

Interview with Geneviève Teil

Luxury goods and the social sciences

Geneviève Teil, is a sociology professor at the INRA, and specialises in the marketing of high quality products, consumer taste and habits. She has covered the question of luxury, high-end products extensively in conferences and publications. She has written a study of the marketing of high quality wines *De la coupe aux lèvres - Pratiques de la perception et mise en marché des vins de qualité* (Editions Octarès, Collection Applications de l'anthropologie, Toulouse, 2004) and runs the Mise en Marché think-tank which brings together experts in order to provide pragmatic analysis of the way in which markets function.

O.A : Up until now how have the social sciences dealt with the question of luxury goods and luxury in general?

G.T : In sociology, the question of luxury goods as dealt with in Veblen or Bourdieu, for example is one first and foremost of a taste for luxury as it is often seen as such, a taste for social elitism.

O.A : What are the difficulties caused by this perception in sociology of luxury being the taste of the elite?

G.T : Luxury products are closely linked to the consumer habits of an elite. Luxury goods are the consumer goods of the elite who show their difference in terms of taste ; and are as such the movement behind the social building of taste. They are class-specific as they are expensive and as such are reserved for those who have the economic means to buy them.

The social elite do not consume only luxury

goods and luxury goods are not consumed only by the social elite. The definition of luxury products thus includes only those luxury products which are consumed by the social elite. This definition throws up two main problems.

If it does in fact correspond quite well to the definition of these products by those who do not buy them, it does not correspond to the that of central actors such as the actual clients themselves who appreciate these products, or the producers for whom they are very high quality products. So the first inconvenience is that it agrees with those who are the least concerned with or aware of the products. The second problem involves taking away all substantial quality from the luxury product to the extent that it becomes a mere sign. The considerable work that went in to manufacturing the product is reduced to the production of rarity and expensiveness, two characteristics on which manufacturers seem to waste a considerable amount of energy. In addition all of the incertitude of luxury products consumers regarding the quality of the products in question are also *a priori* taken out of the picture.

This definition is suspicious. By taking the point of view of the opponents who denounce the existence of luxury products and by removing all content from the arguments of the pro-luxury camp the definition becomes impossible to verify and gives credence to the opponents.

So as to avoid the difficulties posed by these *a priori* definitions of luxury products, we have attempted to approach the question from another angle by avoiding the presupposition that the products have an intrinsic value, their ability to feed the social differentiation of taste, on the contrary we have tried to figure out how the market actors try to create a particular category of products.

O.A : In that case how should the question of luxury products be approached?

G.T : To take it even further, one must

examine the question of taste since sociology has begun to examine that of luxury products, and as such the theories of taste. The term taste has many meanings. It is thus necessary to be very precise as to what we mean each time.

In the humanities, a person or group's taste designates a preference for certain things, in other words the way in which they classify objects. This capacity to classify objects according to a certain hierarchy is given to be the preserve of « actors » : they can make « value judgements ». As it is the preserve of « actors », the phenomenon is dealt with by the disciplines which deal with phenomena of « actors », the humanities in general and more particularly psychology and sociology.

Sociology brought these object hierarchies and social hierarchies together to produce explanations on how objects participate in social orders. Imitation and distinction are two major social mechanisms which can explain, on the one hand, the constitution of preferences as the preserve of a certain class of people and on the other, the order of these classes.

However, taste is not merely a social phenomenon of imitation or distinction where people's taste is totally determined by that of others. This presupposes that they merely like what other socially superior « actors » often seen as opinion leaders are telling them to like. People's preference depends also on their own individual sensory perception which is totally independent from any social prescription.

So, sociology then proposed the theory of incorporation, habituation and in particular familiarisation – one likes what one already knows – mechanisms. Social psychology went more for conditioning mechanisms – one gets to like what others like. In both cases these mechanisms try to explain how socially constructed preferences – as they are linked to social status – are doubled by incorporation mechanisms which transform social preferences into sensory preferences. This is why in sociology the sensory preferences of « actors » are never more than an

illusion not to be taken seriously as they are but the result of the incorporation of socially constructed preferences.

Even if the « actors » say they like luxury products this love for luxury products is only an illusion, as the luxury object is just a pretext which enables the social mechanisms of imitation and distinction to function. To use Bourdieu's terms, objects objectify social relations, they are sensory objective illusions. However, this “objectification” presupposes a very strong mechanism of incorporation which ensures the transformation of social determinations into sensory determinations. Sociology presupposes incorporating mechanisms but is not really worried about understanding how they work or if they are the only ones. For this one must turn to psychology or the physiology of taste.

O.A : Have psychology and physiology managed to present an explanation for the workings of incorporation?

G.T : In both disciplines, the mechanisms of incorporation, conditioning or habit-forming all rely on the same hypothesis in which there are two distinct sensorial registers in the way reality is grasped: on the one hand a register of perception of the variety of distinct, disordered, sensorial characteristics, sugar and salt, red and yellow, spicy, rough etc. ; on the other, hedonism or the perception of pleasure, which would be a sensorial aid to classifying them. The first is the register of description for the world with which one gains knowledge of what constitutes the world. The second is a register of evaluation with which people make their value-based judgements about the world and which is influenced by conditioning and habit. The registers are considered to be superimposed : the non-hierarchical description register informs the hedonism register which in turn gives the former value. But as the hedonist register is sensitive to unconscious influences, and in particular social influences, the value thus

attributed to things is social. According to research, this is why actors' evaluations never escape social influences and therefore imitation and distinction, even if the actors themselves are not aware of the fact. In as much as taste can never escape the social, all consumption taken as the sign of taste is therefore socially produced and repeated independent of its own characteristics. This applies particularly to luxury tastes and therefore the consumption of luxury goods are interpreted as the result of social differentiation mechanisms. In addition, in no way can we trust actors to understand the love of luxury items and their economy as preferences are illusory.

O.A. This hypothesis is quite common. Has it been empirically verified?

G.T : Physiology and psychology use the fact that these perceptions are situated in separate but co-ordinated points of the brain to excuse this difference in nature. Personally in the different experiments I've carried out, I have never observed a systematic link between registers which enable classification and registers which enable description in the comments people made about the products they had to test. When we have products tested/commented on, people can classify them in relation to one another, evaluate them as a whole or even describe them, which often means listing the differences between products. The hidden link supposed by physiology is quite rare (which doesn't mean it doesn't exist). In addition when the link does exist it is troublesome : people often wonder from which point of view they should be judging the product. Should they rely on their own opinion, on what everyone else thinks or on what the object purports to do ? They always wonder if they should have more information, if they've grasped everything etc.

In addition Rozin, a social psychologist, worked on trying to outline incorporation mechanisms, to find out if familiarisation and conditioning are the only ones, how

effective they are etc. He came to the same conclusion : familiarisation does not function well. Children do not have the same taste as their parents, getting used to something does not reproduce taste, positive reaction from parents does not make a product desirable. But then the entire mechanism starts to crack. And if social mechanisms are not effective we can go back to thinking that sensory perception is not only a social illusion and that the actors participate in their preferences or that they can at least be a source of information.

In addition, if we ask actors to give their preferences, to link them to the characteristics of products, we realise that the central hypotheses of the physiology of taste regarding the presence and articulation of hedonistic and non-hedonistic sensory signs are rarely observed. Actors don't always have preferences, don't always know what they like and only rarely have the stability they are thought to have. In particular, the hypothesis of the link between descriptive and evaluative perception seems to necessitate considerable perception skills, for example for sommeliers who sit on tasting juries. In the main, this link does not occur or not to any level of stability and remains a problem for actors when it is not an issue limited to their activity like marketing.

O.A : So what of the description register and the register for evaluation and judgement?

G.T : It would appear that they are two difference means of grasping sensory phenomena. Description is an analytical technique for the non-hierarchical differentiation of objects. It multiplies and sorts good points in horizontal classifications to use an economic term. Evaluation is a sorting technique that needs an external point of reference in order to produce a measure, distance or order between two points. For example, to sort three smells one needs – at least – one external point to these three smells, a smell that is different from the

other three that will be taken as a reference to gauge the level of resemblance between it and the three others. The more accurate a description is the easier it is to see a difference between similar objects. The more powerful an evaluation, the easier it is to sort heterogeneous objects. We can observe these two qualification operations in the comments made by people about things. However they are not always both present and sometimes can be intricately entwined and mutually supportive.

So by taking an interest in description techniques, in judgement, that is to say in what people say about things, we can hope to reach a new level of interpretation of the phenomena linked to taste and as a result to luxury products.

However, one must take into account the activity of all of the professional experts and opinion makers such as critics, producers, artists or even researchers. All of the actors, including those in charge of giving a non-sociological definition to the value of perception such as researchers, musicologists, wine experts, semiologists etc., who were reduced to the status of mere elements of the mechanism of the « sociologisation » of taste.

Regarding luxury goods, the producers can now be seen as people attempting to produce high quality goods, whether it be cars or art. The intention they claim no longer needs to be judged a priori by the researcher as being true or false, but as an uncertain desire which necessitates an activity that can always be perfected. In the same way the choices made by the clients can no longer be dismissed off-hand as illusory, but must be questioned.

O.A : What other generic definition can be given to luxury goods?

G.T : From a research point of view we propose to leave aside the hypotheses on taste and preferences to go back to study the way in which actors know what they like, what is beautiful, but also the way in which they question themselves and pro-

duce their preferences and the very minute nuances in reference (style, my taste, other people's taste) that they bring to play when they make judgements about products. However, if the question of taste appears more problematic than a taste for luxury and as such the social elite becomes just as uncertain.

As a result, taken from this point of view, luxury is not a subject which can be easily outlined by the researcher, it is a result whose delimitation depends on the effectiveness of the action of the actors.

I centred my research exclusively on retail luxury goods. These observations bring to light a highly targeted activity which leads to a pragmatic delimitation based on the activity of people within the luxury goods domain and which makes it totally different from that of other commercial products.

The marketing of luxury goods brings together a large number of actions and commercial procedures which have in common the attempt to create a link between the consumer and the product based on the recognition of the excellence of the products. The clients of luxury products are notably those who recognise this excellence and make it a criteria of purchase but also « left-field » buyers who pick and choose, and buy the products independently of the excellence they are purported to contain according to their producers. This movement in view point leads to a change in the definition of luxury goods : they are products whose producers sell by trying to have their excellence recognised. This delimitation by activity which differentiates them avoids inconveniences such as definitions based on objects – excellent products themselves, products using high quality components etc. – and definitions by the end-users – products bought by actors in a quest for social distinction or motivated by imitative strategies, etc.

However this new delimitation is not without links to these other definitions. The action carried out to make this sector exist depends on a demonstration of excellence

by the products (never a given to start with, which makes all the difference with the definitions based on objects above), and is a question of not looking to configure a particular demand. This makes it impossible to outline luxury goods buyers through specific taste, needs, desires for particular qualities in products. They are often described as buyers whose purchasing behaviour is not product-based. However, our point of view shows that the purchasing behaviour is not the result of the inherent characteristics of the actors ! It is the result of the lack of understanding of the demand in marketing luxury goods.

O.A : How should we take the constant references of the luxury goods actors most notably the producers to quality (materials, rarity, tradition, authenticity, craftsmanship)?

G.T : In sociological terms the luxury product is a product that confers a certain social distinction. Thus the definition of a luxury product has nothing to do with the inherent qualities of the product itself. But it may seem strange to leave aside the question of quality or to reduce it to an illusion, especially when, it motivates the activity of the producers to such an extent, as is the case with luxury products. We prefer to consider the quality of luxury products not as an illusion, even an objectified one, but as a goal. Part of the success of luxury products depends on the capacity of the producers to gain recognition for this goal, something they do so with an astonishing ingenuity through the use of the media and other marketing tools.

O.A : Is it enough to produce a high-quality object to gain the title of luxury item?

G.T : There are a number of products which can pretend to this level of quality, such as wine, cheese, the made to measure,... cars. Not all are luxury goods. In each case, the products claim high quality but the way in which their producers make

this known is different.

Regarding the high-quality wines we studied, the producers tend to validate their claim by using certain criteria. However, critics do not agree on the subject of wines, neither from a sensory point of view nor from the point of view of accepted quality criteria. As a result the work of the critic depends on an intense activity of comparisons and judgement of wines in which they multiply their references: their own taste, the intrinsic quality of the product, the style of the producer, the appellations etc. We have not found a trace of such comparisons for luxury products, comparisons which can seem unusual; in addition, journalists seem more like informers describing the quality of the product rather than judges.

The difference between high-quality products and luxury products can perhaps be found in the notion of excellence which presupposes incomparable quality and which as such cannot be compared. Luxury products seem to manage to supply the media who do their press with products and the style with which the product should be judged while in the case of wine, the work of judging the quality goes way beyond recognising a style within an "appellation" tasting committee.

However inside each of the categories of products above there are groups of particular products (the first grands crus classés from Bordeaux, Romanée Conti, Australian Grange, Vega Sicilia, etc. For wines for example, Rolls Royce, Ferrari, Bentley, etc. for cars), which have almost universal reputations of high quality and do not need critics in order to have the quality of their products recognised.

OA : So you locate yourself at a midpoint between the two definitions without rejecting either definitively?

G.T : The fact of moving a viewpoint in research as we do here enables us to make an important point. The sociological definition of luxury goods as conspicuous

consumption or linked to social status looks like the same denunciation of this consumption by the non-luxury-goods consumers. Defining luxury products by quality and excellence is just taking up the intention of the producers or interpretation by most consumers. Whether we accept either one of these definitions we must consider the efforts made by the opponents or the partisans as totally effective, which is denied by the persistence of both, or else consider a priori that one is true and the other false. But then what principle of classification of the different activities of the actors which will enable us to decide?

O.A : So what of the sociological schools of thought from Veblen to Bourdieu which made luxury products one of the corner-stones of the theory of distinction?

G.T : Like I just said, we often find definitions of luxury products in the writings of the opponents of luxury. But also strangely from the actors who market the products. As is often the case, sociological theories are quickly taken on board by the actors and used by them to understand, explain and motivate their actions. This is very much the case here.

Indeed, contrary to the sociologists, producers of luxury products take their high quality goals very seriously and adjust their actions in accordance. Nevertheless a great number of clients do not buy – or seem not to buy – luxury products for their excellent quality. In order to understand this gap, actors resort to sociological or psychological theories to supply motivation to buyers which isn't linked to the quality of the products.

O.A : Does the theme of luxury goods fall under the category of sociology, philosophy or anthropology? Does a more apt science exist to deal with luxury products taking into account the fact that luxury goods themselves are extremely diverse?

G.T : To approach the question from the

point of view of the discipline brings us back to making hypotheses on the nature of the phenomenon we are observing. If, as we have tried to do, we avoid presuppositions on the nature of the phenomena under observation to enable a better view of the activities of the actors who are trying to confer certain particularities on them, the question of the luxury product, and more generally the question of taste bypasses this categorising by discipline in favour of the observation of collective actions which end up creating a particular category of product, the luxury product..

O.A : Is it possible to limit the question of luxury to the simple fact of taste? Does the luxury object not exist only through the mediations of taste?

G.T : Luxury in general is often defined by a taste for so-called luxury products which in turn are defined as being elitist, if one leans sociologically; very expensive if one leans economically; of very high quality if one is a technologist. These definitions oppose three explanations of the satisfaction produced by luxury products. For the first it is the inherent characteristics of the product that produce its quality and as such the satisfaction of the end-user; for the second and third it is the capacity to classify these products by cost or image. We are not saying that either of these definitions is true or false but there are particular cases of motivation or interpretation of actors whose prior experience of these products or theories enable them to confirm or deny. From our perspective, that of actual marketing, the question of luxury goes beyond that of taste and in fact becomes a question of the production of satisfaction. If we analyse the way in which the producers of luxury products try to engender satisfaction with their product we notice that their common goal of excellent quality leads them to use the same marketing techniques and advertising ploys.

O.A : Is there not therefore a risk involved

in linking high quality with the subjectivity of taste for objects which are aiming for a more universal qualification?

G.T : Taste is not intrinsically subjective. In this case, sociology is making a very strong hypothesis. From our point of view the objective or subjective character depends on the objective or subjective format the actors wish to confer. Some wish to have taste which is independent from their own characteristics as a “taster”, others think this is impossible, it depends! Practice may try to make taste as dependent as possible or as independent as possible from the “taster”. In this case they will often say that taste is subjective or objective. But this is a result of their action, not a property of the nature of taste.

O.A : Is the quality of luxury products an objective property or an identity issue? How can this qualification by the producers be then shared by the buyers?

G.T : From the point of view of our theory, neither property of the object, nor an identity issue for the subject of course. However, all of the methods used for the actual marketing of a vast collection of luxury products try to confer on these products a level of quality which is independent of their end-users, and one that they themselves refer to as objective. But it is not intrinsically objective, it becomes objective by the specific work carried out to publicise the judgements on their quality.

O.A : What are the procedures or activities used by the producers to gain recognition for the quality of their luxury products – or to simply sell their products depending on the question you want to ask ? What role does the media play in this process? How is the reputation of a product built?

G.T : The procedures are refined and complex. They aim to facilitate the aggregation of recognition of the intrinsic quality of products and as such independent of par-

ticular “tastes”, while at the same time trying to avoid opposition by referring them back to the multitude of particular tastes.

The media is used extensively as it is equipped to produce “news” on the products to a multitude of readers with little differentiation. The format of these tools is thus particularly well adapted for the process of marketing luxury products.

O.A : What are the specifics of French luxury products?

G.T : Regarding the link between France and luxury products, it appears that marketing in this area is a French “savoir faire” which is not found in the US for example, and which is indeed quite rare in France itself. But such a statement needs to be verified.