

REVIEW

Capitalising on curiosity: Captation devices and their affective capacity to attract publics and assemble markets

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On Curiosity: The Art of Market Seduction, by Franck Cochoy, Mattering Press, 2016, translated from French by Jaciara T. Lira, 252 pp., £15 (paperback), ISBN 978-09955277-0-6, open- access version (e-book pdf), ISBN 978-09955277-1-3

The study of markets and marketisation has become a prominent topic in Science and Technology Studies (STS) over the last two decades. A recent example of this development is Pinch and Swedberg's (2008) edited volume entitled *Living in a Material World: Economic Sociology Meets Science and Technology Studies*, which includes a section dedicated to exploring 'Technology and the Material Arrangements of the Market'. The editors and authors draw on the conceptual repertoire of economic sociology and STS to explore the materiality of markets, contributing to the volume's goal to bridge the two approaches. Michel Callon's work, in particular, has been important for establishing a conceptual understanding of markets as assemblages of people, things and the relations between them. Since the publication of Callon's *The Laws of the Markets* (1998), a growing number of researchers have examined how markets are assembled and re-assembled by foregrounding the role market devices (Callon, 2007) – tools, instruments, equations, models and more – play in these processes. Drawing on empirically rich case studies these scholars have inquired 'how these devices enact economic properties, how they provoke economic

behaviours, and how they render economic qualities explicit, in a variety of (frequently disputable) manners.’ (Muniesa *et al.*, 2007, p. 3).

Franck Cochoy, professor of sociology based at the University of Toulouse and one of France’s leading economic sociologists, is a key contributor to this field of research that has variously been described “market studies”, the new economic sociology, or social studies of markets. In fact, his work draws on and bridges between different fields such as the sociology and anthropology of consumption, interpretative consumer research (marketing) and economic sociology/STS that heretofore has had limited interactions. Cochoy’s thought-provoking publications on, amongst other things, the role of shopping carts as market actors (2008) and how these shape relations between people and things in supermarkets, have not only been pivotal in foregrounding how devices organise markets but has also introduced a rich conceptual repertoire (e.g. calculation – qualculation – calculation) of how to analyse markets in the making. Cochoy’s recently published book *On Curiosity: The Art of Market Seduction* is dedicated to exploring the marketisation of curiosity. Originally published in French by Armand Colin in 2011, the book’s reception by English-speaking readers has only started with its relatively recent translation (by Jaciara T. Lira) and publication by open access publisher Mattering Press in 2016.

In the first chapter of the book, Cochoy begins by historicising curiosity. He shows how curiosity has been the focus of religious, philosophical and scientific interest in the Western world and played a prominent role in these fields. Ultimately, he argues that curiosity became secularised and “...was abandoned to the market.” (p. 34). It is this marketisation of curiosity that he explores further in chapter two using an unusual

medium: a French fairy tale entitled *Bluebeard* (Perrault, 1697), (which readers are introduced to in part in the ‘Teaser’ preceding the first chapter and can read in full in the appendix). His detailed analysis of *Bluebeard* demonstrates the tale’s importance as a historical document – “*Bluebeard* appears at a pivotal moment, just before modern science established itself, and just before the generalisation of consumer society.” (p. 35) – but also the tale’s capacity to convey curiosity’s marketisation.

The plot of the tale focuses on Bluebeard, a French, wealthy nobleman with an ugly, blue beard, whose former wives have all mysteriously vanished, and who has recently remarried. When Bluebeard leaves for the country, he gives the keys to the castle’s many rooms that contain his collections (or curiosités) to his wife. Yet he warns her to not make use of one particular key that unlocks the door to an underground closet which she is strictly forbidden to go in. Not surprisingly, this temptation is difficult to resist and the wife’s curiosity eventually leads her to unlock the door. What she finds, the murdered corpses of Bluebeard’s former wives, horrifies her and in shock she drops the key. As a result, the key is stained with blood and no attempt at cleaning the key will remove it. Upon Bluebeard’s return, the blood-stained key reveals to him that she knows about his murders. He threatens to kill her immediately but she is able to stall him by asking for a last prayer with her visiting sister. The next day, seconds before Bluebeard is about to murder her, she is rescued by her brothers who kill Bluebeard.

Cochoy focuses in his analysis of the fairy tale on the meaning, role and effects of provoked curiosity and how these can be extended to other curiosity devices (beyond keys and locks in fairy tale castles to contemporary equivalents in consumer markets).

Although neglecting the stark gendering of curiosity and curiosity devices in his analysis, Cochoy's close reading and interpretation of *Bluebeard* offers three interrelated insights about curiosity's marketisation and market-making capacities. First, curiosity is a socio-materially co-produced desire to know. Second, this desire to know as expressed through curiosity is closely entangled with seduction. Third, the entanglement of curiosity and seduction through market devices is an important contribution to understanding the role of affect in the making of markets (cf. Müller and Schurr, 2016).

What is particularly insightful and of likely interest to researchers' of marketisation is Cochoy's proposition to not treat curiosity as an existing human trait that people possess to varying degrees. Instead, Cochoy proposes that curiosity is not the starting point and motivation of human behaviour but the outcome of a carefully orchestrated but not always harmonious (as to its likely to succeed) assemblage of people and particular devices. According to Cochoy these 'captation devices', as he describes them, "play a key role in defining or activating motives for action (and vice versa). ... [They] allow [curiosity] to be expressed and spread throughout society" (p. 12). The French word 'captation' has no exact equivalent in English and, as Cochoy notes, "its meaning corresponds more to 'seducing' than 'capturing' given that it refers to an operation aimed at attracting a public without forcing it (Cochoy, 2007)." (p. 211).

So how do captation devices work in practice? This is the focus of much of Cochoy's book and in chapters three and four he introduces three examples or what he calls 'teasing practices' – displays, packaging and advertising – which are employed in contemporary markets and how these three practices socially activate, renew or enrich

the use of curiosity. Cochoy's analysis of the data matrix (or QR code) (p. 149-156) is based on a collaborative scientific and industrial research project with the aim to understand French consumers' potential interest and engagement with a data matrix on wine bottles. This study involved a questionnaire answered by 502 respondents, representative of the French population, and five focus groups.

This data matrix that interested – or better captivated – consumers is a black and white patterned square on wine bottles which can be scanned with an app on their smartphones, which will lead them to a website where they can access additional information on the 'geo-traceability'¹ of wine. The data matrix, at first sight diverges in terms of visual aesthetics to the examples Cochoy discusses earlier. However, in a visual culture and consumer society that is competing for attention, this opaque square promising more information and transparency turns out to be a novel teasing practice and, in fact, resembles the lock and key in Bluebeard's story closest. As Cochoy notes, "In fact, just like the keyhole in the tale, the Data Matrix only grants access to the knowledge it possesses on the condition that it is activated. [...] the data matrix generates a riddle and a sense of expectation; because it is intended to mean something, it might well arouse the excitement necessary for its activation" (p. 151).

Reporting the results of the questionnaire and focus group, Cochoy states that the findings were not very promising. Although more than 40% of questionnaire respondents signalled interest in accessing the information, the focus group research revealed that "with real bottles, smartphones, and Data Matrix in hand, the consumers

¹ As Cochoy explains, making wine geo-traceable implies the possibility to identify the characteristics of the grapes being used for each bottle of wine. The characteristics accessible contain information such as "soil composition, the properties of a grape variety, meteorological and hygrometric data, plot exposure, gradient, name of owner, and more" (p. 153).

[...] experienced difficulties and showed very little appetite for overcoming the obstacles on the path to the wine's hidden information.” (p. 154). Rather than concluding that these results are indicative of the likely failure of data matrixes on wine bottles in general, Cochoy argues that the results reveal that “[...] the expression of curiosity depends on the right configuration of a very subtle *agencement* (Callon 2015) of a number of devices and a multiplicity of dispositions that the version of the device we experimented with could not achieve.” (p. 154, emphasis in original). In other words, focusing on the curiosity device (data matrix) comes at the detriment of taking into account the larger *agencement* that needs to be established between different actors for curiosity to flow uninterruptedly. Thus, curiosity is neither based on the subject's prior dispositions (the curious consumer), nor on the functionality of one single device (the data matrix). It is the relationships enabled or constrained through curiosity devices that requires the researcher's scrutiny for understanding how market *agencements* are enacted.

What is particularly notable about Cochoy's *On Curiosity* is the use of captation devices by the author himself to enact readers' curiosity about the book. Examples include the cover of the book (Fig. 1), the teaser that precedes the first chapter, or the analysis of a French fairy tale, unusual for this genre of study. Cochoy starts his book with some advice directed at potential readers: he states that, “[...], this book might *derail* some readers.” and he advises those “who prefer to know what to expect [...] to go their own way” (p. 11, emphasis in original). This is not exactly a friendly invitation to purchase or start reading a book! But Cochoy argues it is a “...rhetorical machine which attempts to play on the reader's disposition towards conservatism and/or exploration.” (p. 11). Thus, if one continues reading or decides to buy the

book, which can be interpreted as an expression of one's curiosity, an agencement of the rhetorical device, the book and the reader's disposition has been constituted in the process. This and other examples offer not only additional insights into the topic of the book but also the opportunity for self-reflexively experiencing the configuration of an agencement in the process of reading and engaging with it.

Written in a very engaging style, Cochoy's book is an important contribution to 'market studies'. Bridging economic sociology and STS the volume brings attention to the topic of human dispositions that has been neglected by scholars of marketisation. As Cochoy remarks, "The effort of qualification is twofold: whereas economics and sociology have described to the point of exhaustion the qualification of products and their surrounding social space, the symmetrical operation of the qualification of people remains to be described." (p. 166). By studying the interactions between devices and dispositions Cochoy not only challenges an understanding of curiosity as a human trait that consumers have or do not have but also points to the performative role of affect in the interactive crafting of desire/curiosity in (market) assemblages.

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