A sociology of market-things: on tending the garden of choices in mass retailing

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Introduction

In its attempt to challenge economic explanations of market choices, the (now not so) ‘new economic sociology’ proposed to investigate the social (Granovetter, 1985), cultural (Zelizer, 1985; Abolafia, 1996) and political (Fligstein, 1996) ‘embeddedness’ of market behaviour.¹ This research effort has been very useful in fleshing out economic exchanges, moving their investigation beyond abstract structures and stylized actors. The new economic sociology has given sociologists some robust tools and efficient theories for investigating the richness and humanity of economic activities and processes. Since it tends to reduce market realities to their human dimensions (networks, ideas and institutions), however, this perspective ends up neglecting the role of objects, technologies and other artefacts in framing markets (Chantelat, 2002).

Michel Callon’s Laws of the Markets (1998) may be seen as an attempt to fill in this gap. Callon proposed as a focus, the technical and intellectual devices shaping market exchanges. To a certain degree, this programme may be presented as a fourth contribution to the new economic sociology paradigm, a contribution that insists on the ‘cognitive/technological’ embeddedness of markets. Yet this would only be accurate if Callon and his colleagues could be said to think of a market reality as being ‘embedded’ in some kind of social context! In the very same way that Bruno Latour refuses the idea of an ‘ever there’ ‘social stuff’ encompassing everybody and everything, preferring to define the word ‘social’ as an association process mixing and connecting human and non-human matters and issues (Latour, 2005), one might consider that for ‘ANT-driven’ economic sociology ‘market’ and ‘social’ realities are neither separated nor subject to the precedence of the other. Rather they are both combined and produced through ‘socio-economic’ action.

In this chapter² I propose, to follow along the latter perspective, to move from a sociology of marketing – ie, of how market knowledge ‘performs’ economic action (Cochoy, 1998) – to a sociology of ‘market-things’ – ie, of how commercial objects, frames and tools equip consumer cognition (Cochoy, 2004). In other words, I suggest abandoning market theories and opening our eyes to
market matters. Instead of looking for the explanation of market choices in classical or innovative ‘backstage’ mechanisms, such as cultural-political-social constructs or theoretical frameworks, I intend to show that markets may also be traced at the immediate ground level of ordinary transactions. (The two approaches are of course neither exclusive nor contradictory). In order to accomplish this, I will concentrate on ‘interobjective’ (Latour, 1996) relationships occurring between consumers and market devices in the supermarket.

The perspective being proposed is supported by similar endeavours that precede it, such as studies of situated consumer cognition (Lave, Murtaugh and de la Rocha, 1984), some market ethnographies (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger, 2000, 2002), and more recently the theory of markets as ‘calculative spaces’ (Callon and Muniesa, 2005). Callon and Muniesa’s expression rather nicely insists on the fact that economic cognition, far from being abstract and purely cerebral, is always situated and equipped. It is my conviction that the spatial/material properties of market operations may be even more crucial than their calculative dimension. Even when exchanging goods does not immediately imply computing (goods may be given, stolen, or chosen routinely, blindly, etc.), it always involves moving them from one point to another, through a wide range of physical channels and equipments. These range from traditional bazaars (Geertz, 1978) and flea markets (Belk, 1991) to the electronic screens, sites and networks of financial markets (Callon, Licoppe and Muniesa, 2003) and e-shopping (Licoppe and Picard, 2005).

Even if some markets are highly sophisticated (as financial ones might be), most of them are quite mundane and ‘down to earth’ – just like supermarkets. This chapter investigates the supermarket through the use of the ‘garden’ metaphor. This metaphor evokes soil, plants, tools and enclosures, but it also outlines all of the work that should be done to encourage purchasing. As I have already put it, shedding light on market labour and space moves us a little bit away from theories of markets. But this does not mean that nothing is performed by market professionals and their spatial activities. To the contrary, through the study of the ‘gardening of choices’ in supermarket settings, we observe that performance is not only about the enactment of some ex-ante, given theories. It is also about the formation of knowledge through situated exchanges and practices. In other words – and in supermarkets at least – performance is better defined as ‘performance’. As we will see, what is ‘performed’ is what is played, directed, staged (or rather gardened in this case). The market performance is about those very local and material events and devices that ‘make us do things’ (Latour, 1999), but that, in so doing, also make actors think differently, be they consumers, producers or retailers.

Supermarket cycles

By visiting the material space of the supermarket, I propose to make visible ‘what everyone sees and still doesn’t see’. I will only comment upon things that
are in plain sight, and I will try to outline in these observations some elements, issues and processes that, even if not always noticed, nevertheless redefine the skills, activities and identities of consumers. To meet this objective, I will set aside an omniscient, cartographic point of view, and adopt instead the modest and ‘naturalist’ position of the passing stranger, the shopper, or the wanderer. Rather than looking for hidden backstage mechanisms behind the observed phenomena, rather than calling for some external knowledge in order to increase the understanding of the field, I will try to begin simply from the surface of behaviours and things. In order to give some depth (of field) to my perspective, however, I will displace my point of view and proceed from particular ‘optical’ positions, alternating the observation sites. That is, I will rely on pairs of photographs for the purpose of grasping the dynamics and implications of supermarket objects through anamorphosis (ie, adopting extreme angles of vision) and stereoscopic effects (ie, systematically looking not at one but at two pictures of the same site or topic). This method is consistent with the garden metaphor which invites us to take the supermarket not as a palimpsest whose layers should be scraped off one after the other, but as a landscape, as a space, as a set of clumps and paths that we have to visit with curiosity, fondness and attention, from the right position and at the right time.

Thanks to automobiles (Strassser, 1989), big retail returned to the old site of medieval markets at the cities’ outskirts (Braudel, 1981). In so doing, contemporary supermarkets remind us of the extent to which markets, just like gardens, build bridges between cities and the open country, between sites of consumption and spaces of rural production. The supermarket has displaced the market not only geographically but also in terms of built space. When consumers enter a supermarket they are no longer in the public space of the street. They penetrate instead a curious house everyone can visit and leave, without revealing their identity, but also a house where circulation is restricted: we must first deposit or wrap up previous purchases before entering, we go out with a full trolley (provided you have paid for its contents) or perhaps with an empty one (provided you pass a human or electronic security check), and, of course, you do not steal or grab things and eat them on spot.

The historical cycle is supplemented by a seasonal one. In commercial sites as well as in open nature, activities follow a seasonal pace: wine fairs occur in autumn, toys appear in the winter, gardening happens in spring, sales take place during the summer. A short day cycle also intervenes. Everyday, supermarkets experience an alternation between two ‘dances in a ring’ which are astonishingly symmetrical: the night work of the very special ‘gardeners’ who ‘clean’ the aisles, ‘pick out’ the products on the shelves, ‘set up’ the general display of goods; and the activity of the day shoppers who roam through all of the aisles, pick up the products and thus ‘undo’ the entire scene that was built for them (see Pictures 1 and 2). Having once been authorized to take some photographs before the opening of a supermarket, I was surprised by the nocturnal agitation and disorder. Here and there, positioned in the aisles and in front of end displays, some well-stocked trolleys were waiting, as if some clients were already in their midsts.
Pictures 1 and 2: Night and day. (All photographs by Franck Cochoy)
But I soon realized that, curiously enough, the same trolleys were being independently filled by several people. The issue at stake was not to buy, but to collect the aborted choices of the day before, to reassemble products abandoned in the middle of the shelves, far away from their initial ‘success’ of having been selected.

What was also striking was the congestion induced by cardboard boxes, pallets, rubbish, and the numbers of people rushing all over the place. I noticed that the supermarket’s attendance in the early hours is close to that which it faces during the quiet hours of the day. The pallet carriers and telescopic ladders joined the trolleys of abandoned goods, but this time the ‘consumers’ were retailers. Retailers place and tidy up products while consumers pick and mix them up. Retailers come and go repeatedly from the back of the shop to the same aisles, while consumers move from one aisle to the next. Yet in each group, one could clearly observe the same commitment, the same silence, the same meticulous orientation towards the shelves.

The parallel between the two temporally differentiated scenes became even more striking when the speakers announced at half past eight in the morning, that ‘the shop opens in thirty minutes’. Meaning: everything should be finished before shop opening. As for Cinderella, it is necessary to leave on time and not to forget anything left behind her: tape, torn up boxes, garbage, etc. The announcement was identical to the one that would be given in the evening, varying only the verb ‘close’, and the tone of politeness granted to visitors. Supply is obviously the mirror of demand. But the rule is that neither one nor the other should meet each other directly (or at least, that they meet as little as possible). The supermarket succeeds in performing in some way the liberal, market-view of the world reported by Karl Polanyi:

Vision was limited by the market which ‘fragmentated’ life into the producers’ sector that ended when his product reached the market, and the sector of the consumer for whom all goods sprang from the market. The one derived his income ‘freely’ from the market, the other spent it ‘freely’ there. Society as a whole remained invisible. (Polanyi, 1971 {1944}: 258)

The supermarket gives anthropological content to the cultural scheme outlined by Polanyi, but it does so without reproducing it exactly. With the supermarket, what Polanyi says is simultaneously true and false. It is true, since the perfect dissociation between supply and demand eventually becomes possible within the supermarket (or the ‘hypermarket’, to speak literally of a ‘superlative market’). It is also false, since in this case the market is not the same any more: the birth of mass retailing should be taken neither as the advent of a market without merchants (du Gay, 2004), nor as the triumph of a local auto-regulative bidding system described in Marie-France Garcia’s strawberry market (Garcia-Parpet, 2007). In the supermarket, the distributor’s presence and action is constant even if very discrete and remote. And prices and offers do not fluctuate on the spot, but are set in advance.

This ‘time discontinuity’ is crucial, for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that ‘free markets’ rest on managerial voluntarism. Paradoxically enough, ‘laissez-faire’
has to be ‘done’: supermarket gardeners work hard both to render themselves as invisible as possible (in acting at night and in delegating their skills to market-things) as well as to organize a space were consumers may feel free and move freely. Secondly, time discontinuities between night and day open up a space for ‘pragmatic management’. Night ‘suspends’ not only consumer behaviour on the demand side, but also managerial science on the supply side. Nocturnal supermarket activity performs management not as textbook knowledge, but as situated practice: through its pragmatic gardening activity, supermarket staff shows us that market framing is about adopting the consumer’s point of view ‘physically’ rather than ‘intellectually’: in moving at night into the very space and position consumers will occupy during the day, the supermarket gardeners experience the consumers’ own gestures with their senses and bodies. They thus anticipate consumers’ possible actions and impressions, and frame the scene accordingly.

The ‘presence’ of the shop, as a place but also as an actor distinct from supply and demand, leads us to reconsider the dynamics and implications of ‘self-service’. At first glance, the very mundane self-service device may be taken as a scenography of the theoretical market, since it hardens the free-market scheme. In a supermarket, circulation, calculation and decision-making are meant to be free. Everyone can come in and go out without further explanation. Consumers can examine the entire range of available products in a common unit of place, time and action. They can evaluate and manipulate objects directly, freely activate their preferences, make choices without any human intervention or material constraints – that is, they can fulfil the ultimate dreams of the liberal economy, dreams that only undergraduate textbooks in economics dare to convey, alongside the sociological critique of some ‘fantasized’ economics!

But who are ‘they’? What is the supply they face? What do their exchanges really rely upon? In the supermarket, the central actors of market economics seem to have been removed. On the one hand, the producer rarely intervenes directly, but is rather represented by the products and/or by the work of the aisle managers. On the other hand, the consumers themselves are not as present as one might believe. When I see someone wandering around with a shopping list, I quickly understand that the one who shops is not necessarily the one who consumes. The shopper either acts as the representative of someone else or as an entity larger than herself (when they are not the author of the list, as it is evidenced when they call someone on their cellular phone for explanations). Or do they split their own identity in two, when they oppose their intentions as a consumer to her immediate experiences as buyers.

As a consequence, the buyer should not be taken for the consumer, just as the big retailer should not be confused with the producer. Self-service presents itself not as the encounter between supply and demand but rather as the confrontation of two mediations, two delegations which are commissioned by the production and consumption sides. In order to understand the social dynamics of self-service, we therefore have to study the particular contribution of these two mediations (and their articulation) to the accomplishment of exchanges.
The nocturnal scene reported earlier helps us to identify the fundamental drives of self-service, along with the horticultural metaphor. The alternate ballets of retailers and buyers may for instance take us back to the strategy of an 18th century exceptional ‘gardener-marketer’: Antoine-Augustin Parmentier. In France, Parmentier is famous for being the man who succeeded in making French people consume potatoes. He met this objective by cultivating them on a field given to him by King Louis XVI, and by placing guards all around (except at night). This stratagem made potential thieves think that the mysterious product cultivated there was precious, and enticed them to robbery during the hours when the field was not kept. Self-service professionals, just as Parmentier with his potatoes, set up a garden whose guards vanish (in the day, this time) in order to let the buyers go in and take as much advantage as they can of the windfall of an abundant and ‘open’ supply. Budgetary constraints are expelled as far as possible: payment certainly does occur but only at the end and all at once, after everything has been gathered without any precise idea of the total amount (prices are marked only on shelves and not on products themselves). This confirms the point about the necessary ‘faire laissez-faire’ we already mentioned: there is no such a thing as a market without organization, no choices are possible without preliminary framing not only of these choices, but also of the freedom of the framed actors (Cochoy, 2007). Last but not least, the final virtue of this scene is to help us understand that the same space is surrounded by different populations with their respective activities – populations and activities that now deserve a closer examination.

The work of the visitor

The absence of a direct, physical encounter between supply and demand in supermarket settings forces the sociologist to make a detour through the objects that play a mediating role in markets: we must question the meaning and the functioning of a commercial world where human eyes do not cross, but rather slide towards the edges, towards the tops or bottoms of the shelves (or towards the exit!) (see Picture 3).

The supermarket space reminds us of streets, subways or train stations (Augé, 2002). It looks like a typically urban place where everyone goes their own way, has their eyes turned towards their own horizon, even if they sometimes look for a point of reference to know where to go or what to do. In the shop, however, the visual objective is not a vanishing point located beyond the circulation of people. Rather, the visual objective is the set of objects that surrounds the circulating people. Buyers do not look in front of themselves but to the sides, and behind each other, while all the while looking at the shelves. Eyesight in supermarkets does not seem to be particularly prone to intersubjectivity. People do not look at each other but make themselves busy (du Gay, 2004). Yet the absence of interaction is not experienced as a moment of embarrassment as in the closed and oppressive space of elevators. On the contrary, this absence of human
interaction finds a natural derivative in the general interobjectivity that establishes itself between buyers and products.

Face-to-face interaction between clients and vendors (Prus, 1989) is replaced by a ‘face-to-shelves’ relationship analogous to the ‘face-to-screen’ pattern analyzed by Karin Knorr-Cetina and Urs Bruegger (2000, 2002) in financial markets. Acknowledging the material, industrial and delegated character of market interactions in self-service environments is probably better achieved through a sociology of cognitive equipment (Cochoy, 2002) than through classical interactionism. Each ‘face-to-shelf’ interaction is abutted by a ‘face-to-list’ interaction. An initial ‘face-to-list’ launches the buyers’ attempt to establish a fragile correspondence between their purchase intentions and the differentiated offer of the shelves (Cochoy, 1999). Afterwards, a symmetrical ‘face-to-list’ leads the distributor to adjust his offer according to scanner data as best as he can (Barrey, Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000). But of course, one should not forget the other very complex coordination that happens in between, implicating faces, shelves, lists, as well as the multiple principals and their agents of each of these (Barrey, 2001).

Producing a supply in self-service involves asynchronous, delegated and mediated interactions. These interactions, equipped with objects and scripts, involve
both adventure and calculation, planning and exploration. Such operations and gestures largely rely on scriptural, symbolic and material registers and thus on a scrupulous setting up of the commercial space.

The work of the distributor: tending to the volume of choices

On the opposite side of the ‘buying eye’, we find not only objects, but also an array of professionals who manipulate these objects. Aisles managers for example obviously take advantage of the hybrid interactions between people and products. They do so by arranging cognitive supports, by providing multiple ‘choice devices’. Grasping the knowledge and action patterns of these particular professionals does not require relying on backstage information. I can simply start from a close examination of products and shop furniture, reading at their surface a great deal of the concerns of these ‘commercial gardeners’. This does not exclude more direct and complete observation of market professionals (Barrey, Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000) which, as good landscape architects do, distribute commercial information along the vertical, lateral and depth axes that are open to our eyes.

Pictures 4 and 5: Up and down.
Sticking to my front stage investigation, it is the ‘vertical axis’ that I first encounter when entering an aisle (Pictures 4 and 5). In the upper part of this axis, large boards clearly indicate the alleyway’s contents. For instance, the board I am facing mentions very explicitly, in very large and readable characters, the type of items gathered underneath: ‘sandwich bread’, ‘brioche’ and ‘fruit juice’. On either side of this board, smaller ovoid signs placed along the shelves provide more details about the product offering: ‘individual pre-sliced brioche’, ‘plaited brioche’, etc. Such boards place us in front of a purely informative realm that ranks and distributes an asset of perfectly understandable, monosemic and denotative indications. The main rubric (which implicitly refers to breakfast), is divided into particular rubrics (brioches, beverages), along a functionalist taxonomical logic (close to a botanist’s?). This way of proceeding is also close to a market ideal of pure and perfect information: whether we adopt the point of view of the ordinary consumer or even the critical stance of the most suspicious sociologist, it would be very difficult not to admit that the distributed means of signalling, hanging above our heads, are aimed at informing us rather than at manipulating us. They are obviously designed to help the consumer quickly and surely identify and locate their preferred objects, to assist them in going ‘straight to the goal’ – towards their goal, and not towards the one that someone else may have defined. (This is somewhat accompanied by ulterior motives, since buying quickly allows buying more!). Now, perfect information soon meets other dimensions which add to it but that also counterbalance its importance and significance. First, we should notice the optional and peripheral character of such ‘aerial’ signalling. Informative boards are not like tolls, gates or obligatory checkpoints. They are not constraints but rather resources, they provide possible cognitive supports that anyone can rely on or ignore as they see fit. The remote position of such information in the upper part may correspond exactly to that: the place of something that goes largely ‘above our heads’. Consumers raising their eyes in search of this information are not that common in supermarkets. Some have incorporated the map of the shop during their repeated visits and others favour a systematic exploration of every aisle, thereby rendering the quest for directional supports useless. Many ignore, or at best forget, such signalling devices. It is as if consumers would activate (unconsciously?) the action scheme of the city dweller and the country walker; that is, they activate the behaviour of a subject who first pays attention to the objects in front of her. Now, when examining what lies at eye level in the supermarket, the consumer looks at the lower part of the vertical axis. And when she looks at it, she encounters much more than just clear informational transparency.

As soon as I enter the aisle and look straight in front of me, I abandon the vertical axis in order to engage into the lateral one. Do I leave the realm of transparent information in order to meet products directly? Not yet, not really. In following the lateral axis, I do not see the aisle from head on, but encounter them in profile (Pictures 6 and 7).

And as soon as I look to the aisle in profile, I discover not the products but rather cards, signs, and flags that function a little bit like thumb indexes. These
indexes show me not the full-range but rather a selection of products: ‘World cuisine’, ‘Carrefour product’, ‘Reflets de France’, ‘tea time, 9 euros 49 cents’, ‘new’ (see Picture 6). Elsewhere in the shop, similar indexes also designate ‘promotion’, ‘lowest price’, ‘customer card’, etc. Unlike the aerial boards presented above, these lateral flags operate a double deviation: they attempt to stop my eyes on such or such product (which I may have not noticed otherwise) and to attract my attention on this or that aspect of its dimensions (that I may have not spontaneously considered, or that I may even ignore until now).

Let’s take an example. When I read the flag ‘Carte Pass’ (Carrefour customer card), I learn not only that this product is subject to a price reduction but also that I need the shop’s card in order to benefit from it. The flag’s trick is double: it succeeds both in showing members what they should buy to benefit from their status, and to non members what they lose in not joining up. All of these sorts of flags show new ways of grasping the products. In the process, we learn that preferences, far from always preceding the act of purchase, are largely constructed along the immediate interaction with products that praise their own properties (sometime we do not even suspect the existence of these properties, see below). Finally, let us note the constant zeal of aisle managers in renewing not only the products they introduce on the shelves, but also the ways in which they present them. The highly rationalist slogan reading ‘At Carrefour, our prices are frozen until the summer’, which followed the shift to the euro currency in the first semester of 2002, was later replaced with the more seductive campaign for the new Carrefour product range ‘J’aime’ (‘I love’) in January 2003. After
playing on a calculative logic, Carrefour attempted to activate the consumers’ hedonic drives. I realize the extent to which the market space arranges not only objects but also my inner configuration. I discover that the art of ‘achalandage’ (Grandclément, 2003) activates a plurality of cognitive schemes that are embedded in my self (Cochoy, 2007). This art plays on reason and passion, calculus and feelings, concepts and affects.

Finally, when I face the aisles – when I look at the ‘depth axis’ – I do not see the flags anymore, since their edge becomes invisible through this angle of vision. Now that aerial boards are forgotten and flags are eclipsed, now that no obstacle comes to hamper my vision, I might believe that I am finally in a position to see the products and to finally reach my goal. But not quite, yet. What I take as the products are actually paper faces, boxes, packaging. Packaging is to products what clumps are to flowers. In the very same way that in a flower garden we are charmed by a chromatic assemblage before being able to name the species composing it, in a supermarket we are first attracted by colourful blocks rather than by the brands which constitute these blocks. The place assigned to a product induces an implicit judgement about this product, as does the height and breadth of the display space devoted to it. The upper, lower, side or centred positioning of a product in the supermarket shelve works as a podium, or rather as a target, whose centre is generally reserved to the product the shop managers try to highlight. Most of the time, this space is occupied by the retailer’s private brand.

Facing the package clump that I like (or that attracts me), am I able to access the product I am looking for (or that is pointing at me)? No, still not yet! Just as the bee first has to get over the flower’s corolla to take the nectar it covets, the supermarket customer first has to go through product packaging in order to consume it, and extract from it the satisfaction they wish for. Packaging changes the product, the consumer and the producer all at once. It changes the product since, in hiding what it shows and showing what it hides, packaging transforms the qualification of the product. It helps attribute new characteristics to products, be they intrinsic (eg, a particular ingredient) or extrinsic (eg, a customer service). Packaging changes the producer, who is now able to understand product development not only through his technical skills, but also through the packaging of competitors. Packaging changes the consumer too, since it makes them discover the invisible dimensions of products, for instance the presence of a guarantee or of an additive that they could not have identified without the mediation of the box. In other words, the consumer learns to exchange their preferences for new references. Hesitating between two products is seeing them as similar, as indistinguishable along any ex-ante criteria. The solution to such a problem does not rest on the consumer’s internal or previous preferences, but on packagers’ ability to propose some distributed references which consumers may then take as their possible new preferences, that is, as a means of differentiating the products (Cochoy, 2002, 2007).

Thanks to observations of merchandising and packaging, I understand that I will never reach the product, or at least not here, in the market. Such is the
paradox: in the modern supermarket, references are the things that are being bought, not products. Monetary signs are exchanged for market words and images. Evaluating the adequacy of such references to their substantial counterpart is postponed beyond transaction, in the realms of production and consumption. Since I cannot move further to the product, since I stumble over an impassable paper, a glass or a plastic barrier, since I understand that my exploration of the commercial space stops at the last mediation, I wonder if my shopping journey is truly over. Might I have left some important aspects aside and should I rewind the film of my visit?

This introspective flashback is not useless. It makes me realize that I have only accomplished a very short route. I have only visited one or two aisles. I could have turned off elsewhere, taken other directions, scrutinized many things – I could have completed the examination of the aisles’ diversity and multiplicity. Let me leave packaging and come back upstream. Or, better, let me extend the packaging metaphor to the garden metaphor and see the extent to which the supermarket, as a product, is itself subjected to a packaging process. For the shop works as a physical envelope for the market, and transforms commerce in the very same way that a greenhouse modifies the plants growth. Marketplaces, as any other public arenas (Latour, 2004), are matters of ‘air conditioning’ and atmosphere management (Chung, Inaba, Koolhaas and Tsung Leong, 2002; Grandclément, 2004). In order to make sense of such a transformation, let’s have a look at another pair of pictures (Pictures 8 and 9).

On the left, the wine aisle (Picture 8). This aisle goes far beyond the classical tabular ranking of bottles’ in rows (in line) and their names (in column). Large paper boards hanging from the ceiling simulate the vaults of a cellar, lined with other items of rustic decoration. On the right, the health and beauty aisle (Picture 9). Here again, the display of products breaks with the standard

Pictures 8 and 9: Wine and Heath & beauty.
organization of the other aisles. This space is closed on three sides, giving the impression that one is entering a restricted room. The white frame that surrounds the whole scene channels customers’ eyes towards the interior. Smaller furniture, a special cash register, a shiny floor which contrasts with the dull and colourless floor tiles of the rest of the shop – all these create the atmosphere of a snug and familiar bathroom.

This new way to organize supermarket aisles – known as ‘retail universe management’ in French professional vernacular – recreates sites of production (wineries) and consumption (bathrooms), and thus moves us away from a place of pure exchange. In this respect it contributes to the ‘re-enchantment’ of consumption evoked by George Ritzer (1999). By not gathering products along a commercial taxonomy, as elsewhere in the shop, but along the same rationale we use at home, ‘retail universes’ do not, however, necessarily break with marketing logics. This is not a post-modern occurrence, in which the marketplace would have turned into a pure space of sociability. On the contrary, these universes are designed to reinforce the channelling of consumers towards pure commercial dynamics.

Setting ‘retail universes’ consists in ‘wrapping-up’ the shop, caring for its ‘packaging’, transforming the sale space into a product. With such ‘retail universes’ we do not consume the product anymore but rather we consume the commercial space itself. Consuming the shop is a possible substitute for a purely utilitarian consumption: the supermarket experience can be justified in terms of leisure more easily. The retail universe becomes to supermarkets what leisure gardens are to vegetable growing. On the other hand, favouring free ‘visual consumption’, encouraging not only strictly purchasing behaviour but fostering a personal relationship with the shopping place contributes to settling the consumer into a ‘regime of familiarity’ (Thévenot, 2001) – and possibly also into a regime of reciprocity. The décor of the store might be perceived as a gift to which the consumer is meant to correspond through purchasing. It is as if the shop’s landscape gardeners had invented a sort of a ‘theory of efficient décor’, combining the drives of the Maussian gift and the old dynamics of Elton Mayo’s human relations, or even the lessons of the more recent Goffmanian sociology of service relations, into a theory which insists on the civility exchanges which are necessary to the co-production of services in intersubjective commercial or administrative contexts (Joseph and Jeannot, 1995). The development of these ‘retail universe’ merchandising techniques obviously bets on a ‘postponed’ consumption, a consumption that relies on a long-lasting loyal relationship to the store, where the free enjoyment of a familiar place comes to encourage or anticipate future purchases (Barrey, 2004).

Hopefully, my journey has comes to its end. I have scrutinized the distant and alternating articulation of supply and demand. I have gone through the supermarket in every direction. I have explored the framing of (either actual or postponed) consumption choices. But I might still have missed something. While I thought that all views were limited and channelled towards the ‘inside’ of the commercial scene, three strange windows (one still close, another rather clan-
Three windows to (re)orient the consumer towards political issues

The first window opens towards the French countryside. This window was opened in the supermarket in spite of retailers. It is a fragile window, which now seems to be closed, or even walled up. Under the social pressure of farmers fighting against the gap between producers’ and retailers’ prices, this window was once built and opened with a rule issued by the government in August 13th, 1999, which imposed, for two months at least, the labelling of both the production price and the retail price of some fruits and vegetables. This rule turned consumers into judges in a commercial quarrel and somehow introduced a new way for them to evaluate products, too. Moreover, this effort also anticipated a new kind of competition: the initial intention of the rule (ie, to transform individualistic consumers into consumer-citizens able to evaluate the fairness of ‘trading margins’ in the retailing sector) turned ever so slightly into a call for more ‘commercial transparency’. The tension between producers and retailers has died down ever since this episode. The authorities’ voluntarism has gotten slack, and this first window was thus closed after its two months validation period. It did, however, let fresh air blow through the supermarket, an air which seems to spread through a second window.

This second window opens on several types of relationships that can occur between consumers and producers: fair trade, organic food, GMO-free food, or environment protection. The ‘fair trade’ movement (Cochoy, 2004) opens a discrete window directly on the surface of products. The Max Havelaar label, for instance, guarantees that ‘the coffee you’ll consume was bought directly from small producers at prices higher than world rates, after a partial financing of their harvests’. This label works as a window aimed at opening consumers’ eyes to farming issues in southern countries. It attempts to foster a political consumption (Micheletti, 2003) in which everyone works, at their own level, for a fair allocation of profits in distribution channels. This device may be seen as a global and voluntary equivalent of the French regulatory measure mentioned above. Its promoters expect that its non-mandatory character will (paradoxically) support its visibility and success, through the development of competition based on better ethical commitment.

The third political window is the largest, most visible and spectacular one. It first half-opened at the shop’s entry, in the context of a temporary commercial show which took place in March 2002 in the very French supermarket I have been walking you around in. The shopping mall was transformed into a ‘living farm’, with real animals such as a calf, and even a real ‘gardener’, with a straw hat, apron, trolley and flowers (see Picture 10). The third window opens completely, in a more serious, solid and lasting manner at the back of the super-
market, in the ‘quality channel’ of the meat aisle. In the latter, I observe a terracing of perspectives: in front of me lies the packaged meat (see Picture 11). Meat is clearly visible under the plastic film, well described through references to price, quality, origin and traceability guarantees. A little bit farther, I see the butchering chain which precedes the display of products. Finally, in the back, some windowpanes grant me visual access to the cold room, to the carcasses and to other pieces of meat. The scene just stops of a final window, which would open onto the farms, rendering the overall effort of transparency complete. In fact, the cattle were nevertheless already there in some way, with the quiet calf near the shop’s entry, bringing into surrealism the modern requirement for product traceability.

This kind of ‘visual marketing’, which consists in setting up a ‘transparent’ staging of a product’s distribution path, is an obvious attempt at clearing away the foolish fears of consumers – a hole is pierced in the shop’s walls so they can see beyond. Emphasis on traceability invites consumers to base their choices on safety issues and even to exchange taste (or ‘older’ concerns of the like) for precaution (Cochoy, 2001).

Through these three windows, I see how well mass retailers monitor and adjust to market evolutions, just as farmers from the old days looking at moon’s phases or clouds’ shapes. To promote GMO-free foodstuff, sustainable development, or product traceability is to follow the wind (opinion streams), seasons (fashion) and temperatures (more or less ‘hot’ crises), at least to some extent. The three windows point in different directions, but these directions all turn the consumer towards the ‘outer world’. They try to take the consumer out of the realm of pure price economics and immediate satisfaction. They propose different relations between consumers and producers, between ‘the city’ and ‘the country’. They connect to other values, to other concerns.

Pictures 10 and 11: From calf to veal.
Conclusion

At this point in my journey, I see to what extent the supermarket appears as an ambivalent soil – closed on itself but also opened to the outer world, prone to civic values but also to managerial ones, transparent but also full of ‘captation’ traps. This soil can lock the visitor up inside a consumerist dimension, but it can also reveal formerly hidden characteristics of products, from their production and distribution circuit to their ethical and political contents. Tending the garden of choices may of course involve social networks, cultures and institutions. But it also rests upon some very mundane, immediate and material ‘market-things’ such as boards, flags and shelves. Behind such things, the same gardening of choices also relies on the professional skills and actions I tried to read (rather than unveil) at the surface of supermarket sight. Here we meet the methodological – or rather optical – stake of this chapter. My aim is not only to describe and unfold the supermarkets logics, but also to do so along a particular way of handling marketing realities. I propose to leave large interpretative frameworks as well as backstage investigations at the door of the supermarket, and to focus on the difficult challenge of helping everyone ‘see what they see and still do not see’.

Social scientists often investigate social realities for which ‘special’ access is required. They need to make considerable efforts to find the right path to the data, or at least to some reliable informants. Moreover, the resulting work does not always address (or interest) a potential readership of first-hand specialists in the studied field. This is not to cast suspicion over this kind of research: scientific research is a professional activity with its rules and ethics which deserves the same respect and trust as any other social activity – not less and not more! In these cases, giving a descriptive account of the topic at stake is already an important achievement – although it is not always the primary aim – since this account provides a useful ‘first’ depiction of an ‘unknown’ reality. Further discussions may focus on the possible biases, oversights, mistakes, misinterpretations of this account, but rarely on its ‘trivial’ adequacy to the field under scrutiny.

The situation is radically different with the study of very mundane objects, such as supermarkets. Actors – but also the fellow researchers – are both informants and analysts. Everybody knows the field by heart, as a research agenda or at least as a weekly experience (I confess I am personally unable to separate the two). That’s probably why most monographs dealing with such fields tend to quickly leave aside superficially descriptive aspects to focus instead on theoretical implications – such as Daniel Miller’s highly suggestive *Theory of Shopping* (Miller, 1998) – or to look for something ‘hidden’ behind data that deserves to be ‘unveiled’. In this latter case, market ethnographers tend to favour the critical stance, either in its most classical way – as for instance, Maurice Duval (1981) does in and his fascinating ethnography of street pedlars – or in a more subtle manner – like Michèle de la Pradelle (2006) in her marvellous ethnography of the farmers’ market at the small French town of Carpentras.
De la Pradelle’s study aims at disclosing the reality of industrial supply and false peasants lying behind a façade of tradition and authenticity. But it also reveals that all actors, far from being fooled, are well aware of the merchants’ tricks. They simply prefer to behave as if such ‘backstage realities’ did not exist, in the very same way children know that puppets have their puppeteers, but also know that they will appreciate the show better if they pretend they do not – see Goffman (1986) for a similar analysis. As a consequence, in de la Pradelle’s book, the only real façade is that of critique: in a spectacular reversion of critical studies, the only naïve persons who deserve to be informed about the dark side of the world are de la Pradelle’s readers – ie, the specialists of social critique who have long grounded their professional credentials on their ability to open the eyes of poor credulous citizens on the obscure processes that work behind ‘common knowledge’ appearances.

In my own ethnography, I propose to go (methodologically and analytically) a little bit farther than de la Pradelle, although I am proposing not to go (physically) as far as she does. My bet is that a market ethnography may also be fruitful even if rather restricted to ‘mere surfaces’, acting as though ‘back-aisles’ explorations were not necessary to understand what is at stake in a supermarket. In neglecting backstage mechanisms, I do not fight against other interpretations. I simply attempt not to follow the larger route that most research already follows, in order to see if one might not learn something new in first looking at market-things before looking behind them.

Notes

1 See Philippe Steiner’s (2002) excellent review.
2 This chapter is a translated, updated and ‘upgraded’ version of a paper formerly published in *Ethnologie Française* (Cochoy, 2005).
3 I am not alone in believing in the virtues of such a metaphor. Hans Kjellberg and Claes-Fredrik Helgesson recently showed how considering markets as landscape gardens may improve their understanding (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007).
4 Sophie Dubuisson and I pleaded elsewhere that, as soon as it focuses on market professionals, marketing devices and exchange management, economic sociology does not need to be considered as something essentially different from a regular branch of the sociology of labour (Cochoy and Dubuisson, 2000).
5 I thank Anne Querrien for her documentary help, Sandrine Barrey, Michel Callon, Catherine Grandclément, Hans Kjellberg, Bruno Latour and Jean-Claude Thoenig for their reading of previous versions of this text, and the director of the supermarket ‘Carrefour Portet-sur-Garonne’ who gave me the authorization to take the pictures illustrating this chapter.
6 These operations are also reversible: most supermarkets reimburse the products that consumers bring back without asking anything other than a proof of purchase and that no adulteration has been made to the returned product (this reversibility of purchases is a premium supplement to the perfect competition that the theory do not even require).
7 The marketer Wroe Alderson presented the buyer as an ‘organized behaviour system’ (Alderson, 1958).
8 Of course, some of these flags may only produce their immediate effect thanks to a preliminary work aimed at making them understandable (advertising campaigns, distribution of leaflets, etc.).
9 Colour codes serve to identify the characteristics of some products like coffee (black for Arabica, red for mixtures, blue for decaffeinated, etc., at least in the case of France).

10 The capture or ‘captation’ of consumers articulates two apparently contradictory hypotheses. The first is that the consumer’s trajectory is predictable (it follows a particular action scheme or disposition). The second is that with the help of ad hoc devices – ‘dispositifs’ in French – any trajectory, even predictable, may be cut, seized, or even replaced with another ‘cognitive program’ or disposition (Cochoy, 2003).

11 I believe that theory-less or un-analytical ‘sociography’ should be considered as respectable as sociology.

12 For instance, when Callon and Rabeharisoa (1999) discuss Penef’s (1997) ethnography of surgery work, they do not question the excellence of the description (which they praise for its precision and vividness), but rather they challenge its theoretical standpoint (surgery as a ‘butcher’ work) which led the author to forget the patient as ‘living flesh’ and to neglect other crucial elements such as the anaesthetist’s role.

13 I admit I have occasionally transgressed this rule in referring to supermarkets’ night life, or in bringing here and there some additional information into my ‘superficial’ exploration of market pictures.

References


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