

INTERVIEWS

Market Mechanism and Consumer Choice: An Interview with Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier



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Abstract

The following conversation with Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier took place during the 12th Conference of the European Sociological Association (Prague, Czech Republic, August 25–28, 2015), where Sophie chaired a session called “Food: Meals and Eating Patterns.” With her colleague Gojard Séverine (French National Institute for Agricultural Research), she presented research on food waste called “Food Waste: from Household Coordination to Cooking Competencies”. In her interview, Sophie shared her research interests and described her recent papers which deal with many aspects of consumer behavior. Sophie illustrates the way social movement organizations interfere in market mechanisms, reshaping the relations between producers and consumers and putting pressure on companies. She also outlined the most common social norms concerning food consumption and discussed possible sanctions for not adhering to them. Sophie describes how patterns of food consumption vary with regard to an individual’s income level, socio-economic class and particular stage in the life course. Further, she clarifies the agenda of modern fair-trade organizations and their role in distribution across markets. Finally Sophie shares her views on urgent topics in modern economic sociology, as well as recommends several readings on the sociology of consumption which may be helpful for those interested in this sphere.

Keywords: sociology of consumption; social construction of markets; social movement organizations; fair-trade movement; political consumption; consumption prescriptions and food practices.

— *Sophie, thank you for giving this interview. ... First of all, could you describe briefly your main research interests and how they evolved during your path as a scholar?*

— Okay. My main research topic is on economic conduct. I’m trying to understand how economic conduct is framed and more specifically consumer conduct, consumer economic conduct. At first I was studying the role of firms in shaping economic conduct and consumer conduct, how some techniques such as marketing or advertising or even product design shape consumers’ preferences and how this shaping may be performative into something that looks like economic conduct. And then I turned to contribution and the role of social movements and this is why I’ve been studying ethical consumption. Ethical consumption is an interesting topic since you can see how some movements or organizations such as environmental organizations and NGOs try to shape consumers’ choices and also consumers’ way of expressing themselves in the market and in the public sphere...

— *And overall consumers’ relations with producers of food?*

— Exactly, exactly. And more recently I have turned to the role of the state in shaping economic conduct, so I've been studying a kind of governance of economic conduct. This is basically my research topic. It is basically my research topic.

— *Okay. So as I can see, your latest paper was about social movements and their contribution to market mechanisms... [Dubuisson-Quellier 2013]*

— Yes, that's right.

— *So maybe we can speak a little bit about that. Can you tell please what is the main agenda of modern social movement organizations, particularly in France or around the world? And how do they shape the relations between producers and consumers of food?*

— Well, a lot of social movement organizations consider markets as the arena for protest. So that is because everybody is concerned about product, markets and economic activities. A market could be a very interesting way to recruit people on their side and also to put pressure on companies instead of only targeting the state. Some social movement organizations are considering that recruiting consumers could be an interesting way of targeting companies. In a way it looks like making pressure through demand by trying to change consumers' preferences. It's what is called political consumerism but it's only one way of doing it, of making that pressure, because only few people change their consumption preferences. Most of the people won't change anything though. But by doing this it also means creating some norms that diffuse to the market, what is good and what is bad. Not only changing consumption habits, it's also changing the kind of norms that influence consumption habits. So companies are really aware of this influence and some of them, even though they know that consumers won't change by having very different consumption habits. These companies know that that kind of normative pressure that they have they need to be very aware of.

— *And is it more effective for the social movement organizations to refer exactly to the consumer and not to the state? Who controls the producers more efficiently?*

— I'm sure that they are doing both. It's not turning to the consumer because they don't want to target the state, they still target the state by having some kind of very classical repertoire of means, but they also use that targeting of consumers, as I said, as a way of creating some context of why and how things should change on the market. And if we look at some very recent issues, such as food waste for example. I don't know how it is in Russia but I know that in UK, in Germany, in France there has been some concern from the state about food waste and this has been set on their agenda by social movements. So it's a way of targeting companies, consumers by creating a kind of general awareness of that kind of issues... And also using the market as a way of trying to solve these issues. But thus movements are also waiting some kind of change by the state.

— *But why do such movements exist? What is their personal interest?*

— Well, it's tough question. Why do those movements exist... I think a lot of people have lost a lot of trust in whether companies can adopt some kind of ethical practices, but they also have lost their trust in how the state could solve all these problems...

— *So it is some kind of agency representation?*

— Yeah, yeah, exactly. So they want to use all the different types of ways to change what the consumers consider as major issues — environmental issues or social justice issues and so on.

— *I see... And how many consumers acknowledge those social movement organizations and follow their prescriptions and admit their job overall?*

— It's only few of them...

— *And who are these people?*

— Most of them are well-educated consumers, white people, middle-aged people, 35–45 years old. And for some of them it's not only a way of doing politics through the wallet, it's also about giving a sense to a whole part of their lives... They want to say 'when I'm a consumer, when I'm making my choice on the market, I'm also not that kind of coach potato, I want to do something and I want to be someone, so...'

— *And probably they try to make the world better place for living?*

— Yeah, they think they also can change the world through that kind of thing, but it's only a few people and well-educated. But it's not always people who have a lot of money. Because some of them have a high diploma, but some of them chose job with less responsibilities...

— *Like some kind of downshifting?*

— Yeah, yeah.

— *So, that kind of people, they are self-conscious, they are environmentally-conscious... But what can all these social movement organizations do with other people, the overwhelming majority of consumers who do not know about [the movement's] job and their issues. How can they refer to them?*

— Well, what I'm thinking it's not only them creating some changes in consumption; it's also about creating some kind of norms. But the problem is that those norms about ethical consumption are really middle-class norms. And we know how difficult it can be for popular class to adopt middle-class norms. Of course there is that Veblen's framework that... yeah, that it (norms) diffuses from the top, some sort of top-down diffusion. But it's not easy because a lot of people from lower classes know that these norms are not their norms and that those kind of norms are for the richer, and they are not happy to say "OK, I have to think about the environment. But who will think about my own welfare and well-being? Who is thinking about how difficult to me is to make ends meet"?

— *But maybe they want to adhere to these norms but they simply have not enough income to buy, for instance, some environmentally-friendly food. But in their minds they have notion of how the relationship between consumer and producer should be?*

— Yeah, and especially ethical consumption is about thinking about other people when you consume. But for a lot of people consuming is at first thinking about his or her family so it is very difficult for people to say "OK, I have to think about the environment, I have to think about the small producers in undeveloped countries, but this is too much for me, because I have my own problems and I can't solve them."

— *And in your opinion, is political consumption possible without the impact of social movement organizations?*

— No! I would say political consumption is about those movements. It's not about like consumers who wake up in the morning and say: "Oh, I have to be a more aware, it's all about an organization and the mobilization of people." Well, that is my point of view.¹

¹ See also [Dubuisson-Quellier 2015].

— *So, the thing is that consumers can't collaborate on their own?*

— It's not the individual's initiative in my point; it is a collective action that is organized by those movements.

— *Ok. So, can we now refer to your next paper, which is about the role of household configuration and the life course in food consumption practices? [Plessz et al. 2014] And my question is: what are the most crucial turning points in an individual's life that affect his food consumption practices? And maybe you have some interesting examples from your own interviews?*

— Yeah. Well, I would say that the most important turning point is when the first baby appears in the household. We have some terrific examples about people saying: "well, you know, when it was about us it was not a big deal, we used to go out for dinner or just have some pizza and that's it. But, now, you know, baby's here and everything have changed." So we have a lot of examples of affairs like this which means that when people turn to be parents they want to take into consideration a norm of what is a proper food for their child.

— *For example that it should be healthier..?*

— Yeah, healthier food. Well, it is not only about this. Proper food norms are about healthy food but they are also about having three meals a day and sitting to the table during having a meal, and sitting together and it's whole bunch of habits that people want to adhere to.

— *So, the main turning point is having a first child...*

— Yeah, but there are others... Also a big turning point is what demographers call an 'empty nest' — it's when the children leave the family and the parents who are retired or not are on their own now.

— *And what do they start to eat?*

— Well, they change their food habits because a lot of constraints disappear. They don't have to follow the dictate of what their children want to eat and everything like that. They usually describe their meal as more simple and easier to make with some salads and soups and that's it. So it's a big simplification of their meal and also all the pressure they put around that kind of activity. There is also a big turning point with some events like divorces or moving, changing job. Because you change your colleagues and the kind of prescriptions and advice you receive like "oh, you know, you shouldn't eat that or you know, I know new organic restaurant over there, it is really tasty, you should try it."

— *And what are the sanctions for violating these collective norms of eating? Should you be exiled from your social group or what?*

— Yeah, well, it depends, and this is why the norms about proper food and environmental norms don't function the same. For example for proper food the sanction is about being a good father or a good mother. And you can display that kind of practice to your family, colleagues, friends, making an impression like "hey, yesterday I cooked that really good meal for my child and it was really healthy and tasty." But with environmental norms you can't do so, you wouldn't say "you know, yesterday I sorted my waste" or something like that. But it simply does not work like that, because "I don't care." Even with organic it's not the same as it works within the specific community. Like, if you eat organic and I eat organic I will tell you about that new shop. But if you don't — ok, I'm not like you, I'm different, and you're not interested in that. But if I show you how good mother I am you could be interested even though you're not a mother yourself. So this is the big difference and this is why it is so difficult to spread environmental norms.

— *But maybe one day people will react on the environmental norms as they react now on you making impression of good mother? Maybe someday it will be the same reaction?*

— Yeah, you right.

— *OK, that's clear. And I just wanted to talk with you about one more of your papers. It is about consumers' involvement in fair-trade movements [Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine 2008]. Can you describe briefly what the fair-trade movements are, what is their agenda and how the consumers are being involved in their actions?*

— Well, at the beginning the fair-trade movement at least in France was organized by some organizations from the development sector. And their goal was to help people in Southern countries to develop. And then some part of these movements had this idea of using the market “maybe we could mobilize consumers from the North and if they help producers from the South by paying a surplus for the product — that could help those people.” So this is why they decided to address consumers. But part of the development movement is really against that because most of them were criticizing the global market for the global commodities like coffee and tea and sugar and cotton. And they said that well, you cannot criticize the market and use the market at the same time — it's kind of strange way of doing things... But the fair-trade movement organized that way and it became very popular even though only few were buying fair-trade products. It became very popular and mostly because in some countries the state was pushing towards that kind of actions. But with the crisis 2008, most of fair trade sales have decreased, at least in France. This is the case with organic food.

— *But are all these fair-trade organizations about small local business, or large companies are involved in it too?*

— Well yes, because there are at least two models, business models for organizing fair-trade. In one of them it's about selling a kind of label, so companies can pay royalties to use the label and so it means organizing the fair-trade supply chain by selling more and more products. So it could be different from the another way of organizing supply chain, which is by allowing only specific actors to be fair-trade actors.

— *As I guess, all that fair-trade products are popular only among particular group of consumers?*

— Yeah. And this is the main difference between consuming organic and consuming fair-trade. Consuming organic could be and for most people it's the case — it's for half reasons that people consume organic products even though there is no health prescriptions — it's just about the environment and they think that it is good for their health. So this is why the consumer buys organic products. But consuming fair-trade is all about thinking about producers from the South.

— *Okay. And now I have few more questions. How do you think, what are the main issues and urgent topics of modern economic sociology on the whole, and particularly of sociology of food consumption as your professional interest?*

— Speaking about the major issues in economic sociology which are not related to food consumption. I would say all the issues about financialization are really important. And all the issues about morals and markets, and commodification in my point of view. And also I would say coming back to the role of the state is also very interesting topic to analyze. For me, the food question is just a topic that can lead you to examine broader questions such as the role of the state and ‘the moral.’ Also all the questions of finance too, because there are some credit issues concerning consumption that you can also study.

— *And what project will you present here, at the ESA 2015²?*

— Well, tomorrow I'm presenting a paper on household food waste. So, yeah this is a recent topic that has been as I said addressed by a lot of governments. And most of them are addressing this topic as individual-responsibility topic — it's like people are responsible for that. So I with my coauthor Gojard Severine, we want to show that it's a broader issue and a lot of these practices about waste are about how people frame their consumption habits and how these practices are framed by norms. And especially in the case of food waste people are influenced both by norms that tell them to have a lot of food and some surplus. And some norms tell them to throw it away and other norms tell them not to throw away. And in the middle there are these safety-food prescriptions that tells you "oh, you shouldn't keep that yogurt which is out of date, so throw it away." Or another norm that tells you, you know, you should always have at home some food, like if the friend shows up you should be able to welcome him or her and make him or her meal. So you have to have something in your fridge. But it turns out that nobody showed, so what are you going to do with that food? And all the norms of the proper meal that tell you that for your family you should have a lot of fruits and vegetables and fresh products to cook fresh meals. But you don't know if you will use them, and it happens that you did not and you have to throw them away.

— *But where do these norms come from? About what you should do with the food waste? I mean are there some kind of organizations that tell you what should you do?*

— Well, there are plenty of them (norms) and as I said they are very different. Some come from nutrition professionals, others come from the environmental groups and also governments are involved. During the 1980s there were said a lot like "you should follow the expiration date it is really important because you could be poisoned." And now a lot of governments are saying "oh, maybe those expiration dates are not so good, they are too short and actually it's not a big deal if your yogurt is out of date for one or two weeks." So there are a lot of prescriptions everywhere and people are a bit lost about that. And also in this paper we are demonstrating that people do not have the same habits regarding the type of food. For example, for fruits and vegetables they are not the same as for already cooked food. And they do not do the same for food with an expiration date. So you can't set some kind of unique prescription, also you have to cross all those with all the different social positions so it's very complex issue.

— *I see. And what theoretical approaches do you use when you explore all these kind of relationships between the consumer and producer, or in this topic of food waste? What are the most applicable ones?*

— Well, it's in this work where I'm not using a lot of economic-sociological concepts, not so much. Except maybe the concept of prescriptions, we use it a lot in French economic sociology. It allows us to identify the role of all the "equipment" that people have around them to make their choice and their decisions. And some of this equipment comes from the market, some comes from the government and some comes from social movements. I'm also using the concept of symbolic boundary — which doesn't come from economic sociology at all but comes from cultural sociology. But it shows that some people also want to adopt norms from the groups they think they belong to and not from other ones. So regarding food waste, some people can be really, really reluctant to adopt those kind of prescriptions, they associate them with you know that kind of people, very environmentally-concerned and they don't want to be associated with them. Especially in France.

— *Ok. So two last small questions left. What was the last book you've read?*

— Well, I read a lot this summer. I read a book by Steiner Philippe and Trespeuch Marie which is called *Marchés contestés. Quand le marché rencontre la morale* [Steiner, Trespeuch 2014]. This book is about the

² 12th Conference of the European Sociological Association 2015.

conditions through which a market can develop and function despite the moral opposition it might raise. So “contested markets” are not against morals, on the opposite the authors show how they connect different orders of the moral. Excellent book. And now I’m reading at the time *Food Waste* by David Evans [Evans 2014]. It’s a short but really good book. David Evans is the big specialist of food waste. He is from Manchester University.

— *And what is his main point in his book?*

— Well he is explaining how people are making some surplus when they provision food and how this surplus can become excess and then waste. So it’s the circuit of the food — from food to surplus and then excess and then waste.

— *So that’s all. It was a pleasure to meet you and have conversation with you. Thank you very much!*

— Thank you!

**Interviewed by Kirill Makarov
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