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A Market Mediation Strategy: How Social Movements Seek to Change Firms' Practices by Promoting New Principles of Product Valuation

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Abstract

Social movement theory has recently paid a lot of attention to the diversity of strategies used by social movements to pressurize companies, and has spawned an abundant literature on the combined perspective of social movement studies and market organization studies. This paper adopts a rather different perspective, drawing on market theories from the economic sociology of evaluation to assess a specific strategy developed by a number of groups within the environmental social movement, which relies on the market's capacity to mediate their claims. The literature has widely considered why some environmental social movement organizations (SMOs) choose to address consumers, even though it is not in their tradition to do so and even though their objective is not directly related to consumption issues. I seek to contribute to this debate by analysing the 'how' rather than the 'why', by highlighting a specific social movement strategy which is mediated by market mechanisms. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of a strategy consisting of attempts to change the most prevalent valuation criteria within the market by introducing principles of worth that rely on products' environmental performance. This involves activist organizations suggesting new product valuation criteria, and then seeking to convince firms that consumers' preferences are changing. Their assumption is that firms will see new business opportunities, which will prompt them to adopt more eco-friendly practices. This market mediation strategy is designed to encourage firms to shift towards more eco-friendly supply practices, by creating business opportunities for them. It shows how SMOs, in order to directly shape consumers' preferences, urge them to introduce eco-friendly principles of worth into their valuation of products by providing them with market devices to help in their purchasing choices. By applying these strategies, SMOs seek to shape the market and create business opportunities for firms. Their intention is to make companies see the value of changing some of their practices by introducing new eco-friendly features in their products, because consumers have been convinced by SMOs of the value of such features. SMOs must then pursue two important objectives: one is to shape consumers' preferences for that kind of valuation category on the market by convincing them of their responsibilities and their role as agents of change; and the other is to convince companies that a real shift in consumers' preferences is taking place in the market, so that they see it as an interesting opportunity to benefit from the SMOs' shaping of the market.

Introduction

Social movement theory has frequently studied the relations between social protest and economic actors. For instance, Rao's (2009) studies show that activists are often at the origin of radical innovations which enable economic actors to invest in new activities. Rao also points out that movements can reshape the modes of competition between firms or alter the performance of the different forms of economic organization (Rao, 2009; Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003). More recently, researchers have studied social movements that explicitly targeted firms or economic actors (Luders, 2006; Schurman & Munro, 2009; Soule, 2009; Weber, Rao & Thomas, 2009). The notion of private politics proposed by scholars of business studies has provided a framework of interpretation for anti-corporate protests (Baron, 2003).

These orientations have led sociologists of social movements to pay attention to the diversity of strategies used by social movements to put pressure on companies (King, 2007, 2008; King & Soule, 2007), and have spawned an abundant literature on the combined perspectives of social movement studies and market organization studies (King & Pearce, 2010). In particular, the literature has shown a great deal of interest in certain strategies which encourage companies to comply with social movements' claims through market mechanisms such as non-state market-driven regulation (Cashore, Auld & Newsom, 2004) such as labelling schemes, and private regulation (Bartley, 2007). It has also considered the ability of social movements to open opportunities for innovations and industrial development (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003). These approaches plead for a deeper articulation between the literature on social movement theory and the literature on economic sociology that analyses the functioning of markets. In this respect some researchers have already paved the way (e.g. Davis & Thompson, 1994; Fligstein, 1996, 2001). This paper adopts this combined perspective to assess a specific strategy developed by some groups from the environmental social movement, which relies on the capacity of the market to mediate their claims. The literature has widely addressed the question of why some environmental SMOs choose to address consumers, even though it is not in their tradition to do so and their objective is not directly related to consumption issues (Caruana & Crane, 2010; Holzer, 2006). I seek to contribute to this debate through an analysis of the 'how' rather than the 'why', by highlighting a specific social movement strategy which is mediated by market mechanisms. To this end, I have drawn on the economic sociology literature and provided an in-depth analysis of a strategy consisting of attempts to change the most prevalent valuation criteria within the market. This strategy involves activist organizations suggesting new principles of worth for products based on their environmental performance, and then seeking to convince firms that consumers are now evaluating products differently in relation to their environmental performances. Their assumption is that firms will see new business opportunities, which will prompt them to produce more eco-friendly products.

Based on an in-depth field study within several social movement organizations (SMOs) in France, I analyse a social movement strategy aimed at encouraging firms to change their practices regarding the eco-friendliness of their supply, by creating business opportunities for them. These SMOs work at directly shaping consumers' preferences by urging them to introduce specific

eco-friendly criteria into their valuation of products, such as 'low-packaging', 'seasonal' or 'local', for example. The SMOs' intention in applying these strategies is to shape the principles of worth at play within the market and create business opportunities for firms by convincing them that a real change in consumers' preferences and valuation is happening. Their assumption is that companies will develop eco-friendly practices, not because they are threatened but because they see their interest in acquiring new market shares through these new consumer preferences. SMOs pursue two important objectives: one is to shape consumers' preferences for that kind of valuation category on the market by convincing them of their responsibilities and their role as agents of change; the second is to convince companies that a real shift in consumers' preferences is taking place in the market, and to make these changes a narrative and fiction that every economic actor will believe (Beckert, 2011). In reference to both social movement theory that developed political mediation models (Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan, 1992; King, 2008) and economic sociology that works with the notions of valuation (Beckert & Aspers, 2011; Stark, 2009) and market mediation (Karpik, 2010; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010), I analyse this strategy based on the valuation categories within the market.

In the first part of the paper I review the literature on social movements which introduced the notion of market mediation, to show that it has failed to explain why SMOs consider the market to be so efficient for encouraging firms to change their practices. I then turn to the economic sociology literature, which highlights the role of valuation processes in market coordination, to emphasize this literature's ability to explain how the introduction of new principles of worth may profoundly modify market opportunities for companies. The second part is dedicated to the analysis of this market-mediated strategy based on valuation. I explain that SMOs introduce new principles of worth based on environmental criteria and provide consumers with market devices that may help to apply these new criteria to their purchasing decisions, by equipping them for the categorization, qualification and commensuration of products. SMOs also work at showing companies consumers' real commitment to changing their consumption habits by introducing these new principles of worth.

How Do SMOs Target Companies? The Role of Market-Mediated Strategies

Traditionally, SMOs have been known to target the state and, more generally, public actors. Recent studies, however, have emphasized the fact that social movements have also always targeted non-state actors, as some historians have documented (Cohen, 2004; Glickman, 2009). Armstrong and Bernstein recently suggested that a protest that addresses ideological and cultural issues would appeal to social movements to consider a plurality of targets and repertoires (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Their strategies tend to stem from multi-institutional dynamics that do not focus on one target exclusively (Gamson, 1989). Among these targets that are not states (Zald & Berger, 1978), corporations have increasingly been considered (Soule, 2009; Walker, Martin & McCarthy, 2008). Drawing on the fast-growing literature that has been dedicated to the way SMOs develop strategies to influence firms (see King & Pearce, 2010, for a review), I would like to emphasize two specific findings that may be of particular relevance to the point developed in this paper: the first is the strategy of audience broadening developed by social movements seeking mediated effects; and the second is the ability of SMOs to shape the market in several ways. I end this first section, greatly inspired by results in economic sociology, by presenting a specific strategy developed by social movements to shape the market. This strategy relies on the introduction of new valuation categories into the market and explains why SMOs directly address consumers and convince companies about their ability to change consumers' preferences.

From Broadening the Audience to the Search for Market Mediation Effects

Research on anti-corporation activism has highlighted the various strategies that social movements use to target companies. While some researchers, profoundly influenced by what has been shown in the case of state-related targets, have analysed the intra-organizational strategies of activists (Dobbin, 2009; Raeburn, 2004), most academics have focused on more contentious, persuasive and disruptive public actions.

The literature has focused on subversive strategies which are designed to disrupt the ordinary routines of companies, in order to put pressure on them, such as culture jamming (Carducci, 2006), subvertising or anti-advertising (Dubuisson-Quellier & Barrier, 2007), calls for boycotts (Friedman, 1999; Pruitt & Friedman, 1986) and naming and shaming (Bartley & Child, 2010), which have been used by the environmental movement, the social justice movement and the labour rights movement to fight firms' practices and to threaten companies.

The studies demonstrate that SMOs may seek to broaden their audience to increase their efficiency, either to public opinion as the anti-biotech movement did (Weber et al., 2009), or to market actors as in the case of calls for boycotts (Friedman, 1999). King and Soule (2007) highlighted the fact that the effect of such a protest is 'at least partially a function of its ability to inform investors about dissatisfaction among key stakeholder groups whose support is critical to the survival of the organization' (King & Soule, 2007, p. 435). In this process, media coverage has an amplifying effect, by echoing the demands towards a broader audience. These results have been confirmed by King's evaluation of boycott efficiency (King, 2008), which demonstrates that boycotts do not need to affect sales in order to be effective. In fact, the effectiveness of calls for boycotts stems from their ability to generate negative perceptions among the public, which can in turn undermine a firm's reputation. Some mediation effects are at play, as King shows, since the determinants of the success of a protest lie in the interaction between the movement's strategies, the firm's situation and its ability to capture the interest of a broad audience. Capturing consumers' or investors' attention, or that of public opinion, may be considered as valuable by social movements, either to spread information about their claims or to challenge the public image of a company or its constituents (Baron, 2003).

The market seems to be a potential arena in which to search for such mediated effects. The notions of 'industry opportunity structure' or 'economic opportunity structure' try to capture the way some SMOs may play on the nature of competition within an industry (Schurman, 2004), on the relations of power and dependence between the actors of a supply chain (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994) or on potential responses from competitors (Luders, 2006) in order to influence corporate policies.

The literature highlights the capacity of social movement actions to interfere with economic and competitive structures and contribute to shaping the market through two main strategies: the creation of private regulation and the creation of new identities within markets. The first type of strategy relates to the creation of private regulatory tools developed by SMOs in order to create market standards, as in the case of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or the Marine Stewardship Council. The FSC has been described as a means to encourage firms to undertake costly changes that they would otherwise not pursue, by rewarding them through the marketplace (Cashore, Egan, Auld & Newsom, 2007). From a somewhat different standpoint, the anti-sweatshop movement (Bartley, 2005, 2007), the environmental movement and the social justice movement (Yaziji & Doh, 2009) have tried to encourage leading companies to adopt codes of conduct by playing on their reputation and status vis-a-vis the competition. The second type of strategy relates to the creation, by SMOs, of new cultural identities that the market can then transform into niches. Marketing and

cultural studies have shown how the market is profoundly inspired by counter-culture and critical movements (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). In the context of organization theory, some research has highlighted the willingness of social movements to legitimize or de-legitimize business choices and practices, as in the case of the cooperative firm (Schneiberg, 2002, 2007; Schneiberg, King & Smith, 2008) or the organizational forms of production of specialty beers (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000).

But SMOs are not only part of a social context of culture building, in some cases they act as real entrepreneurs and contribute to the creation of new identities that may generate economic activities either unwittingly, as in the case of the development of the soft drink industry by the temperance movement (Hiatt, Sine & Tolbert, 2009), or deliberately, as in the cases of independent booksellers (Miller, 2006), windmill entrepreneurs (Sine & Lee, 2009), nouvelle cuisine chefs (Rao et al., 2003), grass-fed meat producers (Weber, Heinze & DeSoucey, 2008), recycling organizations (Lounsbury et al, 2003) and alternative food movements (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine & LeVelly, 2011).

The literature has therefore largely emphasized the capacity of SMOs to seek market mediation effects in order to make their claim heard. But this literature fails to assess the real mechanisms through which the market may achieve such to mediate their action. The market is not only a kind of echo chamber which can relay SMOs' claims and automatically cause companies to change their practices. What are the market mechanisms that allow SMOs to expect important changes from the companies they target? Turning to some recent developments in economic sociology may provide interesting insights into analysing how this market mediation works, and why SMOs consider that they create business opportunities which encourage companies to change their practices.

Insights from the Economic Sociology of Valuation: Creating Market Valuation Categories to Open up Business Opportunities

Using the framework proposed in recent economic sociology work, I propose a third type of social movement strategy, in addition to legitimization and identity building. This strategy, which I analyse in detail in the second part of this paper, consists in creating new market valuation categories, or new qualities within the market shaped by social movements, in order to modify the rules of competition within an industry or a market.

The notions of valuation and evaluation have been at the core of certain recent developments in economic sociology. They are based on a specific approach to the market that highlights the role of collective devices in market coordination in situations of uncertainty (for a review in English see Favereau & Lazega, 2002). This research suggests that market uncertainty refers not only to information asymmetries regarding the quality of goods but also to the coexistence of different and non-commensurable regimes of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). This plurality of regimes of worth has since been identified as one of the most intriguing specificities of market coordination and of other social processes (Lamont, 2012). At the same time, convention theory has been highlighted as a viable theoretical alternative to network theory and institutional approaches for understanding the market order (Biggart & Beamish, 2003). Economic sociologists have begun to focus sharply on evaluative activities, as they have the potential to elucidate the conditions of economic coordination for non-commensurable goods (Karpik, 2010), to reveal the role of market devices in market coordination (Callon, Millo & Muniesa, 2007; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010), to identify organizations able to take advantage of the coexistence of different regimes of worth (Stark, 2009) and to differentiate between different types of market based on the existence or not of a common scale for evaluation (Aspers, 2009). The framework has even spread beyond economic sociology

to assess market activities which articulate different types of coordination regimes, such as fair trade (Renard, 2003).

This general literature emphasizes the role of qualification activities as specific evaluative and valuation practices (Lamont, 2012) which are necessary for the market to function. Valuation refers to a process through which goods acquire value (Beckert & Aspers, 2010; Fourcade, 2011; Vatin, 2009) and rely on different devices used by market actors to perform calculations and judgements. From the perspective of the economic sociology of valuation, the value of a product is not pre-existent, but the result of a market process which involves valuation processes, that is processes through which a value is attached to a good. This field of research has developed theoretical frameworks to demonstrate the role of collective devices not only in reducing uncertainty (Karpik, 2010) but also in allowing for the coordination of supply and demand through market mediation mechanisms (Barrey, Cochoy & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010). As a result, for economic transactions to be carried out, different types of market devices are needed, which can be impersonal, discursive, material or technical (Callon et al., 2007). These market devices are wide-ranging, including brands, labels, merchandizing techniques, design, advertisement, prices and packaging, and allow market actors to perform different types of activities such as identification, categorization (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013), commensuration (Espeland & Stevens, 1998) and legitimization (Zelizer, 1979). In a nutshell, market devices equip consumers to make choices by helping them to identify and evaluate products. These devices are the results of intense social activity by producers, retailers and different market professionals (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010, 2013), who all strive to orientate consumers' decisions towards their supply. These devices support, for instance, suppliers' branding strategies, pricing policies and loyalty programmes, in order to capture the demand by providing consumers with criteria for product valuation that will help them to categorize, qualify and commensurate products. As a result, the valuation of products is an extensive process which involves both supply and demand, as well as the use, dissemination and stabilization of principles of worth within the market.

Most of the economic sociology literature, however, has focused on the role of market actors in defining these principles of worth. Following the seminal work of Viviana Zelizer (2011), I argue that under certain circumstances SMOs play a role in valuation processes. More specifically, I show in this paper that they can provide market actors with market devices to support the identification, categorization, commensuration and legitimization of products. I posit that SMOs may try to shape valuation categories in order to influence market valuation and put pressure on companies. Environmental friendliness, fair trade or social quality have progressively been imposed within the market as valuation categories through which goods or economic activities may be evaluated by consumers. But whereas Zelizer mainly emphasized the discourses developed by SMOs in order to qualify and evaluate life insurance, I propose to identify another strategy implemented by social movements, consisting in the direct dissemination, on markets, of specific market devices aimed at equipping consumers to make choices (Cochoy, 2004). Through these tactics, SMOs seek to shape consumers' perceptions of products and to modify their preferences and valuation categories (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2012), thereby creating strong incentives for companies to adapt to these new consumers' expectations.

Some SMOs, in addition to their usual extra-institutional disruptive actions, use other deliberate strategies to influence corporate practices. This type of strategy aims at creating new business opportunities for companies, through market mediation mechanisms and by introducing new criteria into the market for evaluating products. Their main assumption is that a shift in consumers' behaviour may represent interesting business opportunities for firms in a context of market saturation. Social movements will then actively work to provide consumers with new criteria for

product valuation on the market, such as low packaging, seasonal or local production, animal feeding practices and environmental impacts, and try to convince firms that a shift in consumers' preferences is actually at stake. Market mechanisms, such as competition and product differentiation, become mediators of this strategy.

Modifying the Valuation Categories for Products on the Market: A Market Mediation Strategy

In the late 1990s, in France as in other countries, the environmentalist movement started to call for consumers to assume responsibility and take action in addressing certain environmental issues and in proposing solutions to these issues (Bartley, 2007; Boström & Klintman, 2008; Micheletti, 2003; Vogel, 2005). It is however important to bear in mind that this appeal to consumers' responsibility by social movements (Caruana & Crane, 2010) was not new. Historians' analyses of consumer protests in the United States (Cohen, 2004; Glickman, 2009), United Kingdom (Hilton, 2009; Trentmann, 2001), Japan (Maclachlan, 2002) and France (Chessel, 2006) show that the development of the market society was accompanied by very frequent attempts by various SMOs to involve consumers in their advocacy, be it the promotion of social justice, labour rights or civic rights. The market arena rapidly became a sphere of protest, precisely because market relationships were seen to be deeply embedded in political choices.

As a consequence, historical and sociological research has extensively documented the fact that some social movements have always relied on consumers' capability to be agents of change, even when these movements were not consumer advocates. But while most of these studies focus on boycotts or buycotts, they do not consider the full range of ways in which SMOs call upon consumers' involvement to make companies change their practices: a large proportion of the information and recommendations that some SMOs put out relate to the way consumers should behave in the market, how they should choose their products, and on what types of criteria. In order to assess this strategy based on providing consumers with criteria for choosing products, it was necessary to carry out ethnographic work on a broad range of SMOs that leverage that strategy.

I propose to analyse the market mediation strategy by focusing on the different tools and operations SMOs mobilize to create the conditions for companies to reduce the environmental impact of their products. First, I present the field of research and the specificities of the SMOs studied, which have all sought strategies that could leverage ordinary political consumerism. Second, I highlight some of the criteria that the SMOs wish to introduce into the market in order to create new principles of worth for products, based on their environmental performances. I then demonstrate that these new principles of worth are operationalized through real market devices that SMOs disseminate in order to equip consumers to make their choices while shopping. Finally, I describe how they relay shifts in consumers' valuation of products by convincing firms that a growing number of consumers have a strong commitment to changing their consumption practices by introducing new choice criteria.

The Valuation Strategy: From Modifying the Market at the Fringes to Modifying the Whole Market

From 2008 to 2011, I conducted a large ethnographic study in several small organizations within the fair trade movement, the small-scale farming movement, the anti-advertising movement, the organic food movement, the critical consumption movement and the environmental movements that address consumers by providing them with criteria for their purchasing choices. I interviewed

both activists and members of these organizations (n = 90), attended some of the meetings they organized, and collected documentation, publications, website information, flyers and e-mails. As these organizations were small and some of them were quite radical, the strategy of providing consumers with valuation criteria could be understood as a low-profile strategy, namely a kind of strategy only available for SMOs that were not able to organize costly consumer mobilization around the market, such as calls for boycotts, labelling scheme strategies or co-branding strategies. For this reason, I completed field research with a number of interviews (n = 15) conducted in the three leading environmental NGOs in France that directly address consumers in their messages and dedicate specific tools to equipping their choices and purchasing decisions. Even though this paper stems primarily from the latter interviews, I also drew on my ethnographic study to shape most of my arguments about the existence of a strategy that leverages the market. The organizations chosen, the WWF France, the FNH and the FNE, are three of the five main environmental NGOs in France. They all have a reformist position (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007), in the sense that they agree to negotiate with leading institutions such as the state or firms, but have very different organizational structures.

- Created in 1973, the WWF France has 87 employees and is part of the WWF worldwide network. Even though it has its own organization, funding (which comes mostly from the public through donations and co-branding) and actions, it benefits from the renown of the international network and has a brand-like strategy with widespread use of its logotype and the panda to label programmes, products and actions.
- The FNH was created in 1990 by an environmental activist who is also the producer and the host of a famous TV show on nature. It has the status of a foundation, employs 40 people and receives most of its money from several large French firms.
- The FNE was created in 1976 and encompasses over 3,000 small environmentalist groups throughout France. It employs 40 people and is a non-profit association administrated by 24 volunteers, including the president who has an activist background. It receives most of its financial resources from various types of state funding.

In each of the three environmental SMOs, I interviewed the director and the various individuals in charge of consumption-related issues, attended several meetings they organized, and collected all the different documents, publications, tools, website information and flyers that were purposely designed to shape consumers' consumption habits.

These three SMOs have in common the fact that they have all developed a strategy which targets consumers despite the fact that their advocacy is not focused on consumption issues, unlike organizations from the consumer movement (Maclachlan, 2002; Rao, 1998; Trumbull, 2006). Like other SMOs, they have been involved in what has been called 'political consumerism' (Bartley, 2005, 2007; Holzer, 2006; Micheletti, 2003). In this type of activism, consumers are provided with turnkey solutions, through calls for boycotts or the labelling schemes developed by SMOs, so that they can use their purchasing power to exercise their responsibility as citizens. As demonstrated by the notion of 'individualized collective action' proposed by Micheletti (2003), or more accurately by the idea of 'collectivized individual actions' proposed by Holzer (2006), these types of SMOs carry out important work for transforming the effects of each individual consumer's actions into a potential power, echoing the notion of 'power of the purse' that certain SMOs seek to leverage.

But the three SMOs that I studied also share another feature. While they seek to empower consumers through calls for boycotts or labelling strategies, they also consider that these strategies

lack sufficient capacity to move the market and force companies to change. For example, the WWF has been deeply involved in the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) labelling scheme, but the organization also considers that this strategy may not be efficient enough, as only a small part of the supply and a small number of consumers are concerned:

> We knew that boycott was not a solution, because it may also have pernicious effects in countries of the South. Gradually, even at the WWF, the awareness emerged that we had to develop ethical trade and the labelling scheme was a good solution for that. The initiative came from the environmental activist organizations, and we created the FSC. And this was supposed to encourage more ethical economic relationships, to introduce fairness and justice. The sustainable management of forestry, through this tool that is the FSC label, could solve the problem of deforestation…Well, in theory…But then we realized that maybe it was not enough. Because deforestation was not only a problem of forestry management and wood consumption, but also a problem of agriculture, of soy production, of palm oil consumption. We needed to broaden the perspective. And today if you go on our website (protegeonslaforet.com), you will see that we offer consumers a dozen products and if you click on these products you can find out the ecological footprint for each of them, and the amount of destroyed forest the consumer may be responsible for when he/she makes bad choices. So then we propose some recommendations in order to limit the destruction of forests. (Manager WWF, in charge of the forests issue, 2009)

By focusing on very specific products (whether calling for those products to be boycotted or to be purchased), the three SMOs fear that consumers, as well as companies, will remain unaware of the environmental damage caused by other types of products, and will think that these simple and limited solutions can solve the entire environmental problem, or ignore the complexity of environmental issues. The FNE perceives the oversimplification of the labelling scheme as a limit of this strategy, which may even lead consumers to make bad choices with the best intentions:

> Consumers have to have a better understanding of the labelling schemes, which are often more complex than they think. Take the example of a can of tuna. Well imagine developing a carbon labelling system, a can of tuna could have a good carbon impact, but actually consuming red tuna has major environmental consequences. (Manager, FNE, 2010)

Similarly to the smaller radical consumption groups I studied, the three big environmental SMOs point to the potential 'de-responsibilization' of consumers and companies caused by classic political consumerist strategies (Maniates, 2002). In this context, the market mediation strategy appears as an alternative strategy able to deeply modify the market and thus have a powerful effect on firms' practices.

This strategy is aimed at introducing specific criteria that can help all consumers to change most of their consumption choices so as to reduce their environmental impact. It can therefore potentially target any consumer product, and consequently all consumer companies.

Introducing New Principles of Worth for the Valuation of Products

It is the desire to bring about profound changes in companies' supply practices, in favour of eco-friendly products, that spurred the three SMOs studied to develop a strategy to introduce new valuation criteria into the market. These criteria are designed to help consumers turn to products with a low environmental impact. Environmental NGOs have been bringing to light the fact that products travel long distances between their place of production and their place of consumption, and are produced through intensive farming or packaged using a lot of plastic, all of which may

have a considerable impact on the environment in terms of carbon emissions and on biodiversity. The three SMOs that I studied decided to advise consumers by introducing conditions of production, proximity, seasonality or low-packaging as new criteria to evaluate products on the market. These notions are intended to serve as principles of worth on the market: a local piece of meat, a piece of fruit in season, a low-packaging box of cookies, a recycled sheet of paper or a piece of furniture made from sustainably managed forests are presented as highly valuable to consumers, whereas exotic fruits, intensively farmed beef or highly packaged children's desserts are presented as products that should not be bought.

The FNE, which works on water and soil issues, has used waste-related practices as an opportunity to explain to consumers how they can reduce their impact on the environment by buying fewer packaged products. The NGO uses its network of 3,000 groups to develop specific local actions. Every year one weekend is dedicated to specific educational actions in various cities, where activists present ways of producing less waste. One of the solutions presented to consumers to reduce their waste is to opt for products sold in bulk, for instance at farmers' markets or in organic food stores, or products with less packaging in supermarkets, and to avoid small portions of produce. The amount of packaging around a product is thus highlighted as an environmentally friendly criterion to apply when choosing a product.

In the same vein, the FNH launched the campaign 'strawberries in spring', dedicated to explaining to consumers that each fruit and vegetable is grown during a specific season, which makes food seasonal. The goal of the campaign was also to educate consumers on the impact of food bought out of season, due to carbon dioxide emissions from transportation of produce grown abroad, or from heating greenhouses. As proximity and seasonality are not buying criteria supported by labels with specific and compulsory information on products, the SMOs are developing specific tools to educate consumers by providing them directly with prescriptions of choices and actions.

More specifically, local and small-scale farming have recently been singled out by environmental NGOs in France and elsewhere as alternative solutions to conventional agriculture which they see as one of the main culprits in environmental problems. Accordingly, the three SMOs that I studied are deeply involved in the promotion of direct selling and direct contracting between consumers and small local producers, and draw consumers' attention to the distance between places of production and consumption. Proximity or locality are put forward as criteria they should rely on when buying their food. They all recommend that, as often as possible, consumers use most of the alternative food networks that have been created in France since the late 1990s, as in other developed countries (Goodman & Watts, 1997; Holloway & Kneafsey, 2004; Lamine, 2005). Many small organizations within the FNE strongly recommend that their members become involved in these kinds of local food networks by buying their food directly from local farms, organic co-ops or farmers' markets, or else through local contracts between consumers and producers. The FNE is probably the most committed to these groups, as some of its organizations' members are co-ops or local contract organizations. This SMO provides the public with information on where to find these local food networks and on other alternative exchange systems that can help them both to find environmentally friendly products and to support market alternatives. But all three SMOs studied place emphasis on the notion of proximity as a good criterion for choosing food products:

> So we said 'it might be possible to reach consumers through food'. And we launched our campaign 'biodiversity on my plate'. This is where our program on food started. We had no food program before that. We worked with big chefs to create menus that people could develop at home and we promoted organic food a lot, 100% organic! The most important was quality, and proximity and seasonality, and if possible organic. But we prefer local and quality food to organic food. (CEO of the FNH, interview 2009)

The WWF is strongly involved in the protection of biodiversity and has developed several educational tools (booklet, conference, website) to explain to consumers the environmental impact of the consumption of certain products (such as paper, wood, or meat). The information provided about the mode of production of certain types of products (such as wood) suggests that consumers should be more aware about some dimensions of their product which are not shared on the market. Through its website, the WWF proposes specific individual actions for individuals to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 30%. The solutions proposed concern shopping and also consumption routines: buying locally produced fresh fruit and vegetables (instead of frozen food), buying organic milk, using a low-temperature programme of the washing machine, using recycled paper, reducing beef consumption to a maximum of 300 g a week and replacing it with vegetable proteins, poultry and pork. The list is short and easy to implement. It provides different criteria that consumers may rely on for their consumption decisions and routines: locally produced, low-packaged, type of proteins, fresh food, low-temperature programme option for washing machine purchases, modes of production for wood or paper.

But as shown above, some of these criteria may not be so easy for consumers to use, as the information needed may be hidden from them: this is particularly the case with criteria on the mode of production. In this case, the NGO may disclose information which is not directly accessible to consumers. For example, one of the small organizations I studied gave consumers information about how to decode the numbers found on eggs, which indicates the mode of production. Although these figures, printed on eggs for traceability purposes, are not designed to be used by consumers, one of them does refer to the farming system (from 0 for organic and open field farming to 3 for intensive farming). In other cases, the disclosure tactic may also correspond to what some NGOs interpret as green-washing strategies. The FNE, the most radical of the three SMOs that I studied, which readily uses disruptive tactics in certain situations, published subvertising posters on the uncertainties surrounding the effects of GM food. The posters showed a picture of a big raw piece of meat, on which a small sign '100% natural' was planted. The caption read 'big liar' and, in smaller characters, 'the law does not require one to mention that the animal has been fed GM food'. The FNE argued on its website that 'despite the fact that the majority of consumers reject GM foods, GMOs are silently being introduced into our food. A lot of industrial food contains traces of GMOs or even real GM food when the produce contains derivatives of soy.' While the main strategy was to call for more state regulation around the obligation for companies to label food containing GM products, the idea was also to highlight animal feed as a criterion of food choice for consumers. This radical approach is not the one most widely adopted by the SMOs that I studied, but it illustrates that this strategy of providing consumers with purchasing criteria may draw on the whole repertoire of protest actions used by SMOs, from education tools to disruptive tactics.

Since consumers may not have access to full information to choose their product based on the new criteria that environmental NGOs provide, these SMOs also design different market devices intended to directly equip consumers in choosing and purchasing products.

Providing Consumers with Market Devices

Through the use of a mediation strategy, SMOs have acquired an active role in the market by providing consumers with real market devices that will help them to distinguish different categories of products within the supply, based on the criteria that environmental groups have highlighted. The specificity of these devices lies in their capacity to organize the commensurability of products available on the market and, as with any other valuation process, to evaluate them by relying on the

principles of worth provided by the NGOs. Market devices organize the conditions of operationalization of the principles of worth that I described in the previous section.

The FNH has identified the influencing of consumers' choices through shopping guides as an appropriate strategy to articulate regular consumer concerns (how to shop) with the group's environmental concerns (changing behaviours to reduce environmental impacts). A shopping guide called the *Shopping Coach* was created for this purpose in the mid-2000s, in the form of a fold-up leaflet, specially designed to fit in a purse or a pocket, with all the information consumers may need when shopping. One part deals with the different labelling schemes that exist in France; another helps consumers to choose in-season fruit and vegetables, while the third part helps them to distinguish between environmental eco-labels and brands, and gives some information on avoiding GM food. This is in fact a shorter and more transportable version of another tool that was designed by the SMOs. The first version was called *The Small Green Book for the Earth*. This booklet, easy to keep in a handbag, is organized into chapters suggesting ways of being eco-friendly: in the living-room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the garage, the bedroom, the garden, in transport, while shopping, at school, at the office, in the wild, when travelling, and simply as a citizen. The chapter on shopping gives some direct recommendations and also explains how they will help consumers to reduce their environmental impact: choosing in-season products, choosing eco-labelled products, choosing organic food, checking for the presence of GMOs, reducing meat consumption by consuming other sources of protein, not wasting food, using the car as little as possible for shopping, using a basket and avoiding plastic bags, avoiding packaged food, choosing green products, recycling batteries, thinking about tropical forests, avoiding disposable products and finding sustainable alternatives, checking energy labelling, and repairing and reusing as much as possible.

> The *Small Green Booklet* is our flagship tool! We've had it since the Earth Challenge in 2005. It lists 100 eco-friendly acts, everywhere in the house, but also at school and in the office, and for shopping. Everything for the consumer; consumption as a whole. A lot of ideas. People like this booklet a lot, we distributed thousands of them, we even relied on a partnership with a retailing company to help us with the distribution, but we don't have that partnership anymore. But the number of booklets we distributed was huge! (Manager of the FNH – interview 2010)

The purpose of these different tools is not to orient consumers directly to designated products, brands or shops, but to provide them with principles of worth that could help them to identify the kinds of shops, products and producers they should favour. The recommendation is, where possible, to determine principles of worth based on environmental impact:

> A non-seasonal and imported piece of fruit consumes through its transportation 10 to 20 times more oil than the same piece of fruit bought locally in season. It is worth thinking about. (*Green Booklet* – FNH)

Following a comparable approach, the WWF also framed different market devices aimed at equipping consumers to make their choices. The *Conso Guide* on fish, for example, is a small booklet that consumers can keep in their pockets. The different types of fish are sorted into three categories which are not usually used by market actors: the fish you can buy as much as you want, the fish you should buy in moderate quantities, and the fish you should avoid buying. The particularity of this guide is that it introduces a new buying criterion: the preservation of marine resources. This specific criterion helps consumers to sort fishes, to identify different categories of fishes in order to make purchasing decisions. The market device helps consumers to compare products regarding this criterion.

More recently another guide was put on sale on the WWF website to steer consumers' shopping practices and habits surrounding various aspects of ordinary consumption. The guide consists of

several sections: household appliances, water, energy, holidays, school, market, transportation, waste, clothes, gardening and the home. It provides direct prescriptions such as 'buy fresh produce at the market, or even better, directly from the producer: by doing away with intermediaries, direct selling decreases the transportation of products and limits greenhouse gas emissions'. Again, it provides criteria for making decisions – here, the distance between the places of food production and consumption – rather than direct solutions singling out products to buy. The guide called *TopTen* is also a good illustration of this approach. It is a website developed by the WWF with one of the most important consumer associations in France, and included within a European network of similar initiatives, which compares the environmental efficiency of several consumer goods such as TV sets, home appliances, cars, lights and computers. In this case, the brands, prices and names of manufacturers are mentioned and tables make the comparison very easy. This device is similar to many other comparative market devices proposed by consumer associations or even firms. Its specificity is to sort and evaluate products according to specific environmental criteria (such as energy consumption, and the proportion of the product that can be recycled). Of course, like many shopping tests, it does not provide the consumer with one single solution for shopping, because of the multiplicity of criteria used (energy consumption and environmental impact, convenience, quality and price), but introduces the new criteria surrounding environmental impact and allow the commensuration of products on this basis.

The assumption that the NGOs make is that these new principles of worth may create attractive business opportunities for companies, if they are convinced that consumers attribute a high value (meaning their willingness to buy is high) to the products that fulfil environmental criteria. This strategy seeks precisely to force the market to take on board these criteria, by convincing companies that consumers are asking for them. Therefore, instead of simply educating consumers through information, they provide them with market devices that allow them to categorize and commensurate products on the basis of the environmental criteria they promote. To complement these actions, NGOs also need to convince companies that consumers really are modifying their valuation of products by attaching a lot of importance to environmental criteria. In the next section, I show how their activity to introduce new orders of worth into the market is also combined with other activities aimed at demonstrating that consumers adopted these principles of valuation.<marker>

Highlighting the Shift in Consumers' Valuation of Products

The NGOs appear to have successfully opted to address consumers and provide them with new principles for the valuation of products. They see this as a roundabout way of creating economic incentives for companies to change their practices and to supply products with a lower environmental impact. Greening consumers' choices is thus more of a means than an end. In a sense this strategy seems similar to the one used by consumer organizations in the 1930s in the US (Hilton, 2009) and after the Second World War in European countries (Trumbull, 2006). Product testing was adopted as a strategy to force companies to take into consideration the fact that the safety and quality of products might be a right that consumers could expect. They developed technical expertise by comparing products but also gave consumers all the information needed about how to use these new safety and quality criteria, and where to find the information requested about these new product values (Aldridge, 1994). Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the two strategies. When consumer organizations' strategies addressed consumers, it was mainly to ask for more state regulation. In a sense, they were threatening companies by lobbying the state and suing firms, whereas, in the case I am considering in this paper, SMOs are trying to create business opportunities for companies. Their idea is that these new criteria for consumers could represent an opportunity for companies rather than a threat.

'The fact that the environment, or even some social aspects, might be arguments for buying, new criteria for consumers, was very exciting and interesting for us.' (Manager, WWF, interview 2011)

The market is leveraged for its mediating capacities, where some norms and representations may circulate, through principles of valuation of products, to shape consumers' preferences. As a consequence, NGOs are putting as much effort into disseminating information about the shift in product valuation and consumer preferences as they do into organizing that shift in practice at the consumer level. In a sense, a storytelling strategy is at play: the idea is to convince companies of the shift and to demonstrate that they can benefit from it (Beckert, 2011).

This strategy strongly resembles a marketing strategy (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010) and, as a consequence, SMOs do not deny relying on some of the classic marketing tools such as market surveys and opinion pools. Indeed, they rely heavily on opinion polls and surveys designed to both construct these new consumer expectations and demonstrate that they are rising dramatically:

'Making consumers integrate the environment into their shopping habits, in their buying process, is the core idea, and what do opinion polls show? They show that consumers are asking for more and more information on transparency, on environmental impact, for most of their mass consumption products.' (Manager, WWF France, 2010).

Those opinion polls thus become part of an evidence-based strategy that contributes to the pressure SMOs want to exert on companies. Like the most involved SMOs in France, in partnership with companies, WWF-France refers extensively to changes in the behaviour of French consumers regarding environmental concerns. Quoting two different opinion polls, its website explains that:

'The French are changing their way of life: they reject conspicuous consumption, 68% of them think they are offered too many sophisticated products, which do not correspond to their needs and expectations; 76% say they prefer eco-friendly products, even though they might be more expensive. 34% of European consumers say they frequently buy eco-friendly products (32% in 2007). Despite the financial crisis, they are more and more aware of the damage caused to the environment and adapt their shopping habits accordingly.' (WWF-France website on co-branding partnership)

This information, intended for firms rather than consumers, is disseminated in order to demonstrate the main process of change in consumers' behaviour. In a way, the use of these polls by SMOs both shows and performs the shift in consumers' preferences and valuation principles; the polls make the shift visible and serve to urge firms to change. The results presented in consumer surveys are not totally removed from the SMOs' educational actions and campaigning; these actions are producing a change in the normative context that polls can reveal. This is why, even though SMOs know that these results exaggerate real behaviours, they use them and disseminate them to companies. It must progressively become a story which everybody must have an interest in believing.

But SMOs know that this shift in consumers' preferences and valuation should not be presented only in a fiction, which is why they try to demonstrate consumers' genuine involvement in changing practices, that highlights their new concerns and the way they evaluate the supply. To this end, they organize various opportunities for consumers to commit to eco-friendly practices by signing virtual contracts. Since large numbers of people agree to commit, the SMOs use this to show that most consumers want eco-friendly products. Of course, nothing proves that these people have really changed their habits, but the action efficiently demonstrates the huge number of people who claim to be ready to buy differently. In the 2000s, the FNH – whose campaigns and actions are

mostly explicitly dedicated to 'changing individual behaviours' – decided to give consumers the opportunity to commit to eco-friendly behaviours through ordinary, everyday consumption habits. The NGO launched a large campaign in 2005, called 'Challenge for the Earth', to propose that individuals register on a dedicated website if they agreed to make these commitments. Of course the NGO had no possibility of checking whether the individuals who committed really did what they undertook to do, but that was not the point. The main goal of the campaign was to highlight the large number of people (over 900,000 in 2011) who signed up, as evidence of the potential for change in consumption practices.

> *'At first, we weren't talking about consumption; we were campaigning to protect marine ecosystems. But we needed to connect these issues with daily concerns, because we want to increase the public's awareness of these concerns, to make people understand the functioning of the biosphere and take charge of their own responsibility, their own part of the solution, I mean the individual part of the solution. […] Then in 2005 we organized the 'Earth Challenge' which was a large campaign that included some actions on consumption, like avoiding disposable products. We identified small commitments that individuals could make, like showering instead of taking a bath, or consuming sustainable products, like in-season fruit and vegetables. We very quickly got a lot of people who committed on the website, 500,000 people within a year, it went even further than what we'd expected and hoped for' (CEO of the FNH, interview 2009).*

The FNE prefers to use its network of small local groups to organize various actions throughout France and thus to demonstrate the strong mobilization of ordinary citizens with regard to environmental concerns:

> *'Last year we organized more than sixty actions in different cities in France. For a year we asked people to reduce the quantity of waste they were producing, by weighing it. More than 1000 households agreed to participate in the action. And we realized that they were able to reduce their amount of waste by 80%. This is very tangible. And the fact is, people explained that they changed their buying habits to select products that would produce the least waste. It was a great success.' (Manager, FNE, interview 2009)*

The local media are echoing many of these kinds of actions, which are always presented as new aspirations of the citizen-consumer from the late 2000s. More generally, all three organizations rely heavily on the media to shape and spread the normative context. They also regularly publish results of opinion surveys that disclose such a shift. This appears to form a virtuous circle in which SMOs act as the trigger able to create a representation of consumers' expectations that ends up becoming the norm.

> *'OK today maybe only a few people are concerned, but by changing our consumption habits, it may become a trend. We have good reason to consider that what today are practices of a happy few from the well-informed cultural bourgeoisie, who act in an environmentally friendly manner, may become a social norm, and this is our goal.' (Manager, FNE, interview 2009)*

The SMOs also organize special events to present evidence of these real shifts in practices to companies. For example, the WWF frequently organizes meetings at which it invites companies to listen to different presentations by experts, academics, opinion survey companies, and companies that have developed an eco-friendly supply. The aim is to demonstrate that an increasing proportion of the population is environmentally concerned, and to specify the nature of its expectations: low-packaged products, local and seasonal food, non-GM fed meat and so on. Most of the new valuation principles with which social movements have shaped the market are gradually

taken for granted by the different actors observing the consumer society (researchers, media, opinion survey companies) as attesting to real shifts, this process increasing the business opportunities these shifts represent for companies.

Conclusion

The literature has widely addressed the variety of strategies used by SMOs to make companies change their practices. Some of these strategies are mediated by the market, as SMOs rely on growing consumer awareness of some of the concerns underpinning their claims in order to put pressure on companies. But the literature has so far failed to address the concrete mechanisms trough which the market could mediate these claims. It has also failed to analyze the specificity of some strategies which are not as disruptive as calls for boycotts, but that on the contrary leverage the market by using most of its own mechanisms, for instance those pertaining to valuation.

This paper sought to analyse a specific strategy developed not only by certain environmental NGOs, but also by small groups from the critical consumption movement in France, that introduced new orders of worth into the market and equipped consumers to use them to evaluate products. The economic sociology of valuation provides a framework within which to analyse this strategy in depth, so as to highlight the underlying assumptions. This literature has sharply focused on the role of valuation activities developed by market actors, both from the supply and the demand sides, in order to coordinate economic exchange. These valuation processes are based on the existence of different principles of worth incorporated into specific market devices that producers and other market actors develop and that equip consumers to make their choices. Apart from isolated work assessing the frontier of the market (Zelizer, 2011), this economic sociology literature usually overlooks the role of SMOs in shaping the market.

In the strategy I set out to assess, SMOs leverage the market by introducing new criteria of worth such as proximity, low packaging, local production, seasonality, and non GM-fed that are designed to equip the different valuation activities of consumers, such as identification, categorization, or commensuration. They disseminate these criteria through their regular educative activities, but also through market devices which they design to be used directly by consumers while shopping. Under certain circumstances, they may also use disruptive strategies, such as subvertising, but still using market devices – in this case advertising. They also rely on market surveys and opinion polls to demonstrate that the market is ready for the use of such criteria. But they also organize a certain commitment by consumers to changing their practices, which can provide evidence of consumers' willingness to adopt these principles of worth. As is often the case with changes in consumption trends and habits or with market shifts, the media are largely echoing the majority of these new criteria by producing their own evidence about the change in consumers' choices. The SMOs thus make the assumption that these changes, new trends, grounded in the existence of new criteria for consumer choices, represent valuable business opportunities for companies, especially in consumer markets where the demand is saturated and companies are in search of new market niches.

The market mediation strategy that I have described is designed to use the force of the market by creating opportunities that will play on the differentiation and imitation mechanisms in the market. Such mechanisms have been highlighted by different strands of the literature. Academics in marketing and consumer culture have extensively studied the way critical consumption is ultimately endogenized by the market (Holt, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Arnould and Thomson, 2005). The neo-institutionalist literature (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and the economic sociology literature (White, 1981), have shown that the market is a social form within

which actors tend to imitate other actors, thus favouring the spread of models and norms. SMOs may of course count on companies' ability to imitate one another and thus to make the 'eco-friendliness' valuation of products a real norm in the market (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2012).

It was beyond the scope of this paper to assess the effects of such strategies on companies. However, it might not be too difficult to find empirical evidence of their potential effectiveness. Several new marketing strategies have emerged in recent years among manufacturing and retailing companies that exactly match some of the SMOs' prescriptions. To mention just a few examples in France: an industrial bread manufacturer turned the 'palm oil free' label into a marketing argument for one of its products; a retailing company introduced new labelling for its own brand of food products made with non-GM-fed animals; several retailing companies have dedicated specific shelves to local food in their fruit and vegetable department, with the mention that the fruit and vegetables come from an area less than 30 km away from the shop; an international washing powder brand is commercializing a product that may be used with low-temperature programmes. Of course, none of these initiatives are fortuitous, but neither do they stem from pressure exerted by the environmental movement to force companies to adopt such strategies. They are far more likely related to the business opportunities that companies have identified in what they probably consider a valuable shift in consumers' preferences. Indeed, in the specific context of the consumer market, any insight into new preferences is of great value to companies. The marketing work performed by environmental SMOs in constructing consumers' valuation can therefore be capitalized on by companies to supply differentiated products on this basis.

Clearly, this type of strategy is not within the reach of any social movement; it is rather unsurprising that it has been pursued by movements that had already developed other market mediated strategies. More precisely, the 'valuation strategy' stems from a certain dissatisfaction with labelling schemes or usual 'boycott and buycott' strategies which tend to reduce the potential for change in company practices to those being directly targeted, leaving the bulk of the industry unchanged. As a result, such strategies are better used by social movements whose claims concern economic activity as a whole. They are probably more appropriate for organizations which are not too radical and believe in the market's potential as an arena for social change. Radical groups tend to prefer strategies which play on the reflexivity and feelings of guilt of both companies and consumers, and accuse reformist SMOs of instrumentalizing consumers' choices and comforting them in their sovereignty as consumers. Radical critical consumption groups also accuse these reformist NGOs of encouraging consumption patterns instead of promoting a general degrowth of both production and consumption. In a nutshell, using market mediated strategies first requires organizations to believe in the force of the market. In this way, SMOs contribute to the extension of the market and to its capacity to regularly negotiate both values and value: both norms and economic valuation.

This study also offers a contribution to the analysis of the mediated effects of collective action. Different studies have highlighted the search for mediated effects in collective action both in the political arena (Amenta et al., 1992) and the market arena (King, 2008). Based on my study, I would argue that the main feature of a mediation strategy is its deliberate leveraging of the mechanisms at the core of the targeted arena, be it the political arena or the market arena: congressmen's search for constituency in Amenta et al.'s research; companies' search for reputational status in King's work; and in the case that I studied, companies' search for increased market shares. The reason why SMOs may seek to use such strategies is because they allow them to rely on the power of the competitive mechanisms at play in the arena considered. I would conclude that the competition between actors in an arena may be considered by SMOs as one of the most powerful levers for activists to achieve social change.

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