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Devices and desires: how useful is the ‘new’ new economic sociology for understanding market attachment?

Abstract: This article explores the usefulness of recent economic sociology literature for understanding processes of market attachment. It focuses particularly on concepts like agencement and market devices proposed by authors like Michel Callon, Fabian Muniesa and Franck Cochoy and to their application to mass consumer markets. The article addresses critical responses which have been levelled at this literature to argue that despite what some regard as an overly descriptive and apolitical banality, this may in fact be a prime and necessary virtue. Key words: market devices, Callon, calculation, retailing, actor-network theory

Introduction

Besides all Iterations, Petitions, Epistles, News at home and abroad rayling and praying in one breath ... they have now found out another quaint device in their trading. (*Mecurius Mastix*, 1652 in Elliot, 1962: 102)

The market is no longer that cold, implacable and impersonal monster which imposes its laws and procedures while extending them ever further. It is a many-sided, diversified, evolving device which the social sciences as well as the actors themselves contribute to reconfigure. (Callon, 1998: 51)

The ‘quaint device’ referred to by *Mecurius Mastix*’ disgruntled writer was trade announcements or advertisements which, in combination with other forms of trading publicity thinly disguised as news items, saturated much of the early modern press. In labelling these items ‘quaint devices’, the writer called attention both to their role as mundane trading techniques and to the peculiar skilfulness and expertise of their design, by means of which they might achieve their ends without seeming to do very much at all. In the recent upsurge of interest in economic sociology, and market processes in particular, prompted initially by Callon’s (1998) collection, advertising is just one of a much broader range of techniques, ranging from merchandising and packaging design to logistics and stock control, which comprise socio-technical market devices. Market devices, as the ‘new’, new economic sociology literature has illuminated, are devices that produce or ‘render’ markets through processes of attachment and detachment, entanglement and disentanglement. These devices are characterised in the literature as hybrid, diverse and evolving, but they also emerge, like the quaint commercial devices of early modernity, as mundane and obscure in their almost unnoticed capacity to summon economic objects and persons into being.

In highlighting the hybrid, social, technical and material character of market devices, this literature radically parts company with previous sociological approaches to the promotion of consumption which focused almost exclusively on the capacity of advertising as a device to manipulate and conjure forth consumer desire¹. As powerful as such expositions sometimes were their tunnelled focus on advertising – and particular forms of mass-market, big brand advertising at that – to the exclusion of almost all other market processes was symptomatic of a sustained neglect of the economic in sociological and socio-cultural research in the last quarter of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, the tide had started to turn in the wake of the new economic sociology emerging from the United States (Granovetter, 1985, 1992; Zelizer, 1988, Abolafia, 1996), calls for empirical cultural economic analysis (Morris, 1988, Miller 1996, du Gay, 1997) alongside the ‘turn to the economy’ in the ‘new’ new economic

sociology which developed largely after Callon's (1998) programmatic intervention. It is with the usefulness of work in this latter vein that this review is largely concerned.

There are a number of reasons for focusing on this branch of work. First, in recent (and in a number of cases, very recent) years, this branch has, as collections by Callon, Millo and Muniesa (2007) and Mackenzie, Muniesa and Sui (2007) document, proved enormously fertile. Indeed the volume and distinctiveness of work adopting what Muniesa et al. (2007) describe as a 'pragmatic' approach to the study of markets and economic activities is more than sufficient to warrant its own label – although undoubtedly a better alternative than 'new' new should be agreed. Second, this work is ideally pitched as a corrective to the feverish attachment within sociological research to the production of consumption, whether conceived as pleasurable and creative or tyrannical and repressive, almost exclusively through the magical, mystical and glamorous efforts of advertising. The battle to induce sociologists to engage with the dull, mundane and routine dimensions of market processes rather than just the glamorous, or what Thrift (2005: 3) calls the 'sexy', is a crucial one if an informed understanding of how market attachment works and is sustained is to be achieved. Finally, the insight such work offers, as a more or less direct result of its unashamed preoccupation with the pragmatic, material and mundane, into how market attachment is produced or rendered through hybrid socio-technical devices represents a significant achievement. Not only does it advance the research agenda beyond the presumed manipulation of desire, but its preoccupation with pragmatics offers an unparalleled prospect into how particular sorts of economic objects and persons, or particular versions of *being economic*, are summoned into being, how they succeed for a time and how they eventually fail.

The article tackles these issues in two parts. First, in deference to both the volume of literature in this vein and to the proliferation of new terminology it has produced, the first section will outline the key propositions and concepts as they pertain to processes of market attachment. Discussion here will concentrate primarily on the application of this literature to consumer goods markets, particularly retailing, for the simple reason that despite its explanatory potential in these contexts, work here, in contrast to that concerned with financial markets, remains with some notable exceptions comparatively underdevelopedⁱⁱ The closing section of the article will focus on the question of the usefulness of this literature for an understanding of market attachment. Here discussion will address critical responses which have been levelled at this literature to argue that, despite the hostility provoked by what some regard as an apolitical banality, this may in fact be its prime virtue.

Markets, devices and attachment

As Franck Cochoy (2007: 109) recently observed the '(now not so) new economic sociology' proposed by theorists like Granovetter (1985, 1992), Zelizer (1988) and Abolafia (1996) fleshed out economic exchanges to show the social and cultural 'embeddedness' of market behaviour. This work provided a necessary rejoinder to the domination of neo-classical economic theory which posits the existence of essentialized calculative agents who, as Callon and Muniesa (2005: 1229) put it, 'calculate because they are calculative by nature'. In opposition, the new economic sociology placed calculation in observable, empirical settings as one, sometimes marginal, element alongside other social, cultural or affective elements which combine to determine choice. As necessary as the effort to add a little more 'soul' to the abstract model of the calculative agent may have been, Callon's impatience with the limitations of such a solution forms a significant impetus behind the research project heralded in *The Laws of the Market* (1998). Neoclassical economics may have summarily dismissed the diversity of market behaviour but arguments about embeddedness risked dismissing the existence of economic, calculative behaviour altogether. The ensuing effort to clarify the claim that a calculating 'homo economicus really does exist' (Callon, 1998: 51) has been

laborious, controversial and occasionally ill-humoured (Callon 2005; Callon and Law 2005; Callon and Muniesa 2005; Cochoy 2008a; Fine 2003; 2004; Mackenzie and Millo, 2003; Miller 2002; Slater 2002a).

That the debate over the character of calculation has been so enduring is ironic given Callon's early insistence that the key question for economic sociology was neither one of humanizing nor rejecting the calculative agent but of exploring precisely *how* calculative agencies, in all their diverse forms, have emerged and been formatted. At the time *The Laws.*, first appeared this objective was at odds with an economic sociology still largely preoccupied with uncovering the social context in which economic action is embedded. For Callon this preoccupation was of dubious merit when, following the actor-network principles he helped articulate, the social is characterised, not as a prior context, but as the simultaneous creation of specific collective practices. Logically, a prior social context cannot be the exterior to economic action when the exterior is defined only in, and through, the process by which market transactions are framed. Through this move, the idea of a stable 'inside' and an 'outside' to market transactions is called into question. What is outside, the externalities, are defined dynamically in the process of framing whereby agents become temporarily and partially disentangled from other networks to enable a transaction. Framing is not to be confused with 'disembedding' because in framing the agent's 'objectives, interests, will and thus identity' (Callon, 1998b: 253) is caught up in a process of continual reconfiguration which works through his or her networks of associations. Framing may seek to extricate or disentangle agents from this network but the frame is never hermetically sealed and overflows inevitably occur. However temporary and incomplete, the work of framing and disentangling is a prerequisite for market transactions as only through it can the stage be cleared for calculation, defined as the mainstay of economic transactions.

Callon's definition of calculation in *The Laws.*, (1998) specified preconditions in which to calculate, agents had to have access to the minimum information necessary to hold preferences, rank, then reveal and negotiate them to enable transactions to take place. As reasonable as such a definition may seem when applied to some market transactions, its mechanistic formula had little to do with what anthropologists like Daniel Miller (1998) observed of shopping practices. The objections theorists like Miller raised, have been tackled in subsequent work (eg Callon, 2005; Callon and Law, 2005; Callon and Muniesa, 2005) which has sought to clarify precisely what Callon and his collaborators mean by calculation. The clarification - or concession - offered in Callon and Muniesa's (2005: 1230) account that the logical outcome of restricting calculation to its hard, arithmetical sense is that 'nobody calculates' is offered in direct response to the implausibility of hard calculation as a description of observable market transactions. This work retains the earlier emphasis on information gathering, ranking and estimating in a broader formulation designed to avoid the distinction between calculation and judgement. Here, entities to be calculated are first 'detached' or moved and ordered into a single space whether a shopping trolley, a spreadsheet or an invoice, then some manipulations or transformations are performed upon the entities before, finally, a result, a sum or a choice, is extracted. In this definition the diversity of forms of calculation and their dependence on material devices begins to emerge.

Depending on the concrete achievement of each calculative step, calculation can either meet the requirements of algorithmic formulation or be closer to intuition or judgement. Such a definition establishes a continuum between qualitative judgement and quantitative (or numeric) calculation. (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1232)

Here the term 'qualculation', coined by Franck Cochoy (2002, 2008a: 17), is introduced to refer to intermediate situations, such as supermarket shopping, in which 'quality based

rational judgements' appear the main form of calculation. It is to the role of calculative devices in such specific market contexts that the recent literature has turned, and arguably, to most purpose.

With the publication of the '*Economy of qualities*' in 2002, Callon et al. had already signalled the importance of investigating empirically the ways in which socio-technical devices acted to produce attachment in markets. The term, 'economy of qualities' refers to the centrality in contemporary economies of product qualification processes which combine to create singularization of, and attachment to, particular products through the coalescence of consumers' social networks with business and marketing strategies. Here advertising figures as one element of a device – which will include stock logistics, packaging, display etc. – designed to nudge consumers towards qualifying and requalifying products in line with ongoing producer side qualificationsⁱⁱⁱ. These qualification processes, including objectification and singularization form the substance of any market transaction. Through objectification the object becomes a thing and through singularization it becomes 'a thing whose properties are adjusted to the buyer's world, *if necessary by transforming that world*' (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1234). This latter point, as we shall see below, is crucial in accounting for the operation of market devices. For now, the key point is that objectification and singularization processes are 'co-elaborated' such that between human agents and the things that they imagine, produce and purchase there is a process of ongoing, mutual adjustment which allows goods to become attached to consumers. Crucially then the 'purchase is not the result of a subject-object encounter, both external to each other, but of a process of attachment, which, from the qualification to the requalification of the product leads to the singularization of its properties' (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1234). It is in this co-production of singularized properties that market professionals – including advertisers alongside many others – are involved. This is a process which involves exploration of the networks of attachment that make up the buyer's world in order that market professionals can propose new ones.

While Callon et al. (2002) were quite clear that this task of prompting qualification and requalification of products involved the operation of socio-technical devices, the elaboration of what this might mean in concrete practice has become a more explicit preoccupation in recent literature. The notion of 'market device', according to Muniesa et al. (2007: 2) offers a simple way of referring to the 'material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets' and are a necessary prerequisite to their existence. The term device, highlights the relationship between objects and agency; devices do things, 'they act or make others act' (2007: 2). Yet, the term device, Muniesa et al. caution, risks an undue separation of object or *dispositifs* on the one side and human or *dispositions*, on the other. This risk is best countered by understanding devices as compound *agencements* through which, following Deleuze, subjectivity is enacted.

Callon (2005) proposed the term *agencements*, to emphasise the interconnections between agencies and arrangements with the capacity to act and give meaning to action. The term offers a useful elaboration on what Hardie and Mackenzie (2007: 57) describe as actor-network theory's 'agnosticism' on the nature of actors. Actors are better understood in Callon's (2005: 4) terms, as agencies 'made up of human bodies but also of prostheses, tools, equipment, technical devices, algorithms, etc. which together constitute 'agencements.' In this vein *agencements* are defined in Mackenzie et al.'s (2007: 15) collection as the human and non-human, textual and material, social and technical assemblages 'from which action springs'. This latter qualification holds the key to understanding the hybrid, collective character of market devices as *agencements* that *do things*. By understanding market devices as *agencements* the sociologist should be able to unravel what Muniesa et al. call the 'evolving intricacies of agency' (2007: 3).

In marking the constitutive role of fixtures and fittings and the evolving and distributed character of agency, the notion of market devices conceived as agencements offers a reinvigorated prospect on market attachment. Rather than relying primarily or exclusively on advertising as a magical or ideological system (which amounts almost to the same thing) for the production of desire, a sense of the intricate - and intimate - connections between devices as mundane as supermarket trolleys and the practice of supermarket shopping begins to emerge. This insight, however, is not the sole preserve of this branch of the economic sociology literature. Rather as du Gay (2008; 2004) has explained an understanding that the capacity to conduct oneself as a person of a particular sort - whether as the possessor of something called agency, a politician, a bureaucrat or even a supermarket shopper - is not fixed for all time but acquired through technical, material and limited processes, can be traced in the work of authors ranging from Weber and Mauss to Foucault and Bourdieu. In relation to self-service shopping, for instance, du Gay remarks;

The self in self-service, then, does not form the transhistorical object of techniques for being human but only one way in which humans as consumers have been enjoined to understand and relate to themselves as persons. This self is therefore both limited in distribution - you don't have it all the time, it is not your essence - and technically constituted - it exists in relationship to a particular technological regime: the self-service shop. (2004: 152)

The seeds of an understanding that agency is diverse, spatially and temporally, and distributed, materially and technically, as du Gay's (2008) discussion highlights and Callon acknowledges (2005), may long predate the 'new' new economic sociology but that far from negates its importance. Rather the notion of market devices or agencements offers a more robust platform for organising efforts to understand precisely *how* forms of market activity come to be instantiated. Agencements, Callon's (2007) account emphasises, are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending upon *how* they are configured. This points not only to the sovereign importance of the precise social and technical form of such arrangements but also to the nature and significance of the relationship between description and action, or to what Callon terms the relationship between statements and their worlds. Socio-technical agencements include the statements which point to them such that they act in accordance with each other in the same way that operating instructions form part of a device and contribute to making it work.

This points to the role of performativity and its emphasis on enabling things to become true or false, or more precisely in the case of market forms, to succeed or fail. Referring to Mackenzie's discussion of Black and Schole's option pricing formula, Callon concludes the 'formula progressively discovers its world and a world that is put into motion by the formula describing it' (2007: 320). Callon is signalling a performative action in which worlds gain in precision, form and robustness through the continual, intensive and ongoing work of observation and experimentation that is at the heart of the idea of agencements. Martha Poon's (2007) discussion of the US credit scoring industry describes just such a process in the perseverance of the firm, *Fair, Isaac and Company Incorporated*, to move its tools throughout the credit scoring industry. Current industry standard techniques of credit scoring, she concludes, can be understood as the result of the company's dogged efforts at establishing a mode of economic production capable of articulating theory and circumstances, statistical practices and data thus 'rearranging the world through active perseverance' (Poon, 2007: 301).

Thinking in terms of agencements to describe how these processes work, for Callon, reaches further than models like self-fulfilling prophecy, prescription or even performance,

because of what the term *agencement* includes. While self-fulfilling prophecies, for instance, may come true because they reflect human beliefs that people will subsequently act in accordance with, success or failure here is defined only in terms of belief. *Agencement* on the other hand includes everything - beliefs, statements, devices and their worlds - there is 'nothing left outside' (Callon, 2007: 320). It is therefore possible to explain through the performative action of *agencements* not only how certain market devices succeed but also how they fail. *Agencement's* edge over notions like prescription and expression similarly derives from its capacity to incorporate all elements, all materialities which, taken together, perform the whole. This enables *agencement* to advance a model of performativity less bound by either an Austinian emphasis on the performative as 'doing things with words' (Mackenzie et. al. 2007: 15) or a Butlerian emphasis on the constructivist primacy of performance. The link between the performative and *performance* Callon (2007) argues, has fuelled a privileging of language and discourse and an attendant neglect of the socio-technical, material and corporeal elements of *agencement*. It is for this reason that theorists like Callon and Cochoy (2007; 1998) have sometimes preferred the term 'performation' to describe the action of market devices as a way of signalling that something more than language and discourse is involved in making the worlds in which certain *agencements* succeed or fail.

The advantages of considering market attachment in this way emerge most strongly in concrete, empirical settings. For Cochoy (2007: 109) the task is to move from a more abstract understanding of how market knowledge performs economic action to a 'sociology of market-things' which can unravel how consumers are 'equipped' through commercial objects, frames and tools. Consistent with Callon and Muniesa's (2005) account of markets as calculative spaces, the approach taken by researchers like Cochoy, Barrey and Grandclement-Chaffy has been to trace the operation of market attachment through a detailed focus on merchandising, packaging and grocery retailing practices as well as at the ground level of ordinary, routine supermarket transactions (Barrey, 2007, Cochoy and Grandclement-Chaffy, 2005; Cochoy, 2002, 2007; 2008a, 2008b, Grandclement-Chaffy, 2008). Studying what Cochoy terms 'the gardening of choices' in supermarket settings exposes how market knowledge is formed through situated exchanges and practices. His close analyses of the supermarket - the trolleys, aisles, signs and shelving - exposes the way local, material events and devices make us do and think things without seeming, as with the quaint devices of antiquity, to do very much at all. Cochoy concentrates upon things in plain sight that although they pass unnoticed 'nevertheless redefine the skills, activities and identities of consumers' (2007: 111). Thus, for instance, the cards, signs and flags which feature in supermarket aisles show not the full range but a selection of products and are designed to draw attention not only to particular products but to particular dimensions of those products. These flags may appear transparent bearers of information but they offer 'new ways of grasping the product' indicating how consumer preferences or attachments 'far from always preceding the act of purchase, are largely constructed along the immediate interaction with products that praise their own properties' (Cochoy, 2007: 119).

While it is fair to say that the role of merchandising, packaging and the design of retail premises etc. in promoting consumption is scarcely a revolutionary insight - it is after all the key objective of market professionals - this is not, precisely, the action that Cochoy and others are pointing to. Rather this branch of economic sociology, and the work on market devices or *agencements* in particular, is concerned with how things, behaviours and processes are 'rendered' economic (Muniesa et al. 2007). To be economic is understood as the outcome of a particular effort, a process that is historical, contingent and disputable. Even in the context of consumer goods retailing this involves much more than provoking desire through the use of bright colours and clever tricks - although for sure this might be part of the process. But as the term *agencement* signifies market attachment is the outcome of the co-elaboration

of dispositions and dispositifs. So in the context of self-service shopping for example the shopper is *equipped* through a tentative, historical process in which various techniques, tools and devices are trialled, discarded and only sometimes adopted (cf du Gay, 2004). Cochoy's (2007, 2008a, 2008b) concentration on the minutiae of retailing identifies how delicate problems like that of controlling behaviours that were supposed to be free was solved through the adoption of "faire laissez-faire" devices - like entry and exit barriers, trolleys and open display shelving- which act to 'fit out' market freedom. The action here is one in which worlds are gradually discovered, transformed and put into motion through agencements composed of particular economic objects, formulae, practices and persons. In the following section the focus will be on the value of considering market attachment in this way.

"You take forever to say nothing" (Homer Simpson): or how much use is the 'new' new economic sociology?

Perhaps the most immediately apparent and, for some, vexing, characteristic of the field is its terminological proliferation. Performativity, performance, qualculation, calculation are some of the neologisms in a field known also for its use of existing terms like calculation, framing, entanglement, attachment and agencement to describe technical, economic processes. Even linguistic conservatives however acknowledge that technical description requires a vocabulary so while neologisms, appropriations and redefinitions may be a little irritating most will accept their necessity, at least up to a point. The trouble for the field is not with the proliferation of jargon *per se*, but with whether the game is worthy of the candle. Despite all the jargon and terminological novelty the main result has been regarded, in some quarters and with some justification, as a plethora of banal descriptions of processes and objects of limited, if any, general, interest. This criticism is related to a broader concern that in departing from the heartland of political economy analyses of categories like class and capital the field championed research that was not only banal but apolitical (cf. Fine, 2003, 2004; Whittle and Spicer, 2008). This section will briefly examine both these claims before suggesting that while the field may well generate moments of supreme empirical banality, its promotion of pragmatically based research has both practical and political virtue.

Frustration with the vocabulary has a number of causes. Neologisms may be mildly annoying by nature but there is a tolerance for one or two in any new research field. In this field, and the broader actor-network tradition of which it forms part, it is not a matter of one or two but of many new terms. For some, this would be irksome in itself irrespective of the deliberately playful intent of terms like 'agencement' which in French is an everyday term for 'setting' but in English offers a provocative hint at arrangement with added agency!^{iv} But this is a field in which terms have been coined, clarified, discarded and re coined and in which a degree of conceptual uncertainty at times persists despite the amount of effort devoted to pinning down a conceptual vocabulary. Given the protracted debate over whether the best label for the tradition the field grew out of was actor-network theory, the sociology of translation, science and technology studies or the anthropology of science and techniques, the persistence of terminological debate is perhaps unsurprising (cf Law, 1999; Latour, 2005). In the economic sociology niche too, debate centres around the core conceptual vocabulary in the use of terms like calculation alongside qualifiers like qualculation and calculation and performance alongside performance.

As should be clear from the discussion above, in the decade since *The Laws of the Market* was first published there has been an ongoing effort to clarify the definition of calculation. The solution Callon and Muniesa (2005) propose answers the objections raised against a hard, arithmetical model as a description of routine market transactions by proposing a broad continuum stretching from the quantitative to the qualitative. This solution endorses Cochoy's term 'qualculation' to refer to 'quality-based rational judgements' (2008a: 17). But

it is a slightly ambiguous solution in that if calculation properly, and etymologically, stretches on a continuum from the quantitative to the qualitative and employs a diversity of material apparatus it begs the question of why the additional term 'qualculation' is necessary at all. Such a question may be satisfactorily answered simply by qualculation's utility as a term suited to particular instances of calculative processes, notably those which occur in consumer market transactions.

This defence is stretched a little further by Cochoy's (2008a) proposal of another term to describe the collective dimension of consumer calculation; calquation. Drawing upon his anthropological observation of the ways shopping carts redefine consumer's calculation Cochoy argued that, in addition to quantitative and qualitative calculation, a 'calculative' process can be observed in which a cluster of people participate in calculation. Calquation, a profoundly awkward term in English, is derived from the French verb 'calquer' meaning to adjust one's standpoint to the viewpoint of another (Cochoy, 2008a: 17). What Cochoy describes is how the device of the cart, with its spaces for children and its ever increasing size and capacity, favours the transformation of a consumer into a cluster which calculates collectively.^v Calquation

designates the building of a shared project, but also the activation of a collective rationality, which functions less as a distributed cognition or as an average rationality than as a 'doubled' or 'adjusting' rationality. Calquating means anticipating, measuring, testing, influencing and correcting the discrepancies between one's position and that of one's partner, and the other way around. (Cochoy, 2008a: 30)

This is a persuasive account of a particular dimension of calculation, one which although familiar is obscured under the conceptual heading of calculation as an overarching descriptor of economic judgement. It may be unpalatable but Cochoy's calquation is testament to the broader insights into the specific character of consumer market transactions to be gained through a close focus on routine uses of banal, market devices.

When terms like performative and performance were featured in *The Laws*, (1998) to refer to the ways in which markets were configured in part by economics it was with scant reference to the historical lineage of this claim. More recent work has acknowledged the long, multiple and complex roots of the notion of performativity through J. L. Austin's 'performative utterances', through the pragmatist philosophical tradition to Judith Butler's emphasis on the discursive possibilities of gender performance (Mackenzie et al. 2007). For Callon the term performance indicates an action that involves much more than the causal potential of ideas, language and discourse.

We can agree to call performance the process whereby socio-technical arrangements are enacted, to constitute so many ecological niches within and between which statements and models circulate and are true or at least enjoy a high degree of verisimilitude. This constantly renewed process of performance encompasses expression, self-fulfilling prophecies, prescription and performance. (2007: 330)

It is a little disorienting then, given the clarity of this definition, to see Cochoy one of the earliest advocates of the term 'performance' (Cochoy, 1998) adopt the term 'performance' in more recent work (2007). In an article which explicitly locates a move away from the sociology of marketing to a sociology of 'market-things' Cochoy (2007) describes a focus not on market theories but on 'market matters' and the ways in which market professionals stage a 'performance' designed to shape choices in supermarkets. This however is symptomatic, not

of a wholesale departure from the concept of performance, but of a focus on a particular aspect of it in line with Callon's encompassing definition. Performance, Cochoy explains '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' (2007: 110). These situated exchanges occur as part of the market performance staged in supermarkets. What might seem a terminological pedantry in Cochoy's work is in the service of using description to provide a more precise explanation of what is going on.

Such precision is important in the context of the approach to market attachment proffered in this literature. As explained above the term *agencement* encompasses processes of performance and performance, includes beliefs, statements, devices and their worlds and explicitly 'leaves nothing outside'. A concept that leaves out nothing, as Hardie and Mackenzie (2007) remark, offers a promising broadening of economic sociology's toolset but it is not without risks. The most significant of these is one that has been levelled at actor-network approaches before – that in purporting to explain everything, they end by describing everything and explaining very little (cf Thompson, 2003, Fine 2003). The potential result is an indiscriminate account in which the notion of *agencement* 'could become simply a jargon into which to translate banal description and narrative' (Hardie and Mackenzie, 2007: 74). As Hardie and Mackenzie persuasively argue, the key to avoiding this lies in being selective, on focusing on the ways in which the configuration of *agencements* affect economic action and constitute the 'often ignored infrastructure' that enables economic actors to be as they are.

Hardie and Mackenzie are undoubtedly right in general terms. The trouble is that any *agencement* will be composed of an infrastructure that affects economic action in some way so this in itself offers little guide to selection. Decisions about which objects merit such detailed investigation will always be contentious to some degree. Callon et al.'s (2007) collection for instance features objects ranging from Swedish pharmaceutical markets, Norwegian fish market quotas, to securities, derivatives, consumer testing and merchandising. Some of these settings may have a more general appeal than others but that is scarcely the point. The point is that whatever virtue there is in descriptive, pragmatically focused research arises in the research itself and is seldom known fully in advance. The heat generated in the social studies of finance by the 2007 credit crunch and the near systemic collapse in the global financial system which is still unfolding as I write, is a facile illustration of how events can collide to accord unanticipated significance to an existing research field, but the point applies in less unusual circumstances. Some may insist that describing the history of shopping carts tells us a lot about carts but little about consumption more generally and they may well be right. But if they are right it is because the virtue of the sociology of market attachment lies not in telling us about consumption *generally* – about that we already know plenty – but in telling us about the distributed and material character of market processes *specifically*.

The focus on market devices is important because it helps overcome the dualism that pervades much of the sociology of consumption whereby 'subject's' desire for objects is magically mediated by devices like advertising^{vi}. Whether the subject is conceived as corrupted and manipulated or actively and playfully engaged through advertising, matters less than the idea of the subject itself as a pre-existing human agent possessing a stable, core essence. But the category of the 'subject' like the category of 'self' has a history that calls into question the sociological attachment to the idea of the pure subject^{vii}. The notion of hybrid, collective market devices or *agencements* offers a practical alternative to the idea of pure subjects seduced into desire for pure objects that can never quite deliver the magic promised by advertising. More prosaically, what this means is conceding that when products find their way into shopping carts this is the consequence of devices that include but also stretch far beyond advertising. *Agencement* avoids such a divide and the associated pitfalls of

essentialism and relativism by promoting thick description of the situated, distributed and material character of market attachment processes.

Such thick descriptions enable an understanding of how the different priorities and purposes of different market devices format the dispositions and skills of the people who encounter them. This is what Cochoy intends in the phrase 'faire laissez faire' devices that is devices which equip people with the tools and skills necessary to operate as producers and consumers in free markets, often without seeming to do very much at all. Such insights, I suggest, are far from banal but have practical and political purchase over the sort of normative generalisations characteristic of prior sociological approaches to the promotion of consumption which made little, if any, attempt to describe market processes. Research designed to explore or how it is, precisely, that individuals are equipped to consume in particular ways for instance via self-service, out-of-town 'megamalls', or internet auctions, or according to fair-trade, patriotic or sustainable principles is of political consequence for the simple reason that markets are inherently political. Examining how the material, social, technical and corporeal elements of markets collide to produce certain forms of consumption as Callon (2005:12) insists, is about explaining the theoretical and practical dimensions of market struggles.

Ultimately, for critics like Fine (2003, 2004) the problem is not really that ANT lacks politics but that it lacks the right sort of politics, that is, it lacks a general, political economy. Similarly for Whittle and Spicer (2008: 622-23) ANT 'degrades the meaning of political action by elevating the status of non-human actors' and has a tendency to 'legitimize hegemonic power relations, ignore relations of oppression and sidestep any normative assessment of existing organisational forms'. What these critics are looking for is an emancipatory politics that can tackle questions of economic justice, poverty and oppression. The intractable problem with this is that such questions are always easier to tackle in the abstract than they are to resolve in practice. Pragmatic accounts of markets leave little room for doubt that markets *are* necessarily political or, as Fourcade and Healey (2007: 299-300) have it 'explicitly moral' and 'saturated with normativity'. If materialist pragmatic research has the capacity to uncover the conditions in which particular forms of agency and economic life emerge it also has the capacity to be political and politically informed about the objects in questions. By describing the 'quaintness' of market devices which look mundane and insignificant but embody and perform market knowledge, skills and strategy the sociology of market attachment promises to be very useful indeed.

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ⁱ There is a vast literature in this vein but see in particular Williamson (1978); Williams (1980), Baudrillard (1988) Wernick (1991), Goldman (1992).

ⁱⁱ See Pryke and du Gay (2007) for an overview of the extent of work within the social studies of finance. Some notable exceptions include the work of Franck Cochoy (1998, 2003, 2007, 2008a, 2008b), Sandrine Barrey (2007) and Catherine Grandclement (2003, 2008) but much of this work is yet to be published in English.

ⁱⁱⁱ Slater's (2002b) discussion of the 1970s 'requalification' of Johnson's baby products as beauty products; 'best for baby, best for you' is a neat example of the articulation of consumer and producer side qualifications.

^{iv} I am grateful to Franck Cochoy for this clarification.

^v Cochoy's research describes 56% of trolleys escorted by 2 or more consumers. "To the group who push, it offers a reference point which helps them to gather and meet again after individual picking operations. To one, it offers a storage space; to another, it provides an observation point over which to watch, and/or to rest one's elbows on the bar. To the children it provides a playground as well as a rest place. To the parents, it provides a suitable seat for the transformation and watching of the kids" (Cochoy, 2008a: 29).

^{vi} See Mcfall (2004) especially Chapters 2 and 3 on subject/object dualism in advertising; see also Mcfall (2004a) on the materiality of commercial promotion.

^{vii} See Hunter and Saunders (1995) and du Gay (2007)