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# Questioning the Decline of Repair in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Case of Luxembourg, 1945-1990

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Historians of technology often assume that maintenance and repair declined in Western societies during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Reith, for example, stated that repairing lost its meaning in modern throwaway society. He referred to ethnographer Hermann Bausinger, for whom repair was nothing less than the opposite of consumption.<sup>2</sup> In *The Shock of the Old*, David Edgerton wrote that ‘in rich countries, as far as domestic equipment is concerned, and in industry for IT hardware, repair no longer exists—from electric toasters to fridges, repair is hardly worth carrying out—and not surprisingly the networks of retailer/repairers are long gone’.<sup>3</sup> For Edgerton, changing cost relationships in advanced mass-consumption societies were the primary factor shaping the commercial repair industry: ever lower buy-new costs and high labour costs made mending, repair and refurbishment of household objects obsolete.<sup>4</sup> However, we know surprisingly little about the development of repair businesses in Western consumer societies. This is why this article will take a closer look at the development of repair shops in Luxembourg between 1945 and the late 1980s to see how repair services developed over time. Luxembourg is an interesting case study. First, the small country has been one of the most advanced European consumer societies since the 1950s. Second,

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1 This study is part of the research project *Repairing Technology—Fixing Society? History of Maintenance and Repair in Luxembourg (1918-1990)* supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR), grant C15/SC/12547405. The REPAIR project comprises three case studies: the development of repair shops, the maintenance of the telephone system, and the history of DIY repair practices.

2 Reinhold REITH, ‘Reparieren: Ein Thema der Technikgeschichte?’, in Reinhold REITH, Dorothea SCHMIDT (ed.), *Kleine Betriebe-Angepasste Technologie? Hoffnungen, Erfahrungen und Ernüchterungen aus sozial- und technikhistorischer Sicht*, Münster et al., Waxmann, 2002, p.139-61; Hermann BAUSINGER, ‘Flick-Werk’, in Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart (ed.), *Flick-Werk. Reparieren und Umnutzen in der Alltagskultur*, Stuttgart, Württemberg. Landesmuseum, 1983, p.6-7; see also Stefan KREBS, Heike WEBER, ‘Rethinking the History of Repair. Repair Cultures and the “Lifespan” of Things’, in Stefan KREBS, Heike WEBER (ed.), *The Persistence of Technology: Repair, Reuse and Disposal*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2021, p.27-48.

3 David EDGERTON, *The Shock of the Old. Technology and global history since 1900*, London, Profile Books, 2008, p.81.

4 S. KREBS, H. WEBER, ‘Rethinking the History of Repair’, *op. cit.*

statistical surveys of the national repair sector call into question the assumed linear relationship between the rise of mass production and consumption and the decline in repair, since they show that employment in the Luxembourg repair sector went up in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Luxembourg is situated at the crossroads of German and French economies and culture. By around 1900, Luxembourg had become one of the largest steel producers in Western Europe. Initially, the steel industry had close ties with German companies, but after the German occupation during World War One, Luxembourg left the German customs union and established new relations with Belgian and French steel companies and markets. After World War Two and immediate steps to overcome war damage, the Luxembourgish economy once again began to flourish, resuming the economic development that had started in the 1930s. The post-war economic boom, known as the *Trente Glorieuses* or the *Wirtschaftswunder*, helped Luxembourg to become one of the most advanced consumer societies in Europe. Ownership of automobiles, radios and telephones, often regarded as emblematic consumer products,<sup>5</sup> was higher than in the three neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup>

In the first section, we will take a closer look at two statistical surveys of Luxembourg's repair sector that cover the period 1971-1985. We will describe the development of repair businesses and identify some trends and characteristics. In the following sections, we will then broaden our view and contextualise our findings against the backdrop of the socio-economic developments of the 1970s and the preceding decades, giving us a better understanding of the role and importance of repair in Luxembourg. Here we will specifically look into narratives of mending, repair and trades in general as portrayed in the magazine *Revue* and the weekly newspaper *d'Lëtzebuurger Land*, two widely read publications in Luxembourg.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF REPAIR BUSINESSES IN LUXEMBOURG, 1971-1985

Statec, the Luxembourg government's statistics service, conducted two special surveys on wholesale, retail and repair businesses in 1982 and 1987. Before we analyse these two studies in depth, we will look at the aggregated historical

5 Wolfgang KÖNIG, *Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2000.

6 René LEBOUTTE, Jean PUISSANT, Denis SCUTO, *Un siècle d'histoire industrielle. Belgique, Luxembourg, Pays-Bas. Industrialisation et sociétés (1873-1973)*, Paris, SEDES, 1998, p.264; see also: Claude WEY, 'Les "Silver Fifties luxembourgeois": croissance économique et modernisation?', in Claude WEY (ed.), *Le Luxembourg des années 50. Une société de petite dimension entre tradition et modernité*, Luxembourg: Musée d'histoire de la ville, 1999, p.51-78, p.75.

statistics published in 1990 that also contain a few figures on repair.<sup>7</sup> The *Statistiques historiques 1839-1989* show that the number of repair shops for cars and consumer products in Luxembourg declined from 244 in 1972 to 203 in 1986.<sup>8</sup> They further reveal that while the number of shops declined, employment figures in repair services stayed more or less at the same level: the numbers are 634 for 1975, and 632 for the year 1982. Over the same period, the number of owners and their family members went down from 251 to 162, whereas the number of employees rose from 383 to 470. That is a quite dramatic shift in the composition of the labour force in repair businesses in the space of just a few years. It shows that owner-run trade businesses were in decline, and manager-run shops with employees gradually taking over.

A quick look at the introduction to the special survey published in 1982 indicates that the interpretation of the historical statistics is anything but straightforward. In 1975, for example, about 20 automobile repair shops were reclassified from repair to sales businesses,<sup>9</sup> meaning that the overall decline in the number of repair shops was actually smaller than suggested by the figures. The explanation for this reclassification is that the official statistics were based on a very strict classification scheme. 'Class 67' included all repair shops for automobiles, shoes, electrical appliances, watches and jewellery, and those without any particular specialisation. However, this class comprised only those repair shops that exclusively or principally offered repair services, as based on business figures. Thus, car dealers with repair shops were only included when their revenues from repair activities amounted to more than 50% of their total yearly revenue. When the relationship between repair and retail revenues changed and the repair activities fell below 50%, these businesses were excluded from the repair statistics, as was the case in 1975. Unfortunately, apart from the 1982 survey, no information could be retrieved as to how many repair shops were included or excluded because of changes in their respective business figures.

Let us now take a closer look at Statec's repair surveys. The first dates from 1982 and covered the years 1971-1979; the second dated from 1987 for the years 1977-1985. It is important to note here that the numbers for the overlapping years 1977-1979 differ between the two studies, and no explanation is given for this discrepancy. At a first glance we can see that between 1972 and 1978 the share of repair businesses in the national economy remained at the same level; taken together, all specialist repair businesses contributed 0.3% to all national trade activities (in market prices).

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7 These figures differ slightly from the two special surveys, but unfortunately it was not possible to find any information to explain this discrepancy.

8 Statec Luxembourg, *Statistiques historiques 1839-1989*, Luxembourg, Statec, 1990, p.283.

9 Statec Luxembourg, *Le Commerce et les activités de réparation au Luxembourg, 1971-1979*, Luxembourg, Statec, 1982, p.8.

This shows that the steel crisis, which hit the country in 1975, did not have a negative impact on the economic activities of repair businesses.

As already indicated by the *Statistiques historiques 1839-1989*, the two surveys confirm a general decline in the number of repair shops, from 244 in 1972 to 192 in 1985 (a drop of 15.8%).<sup>10</sup> Most strikingly, the number of shoe repair shops fell from 77 to 45. At the same time, the number of garages dropped from 128 to 121, but if we take into consideration the reassignment of 20 garages in 1975, we can assume that the overall number of garages actually went up. The numbers of people working in repair differ between the two surveys and the *Statistiques historiques*: the first special survey shows much higher numbers, 745 in 1975 and 821 in 1978, than the second survey with 632 in 1977 and 632 in 1982, while the numbers in the *Statistiques historiques* follow the latter survey. Thus, the first study suggests a significant increase and the second a stagnation of employment. From the 1982 study we learn, furthermore, that most repairers were men, about 88.7% in 1975 compared to only 46.1% of men working in retail, and that most women in repair were family members of business owners. Overall, 5.3% of repairers worked on a part-time basis, compared to 11.25% of those working in retail.<sup>11</sup>

Both studies indicate a change in overall business structure: fewer and fewer shop owners and their family members were active in the trade. This went hand in hand with a change in the legal nature of businesses: between 1974 and 1979, the number of owner-operated businesses fell from 86% to 78% and the number of capital companies rose from 9.4% to 17%.<sup>12</sup> The same trend, toward larger joint-stock companies, was also visible in the wholesale and retail sectors.<sup>13</sup>

As already mentioned, garages often had an almost 50-50 divide between resale and repair services, meaning that some of them had to be reclassified from repair to sales businesses. This was not the case for other repair businesses like shoe repair shops: here resale accounted for just 20% and repair services for 80% of total revenue in the time period 1977-1985.<sup>14</sup> In the earlier study (1971-1979), the share of revenue from shoe repair was even above 95%.<sup>15</sup> Business figures further reveal that the gross profit margin of garages fell from 52.1% (in 1977) to 43.5% (in 1982), while for shoe repair shops the margin remained roughly at the same level

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10 *Ibid.*, p.48; Statec Luxembourg, *Le Commerce et les activités de réparation au Luxembourg, 1977-1985*, Luxembourg, Statec, 1987, p.102-3.

11 Statec, *Le commerce, 1971-1979*, *op. cit.*, p.61-2.

12 *Ibid.*, p.52.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Statec, *Le Commerce, 1977-1985*, *op. cit.*, p.52.

15 Statec, *Le Commerce, 1971-1979*, *op. cit.*, p.44.

(64.3% to 63.9%). This difference can partly be explained by discrepancies in wage development; in automobile repair wages rose from 44.8% to 53.8% of total costs, while in shoe repair they increased much less, from 31.9% to 33%.<sup>16</sup>

The statistics also give some information about the geographical distribution of repair shops in Luxembourg, in particular between the two largest urban areas: the capital Luxembourg City and Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg's second-largest town, located in the south of the country —the *Bassin minier*, where the famous *Minette* (iron ore with a high degree of phosphorus) began to be exploited in the 1880s. The 1982 survey showed that in 1975, 26.5% of the country's 249 repair businesses were situated in Luxembourg City, compared to 21.7% in Esch. If we take the overall number as a basis, that would represent some sixty-five repair shops in Luxembourg City and fifty-four in Esch. If we look at the business figures, we see that the repair shops in Esch accounted for 24.4% of the national repair services turnover, compared to 22% in Luxembourg City. In the retail sector the situation was the opposite: there were more shops in Esch than in Luxembourg City (31.6% to 25.6%) but they contributed less to the overall national sales figures (26.2% to 36.8%).<sup>17</sup>

To expand the available statistical evidence, we searched for additional sources. We took a closer look at repair shops in Esch-sur-Alzette. In the 1960s, the town had some 25,000 inhabitants with a large migrant population —about one third of the town's inhabitants, most of them Portuguese and Italian. Esch was not only a worker's town but also a shopping destination with some sixty repair shops for consumer products in the early 1970s. The *Association des Commerçants & Industriels d'Esch-sur-Alzette* (ACIE) described the town as the 'centre commercial du Bassin Minier'.<sup>18</sup> Before the steel crisis that hit the country in 1975, the ACIE had some 738 members, representing about 98% of all wholesale, retail and repair shops in Esch.<sup>19</sup> During the steel crisis the number of shops declined, as did the number of ACIE members.<sup>20</sup>

The member lists of the ACIE contain some statistics on repair businesses, and we also referred to telephone books and yellow pages dating back to the early

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16 Statec, *Le Commerce, 1977-1985, op. cit.*, p.67.

17 Statec, *Le Commerce, 1971-1979, op. cit.*, p.59.

18 Many migrants worked in repair, see Statec Luxembourg, *La société luxembourgeoise depuis le milieu du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle dans une perspective économique et sociale*, Luxembourg, Statec, 2009, p.84.

19 Ady JUNG, *80<sup>e</sup> Anniversaire de l'association des commerçants & industriels d'Esch-sur-Alzette*, Esch-sur-Alzette, ACIE, 1985, p.92.

20 *Ibid.*, p.101.

1930s.<sup>21</sup> However, this was a difficult undertaking. To test our data, we first analysed some sources from the 1970s to compare them with the Statec figures. In the ACIE membership list from 1976 we found, for example, 23 shoe shops, 16 jewellery and watch shops, and 22 electricians. That would come close to the 60 repair shops counted by Statec in 1974. However, in the 1974/75 yellow pages we found in Esch some 35 electricians, 18 jewellery and watch shops, 31 garages, and 22 shoe shops and shoe repair shops, coming to a total of 106 businesses, far more than counted by Statec. We have to consider that there were three fundamental problems with our sources. First, the trade names changed from source to source, e.g., for shoe repair shops there were at least four different French designations: *cordonniers*, *bottiers*, *chaussures*, *fabrication de chaussures*. Second, without knowing the exact business figures, we are not able to distinguish between specialist repair shops and retail shops with repair services, as Statec did. From advertisements, we know, for example, that even some shoe factories offered repair services, but they most likely did not fall in Statec's class 67.<sup>22</sup> Third, the figures from telephone books and yellow pages fluctuated so much that it is safer to presume that the numbers are incomplete rather than that they indicated actual developments within the sector. We are therefore unable to retrieve reliable figures to chart the longer-term development of repair shops in Esch.<sup>23</sup>

To sum up the statistical findings: the statistics found are difficult to interpret, since the two Statec surveys for the years 1971 to 1979 and 1977 to 1985 presented differing figures for the overlapping years. Furthermore, the Statec data did not include all repair services, since only specialist shops were counted and not the many retail shops that offered additional mending and repair services. Still, what we can draw from these statistics is that Luxembourg was an advanced consumer society by the 1960s, with ownership of key consumer products surpassing the figures of neighbouring countries. The available repair statistics indicate a stagnation of repair services between 1970 and the mid-1980s. But if we take into consideration the reclassification of some garages from repair shops to retail outlets within the statistics, it is safe to argue that repair services actually gained in economic importance between 1971 and 1985. The statistics further reveal a relatively dramatic reorganisation of repair businesses, with small owner-managed shops being replaced by larger capital companies with more employees. One of the reasons for the decline in owner-operated businesses was a recruitment problem; in 1979, more than 17% of repair shop owners were already aged sixty or above.<sup>24</sup>

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21 The first telephone book we analysed dates from 1932.

22 See e.g. the repair service of shoe factory Voosen (1952), [www.industrie.lu/schunfabrikvoosenluxembourg.html](http://www.industrie.lu/schunfabrikvoosenluxembourg.html), retrieved 28 Jan. 2020.

23 In the course of our project we will look for complementary sources, e.g. from the tax authorities, that can help expand our view.

24 Statec, *Le commerce, 1971-1979, op. cit.*, p.66.

## CONTEXTUALISING THE DEVELOPMENT OF REPAIR BUSINESSES IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

To complement and contextualise the quantitative findings, we investigated the magazine *Revue* and the weekly newspaper *d'Ëitzebuerger Land*. Containing a popular mix of politics, economics and culture, both publications were aimed at middle-class consumer households. The discourses from the 1960s and 1970s can give a better understanding of the development of repair shops and employment as described above. We have identified four repair-related discourses that were used frequently in that period.

First, moonlighting was discussed as a persistent and growing problem. In particular after the steel crisis of 1975, merchants, craftsmen and politicians started to complain that too many workers, among them several migrants, were willing to do cash-in-hand jobs. Journalists recognised the general problem but also defended those people who were willing to pay black-market workers because it was apparently almost impossible to find regular tradesmen, in particular for smaller repair jobs.<sup>25</sup> A law adopted in 1962 imposed various legal restrictions on the process of setting up a business. For all trades mentioned in the law, a craftsperson needed an official permit before starting work in that trade. The 1977 revision of the law, which was the political response to the ongoing issue of moonlighting, did not change this practice but emphasised that anyone without a concession was a 'moonlighter'.<sup>26</sup> For our topic, it is not important to pinpoint exactly how many workers offered cash-in-hand services, but the public discussion on clandestine employment highlights how difficult it is to find reliable figures about repair services, since there was apparently a large amount of undeclared work.

The second discursive strand is intertwined with the first, because one cause of moonlighting was the general shortage of tradesmen. Craft organisations criticised the low social prestige of many trades and bemoaned the fact that most Luxembourgers aspired to white-collar jobs, preferably with the state. This societal development had already been discussed during the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> Because of the shortage of domestic tradespeople, by the mid-1970s, almost two thirds of the officially registered tradesmen in Luxembourg were foreigners. 1974 figures attest to some 19,374 craftspeople, of which 62% were foreigners. The largest

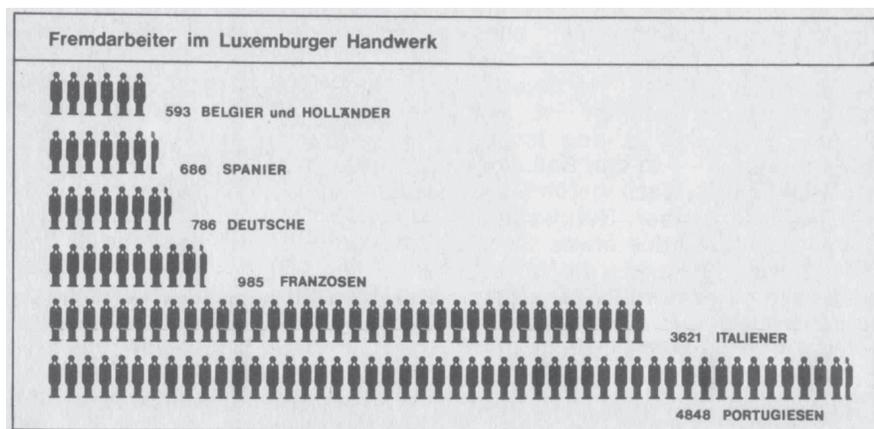
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25 Anon., 'Das aktuelle Bild', *d'Ëitzebuerger Land*, 17 June 1977, p.2.

26 I. th., 'Von Schwarzarbeitern und Anschwärzern', *Revue*, 33, n°31, 1977, p.18-21.

27 See e.g. Anon., 'Eisenbahn und Eisenbahner in Luxemburg', *Revue*, 18, n°6, 1962, p.10-8.

group living in Luxembourg was Portuguese, and the largest group of cross-border workers came from France.<sup>28</sup>



**Fig. 1:** Foreign craftsmen in Luxembourg, c. 1973.

Source: J.t., 'Handwerk: Wo bleibt dein goldener Boden?', *Revue*, 30, n°12, 1974, p.24-7, p.27.



**Fig. 2:** Employment of craftsmen in Luxembourg, 1961-1973.

Source: J.t., 'Handwerk: Wo bleibt dein goldener Boden?', *Revue*, 30, n°12, 1974, p.24-7, p.27.

<sup>28</sup> J.t., 'Handwerk: Wo bleibt dein goldener Boden?', *Revue*, 30, n°12, 1974, p.24-7.

At the end of the 1970s, the government tried to revitalise traditional trades and encouraged young Luxembourgers to take up an apprenticeship.<sup>29</sup> This government initiative was accompanied by promotional efforts by journalists. Over the next few years, for example, the magazine *Revue* published several series that presented information about different professional occupations, among them many trades. The usefulness of these campaigns was questionable, as similar efforts had already been made during the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the articles admitted that a useful trade was not necessarily a goldmine and that some trades did not have particularly good prospects; this was the case for shoemakers and tailors, for example, while various other tradespeople had to adopt modern techniques and machines. In comparison, jobs in areas such as computer programming had great prospects.<sup>31</sup> However, the impact of the steel crisis appears to have inspired some Luxembourgers to reconsider their professional future. At least in 1977, an increase in the number of Luxembourgish apprentices was announced for the second consecutive year.<sup>32</sup> This increase might have eased the recruitment problem in some repair trades.

Third, *Revue* published several stories about the demise and disappearance of repair trades. Readers were informed, for example, that in 1951 there had still been 395 shoemakers in the country, but by 1972 just 182 were left.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, even those shoemakers that did remain, like other tradesmen, had to consider a reorientation of their profession; shoemakers were advised to work more in orthopaedics and shoe engineering. By the mid-1980s shoe repair was considered to be a bygone trade, with the caption of a cover image reading ‘Almost nostalgia: a cobbler’s shop “as it used to be”’.<sup>34</sup> However, the shrinking number of repair shops was not only caused by their apparent obsolescence but also by the aforementioned trend towards larger business entities. That trend was among others fuelled by rising investment costs for new machines; it was simply more cost-efficient to have several employees using one machine that would otherwise be idle for longer.<sup>35</sup> And this was not only valid for shoemakers; another article

29 I. th., ‘Zurück zu der Hände Arbeit’, *Revue*, 33, n°29, 1977, p.18-21.

30 See article series Jean JAANS, ‘Aktion Berufs-Beratung der “Revue” (I)’, *Revue*, 28, n°36, 1972, p.28-35; for the 1960s see e.g. *Berufsbilder der Revue*, e.g. Anon., ‘Der Mechaniker’, *Revue*, 18, n°3, 1962, p.36; Anon., ‘Der Zahntechniker’, *Revue*, 18, n°7, 1962, p.20.

31 JJ, ‘Metier mit goldenem Boden’, *Revue*, 25, n°8, 1969, p. 22-7; Anon., ‘Berufe mit und ohne Zukunft’, *Revue*, 25, n°49, 1969, p. 31-40; Kr, ‘Zwischen Schul- und Drehbank’, *Revue*, 26, n°18, 1970, p.23-7.

32 I.th. ‘Zurück zu der Hände Arbeit’, *op. cit.*, p.19.

33 Pol ASCHMANN, ‘Gebeiert Tröttleken’, *Revue*, 43, n°9, 1987, p.24-7.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

35 Anon., ‘Schuster bleib nicht nur bei deinem Leisten’, *Revue*, 28, n°46, 1972, p.22-3.

explained that in 1940 some 8,000 craft businesses existed in Luxembourg, in 1961 around 5,500 were left and another ten years later only 4,837 firms were still operating.<sup>36</sup> Within this shrinking number of businesses, 80% had fewer than five employees and the other 20% were already large companies.<sup>37</sup>



**Fig. 3:** ‘Almost nostalgia: a cobbler’s shop “as it used to be”....’

Source: Pol Aschmann, ‘Gebeiert Tröttleken’, *Revue*, 43, n°9, 1987, p.24-7, p.27.

Fourth, from the 1960s onwards, more and more supermarkets and large department stores began to open,<sup>38</sup> including the large German mail-order company *Quelle*, which opened a branch in Luxembourg in 1962. Initially, *Quelle* Luxembourg did not offer a mail-order service and sold only household appliances, radio and television sets and photo equipment because the very strict Luxembourgish market regulations did not allow it to offer the full range of products and services available in Germany. However, the Luxembourgish regulations gradually had to make way for common market regulations within the European Economic Community. For the same reason, *Quelle* Luxembourg initially had no in-house repair service and had to rely on partner repair shops. However, by the mid-1970s the company offered a full sales programme and operated its own repair shop with 11 technicians and more than 25,000 spare parts on stock.<sup>39</sup>

36 Jj, ‘Die Rolle des Handwerks’, *Revue*, 28, n°26, 1972, p.10; J.t., ‘Handwerk’, *op. cit.*

37 J.t., ‘Handwerk’, *op. cit.*

38 Statec, *Le commerce, 1971-1979, op. cit.*, p.77.

39 Kr., ‘Quelle - Kunden und Konkurrenz’, *d’Lëtzebuurger Land*, 23 November 1962, p.3; Roland KAYSER, ‘15 Jahre Quelle’, *d’Lëtzebuurger Land*, 14 October 1977, p.11.

To wrap up, articles from magazines and newspapers have proved to be valuable sources to broaden our view on the development of repair businesses in Luxembourg. Reports on moonlighting, for example, emphasised that it is very difficult to find reliable figures on repair shops and that more repair work was being done than was reflected in official statistics. In addition, larger economic and societal changes that occurred during the period had an immediate impact on the repair sector, including the desire for white-collar jobs and the trend towards larger, rationalised companies. Still, as we will show in the last section, these developments had actually already begun before the 1960s.

### REPAIR IN THE LATE 1940S AND EARLY 1950S

Laments about the disappearance of traditional crafts, including some repair trades, can be traced back at least to the immediate post-war years. The 1949 cover of *Revue*, for example, showed a travelling knife grinder with the caption ‘The good old knife grinder’.<sup>40</sup> The implicit message was that he would soon disappear from society. The same narrative can be found in many articles of the late 1940s that presented old and increasingly obsolete trades, e.g., stories about glove makers, shoemakers or weavers.<sup>41</sup> In all these cases industry was about to replace small trade businesses. Looms, for example, were referred to as ‘machines that were dying’.<sup>42</sup> And a report about coopers stated that the heyday of the trade was over. This was also a consequence of the high quality of the wooden barrels they produced, because, as the author emphasised, if maintained properly a good barrel could last some thirty years.<sup>43</sup> Another article presented already ‘extinct trades’.<sup>44</sup> The survey of telephone books and yellow pages confirms that some trades that were still present in the late 1930s, like vulcanisers and invisible-mending establishments, gradually disappeared in the first post-war editions.<sup>45</sup>

40 Caption on cover page, *Revue*, 5, n°51, 1949.

41 See e.g. Paul LEUCK, ‘Von der edlen Kunst der Lauer und der Handschuhmacher’, *Revue*, 3, n°7, 1947, p.322-24; Paul LEUCK, ‘Von der edlen Schusterei, oder: Vom Handwerk zur Fabrik’, *Revue*, 5, n°11, 1949, p.204-05.

42 KCM, ‘Sterbende Maschinen’, *Revue*, 4, n°11, 1949, p.626-27; -n., ‘Der Weber ist der erste Handwerksmann’, *Revue*, 4, n°1, 1948, p.6-7, p.22.

43 Tem, ‘In der Werkstatt des Küfers’, *Revue*, 10, n°35, 1954, p.4-7.

44 Anon., ‘Ausgesturwe Beruffer’, *Revue*, 7, n°17, 1951, p. 8-9, 2<sup>nd</sup> part: n°18, p.4-25.

45 See e.g. Record (ed.), *Record du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 1937/38*, Luxembourg, 1937; Record (ed.), *Record du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg 1974/75*, Luxembourg, 1974.



**Fig. 4:** ‘The good old knife grinder’.  
Source: *Revue*, 5, n°51, 1949, cover.

In addition, other themes such as market concentration and a shortage of craftspeople, which were at the forefront of discussions in the 1960s and subsequent years, were already mentioned in the 1940s and 1950s. A 1949 article described the advent of self-service department stores in Luxembourg.<sup>46</sup> And advertisements in the 1950s tried to attract customers for new centralised repair services; the company *Express*, for instance, offered dry cleaning and mending services with drop-off/pick-up points in other stores.<sup>47</sup> Other articles voiced concerns about the growing lack of interest in apprenticeships in traditional trades. Aspirations for higher education were described as a positive societal development, but there was still an urgent need for craftsmen.<sup>48</sup> In 1956, Willy Müller published an article entitled ‘The apprenticeship problem’. In the article, he cites statistics showing that since 1938 1,661 craft businesses had closed down and only 233 had opened. In the same period the number of apprentices fell from 2,001 to 1,328, and the demand for craftspeople had to be compensated by more than 3,300 foreign workers.<sup>49</sup>

46 Paul LEUCK, ‘Von Kaufherren und Kaufhäusern’, *Revue*, 5, n°3, 1949, p.266-67.

47 Advertisement S. A. Express Luxembourg, *d’Lëtzeburger Land*, n°36, 1957, p.8.

48 Jean JAANS, ‘Brief an einen jungen Lehrling’, *Revue*, 8, n°39, 1952, p.8.

49 Willy MÜLLER, ‘Zum Lehrlingsproblem. Die Zukunft des Luxemburger Handwerks’, *Revue*, 12, n°39, 1956, p.26-7, 31.

Moreover, the trend towards larger craft establishments was also already visible.<sup>50</sup> In short, some of the same arguments that described the decline of (repair) trades in the 1970s were already being raised much earlier, showing that Luxembourg's trades had to struggle with the upward social mobility enabled by the successful economic development during the *Trente Glorieuses*.

An insightful article published in *d'Lëtzebuerger Land* in 1954 connected the apparent shortage of skilled craftsmen with new attitudes towards repair. The author, Jean Jaans, lamented that customers often had to call several times and beg a tradesman to do a small repair job, continuing: 'If [the tradesman] behave[s] like this, he should not be surprised if customers do it 'the modern market economy way' and order a new product.'<sup>51</sup> Two things are remarkable here: first, the author does not blame consumers for their new mentality of replacing rather than repairing their broken objects but identified the craft crisis as main reason for this new attitude to consumption. Second, he describes this dramatic shift at a time when most Europeans could still only dream of becoming full members of consumer society; the term 'throwaway society' was only coined in the American magazine *Life* a year later.<sup>52</sup>

At the same moment as Jaans was publishing his remarks on the new throwaway attitude of Luxembourgish consumers, maintenance was still an important subject that was receiving a good deal of attention in *Revue*. Readers were, for example, given instructions on how to maintain their brushes and combs,<sup>53</sup> a special column presented helpful hints and tricks for thrifty housewives,<sup>54</sup> and another article explained 'how mending becomes fun'.<sup>55</sup> The reuse and refurbishment of consumer objects was also discussed.<sup>56</sup> These educational pieces not only described how more traditional household objects had to be maintained in times of post-war scarcity; they also provided information on how to care for new consumer products like electrical appliances.<sup>57</sup> In short, an awareness of the importance of

50 Anon., 'Handwerkliche Probleme', *Revue*, 17, n°39, 1961, p.28-30.

51 Jean JAANS, 'Handwerkspolitik als nationales Anliegen', *d'Lëtzebuerger Land*, n°32, 1954, p.5.

52 Kai-Uwe HELLMANN, Marius LUEDICKE, 'The Throwaway Society: a Look in the Back Mirror', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 41, 2018, p.83-87; see also Wolfgang KÖNIG, *Geschichte der Wegwerfgesellschaft. Kebrseite des Konsums*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2019.

53 Anon., 'Von Kämmen und Bürsten', *Revue*, 3, n°10, 1947, p.281.

54 Anon., 'Praktisches am laufenden Band', *Revue*, 4, n°27, 1948, p.800.

55 Anon., 'Das Flicker wird zum Spass...', *Revue*, 6, n°20, 1950, p.8.

56 Anon., 'Mit alten Möbeln eine moderne Wohnung', *Revue*, 5, n°25, 1949, p.95.

57 Anon., 'Elektrischer Bedarf im Haushalt', *Revue*, 4, n°11, 1948, p.348.

maintenance and repair still existed alongside new practices that seemed to favour the replacement of broken things.<sup>58</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, in our article we have discussed the perceived decline of repair opportunities in Luxembourg as a case study for Western consumer societies in the short 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the 1970s and 1980s are often described as turning points in repair history—repair services are said to have gradually disappeared and become *obsolete* at this time because of the availability of cheap consumer products and the new throwaway culture—, the repair statistics for Luxembourg do not confirm a decline in repair over this (time) period. Although official statistics show a general stagnation and reorganisation of the Luxembourg repair sector, when we take the statistical exclusion of some repair shops in the 1970s into account, we can assume that repair gained even more economic importance in the 1980s.

Furthermore, the statistical data covered only part of the repair industry; they did not account for all those people working in repair outside specialist repair shops, those moonlighting and, last but not least, those who took their repair business home with them or habitually carried out repairs in the household. But these data, as sparse as they might be, do allow for some interesting observations against the notion of repair as a dying trade. However, the numbers also point to broader, well known socio-economic trends, e.g., the general move towards larger and centralised companies and increasing aspirations for white-collar jobs, which also changed the overall organisation of repair trades in Luxembourg, bringing about a shift from small owner-run shops to fewer but larger manager-run companies with several employees.

In a similar vein, we have shown some evidence indicating that, at least in Luxembourg, the more general 'decline' in repair had already started by the late 1940s, as some trades vanished and others were replaced by new rationalised services. Moreover, we also pointed out that throwaway practices were already discussed in the early 1950s—much earlier than it is commonly assumed.

Still, the picture we have drawn in this article is far from being complete. It would be necessary to further investigate other significant developments, e.g.,

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58 See Heike WEBER, Ruth OLDENZIEL, 'Introduction: Reconsidering Recycling', *Contemporary European History*, 22, 3, 2013, p.347-70; Heike WEBER, 'Mending or Ending? Consumer Durables, Obsolescence and Practices of Reuse, Repair and Disposal in West Germany (1960s-1980s)', in Heike WEBER, Stefan KREBS (eds.), *The Persistence of Technology: Repair, Reuse and Disposal*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2021, p.233-61.

how new products —especially consumer electronics— were designed to need less maintenance. Here, too, the *Revue* allows for some interesting insights when advertisements in the 1970s started to promote products like the self-cleaning oven.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, the new legislation played an important role in the decline in small repair shops, when producers and retailers were made liable for the functioning of consumer products during statutory guarantee periods, and preferred to offer rationalised in-house services instead of outsourcing these to owner-operated shops.<sup>60</sup> Overall, we can assume that the ups and downs of repair in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not only depend on decreasing buy-new and increasing repair prices, but on much more complex economic, technical, societal, political and cultural changes that future research on the history of repair should take into consideration.

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59 Advertisement, 'Der Herd, der sich selbst reinigt', *Revue*, 26, n°30, 1970, p.23.

60 M.C., 'Kundendienst... großgeschrieben', *Revue*, 20, n°21, 1964, p.66-7.

