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Shelley L. Koch, *A theory of grocery shopping, Food, choice and conflict* L. Koch Shelley, 2012, *A Theory of Grocery Shopping, Food, Choice and Conflict*, London and New York, Berg.

Franck Cochoy

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Comptes-rendus de lecture

Shelley L. Koch, 2012, *A Theory of Grocery Shopping, Food, Choice and Conflict*, London and New York, Berg.

Despite its title, it is not a “theory of grocery shopping” that Shelley Koch offers us in this book, but a very simple sociology of everyday purchases. Paradoxically, this is where the book’s merit lies—unlike Daniel Miller’s (1998) ambitious theory of shopping, Koch does not seek to intellectualise the banality, but on the contrary, to examine from all sides the most trivial facets, mechanisms and issues. However, although they may appear trivial, these issues are nevertheless crucial at a time when obesity is endemic, especially in the United States where this study was conducted.

The chosen protocol for the survey is very simple, as the author bases her study on around twenty interviews with people (mainly women) who do the grocery shopping for their households in small towns and in rural areas, as well as a few additional interviews with people working in distribution, and this is completed with an analysis of documents about the activity studied: magazines, nutrition brochures, specialists’ articles, the trade press, *etc.* This protocol is interesting as it introduces the reader to the “institutional ethnography” approach chosen by the author, an approach that consists of recording interviewees’ descriptions of their daily activities to compare this description with how those in the industry “coordinate and shape experience in ways shoppers often cannot see” (p. 5).

The work scrupulously follows the order of presentation that this approach requires, with the exception of an initial, introductory chapter to contextualise the world of grocery shopping. This world is marked by 1. a very striking gender inequality that delegates the lion’s share of grocery shopping and the responsibility of food choices to women (this confirms the results of a similar survey carried out in France by Martyne Perrot, 2009); 2. the weight of experts’ nutritional advice, which increases the pressure on women to better manage food choices, and 3. the centrality of the supermarket and marketing and merchandising techniques that, being founded on the “self service” system and therefore on a world of unimpeded choice based on “consumer sovereignty”, also strengthen the idea that the entire responsibility for choices falls upon the end users, despite the fact that everything possible is done to shape their behaviours.

The second chapter, well supported with quotations, describes grocery shopping as a job that greatly exceeds the task shifting imposed by self-service selling reported by Marie-Anne Dujarier (2008), as it extends to cover the efforts made before and after shopping in its narrowest sense to include

planning purchases, reading advertisements in the press to seek out bargains, and the division of labour in the home: men's supposed incompetence or inconsistency leads women themselves to reinforce their own subjection to the task of procurement.

In line with the institutional ethnography approach, the third chapter compares these accounts with the discourse on nutrition. The author skilfully demonstrates how a century of nutrition policies has led people to assimilate the categories of expert discourse, to the extent of being able to understand foods as though they were scientists. This knowledge translates as a tension between nutritional logic (health and quality demands) and the logic of cost (financial constraints), and thus as marked anxiety and culpability in those who are responsible for managing as best they can these often contradictory demands (particularly in the United States, where the price of ready-made meals and even eating out tends to be lower than cost price of home-cooked food).

The fourth chapter compares the interviews with the discourse of "the efficient housewife" expounded by home economics specialists. This chapter reveals the especially interesting traits of American consumption practices, such as planning meals according to promotional offers and coupons, identified and collected by regularly and systematically reading advertisements, particularly in more modest households, or such as the novel way of merging of public policies and market logic, for example when the food stamps distributed by the Federal Government are combined with a competition for their best use in order to stimulate more virtuous behaviours (p. 80).

The final chapter explores the workings of market forces on shopping, emphasising the emerging discrepancy between the industry's declared ideology that puts the decisions of the "customer-as-king" at the heart of market activity, and actual marketing and merchandising practices, which are clearly based on the logic of supply, strongly backed by incentive signing, advertising campaigns, commercial events, product placement, consumption surveys and analysing purchase data collected by means of loyalty cards, in supermarkets where the power of big brands appears to be greater than it is here in France.

In sum, this little book provides a welcome addition to the social studies of distribution that have proliferated in recent years (Bowlby, 2001; Deutsch, 2001; Dujarier, 2008; Grandclément, 2008; Miller, 1998; Perrot, 2009; Spellman, 2009, *etc.*). Obviously, there are a certain number of elements missing from this work—for example, the absence of minorities is a great shame, as is that of higher social categories in the panel studied. Given the accent on nutritional issues, it would have been interesting to have indications about the weight problems of the people questioned, a variable that is doubtlessly more significant in judging their discourse than merely the classic social attributes that are highlighted. One might also regret the exclusive use of interviews and written documents and therefore the lack of observation techniques: indeed, this choice of method tends to overrate conscious and reflexive behaviours at the expense of more automatic or impulsive gestures.

More fundamentally, by ordering her remarks around the classic alternative “do we control our shopping or does it control us”, the author is unable to identify clearly the dynamic inherent in all these market approaches that instead combine both, that make our sovereignty work, that “make us do” the things that are both our choice and the choices that are suggested to us (Cochoy, 2010). Furthermore, the book fails to mention that forms of controlling individual choices can be used to serve the consumer’s interest, as recently reflected by the “nudge” theory (Thaler and Sustein, 2008), thus weakening the interpretation of unilateral market determinism that the author appears to favour. The book also neglects to examine the “market for market approaches”, in other words, the selling of business techniques, a market that shows that promises of “consumer traps” first trap those who purchase them, believing that in this way, they can make all the others buy things, which remains to be proved (Cochoy, 2008).

Nevertheless, the book’s contributions greatly outweigh the points that could do with more information or discussion. To conclude, I would like to emphasise two of these contributions. Koch clearly demonstrates that the liberal doctrine of the sovereign and rational consumer is carried out, but in an asymmetrical way: it is the poorest people that are forced into calculations, reflexivity and optimisation. She develops a very relevant critique of the hyper-responsibilisation of the consumer and more specifically of mothers, upon whom this responsibility falls; this hyper-responsibilisation of mothers reduces the responsibility of the food industry in the choices made. She also convincingly illustrates the illusory nature of rational consumers’ decision-making, which does not exclude their control, and this enables the author, in passing, indirectly to slate those promoting “individualised collective action”, who believe that changing eating practices can be based on personal food choices alone (Michelletti, 2003) independently of public measures that, in the author’s opinion (and I agree with her on that point) are urgently required, now more than ever.

Franck COCHOY

University of Toulouse II, CERTOP

cochoy@univ-tlse2.fr

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