On the Road Again—Lessons from the Proto-Logistics of Peddling for Contemporary Supply Chains

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Abstract

Throughout the European countryside of the 18th and 19th centuries, peddlers—itinerant merchants transporting small quantities of goods such as fabrics, books, and religious images on foot or by mule—shaped logistical networks that foreshadow modern supply chains. Often coming from marginalized rural areas, they adapt their routes, volumes, and assortments to local, seasonal, and event-driven constraints, connecting producers to remote consumers. Each journey combines market observation, knowledge of local behaviors, and anticipation of demand, while fostering trust and long-term relationships with customers. This paper analyzes peddling as a laboratory for innovative retail logistics: systematic collection and transmission of information transform peddlers into "market sensors," enabling suppliers to adjust production, distribution, and product assortment. Diversifying supply sources, optimizing inventory, and ensuring rapid turnover demonstrate an early mastery of principles later formalized as lean management. By integrating physical flows and on-the-ground intelligence, peddlers create a circular and resilient logistics system in which organizational memory and interpersonal networks play a strategic role. Examining these practices highlights the historical continuity of logistical principles and opens new avenues for research in retailing.

Keywords

History, innovation, merchandise circulation, peddling, proto-logistics

DE NOUVEAU SUR LA ROUTE—LEÇONS DE LA PROTO-LOGISTIQUE DU COLPORTAGE POUR LES CHAINES LOGISTIQUES CONTEMPORAINES

Résumé

À travers les campagnes européennes des XVIII^{e} et XIX^{e} siècles, les colporteurs, ces marchands itinérants transportant à pied ou à dos de mulet de petites quantités de biens—tissus, livres, images pieuses—façonnent des réseaux préfigurant les chaînes logistiques modernes. Issus de zones rurales souvent marginalisées, ils adaptent leurs itinéraires aux contraintes locales, saisonnières et événementielles, connectant les industriels aux lieux de consommation. Chaque déplacement combine observation du marché et des comportements, habitudes locales, et anticipation de la demande, tandis que le colporteur construit un climat de confiance avec ses clients propice à la vente. Ce papier analyse tout particulièrement la pratique du colportage en tant que laboratoire d'une logistique innovante : la collecte et la transmission systématique d'informations transforment les colporteurs en « capteurs de marché », permettant à leurs fournisseurs d'ajuster production, distribution physique et assortiment. La diversification des sources d'approvisionnement, l'ajustement des stocks et la rotation rapide des biens soulignent une maîtrise précoce de ce que l'on dénommera plus tard le management au plus juste. En intégrant flux matériels et intelligence du terrain, les colporteurs créent une logistique circulaire et résiliente au sein de laquelle la mémoire organisationnelle et les relations interpersonnelles jouent un rôle stratégique central. L'étude des pratiques illustre la continuité historique des principes logistiques et ouvre des perspectives inédites pour la recherche en commerce et distribution.

Mots-clés

Circulation marchande, colportage, histoire, innovation, proto-logistique

Executive Summary

In 18th and 19th century Europe, peddlers—merchants transporting light goods across villages and towns—turn mobility into a decisive strategic lever for value creation and market intelligence. Emerging from marginalized rural areas, they adapt routes, volumes, and assortments based on local constraints, seasonal cycles, and occasional events, while constantly observing trends, weak signals, and emerging customer needs. Each journey functions as a live intelligence hub, delivering actionable insights to suppliers that guide production, distribution, assortment, and inventory allocation, enabling rapid responses to shifting demand. Trust cultivated with customers and partners ensures continuity, loyalty, and repeat engagement, while obstacles or disruptions transform into strategic opportunities. Experience accrued across seasons becomes a tangible operational asset, reinforcing network resilience, agility, and adaptive capacity. Multi-sourcing, rapid inventory rotation, and continuous adjustments anticipate modern lean management and demand sensing. Peddlers show that human judgment, situational awareness, and relational intelligence surpass technology alone, providing a blueprint for observation-driven networks that sustain performance in dynamic environments.

Peddlers construct a relational and informational ecosystem linking suppliers, customers, and partners into a cohesive, responsive network capable of continuous adaptation. Suppliers secure supply by diversifying sources, adjusting conditions based on trust, and mitigating risk, while loyal customers reinforce reputation, stability, and ongoing transactions. Feedback from the field transmits precise signals on purchasing behaviors, price changes, inventory levels, and local market trends, aligning production, distribution, and allocation decisions. Flexible routes, temporary storage, and rapid inventory rotation form a decentralized logistics system that sustains operational flow and service quality despite uncertainty and disruptions. Constant observation, experiential learning, and adaptive adjustments transform local intelligence into actionable decisions, while social relationships act as strategic levers enhancing system-wide resilience, reliability, and responsiveness. Performance relies on integrating human capital, practical knowledge, coordination, and trust rather than centralization. By connecting observation, interaction, and rapid decision-making, peddlers create a model for supply chain adaptability, showing how decentralized, trust-based networks consistently deliver results and strengthen engagement under volatile conditions.

The legacy of peddlers offers actionable insights for today's executives seeking resilient supply chains. Their approach demonstrates that combining mobility, human judgment, and relational intelligence drives measurable competitive advantage. By observing markets directly, interpreting subtle signals, and adapting routes, volumes, and assortments, managers transform disruptions into opportunities and optimize resource allocation. Trust-based relationships with customers, suppliers, and partners strengthen reliability, reduce risk, and enable rapid decision-making under uncertainty. Implementing modular networks, temporary inventory points, and rapid rotation strategies enhances agility while maintaining flow continuity. Leaders should integrate real-time feedback, field observation, and cross-functional coordination to create decentralized, responsive systems capable of anticipating demand fluctuations. Leveraging accumulated operational experience as strategic capital enables more accurate forecasting, proactive planning, and smarter contingency management. Ultimately, peddlers of 18th and 19th century Europe show that sustainable performance depends on human-centered practices, situational awareness, and adaptive processes. Executives who embed these lessons into modern supply chains unlock resilience, operational excellence, and enduring value, turning complexity and unpredictability into strategic advantage.

Introduction

Appearing between the 12th and 14th centuries in Europe, the earliest peddlers emerged as a pragmatic response to the absence of formal distribution infrastructures and the pronounced dispersion of rural populations (Kallioinen, 2020). Operating within a medieval land transport system gradually improved through incremental developments in roads, bridges, and circulation networks (Langdon & Claridge, 2011), these itinerant merchants progressively constructed relational and spatial networks linking artisanal production centers to distant consumption sites. From the circulation of textiles in Flanders to the movement of religious manuscripts across the Alps, their routes reveal a form of logistical intelligence grounded in acute terrain awareness, sensitivity to seasonal rhythms, and anticipation of localized demand structures. Organized through kinship ties or brotherhood-based arrangements, peddlers developed collective coordination mechanisms enabling the orchestration of flows across fragmented geographies (McKee & Leboissetier, 2022). From the 17th century onward, these practices became increasingly structured, reflecting the gradual emergence of what may be conceptualized as "proto-logistics."[1] Pre-capitalist dynamics thus constitute foundational elements of contemporary logistics thinking, demonstrating that coordination, resilience, and systematic information processing are deeply embedded capabilities. In this perspective, peddling operates as a conceptual bridge between historical trade systems and modern supply chain theory, underscoring the persistence of managerial challenges in which coordination and human judgment remain central to distribution efficiency.

As Southern (2011) notes, logistics has progressively evolved from the simple movement of goods toward an integrated supply chain paradigm, underscoring the relevance of historical inquiry for understanding contemporary distribution systems. Marginal commercial actors such as hawkers, peddlers, and street vendors developed early forms of logistical capability by continuously adjusting assortments, modulating mobility, and exploiting granular knowledge of local contexts (Tejwani & Stock, 2019). Semi-urban and rural networks simultaneously enabled the circulation of goods and the diffusion of information, thereby revealing organizational forms that were both adaptive and structurally resilient. Studies of merchant correspondence and small-scale trade further show that even modest commercial configurations were able to sustain operational continuity under conditions of persistent uncertainty (Gelderblom & Trivellato, 2019; Orrje, 2020). By integrating physical distribution with the generation and transmission of market intelligence, peddlers established early mechanisms of demand sensing, while coordination embedded in kinship and community structures reinforced trust, continuity, and reliability. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that strategic adaptation and human-centered decision-making constitute enduring foundations of supply chain performance, predating the formalization of logistics systems.

An examination of 18th- and 19th-century peddlers reveals a high degree of sophistication in pre-capitalist logistical configurations. Routes were deliberately structured according to seasonal, topographical, social, and event-driven constraints. Within this system, social ties, reputation, and trust functioned as critical coordination mechanisms, no less important than the physical movement of goods (Heuer, 2007). Peddlers operated as de facto "*market sensors*," transmitting signals related to prices, preferences, and emerging trends toward urban centers, thereby anticipating contemporary demand sensing systems (Raymond & Moxham, 2016). Diversification of supply sources and itineraries strengthened resilience against localized

[1] The term "proto-logistics" is used here to describe the early practices of organizing, coordinating, and optimizing material flows prior to the formalization of logistics as a managerial discipline. As Sutherland (2008) observes, logistics has existed in empirical forms since human societies first needed to plan the movement and supply of resources, particularly for military purposes. Long before its institutionalization, it functioned as a "practical art" grounded in observation, anticipation, and the coordination of available means. Proto-logistics, in this sense, refers to early, often intuitive systems for managing flows and resources efficiently.

disruptions (Grimshaw, 2024), while territorial mobility combined with seasonal trade patterns provided a robust framework for organizing distribution flows (Laffranchi et al., 2025). Each transaction thus generated actionable intelligence, enabling continuous recalibration of production, distribution, and assortment decisions. Coordination across actors, reinforced by route diversification, ensured systemic continuity in the absence of centralized infrastructures, illustrating an early mastery of multi-sourcing logic, lean inventory principles, and adaptive logistical routines.

It is essential to clarify the conceptual status of the activities under analysis. Certain practices of peddlers—such as observing local preferences, collecting demand-related information, or adjusting assortments—may appear closer to market sensing or informal business intelligence than to logistics in its narrow sense. In this paper, however, these activities are conceptualized as constitutive components of an expanded logistics system, insofar as they directly structure physical flows, inform resource allocation, and enable adaptive configuration of distribution channels. In this perspective, systematic information gathering transforms peddlers into both commercial intermediaries and knowledge brokers, integrating material circulation with relational intelligence. Mobility, observation, and iterative learning enabled continuous adaptation to local conditions, while repeated interactions reinforced trust and sustained long-term customer relationships. Some peddlers embedded themselves within broader community networks, whereas marginalized individuals and women often relied on itinerant trade as a survival strategy, highlighting the heterogeneity and adaptive capacity underlying logistical performance (Fontaine, 2018). The combined effects of adaptive planning, network diversification, rapid inventory turnover, and relational capital generated a proto–smart supply chain that was simultaneously circular, resilient, and highly responsive. By examining these historical configurations, this paper highlights the deep structural continuity of logistical principles and opens avenues for retail research, demonstrating how mobility, relational intelligence, and adaptive decision-making remain foundational to the design of human-centered distribution systems today.

Methodological Box

This paper adopts a qualitative, historiographical, and interpretive research design based on the systematic analysis of a secondary-source corpus drawn from economic, social, and pre-industrial commercial history. The corpus focuses on Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, with particular attention to France, Alpine regions (Briançonnais, Queyras, Jura), and broader transnational European trade circuits. The sources include established historical scholarship, 19th-century press accounts, and literary analyses documenting the social representations and cultural imaginaries of peddlers. In line with established practices in historical analysis, the study adopts a comparative and long-duration perspective consistent with approaches in economic and social history that emphasize large-scale structural patterns across time and space (Tilly, 1984). In addition, and following methodological standards in qualitative document analysis, secondary and archival textual materials are treated as legitimate empirical data for systematic interpretation (Bowen, 2009). An inductive thematic coding strategy is applied, structured around three analytically derived dimensions: (1) mobility patterns and route organization; (2) coordination mechanisms governing flow management; and (3) systems of information generation and dissemination supporting commercial intelligence. This coding process follows an iterative logic of theme development consistent with thematic analysis approaches in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing categories to emerge from the corpus while remaining theoretically sensitized. These dimensions are then interpreted in dialogue with contemporary frameworks in supply chain management (SCM) and dynamic capabilities theory to identify conceptual continuities, organizational analogues, and enduring logics of coordination. Rather than aiming to reconstruct historical flows exhaustively, the analysis seeks to uncover recurring organizational regularities across contexts, thereby enabling a theoretically grounded interpretation of peddling practices as a proto-logistical system shaped by the co-constitution of mobility, coordination, and information-based adaptation.

1. Peddlers as Proto-Logistics Innovators

Peddlers exert a profound influence on the European imagination, occupying a liminal space between fascination and suspicion. Social historical research documents itinerant merchants transporting almanacs, devotional images, and even prohibited or obscene books (Corbin, 1998; Couégnas & Moretti, 2006; Craig, 2018) (see Figure 1), while literary representations consistently frame them in ambivalent terms. Balzac (2009 [1844]) emphasizes their dual positioning between legitimate exchange and contraband circulation, whereas Sand (2011 [1846]) highlights their role as vectors of stories, news, and ideas. Contemporary press accounts, such as those published in *Le Petit Journal* (June 12, 1895), further report accusations of fraud or receiving stolen goods, underscoring the precarious and often stigmatized social position of peddlers. Yet beneath this ambivalence lies a highly structured and efficient system of long-distance commercial coordination, in which routes, timing, and inventories are continuously adjusted to fairs, seasonal cycles, and political events. Long before the formalization of modern supply chains, these actors exhibited a form of resilience rooted in mobility, trust, and fine-grained territorial knowledge. Through continuous anticipation and adaptation, they reveal that core principles of commercial organization—flexibility, responsiveness, and relational intelligence—were already deeply embedded in pre-capitalist systems of exchange.

Figure 1: A German Peddler Interacting with a Customer



Source: Sauermann & Schmitz (1987).

In 18th- and 19th-century France and across Europe, peddlers occupied a discreet yet indispensable position in the circulation of goods and ideas. Originating from mountainous regions such as the Briançonnais, Queyras, or Jura, they traversed rural territories on foot or mule, embodying a form of logistical entrepreneurship grounded in exceptional mobility and precise alignment between supply and demand. Each peddler carried limited inventories,

ensured rapid turnover, and replenished stock upon returning to urban centers, thereby producing a highly rhythmic system of circulation. Far from constituting a marginal form of trade, they operated as flexible intermediaries linking manufacturing centers, marketplaces, and remote rural settlements, often with minimal financial integration (Braudel, 1992; Fontaine, 1996). Their routes functioned as living infrastructures of exchange, governed less by formal contracts than by reputation and trust. Crucially, their performance cannot be reduced to the mere circulation of goods, as it rests on the tight coupling between material coordination and relational infrastructures. System resilience emerges from the interdependence between physical flows and social capital, anticipating a proto socio-technical configuration of supply chain organization. By embedding goods movement within continuous engagement with local conditions and social environments, these merchants established early forms of "living" supply chains, integrating circulation with information gathering and demonstrating that adaptive logistics predates industrialized distribution systems.

Logistical practices among peddlers are characterized by pragmatic resource optimization and operational frugality. Lacking permanent storage infrastructures, they prioritized lightweight and fast-moving goods, relied on temporary relay points for bulky items, and systematically adapted assortments to local market conditions (Van den Heuvel, 2012). Such practices prefigure contemporary lean and agile paradigms, including inventory minimization, accelerated turnover cycles, and transport-constrained load optimization (Womack et al., 2007 [1990]). Equally critical was relational intelligence: through recurrent visits, detailed knowledge of household preferences, and sustained interpersonal ties, peddlers functioned as conduits for cultural information, news, and market intelligence, while simultaneously distributing goods (Clark, 1978; Fontaine, 2014). Reputation operated as a form of strategic capital, where even minor breaches of trust could rapidly result in exclusion from local exchange networks. The combination of mobility, adaptive resource allocation, and relational embeddedness enabled peddlers to operate resiliently across fragmented rural and semi-urban landscapes, offering a robust archetype of early supply chain functionality grounded in the co-production of social and material flows.

Peddlers functioned as critical informational interfaces between rural peripheries and urban supply centers, transmitting data on prices, emerging preferences, and competitive dynamics, thereby operating as proto market-sensing agents. The feedback loops generated through these exchanges enhanced systemic adaptability and enabled continuous adjustment to localized demand fluctuations. Operating within ambiguous institutional environments, peddlers were tolerated insofar as they facilitated circulation, yet frequently subjected to surveillance or repression when perceived to challenge established commercial authorities (Ogilvie, 2003; Van den Heuvel, 2012). The subsequent rise of department stores and mail-order firms, such as Manufrance or Sears, institutionalized many of the principles developed along these itinerant routes—route rationalization, customer intelligence, and home delivery systems (Miller, 1994). Although peddlers gradually declined under the structural pressures of railway expansion and retail formalization, their legacy—mobility, localized adaptation, and reputational governance—persists in contemporary strategies targeting peripheral markets and fragmented demand structures. At a micro-territorial level, they embody foundational principles of agility, resilience, and customer intimacy (Sheffi, 2005), demonstrating that many innovations in modern commerce are deeply rooted in the adaptive ingenuity of pre-capitalist itinerant networks.

2. Peddlers as Early Resilient Actors

European peddlers in the 18th and 19th centuries exemplify exceptional logistical ingenuity in contexts largely devoid of formal infrastructure. Originating predominantly from marginalized rural regions, these itinerant merchants developed flexible distribution circuits that combined

anticipatory foresight with real-time responsiveness under conditions of persistent uncertainty. They continuously adjusted routes, volumes, and assortments in response to local conditions, seasonal variability, and exogenous shocks, fully leveraging granular knowledge of territorial, social, economic, and climatic constraints—a perspective closely aligned with principles of humanitarian SCM. Each journey unfolded within a dense relational ecosystem, where direct market observation enabled anticipatory demand sensing and precise adaptation of offerings. The cumulative experience acquired through repeated itineraries generated a form of organizational memory, ensuring continuity and resilience of flows over time. Drawing on Mintzberg & Waters (1985), itinerant logistics can thus be understood as an emergent strategy, in which decisions evolve iteratively from field-level signals rather than ex ante planning. This underscores that operational resilience—well before the digital era—was fundamentally grounded in human intelligence, strategic mobility, and deep territorial embeddedness, transforming each interaction into a concrete operational advantage.

Upstream supply relationships occupy a pivotal position within this system. Peddlers were not merely buyers of goods but embedded participants in broader credit- and exchange-based networks structuring local commerce. Fontaine (2014) emphasizes that kinship and regional networks supplied itinerants with diverse goods, often on credit or under deferred repayment arrangements contingent on resale in peripheral markets. Van den Heuvel (2012) shows that wholesalers calibrated payment conditions based on reputational assessments and prior performance, while Diner (2015) illustrates that in diasporic Jewish trading communities in the United States, consignment systems enhanced both operational flexibility and mutual risk-sharing. Across these contexts, transactions were governed less by formal contracting than by reputation, trust, and relational continuity. Within this configuration, peddlers function as informational nodes, relaying signals on prices, consumption patterns, and emerging demand back to upstream suppliers. The resulting structure constitutes a distributed resilience architecture in which social capital compensates for the absence of fixed retail infrastructure, and relational embeddedness becomes as critical as material circulation for sustaining operational performance.

The coordination of multiple supply and commercial relationships further underpins this exceptional adaptability. By diversifying sourcing across partners, peddlers reduce exposure to single-channel dependencies and mitigate supply-side fragility. Dynamic assortment adjustments aligned with localized demand ensure contextual relevance, while iterative feedback loops enable upstream actors to recalibrate production and distribution decisions. These pre-capitalist mechanisms anticipate core principles of modern multi-sourcing, lean management, and agile supply chain design (Womack et al., 2007 [1990]). Mobility, flexible planning, and reputation-based governance collectively ensure continuity under uncertainty, positioning peddlers as early archetypes of resilient supply chain systems. Table 1 synthesizes the principal logistical dimensions—routes, sourcing, storage, customer relations, and information flows—linking them to operational practices and strategic functions. This framework highlights a field-embedded logistics system that is simultaneously decentralized, adaptive, and deeply relational, demonstrating that adaptability, intelligence, and relational leverage were already structurally embedded in early commercial networks.

Beyond the management of physical flows, peddlers give rise to a proto-information economy in which each stage of movement constitutes a strategic vantage point for observing economic, social, and commercial dynamics. The detection of shifts in preferences, prices, and availability transforms mobility into an early form of market intelligence (Kembro & Selviaridis, 2015). These observations circulate through informal communication channels, including correspondence networks, oral exchanges, and community ties, enabling rapid diffusion of actionable insights across geographically dispersed territories. By linking urban production centers with rural consumption zones, peddlers facilitate an implicit synchronization

of supply and demand cycles well before the emergence of formalized SCM systems. Their itinerant operations generate territorial coherence in which accumulated experiential knowledge substitutes for centralized planning, and system efficiency emerges from situated intelligence. Through the interaction of adaptive behavior, relational embeddedness, and repeated exchange, peddlers construct a decentralized yet highly responsive informational infrastructure that sustains resilience and continuity. In this sense, they translate everyday observations into actionable strategic knowledge, demonstrating that operational intelligence can emerge robustly in institutional voids, relying instead on human judgment, mobility, and locally embedded expertise.

Table 1: Peddlers' Micro-Network Practices and Strategic Objectives

Logistical components	**Peddling practices**	**Strategic objectives**
Routes	Adjustment according to seasons, local events, and market opportunities	Ensure continuity of flows and avoid disruptions
Sourcing	Multi-sourcing from urban and regional suppliers	Reduce risk of supply interruptions
Inventory and storage	Use of temporary storage points and rapid stock rotation	Minimize losses and obsolescence
Customer relationship	Trust and loyalty building through repeated visits and reputation	Maintain client trust and satisfaction
Information collection	Gathering and transmitting local market trends and customer preferences to suppliers	Enable informed decision-making for supply allocation

Source: Own elaboration.

An examination of peddlers' practices further underscores logistics as an inherently social and cultural phenomenon. Their effectiveness depends not only on the management of goods but equally on the cultivation of durable relationships with the communities they serve along their routes. Trust, reinforced through repeated interactions and carefully constructed reputational capital, operates as an invisible asset that secures transactions and sustains customer loyalty (Wieland & Wallenburg, 2013). Through the circulation of news, advice, and cultural knowledge, peddlers reinforce interdependencies among suppliers, intermediaries, and consumers. Relational networks thus compensate for the absence of formal governance mechanisms, ensuring continuity of exchange under conditions of uncertainty. By integrating mobility, trust, and territorial embeddedness, itinerant merchants demonstrate that operational efficiency can emerge from dense social infrastructures rather than technical systems alone. Their capacity to observe, interpret, and adapt positions them as proto–market-sensing agents, capable of anticipating demand shifts and mitigating disruptions, thereby underscoring the enduring centrality of human intelligence, relational capital, and adaptive strategy in resilient supply chain design.

3. From Peddlers to Modern Supply Chain Principles

The existing literature on peddlers is structured around three main bodies of work: approaches in economic history analyzing itinerant trade networks, research in social history focusing on the status and representations of street vendors, and finally, contributions in management that use these figures as historical analogies for logistical flexibility. Despite their richness, these

strands remain largely siloed and only weakly integrated into a unified analytical framework. In particular, the organizational and informational dimensions of peddler networks remain underdeveloped relative to contemporary advances in SCM, especially regarding distributed coordination, knowledge circulation, and adaptive capacity. This conceptual fragmentation hinders the identification of the mechanisms through which historical practices may inform modern logistical principles. Addressing such gap, the present study advances the argument that peddlers constitute an early manifestation of logistical intelligence that prefigures contemporary strategic management models. Their mobility should therefore not be understood merely as a means of transporting goods, but rather as the infrastructural basis for a distributed cognitive system grounded in observation, memory accumulation, and iterative knowledge exchange.

Each stop operates as a localized learning node within a broader distributed system, where economic signals—including price fluctuations, supply disruptions, and evolving consumer behaviors—are continuously captured, interpreted, and transmitted, thereby anticipating contemporary paradigms of demand sensing and predictive analytics (Kembro & Selviaridis, 2015; Choi et al., 2018). Operational effectiveness emerges from the situated interpretation of granular information and its rapid translation into adaptive decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Such interactions generate a horizontally coordinated structure characterized by self-regulation without centralized authority yet sustained by strong functional coherence across actors. Within this configuration, system-level performance derives from the aggregation and alignment of individual actions rather than hierarchical control or resource concentration, foreshadowing distributed architectures now prevalent in digitalized supply chains. By converting situated observations into actionable knowledge, itinerant merchants demonstrate that logistical systems can achieve high performance in complex and volatile environments through mobility, experiential learning, and embedded intelligence rather than infrastructural rigidity.

Beyond operational flexibility, peddlers generate an emergent commercial ecosystem that integrates intermediation, flow continuity, and social coordination into a unified relational structure. This configuration is, however, characterized by structural paradoxes: itinerant merchants simultaneously operate as agents of proximity and distance, as essential enablers of circulation and as socially marginalized actors within formal economic hierarchies. Such tensions echo contemporary retail dilemmas, particularly the persistent trade-offs between standardization and localization, scale efficiencies and customer intimacy, or cost optimization or responsiveness. Informal exchange systems rely on a finely differentiated division of roles among producers, wholesalers, peddlers, and end consumers, each adjusting behavior in response to information asymmetries and reciprocal signals. In this sense, coordination resembles a proto-orchestration of supply networks in which value emerges from alignment processes rather than centralized command. Verbal exchanges, ritualized interactions, and credit-based arrangements stabilize transactions over time, reducing volatility and strengthening relational continuity (Fontaine, 2014; Diner, 2015). Within such arrangements, systemic resilience depends as much on distributed social capital as on material flows. By embedding trust, knowledge circulation, and iterative feedback loops into commercial routines, itinerant networks offer early insights into human-centered SCM, where interpersonal coordination constitutes the foundation of adaptive and durable systems (Ivanov et al., 2017).

The practices of peddlers also anticipate foundational principles of circularity in resource utilization (Zhang et al., 2021). Through redistribution, repair, and reuse strategies adapted to local contingencies, they implement an embryonic form of reverse logistics that systematically transforms constraints into operational opportunities. Unsold or damaged goods are reallocated to alternative markets, repurposed for secondary uses, or transferred to artisan partners, thereby minimizing waste while maximizing residual value extraction. Inventory governance relies on

rapid turnover cycles and temporary storage configurations that align circulating quantities with real-time demand conditions. This logic closely parallels JIT principles, reducing exposure to obsolescence while enhancing responsiveness to seasonal and episodic demand variability. By combining material efficiency, anticipatory judgment, and territorial embeddedness, peddlers establish circular and adaptive logistics systems in which each movement contributes to continuous cycles of valorization, optimization, and redistribution, thereby prefiguring resilient and sustainable supply chain configurations (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Tang, 2006). These dynamics suggest that retail performance depends on a finely balanced integration of mobility, proximity to customers, local market intelligence, and assortment flexibility. Within contemporary omnichannel ecosystems, such dimensions are central to embedding field-level insights into supply chain decision-making processes. Peddlers therefore represent an early configuration in which sales and logistics functions converge within a unified adaptive logic, where continuous adjustment constitutes the main source of performance.

Finally, the conceptual legacy of peddling resonates strongly within contemporary supply chain thinking. Itinerant merchants demonstrate that effective supply systems rely on a calibrated balance between technological tools, human judgment, and relational trust. Their governance logic privileges experiential discernment over mechanistic efficiency, illustrating that agility stems from the capacity to perceive weak signals, interpret contextual variation, and act prior to systemic disruption. Through sustained market engagement and accumulated customer familiarity, 19th-century peddlers establish a form of relational proximity that prefigures the customer intimacy central to modern omnichannel strategies (Mollenkopf et al., 2010). Far from constituting a historical curiosity, their practices provide actionable insights for the design of robust, flexible, and human-centered supply chains. Relational intelligence, field-based experience, and continuous feedback loops emerge as core capabilities, underscoring that resilience, adaptability, and customer centricity are deeply rooted in historical forms of itinerant commerce. The key principles and their alignment with modern supply chain strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Peddler Practices and Their Modern Supply Chain Counterparts

Peddling practices	Modern supply chain principles	Key insights
Moving across regions, reaching remote villages	Flexible distribution networks	Agility in routing and responsiveness to local demand
Observing customer preferences, seasonal trends, and price fluctuations	Demand sensing and real-time analytics	Human intelligence parallels modern data-driven forecasting
Adjusting assortment to local markets	Customer intimacy and personalized offerings	Local adaptation enhances satisfaction and loyalty
Collecting information for urban suppliers	Feedback loops for production and distribution planning	Early form of market intelligence and continuous improvement
Diversifying sources of goods	Multi-sourcing and redundancy	Risk mitigation and continuity of supply
Rotating stock rapidly with temporary storage	Lean management and JIT practices	Obsolescence control and holding cost reduction
Building trust and reputation in communities	Supplier relationship management and brand trust	Social capital as strategic asset for resilience

Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusion

The present paper contributes a distinctive perspective to the history of logistics by examining the practices of pre-capitalist peddlers and itinerant merchants—economic actors largely overlooked in mainstream management scholarship. Far from operating at the margins of commercial organization, such traders developed sophisticated micro-networks that integrated mobility, assortment adaptation, and continuous information gathering into effective systems of logistical coordination. A central contribution lies in demonstrating the convergence between historical practices and key principles of contemporary SCM, including agility, resilience, and operational flexibility. Through the orchestration of material flows, territorial knowledge, and enduring customer relationships, peddlers mobilized capabilities that prefigure modern concepts such as multi-sourcing, customer centricity, and dynamic assortment management. A historiographical perspective reveals that logistics performance has never depended solely on technological infrastructures or physical assets; it has also been shaped by human intelligence, adaptive capacity, and experiential expertise. Viewed through such a lens, the historical experience of itinerant merchants offers more than a retrospective account of commercial exchange: it provides a valuable framework for rethinking resilient and human-centered supply chains. By highlighting the strategic significance of local knowledge, relational trust, and decentralized decision-making, the analysis underscores the foundations upon which effective logistics systems continue to be built.

Notwithstanding these contributions, several methodological and empirical limitations warrant consideration. Historical evidence concerning peddlers remains fragmented, unevenly documented, and frequently shaped by normative biases, constraining the reconstruction of trade routes, commercial flows, and supplier relationships. The prevalence of myths, anecdotal accounts, and sensationalized representations further complicates the establishment of a reliable empirical record. In addition, the scarcity of quantitative evidence limits rigorous assessment of trade volumes, network efficiency, and comparative performance across contexts. The analysis is primarily situated within Western European settings and specific historical periods, restricting broader generalization. Moreover, the emphasis on logistical and operational dimensions leaves less room for examining the social, cultural, and economic structures underpinning itinerant commerce, including kinship ties, community networks, and reputational capital. Comparisons with contemporary SCM must likewise be approached with caution to avoid teleological interpretations that project modern concepts onto fundamentally different historical realities. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that contemporary retail and supply chain challenges cannot be reduced to technological sophistication or digital transformation alone; they also depend on an organization's capacity to combine market intelligence, operational adaptability, and territorial embeddedness in a coherent and responsive manner.

Several avenues for future research emerge from the inquiry. Extending the analysis to other geographical regions and historical periods would facilitate cross-contextual comparisons identifying recurring patterns, significant divergences, and alternative models of adaptive performance within pre-capitalist supply networks.[2] Systematic archival research drawing upon commercial registers, inventories, account books, and transactional records could generate richer quantitative evidence on material flows, inventory turnover, and temporary storage practices, offering deeper insight into anticipatory planning mechanisms

[2] A particularly promising direction would be the study of itinerant peddlers in 19th-century North America, whose role in vast, sparsely populated and rapidly expanding territories differed in significant ways from their European counterparts. In contrast to the more structurally embedded and often urban- or proto-industrial contexts of European peddling networks, North American peddlers operated within highly fluid frontier economies, characterized by weak market infrastructure, long-distance mobility, and a greater degree of commercial improvisation.

and proto-logistical forms of JIT coordination. Further exploration of the social and cultural dimensions of itinerant trade would illuminate how trust, reputation, and community-based relationships structured the circulation of goods, information, and opportunities across dispersed networks. Collectively, such perspectives position the study of historical logistics as a fertile conceptual laboratory for contemporary supply chain thinking. More fundamentally, the experience of pre-capitalist peddlers demonstrates that adaptive intelligence, experiential knowledge, and human creativity have long been central to operational effectiveness. Far from constituting a historical curiosity, their practices offer enduring strategic insights for the design of resilient, flexible, and human-centered supply chains, reaffirming the lasting value of relational capital, local expertise, and adaptive capability in navigating increasingly complex and uncertain environments.

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