number of 40,000 visitors.

Such consumerist local initiatives were popular among politicians as well. Municipalities such as Antwerp, Huy and Wilrijk already had council members who took up consumer affairs or developed collective action in this field.⁸¹ There were many more local politicians who looked favourably upon TA's plans. But there were also adversaries. TA reported internally that a local tradesman, who happened to be a city council member, was ill-disposed towards their proposals because it could harm his own interests.⁸²

But after two years of careful negotiation and planning, TA's promising plans collapsed completely. One of the most conspicuous reasons for failure was that the staff member who managed the project, stole the cash register of the Brussels center and disappeared.⁸³ After filing a complaint and sending out a new project manager, TA discovered that the enthusiasm of the local municipalities and CPAS for co-founding consumer centers was more mooted than the employee had suggested. Funding from the Brussels city council actually never came through. TA could hence no longer afford an office in a popular shopping mall such as City 2. The Brussels information center was continued for one more year in TA's own office. After 1981, it was replaced by telephone-based advice for paying subscribers only.

Why did local authorities promise support only to withdraw it once the plans became more concrete? Perhaps they had concluded that TA offered

78 Ughent, wvr, 16, board meeting 25 September 1978 and *Note concernant les centre locaux des consommateurs* (1978).

79 Ughent, wvr, 15, *actions prévues à City 2 pour la fin de l'année 1979*.

80 Ughent, wvr, 16, board meeting 25 September 1978 and *Note concernant les centre locaux des consommateurs* (1978).

81 Ughent, wvr, 123 *Rapport sur le developpement des centres d'information* (1981) and M. Driesen *Vivec*, 1959-1984, 118.

82 Ughent, wvr, 121, *note au conseil du 3 mars 1980 (centres locaux)*.

83 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L'histoire de Test-Achats*, 143.

an uneven bargain, in which public authorities would have more burdens than benefits. The local centers would have been managed by TA but paid for by the public authorities, who thus had little control over the staff members. Total costs included staff, prestigious office space and a contractual payment of 50,000 Belgian Francs each year for TA's services as a private subcontractor to public welfare.⁸⁴ TA never completely forgot its own objective, which was first and foremost expanding its customer database. Board meetings spoke of the centers as places for data-mining. Visitors were given free information but then convinced to subscribe to TA.⁸⁵ Incidentally, a lack of new subscriptions was the main reason for relinquishing the Brussels experiment.⁸⁶

In TA's philosophy, the considerable savings individuals could make by reading the magazine compensated subscription costs.⁸⁷ But this assumption surely did not apply to every consumer. Lacking any experience in social work, TA was moreover not prepared for the multidimensional nature of social exclusion and poverty, which the CPAs had to remedy. In their insistence on popular shopping quarters, they showed little understanding of the geography of poverty. Finally, most questions handled in the Brussels center dealt with notarial advice and expensive household durables. The information centers had a middle-class bias.⁸⁸

The projected cooperation between private and public actors showed other salient features. Informal contacts between TA's board members and local politicians served to set up the first plans for local centers. Contingency and mutual understanding thus became more important than a reasoned, well-designed set-up of information centers in locations that really needed consumer advice. Since TA's board members were already quite well-heeled, the plans could reinforce the inequality between local communities, which was the *major* unresolved problems of the reform of the CPAs.⁸⁹ Matters of accountability to the public were nowhere mentioned in TA's euphoric, but rather superficial project notes on the centers. TA also had a history of holding tight control and allowing little participation when it teamed up with

84 In these days, the Belgian federal government paid a substantial part of the wages to companies that absorbed part of the massive youth unemployment. Such employees were known as 'Bijzonder Tijdelijk Kader'. Ughent, *wvr*, 15, board meeting 21 November 1978.

85 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L'histoire de Test-achats*, 123.

86 W. Van Rijckeghem, *Ibid.*, 143.

87 Interview Ivo Mechels of TA by the author, 2013.

88 Questions posed by the visitors to City 2 involved mainly purchasing advice (40%), judicial advice

(40%) and 'social' questions (8–10%). Ughent, *wvr*, 15, board meeting of TA, 23 January 1979 and 20 March 1979.

89 Ughent, *wvr*, 15, board meeting of TA, 21 November 1978: 'dans l'objectif du financement des centres d'information locaux, Yves Génin demande aux membres du conseil leur intervention éventuelle auprès des administrations communales de couleur politique variée, où ils auraient quelque influence'.

partners.⁹⁰ But as the history of their own unscrupulous project manager showed, employees with the skills, experience or ethics to deal with the task at hand were an invaluable asset. TA's plans for information centers had design flaws that could have made them another prime example of a Matthew's effect: a policy that benefitted those who least needed it.

As this grassroots approach to expansion was dwarfed, TA identified two alternative strategies to grow. The first was getting more media attention by taking up the role of assertive watchdog. Once UFIDEC disappeared, TA approached this job with even more professional commitment. The second strategy was offering an insurance policy to its paying members.⁹¹ This included a hotline for questions, legal advice on demand and cheaper tariffs for certain services. By building this private ombuds service for subscribers only, the privatization of consumer assistance took a decisive turn. Unlike in e.g. Germany or Puerto Rico, plans for a publically paid and easily accessible service for consumers were never again made in Belgium.⁹²

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that consumer movements were initially referred to the margins of the welfare state, as unsuccessful players in a consultative council. Consumer movements were not able to revert the focus on economic growth and full employment policies into one on increased consumer welfare. Like the trade unions, they missed a historical opportunity to overcome the compartmentalization of citizen's interests.

While the economic crisis of the seventies provided an opportunity to tie the consumer interest to the welfare state more closely, the outcome (an amputated public center known as CRIOC) was less than optimal. As the most dynamic Belgian consumer movement, TA played a very important role in the final outcome of the negotiations, in which its specific ideological agenda and its commercial model took prominence. Yet these features simultaneously jeopardized TA's position as contractors of even more public social welfare. Their plans for local information centers were fraught between opposing logics.

The Keynesian welfare state increasingly took the character of a service provider, rather than a powerful broker between labor and capital. Consumer movements reflected the same evolution. Despite delivering some very original ideas on social policy and slowly constructing consumerist awareness among the general population, consumer movements have not dealt with

90 J. Steif 'L'information comme mode d'action des organisations de consommateurs' *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 18:1 (1977) 103-106 and *Larousse Journal de l'année 1975* (consummation-protection).

91 W. Van Rijckeghem, *L'histoire de Test-Achats*, 158.

92 After the dissolution of CRIOC in 2015, plans were made to start up such a general ombudsservice at the federal level. The result has actually not been an ombudsservice, but rather a hotline.

issues of social stratification or the limits of the commodification process. For private and public actors alike, these challenges remain out in the open.

Giselle Nath (1989) worked as a fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders within the Social History Research Group at Ghent University. She worked on food crises, gendered social protest and consumerism as an international social movement. She defended her dissertation ‘Shaping consumer interests: Belgian consumer movements between technocracy, social democracy and Cold War internationalization (1957-2000)’ in 2016. Recently, she published ‘Reproducing or contesting the global? Belgian organized consumerism and its international entanglements (1975-1995) *International Review of Social History* 60:3 (2017) 413-448; *Brood willen we hebben! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Antwerp 2013) and together with M. Van Alstein *14-18 van dichtbij. Inspiratiegids voor lokale projecten over de Grote Oorlog* (Ghent 2012). She currently works as a journalist for Flemish daily *De Standaard*. Email: Gisellenath@hotmail.com.