

SCALES OF OBSERVATION OF CONSUMPTION¹

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Consumption analysis has been the focus of numerous debates. In most cases, these controversies do not originate with radically opposite hypotheses and conceptions. Often, they come from the fact that observers do not study, truly, the same things: they analyze the phenomenon of consumption at different levels. The question of observation scales appear then, as a key element in the study of consumption in particular, and of social phenomena in general. Being both a researcher and a consultant, I have the opportunity to measure this gap and to try to draw conceptual and practical conclusions from it.

As a researcher in social sciences (anthropology, micro-sociology, macro-sociology) I am led to raise the question of the status of consumption in the comprehension of our society. From this point of view, consumption does not amount to buying behaviors and commercial relationships. It doesn't amount either to "lifestyles"(or "sociostyles") as described by Bernard Cathelat at the end of the seventies, nor does it amount to the ephemeral and the void of Gilles Lipovetsky. Here, I do not consider consumers to be in a social vacuum. They have roots in society beyond their emotions and esthetical feelings. Moreover, consumption fits into the economic production process³. Consumers also partake of this system of action, production, exchange and consumption whether they are included in or excluded from this process. Finally, consumption is at issue in the larger game of social competition, of status distinction between social groups, of construction of social ties and of exclusion processes⁴.

As a fieldwork specialist on decision making processes in general, I tackle the question from a different point of view. With our team at Argonautes⁵, we worked for numerous organizations. The main demands came from enterprises or government departments such as

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³ As shown by Francois Dupuy and Jean-Claude Thoening for the household appliances market in La loi du Marché. L'Electroménager en France, aux Etats-Unis et au Japon (The Law of the Market. Household Appliances in France, the USA and Japan), L'Harmattan 1986, or Ben Fine and Helen Leopold for food and clothes in The World of Consumption, Routledge, 1993.

⁴ X. Gaullier, "La Machine à Exclure"(The Exclusion Machine), Etat-providence, Gallimard, 1996.

⁵ Organized by Sophie Taponier in collaboration with Sophie Alami, Isabelle Garabuau and Isabelle Ras, partner researchers at CERLIS (CNRS-Paris V-Sorbonne).

EDF⁶, Nestlé, France Télécom⁷, La Poste⁸, Leclerc⁹, Motorola, the department of Equipment, the department of Agriculture, Pernod-Ricard, Promodes, Total, etc...We were asked to elucidate the social conditions of purchase of goods or services. We found that these are mainly strategic: how to position a product, a good or a service in the national and international competition; how to approach the deregulation problem; how to better evaluate the impact of day to day life changes on consumers behavior.

With the enterprises, we do not touch the problem of consumption solely for itself (the way marketing specialists do). Our analyses partly seek to demonstrate, when it is possible, that the behavior of the consumer or the user belongs to a larger concrete system of action that interacts with the game of the actors of the company, and sometimes of the professional channel. The decision to buy a product is seen as one of the possible moments in the itinerary that leads the consumer to the acquisition of a good or a service. Therefore, we first touch on the subject of consumption from the angle of its social, practical and symbolic use in the domestic environment before analyzing it as an individual decision of purchase. The investigation we conducted on how children “manipulate” their parents is a good example to show that the purchase of children products is a social construct made of a series of interactions going from the school yard where is constructed a part of the demand, to the home and the pressures of the children on their parents to get the thing they want on the shopping list, then the pressures to go to the store with the adult and “mark” him or her like a player during a soccer game and finally the strategies of negotiation, seduction, blackmail or swindle to get the coke or avoid the cheese.¹⁰

This confrontation between university researches and applicable studies led me to reflect on the importance of observation scales in our understanding of consumers behavior and of the social dynamics behind consumers decisions. We will keep in mind three ways to touch on the subject of consumption through different areas of social sciences:

- consumption as individual purchase.
- the consumer society and the analysis of the social game and of the status distinction imposed by social competition.
- consumption as exchange mechanism and as constituent element of the social tie.

⁶ Public services in charge of electricity (Electricité de France) (NdT).

⁷ Public services in charge of telephone communication (NdT).

⁸ National post office (NdT).

⁹ A supermarket brand (NdT).

¹⁰ D.Desjeux (with the collaboration of Sophie Taponier and Laurence Sicot), “The Influence of the Child in the Buying Behavior of Food Products of his or her Parents”, *Economie et Gestion Agro-alimentaire* n° 19, 1991.

1 Consumption as individual purchase, between conscious choice and unconscious motivations (economy and psychology).

The analysis of supply and demand is one of the traditional fields of neoclassical economic theory and of the psychology of motivations, and of their application, through marketing, to the analysis of buying decisions of consumers. The main explanatory model is that of the individual rationality of the consumer. This rationality is limited for several reasons such as an unequal access to information, the unconscious motivations of the buyer, or even the characteristics of his or her social group. In any case, belonging to a certain social group, and adhering to certain values are only variables that depend on each individual, meaning the “person” of the psychologist, the “consumer” of the marketing specialist, the “subject” of the philosopher, or the “agent” of the economist.

In this context, the diffusion of an innovation brought down to its buying process is often explained from a psycho-sociological model called “epidemiological paradigm” that describes the diffusion of the product following the same curve as the development of a contagious disease. Adopting or not a good or a service is described as a psychological process, starting with the most favorable attitude towards change to the most unfavorable. Individuals are classified in groups such as “pioneers” (the first to adopt), “innovators”, “precocious majority”, “latecomers” (the last to adopt) or “rebellious”. The “innovators” and the “pioneers” can be characterized following classical socio-demographic variables in terms of education or social level, but always dependent on individual behavior and motivations of social actors.¹¹

All these explanations work and are legitimate if one considers that they are ways among others to classify reality, the individual and his or her calculations. They presuppose that society is first a “collection” of individuals, free and rational, whose sum of behaviors explain everything in society. On the opposite, every approach that presuppose a social conditioning will be classified as “deterministic”, “relativist”, or “holistic”¹².

The important point here is that both scales of observation, micro-individual and macro-social, are confronted to a dead angle: that of the observation of social interactions between actors. Indeed, being partly based on cognitive and quantitative approaches, and statistics being based on the principle of correlations, these scales of observation cannot observe

¹¹ H. Mendras, M. Forsé, *Le Changement Social. Tendances et Paradigmes* (Social Change. Trends and Paradigms), Armand Colin, 1983.

¹² B. Valade, *Introduction aux Sciences Sociales* (Introduction to Social Sciences), PUF, 1996.

concrete social interactions, especially face to face interactions, and the social mechanisms that are linked to it, such as power relationships and social constructions of meaning, contrary to the example given above that shows the influence of children on buying behaviors. The micro-individual approach shows, then, cognitive choices of buying decisions that do not necessitate the observation of interactions with other actors. To choose between a ready to eat lettuce and another, a consumer is going to “judge” between the price, the freshness, whether or not it is easy to get and the social acceptance of the “industrial” lettuce by her family or her husband¹³. The Bourdieu type of macro-social approach, for example, shows the correlation between pertaining to the working classes and the preference, in classical music, for the “Beautiful Blue Danube River” correlated to a rejection of “The Art of the Fugue”, there too, without having to observe the interactions between concrete actors.

Social sciences like anthropology, micro-sociology or macro-sociology, with which decision making people in big organizations are less familiar than economy or psychology, suggest other approaches, either at another level of observation, or following another division of reality. Then, the decision to adopt or buy a good or a service can be analyzed either on the micro-social scale (following two main divisions: that of social interactions or of institutional games), or on the macro-social scale (that of social groupings, in which social classes are one particularity).

2 Consumer society, from use value to exchange value in the game of social competition (historical approach).

Historians have been studying the beginning of consumer society, the moment in history when the purchase of consumer goods left the use sphere to enter a commercial sphere first linked to social competition, then to fashion, as driving force of the market economy. The “merchandisation” of goods and services, like water in the 19th century, which, from free good became a saleable good¹⁴, is the sign of the beginning of the consumer society. It is also the beginning of the bureaucratic organization of society in Europe as described by Max Weber.

¹³ D. Desjeux, S. Taponier, *Etudes sur les Légumes Prêts à l'Emploi* (A Study on Ready to Eat Vegetables), Paris, Argonautes, INRA Nantes, ADRIANT Nantes, 1990.

¹⁴ D. Roche, *Histoire des Choses Banales. Naissance de la consommation XVIIe-XIXe* (A History of Trivial Things. The Birth of Consumption XVIIe-XIXe), Fayard, 1997.

a. Curialisation¹⁵, fashion and social competition

Historians, since Norbert Elias' works¹⁶, seem to agree to point out the importance of a phenomenon of *curialisation* of aristocracy at the end of the Middle Ages, in France and in England. With the concentration of political power, aristocracy was forced to live at court, of Elizabeth I for England and of Louis XIV for France. The debate is about the importance of *curialisation* in the development of consumer society and about the place of consumption in the social competition, the competition for status distinction.

Historians have shown that a strong social competition developed, either around the purchase of clothes and pieces of furniture for Tudorian England at the end of 16th century¹⁷, or around the cooking and the meals for the court of Louis XIV in the 17th century¹⁸. Competitive market consumption still concerned only the privileged few, the aristocracy, but the bourgeoisie was in the social competition as it is shown in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme by Moliere. Grant McCracken shows that this competition for social status translated into a transformation of cultural values: the patina of things (this layer that covers, over time, pieces of furniture, frames, or dishes), which used to represent the basic value of social status and identity, was going to be toppled by a new value, novelty. It was the beginning of fashion, one of the great driving forces of market economy and of a social hierarchy process that was going to spread all over Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance period¹⁹.

18th century England saw the beginning of styles differentiation (people talked about "George I, George II style, etc.)²⁰ It was also the beginning of the first advertising campaign, with the launching of fashion magazines for clothes, dolls or dishes, the first advertisement in the press and the development of the profession of peddler. The number of consumers became very important. For Colin Campbell²¹, the second change was cultural. The 18th century was characterized by a rise of a new conception of self and pleasure, linked to a new pietistic protestant ethic, to the English romantic movement and the French revolution, based on the importance of emotion and aesthetics. This evolution was going to foster the rise of

¹⁵ French neologism coming from the word *cour* (court) and used in Norbert Elias's book to describe the phenomenon by which the nobility was concentrated in King Louis XIV's court (NdT).

¹⁶ La Dynamique de l'Occident (The Dynamics of the Western World), 1939, rpt. Calman-Levy, 1975, La Société de Cour, 1969, rpt. Flammarion, 1985.

¹⁷G. McCracken, Culture and Consumption. New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities, Indiana University Press, 1988.

¹⁸S. Menell, Français et Anglais à Table. Du Moyen-âge à Nos Jours (French and English People at the Table. From the Middle Ages until Today), Flammarion, 1987.

¹⁹N. R. König, Sociologie de la Mode (A Fashion Sociology), Payot, 1969.

²⁰N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, J.H. Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England, Indiana University Press, 1982.

consumerism, the same way puritan protestantism had facilitated the development of capitalism, as noted by Max Weber.

But 19th century was chiefly the century of one key innovation: the department stores. They transformed the buying practices and allowed the concomitant development of industrial society. In the 20th century, electricity was one of the material driving forces of the expansion of consumer society.

The historian Grant McCracken distinguishes two periods: one that preceded the 16th century, when a non marketable consumption dominated, and another that started at the beginning of the Renaissance on the basis of a marketable consumption that was going to become more and more a “mass” consumption.

b. Sharp increase of consumption and symbolic violence

Post world war II years were marked by a new brutal change of consumption as Kristin Ross showed it for France²². She shows that, between 1945 and 1970, like in the world of production at the plant, the world of domestic production was going to be rationalized following hygiene, efficiency and cleanliness principles (especially the bathroom and the kitchen thanks to the development of electricity)²³. It was the era of the Ideal Home Exhibition.

The sharp increase of consumption introduced changes in daily life, in family relationships, and social relationships. These changes were bearers of latent violence, meaning invisible tensions internalized by the actors without knowing in advance the social expression that they will take. It is partly this phenomenon that we observe nowadays in Canton in China, with my colleague Zheng Lihua, for our work on space and housing on the place of things in the rooms of the house or apartment and on their use between the members of the family and their network of friends. The massive arrival of electrical appliances (refrigerators, microwave ovens, sterilizers), running water, electricity and modern communication devices (television, telephone, computers, email, organizers, mobile phones and pagers), coupled with a fashion phenomenon, promises big changes in the relationships between generations and sexes. This translates into a movement where members of different generations start living apart. The well to do couples seek to live only with one another, without the mother in law or the

²¹C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Blackwell, 1987.

²² K.Ross, *Aller Plus Vite, Laver Plus Blanc. La Culture Française au Tournant des Années Soixante* (Going Faster, Cleaning Better. French Culture at the Turn of the Sixties), Edition Abbeville, 1997.

extended family. This evolution corresponds to a questioning of the family structure and of the system of “social security” that it could represent²⁴.

c. Mass consumption and the end of social classes?

Today the marketing perspective notes the consumer's infidelity to brands and the absence of links between the purchase of a product and the fact of belonging to a social class. Indeed, most products, except the luxury products, can be bought by different social classes. Therefore, marketing concludes that social classes have disappeared and that the consumer is inconsistent and flighty, which, both as explanation and observation, says nothing more than what is obvious.

There is a confusion between a legitimate question (how to sell a product to the larger possible segment of society thus to several social classes?) and a sociological question (how to analyze social distinctions?). This confusion comes from the failure to distinguish between three different problems:

- the instability of the choice for one brand rather than another, for the same product (for example “the carousel of jewels” by Leclerc rather than other brands);
- the changing character of purchases of a product rather than other products (the purchase of the jewel product seems to be rather stable, but with a threat on traditional selling places, the jewelers);
- some inconsistency of consumption behaviors that could be associated with the eventual disappearance of social classes.

The last advertisement by Leclerc in 1997 plays both on the “sacred” dimension of the product (use of the black color and the gilding), and on the “democratization” of the purchase of golden jewels, a notion that comes with the image of Leclerc. It is indeed a multi-class product, but its purchase does not have the same meaning depending on the social class the buyer belongs to: to reach the sacred for the working classes, to profit from a rebate on the price of gold for the well to do.

²³ D. Desjeux, C. Berthier, S. Jarraffoux, I. Orhant, S. Taponier, Anthropologie de l'Electricité. Les Objets Electriques dans la Vie Quotidienne en France (An Anthropology of Electricity. Electrical Objects in Daily Life in France), L'Harmattan, 1996.

²⁴D. Desjeux, Li-Hua ZHENG, Objets du Quotidien et Espaces de Vie à Guangzhou (Daily Life Objects and Life Spaces in Guangzhou), Anthroepotes, (to be published).

d. From postmodernism to the marketing of the tribes.

It is not enough then to notice the variability of the choices between brands to conclude that it is the end of social classes and to suggest the marketing of the tribes as general method of analysis of consumers behavior. This methodological remark is not so much a criticism of marketing when the latter only tries to understand the choices of consumers without trying to interpret the evolution of society as it is a criticism of postmodernism, as global approach of society.

Indeed, post-modernists consider that consumption, emotion, aesthetics, or the illusion of virtual communication are the important factors that explain contemporary societies. Economic production, social classes, all that is the background of real daily life for most consumers are considered old stuff.

Why not, if it is empirically demonstrated. But, the main weakness of postmodern writers is that most do not do empirical studies²⁵. Most of the time the basis for their conclusions is either their feeling, or advertising, or even results of marketing studies published in magazines. This leads them to develop, on a rather interesting aesthetic mode, conclusions about *The Time of the Tribes*, to refer to one of the most significant books of Michel Maffesoli, or about the “aesthetization” of society and changing lifestyles²⁶.

The second weakness of postmodernism is to have generalized a “romantic” moment, that of youth, to make of it a general characteristic of society. Society would be neither individualistic, nor class structured, but organized in small emotional and temporary groups. This approach is valid only for two specific categories: on the one hand, adolescents and a part of the young people, and on the other hand a limited fraction of adults who go out in bars at night or go to parties looking for some sort of fleeting and emotional social transgression, because they are alone or in a period of instability. The consumers represented in the Whisky Clan Campbell commercial (for adults) and the one for Tam-tam pagers (adolescents) refer clearly to this type of population. Therefore, the postmodern vision of the individual has had a strong impact on the imagination of advertisers.

Postmodernism has understood the importance of consumption as one of the forms of contemporary “expressionism”, but without seeing that consumption still played an important part in the social game (that of hierarchy and competition), and in the game of economic production, without seeing that it was not limited to the expression of the “self”.

²⁵ D. Miller (ed), *Acknowledging Consumption. A review of New Studies*, Routledge, 1995, N. Herpin, “Sommes-nous post modernes?” (Are We Postmodernists?), *Sciences Humaines*, n° 73, 1997.

Consumption also fits into practices and structures, and into a social logic that is beyond actors and their intentions, as anthropology and macro-sociology show.

3 Consumption, social tie and social hierarchies (anthropology and macro-sociology).

Economy, psychology and marketing deal with consumption as a buying behavior. History seeks to find the beginning of consumer society as competition and as fashion. For anthropology, consumption is a-historical. Human beings have always been consumers. At the micro-social observation scale, to consume is first to create some social tie, to build a social fabric. As the title of Jean- Claude Kaufmann's book *The Conjugal Fabric* recalls, things (here the washing machine) are part of the construction of the couple in particular, and of the family in general²⁷. The anthropologist Mary Douglas and the economist Baron Isherwood wrote in 1979, in *The World of Goods* : "Economists presuppose that people desire things first for individual and psychological reasons. Anthropologists presuppose that people seek to acquire things to give, to share, to fulfil social obligations. To say that consuming is first consuming in relationship with other people puts back on its feet the whole question of consumption." For these two authors, consumption is not first and foremost some sort of alienation, like for Jean Baudrillard, nor is it only a means of social distinction, like for Pierre Bourdieu. It is an exchange mechanism inherent in the functioning of all society. To consume is first to exchange²⁸.

But for Mary Douglas the access to things is not equal between social groups. What is different between the rich and the poor, at the end of the seventies in Great Britain, is the degree of accumulation following three levels of possession: a small scale defined by an important proportion of the income dedicated to food expenses; a medium scale characterized by a big consumption of advanced domestic technologies; and a large scale marked by important expenses dedicated to getting information coming from the tertiary sector, including education, and by a small proportion of the income dedicated to food expenses. It is at this level of consumption that one most uses the tertiary services the function of which is to be social markers. We partly find these distinctions today in France, by crossing qualitative results and quantitative data: the poorer one is, the bigger the energy expenses are in the

²⁶ M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Sage, 1991.

²⁷ F. de Singly, *Le Soi, le Couple et la Famille* (The Self, the Couple and the Family), Nathan, 1996.

²⁸ B. Cova, *Au-delà du Marché: Quand le Lien Importe Plus Que le Bien* (Beyond the Market: When Bonds are more Important than Goods), L'Harmattan, 1995.

family budget, around 15% for a budget of 2000 francs per month, against 4 % for expenses between 8000 and 20 000 francs per month (large scale of consumption). It appears also that the poorer people are mostly interested in face to face services, contrary to well to do people who rather seek automated services. For privileged groups, time is a rare resource, from there ensues the interest in automated services which limit the time spent in social contacts and the waste of time linked to the interaction rituals that come with them. On the opposite, the poorer people need to delay a power cut or to finance a purchase, and therefore, are more inclined to discuss their problems face to face to try to improve their negotiation capacity in order to solve their problem. Another of our inquiries show that the most privileged groups also demand more “electronic services” or personal training outside the market of adult continuing education.

The macro-sociological approach is at the basis of pioneer works by Pierre Bourdieu on the link between schools, consumption and social distinction. In *The Distinction* he shows, after the work of Maurice Halbwachs (*The Working Class and the Standard of Living*, in 1913) or of Thorstein Veblen on conspicuous consumption in the USA (1899), how personal tastes are also social products: consumption represents a way to analyze the social game of distinction.

These approaches, which partly concur today with the more descriptive approaches of the “ways of life” suggested by Yannick Lemel and Alain Degenne, indicate that to start from a single purchase has no social meaning. It is the sum of things, techniques and services possessed in the household that helps understand the link between consumption, social groups and social distinction.

4 An anthropological reading of consumption

The analysis of the different approaches to consumption led me to an anthropological reading of difference and of the identity of social sciences, life and society in terms of scales of observation²⁹. The same way I studied the differences or the common cultural points between the “Corps des Mines”³⁰ in France and the ethnic system in Congo, or dwelling places in China compared with France and the USA, I now approach the differences between disciplines from an intercultural point of view.

²⁹ D. Desjeux, *Tiens Bon le Concept, J'enlève l'Echelle ...d'Observation* (Hold on to your Concept, I am Changing the Scale of Observation), UTINAM, n° 20, L'Harmattan, 1996.

³⁰ National body of engineers and professionals specialized in the study and exploitation of the grounds (NdT).

a. the discontinuous observation of a continuous reality.

The viewpoint defended is one of a “methodological relativism”. I am talking about a “moderate” relativism. The better protection against a total relativism, where everything would have the same value, is to accept that reality exists outside the researcher’s consciousness, that it is possible to objectify it by an empirical investigation, but always from a relative angle of observation. It is this angle of observation that defines the macroscopic, micro-social, micro-individual and biological scales described below.

By postulating the existence of observation scales, I choose a descriptive point of view, which goes from a particular moment in the process of production of knowledge and of the ways to gather information (statistics, archives, interviews, practices observations). If reality is global or complex, observation cannot be global, and its presentation cannot be too complex. This explains my division in four scales, while reality is a continuum. The observation of human behaviors can only be discontinuous even if each one of us create his or her own personal unity.

Although I maintain that all global empirical observation is impossible, I do not mean to say that connections between scales are impossible. On the opposite, putting together different things is characteristic of research but these are only connections. Each scale has its autonomy of analysis, thus, of interpretation. I do not suppose either that the question of cognitive patterns that structure the way we observe things is solved: for me it is a variable depending on the observation scale. I am not saying then that I am outside these scales of observation. I suggest a micro-social approach of knowledge, in which the latter is considered an itinerary, an interactionist process.

b. Four scales of observation (diagram 1)

During my research on consumption, especially food consumption, I identified four scales of observation.

° The **macro-social scale** is the scale where researchers do not focus on the study of actors as subjects and as intentional “calculators” but on the study of large regularities of classes, sexes, generations or cultures. It is the scale of Pierre Bourdieu or Mary Douglas for social classes, the scale of lifestyles and ways of life. This scale is used a lot in marketing, psychology and economy and more generally macro-sociology to understand the buying behaviors of consumers. With this scale, consumers behaviors are brought together. We know, for example, that “56% of French people change their underwear every day when 94% of French women say that they wear clean panties every day”; we know the rates of kitchen

equipment per household; between 99% and 91% for the refrigerator, the most important rate before the iron, the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine and the television, against the microwave 52%, the oven 25%, and the dryer 20%.

◦ The **micro-social scale** is the scale of interactions between actors, the dead angle of statistical approaches: ranging from face to face interactions to relationships within an organization and including institutional games. It is the scale of ethnology in general and of the sociology of organizations. It has developed since the middle of the 80s in the USA and in Great Britain as “anthropology applied to consumption”³¹ and in France as “ethno-marketing” or anthropology of consumption. It is a rather moderately used approach compared with the relatively big rise of semiotics³². It is more centered on practices and habits than on motivations. Out of a total of 4 billions of francs, it represents less than 5% of the total budget of marketing studies in France, against 80% for quantitative studies, the rest being allocated to the diverse test studies of products or of advertising campaigns. This remark serves well the idea that the debate between qualitative and quantitative approaches is not a false debate: it is at least a real budgetary debate.

◦ The third scale is the **micro-individual scale**. It is the scale that is most used in micro-economy and in psychology for the study of consumers behaviors. This scale is divided into cognitive (choices of consumers), biological (needs) or psychoanalytical (unconscious choices or symbolical dimension of products) approaches. It is also the one used in the study of taste by Matty Chiva³³. This scale focuses on the individual. The approaches can be qualitative or quantitative.

◦ In some fields of study, such as food industry or ergonomics, it is necessary to add one more scale which corresponds to the **biological level**. As far as food behaviors are concerned, it refers to nutrition processes (bio-chemical and physiological data, and alimentary metabolisms)³⁴.

³¹ J.F. Sherry (ed), *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior. An Anthropological Sourcebook*, Sage, 1995.

³² See for example the work by Jean Marie Floch or Andrea Sampirini.

³³ M. Chiva, *Le Doux et l’Amer. Sensation Gustative, Emotion et Communication Chez le Jeune Enfant* (The Sweet and the Sour, Taste Sensation, Emotion and Communication), PUF, 1985.

³⁴ J.F. Desjeux, S. Hercberg (eds), *La Nutrition Humaine. La Recherche au Service de la Santé* (Human Nutrition. Research at the Service of Health), Nathan, 1996.

To go back to the example of researches on health and nutrition (J. F. Desjeux, S. Hercberg (eds), 1996), those at a very micro scale, will show the importance of the distribution between calories, proteins and lipids in the food balance, or, the importance of hereditary factors in the onset of some diseases. At a more macro scale those researches will point to the cultural relativity of that balance following periods and societies. At a very macro scale, that of big epidemiological inquiries, researches will point out the link between food and health like the famous “French exception” that shows that thanks to wine, cardiovascular diseases are less prevalent in France than in the USA. However, the micro-social scale will point out other data on the decision making process and the choice of therapeutic itineraries by families, choices that do not relate to either biology or heredity but to interactions between members of the family all along an itinerary that can lead the family to choose between self-medication, going to the hospital or the dispensary, going to see a “bonesetter” or visiting a doctor³⁵. Each scale has its pertinence depending on the problem to solve for each actor and of the type of information that he or she needs. Biology is neither more nor less true than the micro-social approach. The itinerary gives a relevant piece of information on what influences the choices beyond biology, beyond the motivations or the effects of social structures observed in epidemiology.

c. The method of itineraries (diagram 2)

The method of itineraries that we perfected at Argonautes enables to regard the decision to buy a product as a process in time, like the crystallization of a series of social interactions within the family, with friends or with professional relationships, and not as a choice process between preferences for what is useful or symbolical.

It is located at the micro-social scale of interactions. Starting from the practices of actors rather than from their motivations and intentions, it allows the reconstruction of what “conditions” the choice of actors, meaning the structures of their day to day lives. For example, it seeks to find, inside those structures, the rooms for maneuver at the disposal of actors, or the share of routine and changes that organize the domestic practices.

We look for prescribed practices, allowed or prohibited following the things or the rooms of the house, depending on how are classified those spaces in intimate, private or public

³⁵ D. Desjeux, I. Fabre, J. Simongiovani (avec la participation de S. Taponier), Anthropologie d'une maladie ordinaire. Etude de la diarrhée de l'enfant en Algérie, Thaïlande, Chine et Egypte (An Anthropology of a

spaces. For example, it is “prescribed” in France to put away the toilet paper in the restroom or bathroom. It is “allowed” to put it in the kitchen. It is “prohibited” to put it away or to use it in the living room, except in the case of serious lack of space. In China or Denmark, it is “allowed” to put it and use it in the living room for different uses. In the USA, the kitchen and the bedroom are not classified as intimate places the way they are in France or in China. The refrigerator is open for use by family members, friends or close neighbors. In France, its access is forbidden to everybody who is not intimate.

The technique to gather information is to choose a thing or a service, and to follow it all along an itinerary, the outlines of which are recreated subsequently. The itinerary is made of 6 or 7 stages comprising (for an inquiry on purchases of food products): the decision making process at home, linked most of the time to an opportunity to use the product; the means of transportation (bus, foot, car, bike, subway, motorbike); the location of purchase (large store, small, neighboring store); the place where it will be kept in the house (cupboard, pantry, refrigerator); the culinary preparation, the meal, then the scraps or leftovers. All these practices vary following the life cycles, and the big social distinctions we already talked about.

This way we could observe how children can influence their parents by trying to have some products on the shopping list. The means of transportation, like the bike in Holland or in China, or the car in the USA, indicate the shopping frequency and has some influence on the nature of the purchases. The place where the product is kept helps understand the importance of the packaging: for example, if the dressing bottle that is in general kept in the fridge door, is too big, that may prevent its purchase. The kitchen is the strategic place of apprenticeship of culinary secrets between generations and sexes. The meal time, the room used and the eating habits vary depending on the day of the week: the more formal meals are rather in the evening or on Saturday in France, the informal meals with a single dish, sometimes sitting on the carpet, or on a tray in front of the TV, occur rather on Sunday night.

On the one hand, with this scale of observation, it is difficult to point out social classes effects, except under the form of indexes. On the other hand, it is possible to see strategies to establish or to question borders between sexes and ages in the sharing of domestic activities such as cooking, house cleaning, repairing or gardening. It is also possible to see evolutions of forms of family communication, with, for example, the setting up of several telephone lines and the appearance of pagers or to observe the managing of friendship or social distance that

Common Disease. A Study of the Child's Diarrhoea in Algeria, Thailand, China and Egypt), Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993.

each wants to establish, depending on the choice of the objects of communication: it is more aggressive to send a registered letter to a friend than to the tax collector and to send a love letter on a computer can be considered a game by young people and shocking by adults. It is also possible to show “the social life of things”³⁶, especially at the occasion of moving or settling down of young people: for example, how a refrigerator circulates from the parents to the children to transit by Emmaus³⁷ or to finish on a garbage place. It is an example of non marketable consumption of material things³⁸.

The interest of the approach by itineraries is then to recall, without eliminating their existence, that the choices of consumers are not limited to decision making processes, but that they fit into emotional and symbolical strategic social games.

Conclusion

To understand the development of goods and services, we must not consider them in isolation, but as a whole, like a supplying system for each family, organized by the social classes to which each group belongs. In other words, consumption choices depend on the network (capital) of social actors, of its nature and of its functioning, of the norms of the social group, of the opportunities for social exchanges, and of the social and material territory in which they fit. Things integrate a pre-existing social structure and it is that structure that we must reconstruct.

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³⁶A. Appadurai (ed), The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

³⁷ A charity organization (NdT).

³⁸ D. Desjeux, A. Monjaret, S. Taponier, Quand les Français déménagent. Rituels de mobilité et mobilité des objets (When French People Move, Mobility Rituals and Mobility of Objects), PUF, 1988, J. P. Warnier, Construire la culture matérielle. L’homme qui pensait avec ses doigts (Constructing Material Culture. The Man Who Thought with his Fingers), PUF, (to be published).