



HAL
open science

Review of "Thibault Le Texier, La main visible des marchés: Une histoire critique du marketing (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2022), pp. 656"

Kevin Mellet

► **To cite this version:**

Kevin Mellet. Review of "Thibault Le Texier, La main visible des marchés: Une histoire critique du marketing (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2022), pp. 656". Journal of the History of Economic Thought, 2023, pp.1-3. 10.1017/S1053837222000396 . hal-03968972

HAL Id: hal-03968972

<https://hal.science/hal-03968972>

Submitted on 2 Feb 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Kevin Mellet
Sciences Po - CSO

Thibault Le Texier, *La main visible des marchés: Une histoire critique du marketing* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2022), pp. 656, €26 (paperback). ISBN: 9782707299249.

In *La main visible des marchés* (The visible hand of markets), Thibault Le Texier develops, over more than 600 pages and in twenty-six chapters, a critical history of marketing. This story is centered on what the author, an associate researcher to the Centre Européen de Sociologie et de Science Politique de la Sorbonne (CESSP), calls “marketing rationality,” namely a “coherent system of prescriptive knowledge” (p. 13) whose genesis, specific logic, and diffusion he studies. The author chooses to center his story on the United States, and on the way in which this knowledge has been codified, structured, and prescribed there, mainly in scholarly textbooks.

The first three chapters deal with the genesis of this marketing rationality. In the nineteenth century, “domestic marketing” manuals included recommendations addressed to housewives to orient themselves within a commercial offer that was diversifying but whose quality was uncertain. At the turn of the century, “agricultural marketing” manuals were aimed at sellers of agricultural and livestock products, who had to find ways to sell their surpluses and supply markets made accessible by agriculture, and road and rail infrastructure. Knowledge from agricultural marketing was then systematized, formalized, and applied to all market goods and services, leading to the establishment of “modern marketing.” According to the author, “since the 1920s, the marketing rationality has extended its hold, but it has evolved little” (p. 71).

The following chapters abandon a chronological structure to adopt a thematic division. First, the author shows how marketing rationality leads to rethinking about consumers (chapters 4 to 7), products (chapters 8 to 12), and the many channels that connect them (chapters 13 to 19). Marketing rationality is what puts in tune the multiple mediations aimed at bringing together consumer demand and producer supply as markets multiply and expand. The author then looks at how marketing rationality has been invested with an expansionist mission by some of its theorists. Attempts to implement marketing in fields as diverse as politics, non-profit organizations, or “self” marketing are examined in turn (chapters 20 to 22).

Throughout these pages, two major arguments emerge. The first is that the marketing rationality has succeeded in animating, connecting, streamlining, and harmonizing a vast set of products, channels, and consumers, to the point that these, put together, form a system. By “marketing system,” Le Texier means “the general arrangement of society with a view to ensuring an abundant flow of goods between distant producers and consumers” (p. 418). In this system, the strength of marketing rationality rests less on its ability to guide consumer choices, or even to manipulate them, than on giving supply players (i.e., producers and traders) the means to act on the market without seeming to. The “ruse” of marketing is to promote the figure of the consumer-king or -queen, to bend to their free choice and whims to better attract them. For the author, “marketing is a subordinate power, a servant power: it achieves its full effectiveness when it puts itself—or seems to put itself—at the service of subjects” (p. 103). The author's second thesis is that marketing rationality struggles to impose

itself outside its original domain, that of trade in goods and services. For Le Texier, marketing rationality travels badly, differing in this from managerial rationality, which he has studied for his PhD dissertation (Le Texier 2011): “Throughout the 20th century, marketing theorists worked together to universalize the model of company by applying their concepts in all directions, like management theorists but with less success” (p. 486). If the author struggles to explain why marketing rationality fails in its expansionist enterprise, he sees there the proof that critical approaches to marketing are on the wrong track: “A critical literature has flourished on the alarmed denunciation of the empire of the market: everything would be for sale, from love to happiness, from organs to diplomas. In fact, this is not the case” (p. 462).

The main concept of the book is that of “rationality.” With his focus on textbooks and prescriptive knowledge, Le Texier examines what, following Max Weber, we would call “formal rationalization,” namely the systematic elaboration of knowledge that participates in the constitution and development of a domain. Once this movement of formal rationalization has been accomplished (around 1920, according to the author), the subject that occupies most of the book is the diffusion of this rationality in different economic and social spheres. On these two axes of the constitution and dissemination of a formal rationality, the author's analysis nevertheless has its limits.

First, if we stick to formal rationality alone, one can regret that the author does not offer a detailed presentation of it in the book. The methodological appendix (pp. 631–640) informs us about the approach followed by the author. Le Texier has produced a corpus of approximately 20,000 texts from the query “marketing” in the title, table of contents, or keywords of books referenced by the Library of Congress. But Le Texier does not give a systematic presentation of this corpus. He does not explain his strategy for analyzing this vast corpus, and neither does he offer a guide allowing his specific contribution to be clearly differentiated from academic work on marketing that he also builds upon. The context of the development of this prescriptive knowledge, the audiences for which they were intended but also their material form, are not presented in the book.

Second, prescriptive books are not a self-sufficient source for describing the dynamics of diffusion of knowledge, which mobilizes a wide variety of actors, institutions, and scales, and are likely to come up against competing rationalization processes. These processes of transformation and social recomposition, which in the Weberian approach fall under material rationalization, are generally absent from the book. Admittedly, the author shows that the knowledge of marketing, stabilized and made consistent, comes to materially equip market exchanges. But the marketing rationality seems to impose itself, and to float above the commercial exchanges that it tends to streamline, by harmoniously aligning channels, products, and consumers. It is unfortunate that the author does not focus more systematically on formal rationality compared with other historical approaches to marketing, whether it is studied through the lense of its spokespersons, such as trade associations (Chessel 1998) or the trade press (Cochoy 2014), the structure of power in productive companies (Fligstein 1990), or social movements (Cohen 2003; Johnson 2019).

Third, the project appears unconvincing when the author is concerned with passing severe judgments on the social sciences of marketing. Le Texier abruptly considers that “the social sciences have abandoned this object” (p. 160). Works in history are presented as descriptive, precise, but specialized, and “little careful to articulate the different facets of marketing” (p. 636). Faced with so-called critical approaches, which denounce the manipulations of marketing and advertising, and the extension of the field of commodification, Le Texier offers

a plea in favor of marketing, unfairly caricatured, according to him. But the author, himself a sociologist, directs his harshest criticisms at comprehensive approaches in economic sociology, which “do nothing but observe the work of marketing and repeat what its specialists have been saying for a century” (p. 640).

The sociology of marketing is, on the contrary, very dynamic, and mobilizes researchers from different traditions and approaches (see, for example, Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier 2013; Zwick and Cayla 2011; Araujo, Finch, and Kjellberg 2010; Geiger et al. 2014). Far from "repeating" what marketing professors say, these works strive to identify, qualify, and historicize all the efforts undertaken by marketing professionals to define and organize the market in their own way—without being limited to what Le Texier calls “marketing rationality” but by integrating devices, organizations, ways of doing things, and strategies. These frameworks are often incomplete or flawed, and they come up against other frameworks, whether they emanate from the public authorities and the law, from consumers and their representatives, or from institutions and organizations that, in one way or another, apprehend the market as a political instrument. Marketing professionals are not the only ones to make the market, hence the interest of studying them in their companies and in the market and non-market spaces that they intend to organize and govern.

Kevin Mellet
Sciences Po, CSO

<REF>REFERENCES<REF>

Araujo, Luis, John Finch, and Hans Kjellberg, eds. 2010. *Reconnecting Marketing to Markets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chessel, Marie-Emmanuelle. 1998. *La publicité: Naissance d'une profession (1900–1940)*. Paris: CNRS.

Cochoy, Franck. 2014. *Aux origines du libre-service. Progressive Grocer (1922–1959)*. Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau.

Cochoy, Franck, and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier. 2013. “The Sociology of Market Work.” *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter* 15 (1): 4–11.

Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Fligstein, Neil. 1990. *The Transformation of Corporate Control*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Geiger, Susi, Debbie Harrison, Hans Kjellberg, and Alexandre Mallard, eds. 2014. *Concerned Markets: Economic Ordering for Multiple Values*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Johnson, David K. 2019. *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Le Texier, Thibault. 2011. “La rationalité managériale: de l'administrations domestique à la gouvernance.” PhD diss., University of Nice.

Zwick, Detlev, and Julien Cayla, eds. 2011. *Inside Marketing: Practices, Ideologies, Devices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

