

BECOMING ECONOMIC:  
A POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF CAR PURCHASES

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## Abstract

The point of this dissertation is to revisit the most ambiguous and perhaps most controversial aspect of Karl Polanyi's *embeddedness* thesis, namely the implication that socially disembedded economic action (i.e. action guided by a purely calculative disposition, ontologically separate from considerations of sociality) is "always embedded" (Block, 2003: 294) nonetheless. I aim, that is, to trouble and interrogate what it means to say that economic action is either embedded or disembedded. Yet what follows is less a re-evaluation of these ideas than a 'reboot,' given that Polanyi is rarely mentioned herein – less still Mark Granovetter, embeddedness' more recent champion. I call instead upon an altogether different set of protagonists: Daniel Miller and Michel Callon, who in 2002 and -5 squared off in a fruitful debate on the nature of economy. The analysis here adopts their terminology – entanglement versus disentanglement – as well as Miller's ethnographic sensibility, specifically of car purchases.

Via semi-structured interviews with car buyers ( $N=39$ ), I have sought to ascertain the determinants of the car-buying calculus and in doing so, to lay bare the socio-technical dynamics of automobile transactions. Putatively disentangled decision-making and -taking is entangled, I argue, with *market/power*, a neo-Foucauldian neologism emphasizing ways by which the buyer's sense of

inferiority acts a focal point of market experience and subjectivity. Becoming economic in the context of an automobile acquisition (or any other major life purchase for that matter) is hence less a matter of optimally formatting one's calculative competencies than of reasonably justifying one's inferiority; of learning, that is, the crucial injunction to stop calculating. Another way of putting it, the market asymmetry that counts most is not the one between the buyer and seller, but rather the buyer and herself.

## **Acknowledgements**

Developing this argument has proven an immeasurably rewarding experience, both in terms of the analytical and imaginative energies expended. This project was truly a character-building exercise for me, yet it also represents the fortuitous culmination of intellectual experiences and relationships stretching back, it seems hard to believe, half my life! So for my final act of composition as a university student, I would like to give thanks to those who have shaped me into the angular thinker (I would like to think) that I am.

At King's College and the University of Western Ontario in London (both of which have officially changed names since my time there as an undergrad), I was blessed to learn from Lesley Harman, Bernie Hammond, Madeleine Lennon, Kathryn Kopinak and Tom Murphy, my first true mentor. At York University, I had the fortune to study and work with arguably Canada's deepest, most diverse and most creative sociology faculty. I am indebted in particular to Alan Blum, Alan Simmons, Michael Lanphier, Anthony Richmond, Kathy Bischooping, Stephen Longstaff and John O'Neill. Humber College in Toronto has also figured prominently in intellectual upbringing, which was – and still is – where I learned how to teach. From there I want to thank Clive Cockerton, as well as colleagues like the late Ian Baird, Jason Galea, Danita Kagan and Suzanne Senay.



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Every York sociology grad student needs to acknowledge the contribution of Audrey Tokiwa who – and everyone who knows her will agree – is the heart and soul of the sociology graduate program, and whose maniacal laugh can be heard seemingly anywhere on the second floor of Vari Hall! I also want to mention Audrey's predecessor, the late Ursula Krug, who at a crucial point convinced me not to drop out of the master's program.

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telling and compelling me to find better, simpler yet richer ways to express myself.

I cannot say enough about the influence of Peter Landstreet, my long-time supervisor, mentor and, most importantly, champion when I had none. Peter's passion for sociological concepts helped me see the beauty of conceptual rigour at a time when all I wanted to do was make long (and perhaps baffling) leaps of conceptual logic. It was Peter who instilled in me an appreciation for clarity of writing and lecturing, and it was Peter's pedagogical example that allowed me to honour my students by allowing me see them in all their glorious ordinariness. Know always that my appreciation for all you have shown me is immeasurable.

I could write pages and pages of superlatives about the supervision of Brenda Spotton-Visano, but there is no need. Brenda, you have given me a gift which I can sum up in one beautiful and powerful word – *thoughtfulness*. I am obviously not talking about courtesy or kindness to others per se, but something far simpler, yet so simply neglected: the humility to acknowledge the limits of one's own text, and the courage to articulate what may lie beyond. This, you have taught me, is an indispensable aptitude, without which we have no hope of finesse, relevance or confidence as academics. All that remains in its absence is intellectual hubris, a parochialism that inevitably chokes our capacity to love the

ambivalence of 'worlds' we purport to know as specialists. I am clearly in your debt for this lesson, which I can only pledge to pay forward.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my partner Julie, whose patience, support and intellect I treasure. My love and respect go also to our children Lili (who as I was writing this acknowledgement read her first book!), Anaïs and soon-to-be-born third child, my sister Aleks (who first sparked an intellectual curiosity in me), my parents-in-law Francine and Claude, and, it goes without saying, parents Marijana and Vojin.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	viii
Chapter One: A Pandora's Box on Four Wheels.....	1
Chapter Two: Problematics of Method.....	32
Chapter Three: An Entangling Frame: Sociality.....	53
Chapter Four: An Entangling Frame: Femininity.....	81
Chapter Five: From Market Power... ..	114
Chapter Six: ...to Market/Power.....	140
Chapter Seven: Disentangled Enlightenment.....	177
Conclusion: Death of the Dicker?.....	212
Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....	225
Bibliography.....	226

## Chapter One

# A Pandora's Box on Four Wheels

### 'Another Year' of Automobility

AUTOMOBILES ARE AN ADMITTEDLY ATYPICAL OBJECT of sociological analysis.

Because of this I feel it necessary to begin this dissertation, a phenomenology of car purchases, by justifying the relevance of cars. Serendipitously enough, it was my eldest daughter, an avid story listener, who showed me how to do this.

Aged four at the time, she became engrossed in a recording of *La Boîte de Pandore*, the well known Greek myth about humanity's loss of innocence. For those foggy on the story, Pandora is entrusted by the gods with a deceptively ordinary jar which under no circumstances is she to open. Tender voices inside beseech her to set them free and when she does, Pandora unwittingly unleashes evils hitherto unknown. Hatred, pestilence and a host of other hardships infect the world with gleeful recklessness as the narrator croaks with bitter staccato, "*Le monde merveilleux semblait être devenu laid, horrible et méchant*" (The wondrous

world appeared to become ugly, horrible and mean). Listening repeatedly to the story – on the road no less – it dawned on me the narrator could well be describing the car, an altogether larger box engendering similar disenchantment nonetheless.

Seriocomic filmmaker Mike Leigh perfectly captured this predicament in *Another Year* (2010). One of the main characters is Mary (Lesley Manville), a patently spent human being. Once idealistic, vivacious and beautiful, 50-plus-year-old Mary now stumbles through life in self-medicated stupor, suffocating under the weight of loneliness, futility and unfulfillment. In a bid to break from this rut she invests in a used, fire-red hatchback. In the following scene she visits long-time friend and colleague Gerri and her husband, Tom. Mary enters their house with great fanfare and a broad smile, pleasantly surprised to find their son Joe in attendance, whose past flirtatiousness Mary sees as a good romantic omen. Her disposition sours, however, when Joe introduces his new girlfriend, Katie. Mary stands stunned by the entrance of the kitchen.

GERRI: How was your journey?

MARY: It was alright.

GERRI: Good.

MARY: Oh no, it wasn't actually.

TOM: You didn't get lost again, did you?

MARY: Oh no. The journey was alright, it's the car.

TOM & GERRI: Is it OK? What happened?

MARY: It wouldn't start.

TOM: Oh no!

MARY: Yeah, and it got broken into last night. [GERRI, TOM, JOE and KATIE wince in sympathy.]

JOE: Oh sorry to hear that.

MARY: Yeah, I did my big weekly supermarket shop yesterday and uh – which is great because I couldn't do that before I had the car – and uh, I went nice and early so it wouldn't be too dark when I got back. And I brought three bags in, but I must have left the fourth one on the front seat. And I got in, I thought, 'That's great, that's done, I can chill out now and have a nice little glass of wine.' And I had a really nice evening, actually. Um, but then this morning, I'm in the bathroom and I'm sitting on the – 'cause it's the toilet roll that I've left in the car. So I rush out; my window's been smashed. There's glass *everywhere* and all my toilet roles have been stolen. [TOM sighs.]

JOE: It was probably kids.

MARY: Yeah, I think you're right Joe.

KATIE: You insured Mary?

MARY: [She pauses and scowls, insulted KATIE is addressing her.] Yeah of course I'm insured.

KATIE: Well that's something, isn't it?

MARY: *[Continuing to scowl, pondering the apparent nonsense of KATIE's comment.]* You can't drive without insurance, can you? It's illegal.

KATIE: No, but what I'm saying is, at least you'll be able to claim for your window, won't you?

MARY: *I know!* Anyway, I-I-I'm sick of it, I just left it. It's just a car, what does it matter? *[JOE glances at KATIE reassuringly.]*

GERRI: Sit yourself down Mary. Put the kettle on Tom. *[TOM does.]*

MARY: ...It's given me a lot of stress Tom.

TOM: This car's been a catalogue of disaster, hasn't it? Maybe you should cut your losses and get rid of it.

MARY: Yeah, but I've spent so much on it Tom. I can't just sell it now.

TOM: Yeah but if you keep it, it's just going to get worse, isn't it?

GERRI: *[Disapprovingly.]* Well you know what I think Mary.

MARY: Yeah, yeah. I'm fed up with it to be honest Tom. I've'd three punctures.

TOM: Three...? *[He turns to GERRI who roles her eyes.]*

MARY: Yeah. My exhaust's fallen off; I've had to get a new one. My carburettor went-

TOM: You can't take it back to the guys you got it from, can you?

MARY: No! They'd said they'd guarantee the labour for three months but not the parts - *bastards!*



TOM: The other way around probably, isn't it; the parts for three months, but not the labour?

MARY: No! [*She pauses, confused.*] Oh yeah, that's right. Oh I dunno! Anyway, my windscreen wiper got ripped off. I got three points for speeding at £60 each, so I've got nine points on my driving licence, haven't I?

GERRI: Yes.

MARY: It keeps making funny noises. I got towed away and I wasn't even parked on a double yellow line. I got seven parking tickets – no! Nine parking tickets, and then, [*Swallowing.*] I broke down on the motorway on the way to Brighton. And I got towed to Crawley, which is the last place I wanna go because I grew up there and *I hate it!* So I had to get the train home and then the train back to Crawley the next day and the guy kept trying to touch me up and it cost me nearly £500, and I never even got my weekend in Brighton, and that was supposed to be my summer holiday, wasn't it Gerri?

GERRI: Yes.

MARY: It's not fair, is it?

TOM: No.

GERRI: Well, never mind!

JOE: Come and sit down, relax.

MARY: Yeah thanks.

KATIE: At least you're here now, eh?

MARY: [*Squinting in contempt as she takes a seat.*]  
Wha'd'you say your name was?

KATIE: Katie. [MARY *grunts softly in acknowledgment.*]

Like the unassuming voices of Pandora's gift, the hatchback promised so much – self-renewal, freedom, utility – but merely delivered more anguish. A sense of impotent rage washes over Mary as the realization Joe will remain forever out of reach becomes indelibly linked to the failure of her motoring experience.

To liken the car to a Pandora's Box is therefore to highlight its contradictory nature, a theme that finds resonance in much contemporary sociological thinking. John Urry's take on *automobility*, for instance, is predicated on the duality of freedom and coercion: cars allow for unprecedented flexibility in travel, but at the necessary cost of fixing one's mobility within a complex of asphalt, regulation and mechanics (Urry, 2000: 59-60; 2004: 27-9). Automobility thus signifies a system, a "hybrid" or "interlocking" of "social and technical" elements (2000: 57), which becomes autopoeitic in that it "generates the preconditions for its own self-expansion" (2004: 27). The most exasperating example of this is when road expansion in the name of decongestion has the opposite effect, revealing the perversely positive correlation between road capacity and demand.

The consequences of this vicious cycle cannot be underestimated. "The car's significance," Urry (2000: 59; emphasis added) argues, "is that it

reconfigures civil society involving distinct ways of dwelling, travelling and socialising in, and through an automobilised time-space. *Civil societies of the west are societies of automobility.*" Social science can no longer treat the car as a neutral tool wielded for better or worse. It must explicitly problematize the indispensability of private vehicular travel the globe over.

The automobility school (e.g. Böhm, 2006; Conley & McLaren, 2009; *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004; Urry, 2007) is part of a larger *material turn* in sociology – 'material' here referring not to materialism as such (i.e. the historical centrality of concrete, institutionalized relations), but an appreciation for the sociality of material objects. Like other theorists of this turn – Donna Haraway (1991), Ulrich Beck (1992) and Bruno Latour (2005) are iconic, if disparate exemplars – Urry's (2000: 77-8) aim is to interrogate the agency of material objects, and in the process to decentre social causation from sentient humans, in effect dissolving age-old dichotomies like *society-nature*, *agency-structure* and *subjectivity-objectivity*. In what sense then are things 'agent-ful,' capable of instigating social action? This is the question underlying all sociologies of materiality.

Latour, who serves as Urry's (2000: 77-8) point of conceptual departure and comparison, offers a comprehensive answer. "Action," he writes (2005: 44),

“is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies.”

There are two points to be gleaned here. Firstly, because action is not necessarily synonymous with intentionality, researchers must remain open to attributing action to “*any thing* that...modif[ies] a state of affairs by making a difference...”

(Latour, 2005: 71; italics in original). An actor may thus be a person or group, but equally an idea, statistic, object or technology. Does not, asks Latour rhetorically (2005: 71), the assignment of verbs to objects (e.g. “kettles ‘boil’ water, knives ‘cut’ meat...” ) designate a propensity for modification?

Identification of novel agencies is, however, only half the story.

Researchers need also to provide accounts of *figurations* of action by specifying linkages and limits by which an agency makes another do, behave or be (Latour, 2005: 52-4). This is termed *agencement*, the ability to translate, dislocate or distribute agency through a system of interfaces across time and space. The figuration’s interfacing parts – sentient or not – are called *actants*, while the figuration itself is alternately an *actor-network*, *assemblage*, or *apparatus*. Latour (2005: 132) himself prefers *work-net*, a neologism emphasizing the deliberate effort required to sustain agency.

Take a hypothetical nineteen-year-old who lovingly pours his passions and parent's money into an older-model Honda Civic. Among other modifications, he retunes the engine to deliver more torque sooner, drops the suspension and dresses the racing rims with tires of seemingly paper-thin profile. He does all this, only to wreck the Civic on a deserted arterial at night, killing himself and critically injuring two passengers. What caused this tragedy? Was it a culture of masculine bravado, lax parenting, lax laws, a neurochemical predisposition for thrill seeking, the car itself, a network of mechanics willing and eager to perform illegal alterations, or simply peer pressure? The answer could be any of these, if not all, and perhaps others not mentioned. The onus is on the researcher not simply to posit, but to demonstrate the connections by which it can be known that these factors delivered this fate. In the event our protagonist's death sparks outcry on the perils of street racing, the web of causation continues to proliferate. Analysis of causation, in short, is not an exercise in the revelation of latent forces, but the tracing of visible linkages among actants, consisting in this case of people, ideas, machines, magazines, music, marketing, news, law, law enforcement, coroner's inquests and popular and scholarly debates.

Urry similarly speaks of systems of automobility as *machinic complexes* (2000: 60) or *car-driver hybrids* (2004: 26): the car may be an extension of the driver's agency, but the opposite is also true, since it brings to bear on the driver's senses a plethora of influences both tangible and intangible.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that cars are integral to the constitution of perceptions, identities, relationships and more generally, "the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human" (Miller, 2001: 2). It is for this reason the automotive experience, in all its (in-) tangibility, stands out as a timely and critical object of study.

## **Economization of the Automobile**

About the same time Urry was shifting his gaze onto cars, so was Daniel Miller. His approach, known as *the humanity of the car*, is complementary to Urry's, the difference being one of emphasis rather than substance. Like Urry, Miller (2001: 24) focuses on the consequentiality of the car-driver bond or the "highly visceral relationship between the bodies of people and bodies of cars." But unlike Urry, whose inclinations are largely systemic, Miller (2001: 17) strives for a balance of systemic and ethnographic sensibilities: "The problem for the study of car

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<sup>1</sup> I draw here a rather facile connection between Latour and Urry but the parallels go only so far. Urry (2000: 78) ultimately dismisses Latour's understanding of hybridity as "somewhat vacuous" because Latour fails to recognize "the sensuous constitution of...hybrids."

cultures...is to retain the link between the micro-history of ethnography of experience and an appreciation of the way these are shot through with...acts of commerce and the state.” The balance is crucial for without it, any critique runs the risk of being unduly two-dimensional, resembling “a fetishized history... abstract and distant from the humanity in which it is involved” (2001: 9).

Gender is a good example. One may well castigate the car for its masculinist bias, given its associations with violence and power. Yet one can scarcely afford to ignore “the centrality of the car to the mundane tasks of women” (2001: 12), which chiefly amounts to, as Betty Friedan ([1963] 2001: 299) noted decades ago, “buy[ing] more things for the house” (also cf. Maxwell, 2001: 213, 215-7). Focusing our interrogations on dualities like destruction-reproduction allows us to build a critical foundation on the polyvalence that lies at the heart of all things social. After all, did not Pandora also find hope – that most quintessential and slippery of human traits – buried underneath all those duplicitous voices?

The present study focuses on the economic dimension of the car’s humanity, something I call the *economization* of the automobile. Allow me to begin unpacking this term by acknowledging that economic themes are hardly foreign to automobility scholars. One of the more prominent strands in the

literature, particularly from a policy perspective, concerns the identification of motoring's *externalities* or hidden costs. This is basically an attempt to provide a more thorough accounting of private vehicle use, incorporating publicly borne costs to infrastructure, environment, healthcare, productivity and so on (cf. Porter, 1999). Todd Litman has more recently taken the method in a distinctly socioeconomic direction by quantifying the car's impact as an object of status or prestige. He concludes (2009: 214) the car is an "economic trap ...tend[ing] to favour more costly, faster, resource-intensive modes [of travel]...." The literature equally boasts less quantitative ways of broaching the economic: Herbert Moorhouse's (1991: 39) oft-cited history of postwar hot-rodding points to "burgeoning economic interests" as a factor in the sport's organization and acceptance, while Catharine Genovese's (2009: 22) corresponding study argues that the sport's legitimization afforded "opportunities for some members to capitalize economically."

Despite their differences, both the externality and social-historical approaches interpret the economic similarly, namely as something existing positively, independent of lived experience. In the former, economy provides a set of metrologies allowing us to apprehend reality more objectively, while in the latter an institutional realm of roles, relationships and interests. I, however, want



to put aside the economic's *a priori* solidity, proceeding from the premise that economy emerges through experience. This is what economization and the title, *Becoming Economic*, are meant to invoke.

Towards that end I treat economy in the sense of reason or rationality: it is a means-ends relationship, a way of inferring an optimal or balanced course of action, as epitomized in the Ford ad slogan (see figure one below), "the... combination of minimal input and maximum output." Toyota too relies on the theme of balance to sell its cars: their Camry, a mid-sized sedan in the same competitive league as the Fusion, has been christened a "New ERA" car, boasting both emotional and rational appeal (Kenzie, 2011b). Economization then is all about learning balance with respect to one's market encounters, turning on the question – or process, rather – of *justification* of balance: being economic not only involves perceiving, but also articulating an optimal resolution to contradictory priorities. Such an understanding may appear to read as if it were ripped from an economics textbook, but the analytical spirit of what follows is anything but. In economics rationality serves in "the investigation of causal processes" (Hayek, 1948: 35), representing the problematic *par excellence* by which to interrogate social facts. What I intend is quite the opposite: I mean to interrogate reason and

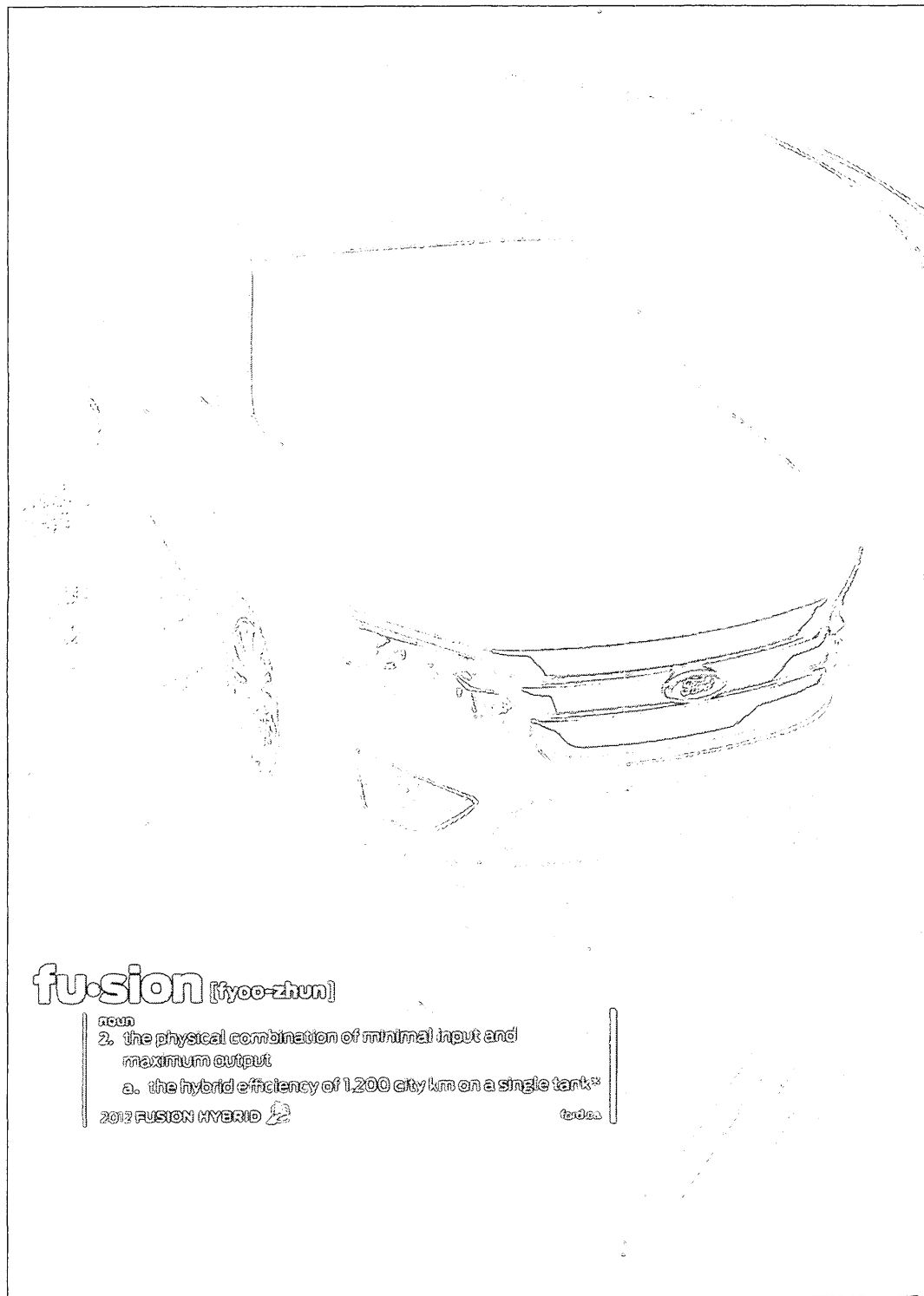


Fig. 1: 2012 Ford Fusion Advertisement

the calculus of balance leading to it by way of problematical social facts. Reason, in short, does not (re-) construct social reality, but is itself a social construct.

A brief illustration is in order here: sweeping changes in the automotive industry over the past two decades, dubbed 'lean' or 'just-in-time' (JIT) production, have sought not only to economize the processing of cars, but the processors as well – i.e. the workers – by decentring a number of decision-making functions (e.g. work scheduling). Such re-organization naturally serves political ends as well, rendering union representation superfluous with respect to day-to-day operations. What are the lived consequences of treating workers like entrepreneurs? Examining the situation at a union-free subsidiary of auto-parts giant Magna International, Wayne Lewchuk and Don Wells (2006: 656) argue,

The result has been the creation of work-group and plant-level identities that are strongly congruent with management productivity objectives and inconsistent with union adversarialism.... Worker cooperation is understood as a 'common sense' condition of mutual economic survival rather than as an antagonistic, mutable power relation.

On paper then, entrepreneurialization represents a win-win solution: workers gain a measure of calculative autonomy in exchange for claims to collective advocacy. Experientially though, because "[w]orkloads remain heavy and health and safety problems affect a large percentage of the workforce" (Yates, Lewchuk

and Stewart, 2001: 523), there is no appreciable difference between the new and old regimes except one: workers must now take individual responsibility for or to internalize any sense of precariousness on the shop floor.

This example reminds us of the two basic parameters by which to conduct an analysis of economization. Economization is first and foremost a structural property. Organizational by design (and hence implicit in shifting struggles over labour representation), it plays a seminal role in what we might call the automobile's *history of production*: economy in this ongoing narrative renders patterns of relationships concrete, not simply with respect to roles (i.e. the contractual obligations of workers to managers and vice-versa) but also those roles and their material mediators, specifically the machinic in- and outputs through and on which people perform economy. Secondly, although economization concerns the art and science of balance, we should not be so quick to equate it with empowerment; ambiguity, anxiety and anguish can and do form part of that balance. Another way of looking at it, the study of balance requires consummate sensitivity to the variability by which social structures are internalized, or how structural dynamics represent, paraphrasing Michel Foucault ([1983] 2010: 3), contestable "focal point[s] of experience." Economization unfolds, we might say, at the articulation of histories of structures

on the one hand (viz. chains of influence stretching across people and things) and subjectivities on the other (viz. modes of knowing, experiencing or simply 'being' in these structures).

Alas on the structural side of the equation, this dissertation leaves aside the labour-car-management nexus in favour of one containing buyers, cars and sellers. I focus on a history of consumption, not production, for the principal reason that the act of acquisition yields, I think, a more robust understanding of economization: it forces us to explicate the role of the market in a way that is less abstract compared to production. Or rather, buying a car helps us trace an experientially immediate link between subjectivities (e.g. an attitude of frugality) and the objective structures in which they are immersed. My argument is basically this: car acquisitions confirm to the buyer the *consequentiality* of the market due to the scale of the commitment undertaken, pecuniary and otherwise. A form of pseudo-pedagogy by necessity, economization brings the buyer's sense of self in line with the gravity of her acquisition, helping her make retrospective sense of her actions vis-à-vis the seller and vehicle. What makes a car purchase, in other words, such an effective vehicle of economization is that it obliges the

buyer to *feel* the full weight of balance: no longer abstract, economy becomes associated with a tangible sensation, be it fear, humiliation or initiation.<sup>2</sup>

Such a contention, I am all too aware, raises an obvious methodological concern. If the power of car acquisitions derives from its status as a major life purchase, is not acquiring a house an even better instance of economization? It probably is, but a real estate transaction is also more complicated, with agents, lawyers, inspectors and all manner of consultants clogging the transactional apparatus. The empirical virtue of the car buying relationship is that it is direct, bringing into sharper relief the strategy, anxiety and unpredictability of market action. Besides, the economizing effects of house hunting and ownership have been well documented – by Pierre Bourdieu (2005) no less – while as far as I can tell, the present study is the first of its kind, filling a hole Miller himself (2002: 225) has recognized.

## **Michel, Daniel & Sophie**

There is another reason to study car purchases: despite the paucity of research, a contentious debate has already flared on the subject which fortuitously cut to the

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<sup>2</sup> I suppose the ideal study of economization would link histories of production to consumption, as opposed to focusing on one or the other. The question would then become – and I thank Mark Thomas for making me see this – *how do production regimes impact consumer subjectivities?* While such a research program would doubtlessly allow us to say something about contemporary capitalism, it would be exceedingly difficult to undertake since much of the necessary marketing data is proprietary (see Chapter Two below, footnote 3 especially).

heart of economic sociology, featuring opposing conceptions of market action. I want to pause on this debate for the remainder of this chapter, since it offers an especially rewarding angle of conceptual attack on economization.

The debate was occasioned by the introduction to *The Laws of the Market* (*LotM*) by Latour collaborator Michel Callon (1998a). This was the first attempt to articulate an actor-network theory of economy, remaining to this day the classic statement on the matter. Callon's (1998a: 3) basic premise is, "a market implies a peculiar anthropology, one...assum[ing]... 'calculative agencies,'" from which three corollaries follow. Firstly, calculative agencies are compatible with mainstream economic notions of formal rationality; the difference being, whereas economics takes rationality for granted, Callon places emphasis on "the conditions in which rational action can emerge" (1998a: 52n8). Secondly, these conditions have to do with "possible states of the world," or more precisely shifts – potential and/or actual – in the distribution of goods, resources or knowledge in one's market 'vicinity' (1998a: 4). And because the possibilities in question are necessarily calculations, market-worlds are ontologically a fusion of actors and the calculative devices binding them: "Agents," Callon (1998a: 8) advises, "are actor-worlds." Lastly, calculative agencies are compatible with methodological

individualism, in that market participants “enter and leave the exchange like strangers. Once the transaction has been concluded [they] are quits” (1998a: 3).

The second and third corollaries present us with an intriguing tension: the latter assumes a *homo clausus* closed in on himself (1998a: 8), the former a *homo apertus* (1998a: 11), “entangled in a web of relations and connections” (1998a: 8). The goal of Callon’s program, *very* simply put, is to specify processes that reconcile openness with imperviousness, or phrased as a question, “How is it possible to become *homo clausus* when survival requires one to be *homo apertus*” (1998a: 25)? The operation Callon highlights, in the concluding chapter especially (1998b), is *framing*, “the tracing of a boundary between relationships and events which are internalized and included in a decision or, by contrast, externalized and excluded from it” (1998a: 15). This is in effect a suspension of the condition of entanglement – a form of investment in disentangling people and things from their contexts – allowing one “to make relations visible and calculable in the network” (1998a: 17). Framing thus presupposes the double movement of entanglement and disentanglement, without which calculation is impossible (1998a: 19; 2005: 6; cf. Barry & Slater, 2002: 293).

Callon illustrates this with a hypothetical automobile transaction. Because the passage is brief, Callon is uncharacteristically elusive with respect to the



devices involved, apart from passing references to property rights (1998a: 18) and “professionals of embedding” (2005: 7), presumably marketers. Specifics notwithstanding, car transactions reveal a key upshot of the entanglement-framing-disentanglement nexus, namely the creation of alienable, marketable commodities:

[T]o transform something into a commodity, and two agents into a seller and a consumer, it is necessary to cut the ties between the thing and the other objects or human beings one by one. It must be decontextualized, dissociated and detached. For the car to go from the producer-seller to the customer-buyer, it has to be disentangled (Callon, 1998a: 19).

The moment of disentanglement, in other words, furthers the “life” or “career” of the car, disembedding it from the design, engineering and marketing networks of the manufacturer-dealer, only to re-embed it in the occupational, familial and ideational lifeworlds of the consumer (Callon *et al*, 2002: 197-8). Of course, vehicle warranties and recalls belie the absoluteness of the transfer – a residual Callon calls *overflowing* (cf. 1998b) – but in principle, the *sine non qua* of the market experience is the cutting of ties among transactors and commodities.

With respect to theoretical questions about the nature of economy, Callon (1998a: 4-6) positions himself between the extremes of cognition *à la* Herbert Simon and institution *à la* Karl Polanyi. This is to say, his focus on framing and

alienability as deliberate accomplishments are meant to demonstrate that *homo economicus*' calculations are neither "bounded by [the] complexity...of computational effort" (Simon, 1972: 164), nor "submerged in his social relationships" (Polanyi, [1944] 2001: 48). Rather, he is mobilized and configured, "formatted, framed and equipped with prostheses which help him in his calculations..." (Callon, 1998a: 51, 22). This has more generally come to be known as the *performativity thesis*, the contention that economics *at large* (i.e. academic economics alongside accounting, marketing and the like) does not observe the functioning of economy so much as provide conceptual and metrical tools to create it (1998a: 2, also 23-32). "[E]conomy," Callon provocatively declares (1998a: 30), "is embedded not in society but in economics." In the intervening years, a flurry of ANT-inspired research has developed the argument further (e.g. Callon *et al*, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006; MacKenzie *et al*, 2007).

By 2002, interest in Callon's program was such that *Economy and Society* devoted a special issue to it. The editors so happened to approach Daniel Miller "to write a live response" (Miller, 2005: 3) principally because in the same year as *LotM*'s publication, Miller (1998) too penned a theory about economics, *virtualism*. Virtualism also speaks of performativity, but in a decidedly destructive sense: economics boasts the ideological "authority to transform the

world into its own image [and]...to eliminate the particularities of the world” (Miller, 1998: 196). As Petter Holm (2007: 225) later sized it up, this difference amounts to “a classical confrontation: between two books; between two authors; between two different interpretations of the same phenomenon.”

Because Miller had just published *Car Cultures* (2001), the thrust of his critique fell on the car example. Miller begins (2002: 224) by taking Callon to task for underspecifying the frame of the transaction: because Callon ignores the “huge literature on the externalities of the car” (framing is, after all, the sociological act of creating externalities [Callon, 1998b: 248-9]), one is left with a poor sense of what lies in and out of the frame. Moreover, can we really say framing suspends entanglement, insulating actants in a state of pure calculation?

Miller elaborates his answer – an emphatic no – by way of a psychosocial evaluation of Sophie, imaginary buyer of a Renault (2002: 225-7; 2005: 6). Recently divorced, Sophie lost use of the familial BMW, a vehicle that in any event came to epitomize for her everything she despised about her ex-husband. Her motives for buying the smaller, less powerful Renault are mixed to say the least, in equal parts recognition of lean financial days ahead, affirmation of environmental responsibility and identification with a design language commensurate with youthful optimism, new beginnings and “a new Sophie”

(2005: 6). As for the sales dimension of Sophie's choice, Miller (2002: 226-7) shows it too contains,

all the entanglements of an octopus at the moment when the prey is about to give up the struggle. ...If Sophie buys this car it is in large measure because commerce has spent years forging the tentacles that would make this already in some sense 'Sophie's' car.

Sophie's sole disentangling moment was her divorce. The purchase, on the contrary, was a moment of *aesthetic totalization*, a term borrowed from Sartre, in which everything about Sophie – past, present and possible – was brought to bear, forcing her to balance a veritable "constellation of values" (2002: 226). In short, "no disentanglement is required in order for a decision to be made" (2005: 6), for price is ultimately an intensely qualitative – not quantitative – consideration. "Human beings," contends Miller (2002: 231), "are capable of quite effective assessments of value, the true basis for transaction, [but]...Callon confuses the simplification of calculation to numbers with the practice of calculation."

Miller and Callon hence espouse polar positions with respect to what lies within and -out the calculative frame. For Callon, disentangled quantification is inside, entanglement outside. For Miller, entanglement is in, while 'objective,' quantifiable assessments of entailments (i.e. externalities) are out. Considered

economistically, Miller's conclusion is unorthodox to say the least: exchange for him is a symbolic, ritualized encounter bearing little resemblance to economists' rarefied logic. Indeed, "the problem for the contemporary capitalist economy is that...actual economic agents are trying to keep the market as an externality, outside the frame of the transaction" (2002: 231). "Callon's emphasis on calculation and disentanglement," in which case, "ends up as an attempt to rescue more conventional notions of the market, for no particularly good reason" (2005: 5).

If this all sounds familiar, it should. It amounts a re-run of the substantivism-formalism debate of decades past, a similarity lost neither on Miller (2002: 221-2) nor *E&S* co-editor Don Slater (2002: 235).

### **From Entanglement to Disentanglement**

Although polemically opposed, Callon and Miller's positions are not, as Miller (2005: 3, 11) himself concedes, completely irreducible. Indeed, the beneficial legacy of the debate is that it has generated reflection on two key questions, *what exactly is disentanglement* and *what is its relationship to the condition of entanglement from which it stems?* Slater (2002: 242), for one, sees relevance in disentanglement, not as the delimitation of entanglement, but the calculating or reading of another's entanglements. "Sophie and her salesman," he remarks (2002: 240),

“are certainly entangled in complex social worlds; they just are not the same worlds, and each wants to get the most out of the other’s.” For Patrik Aspers (2005: 36), the veracity of disentanglement is predicated on market structures wherein roles are multiple or exchangeable (viz. an actor *buys* a commodity which she later *sells*). He argues that Miller, whose critique implies fixed market roles, does not repudiate disentanglement as much as demonstrate its conceptual limits.

My intent is likewise not to take Callon’s or Miller’s side, but to stake fertile ethnographic ground between them. What this concretely means, the data here lend no support for Callon’s claim that car-buying represents an archetypal site of disentangled calculation. Something like framing does occur, but the frame is so thoroughly permeated by extra-calculative factors that calculative refinement, as Miller (2005: 6) correctly surmised, is typically not the outcome. If Callon thus be faulted for anything, it is that he presumes the generalizability of disentanglement perhaps too much.<sup>3</sup> Yet the absence of disentanglement in the first instance does not mean the absence of formal economic reason in the last, for

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<sup>3</sup> Car sales are not the substantive illustration of framing or disentanglement; as mentioned earlier, their appearance in *LotM* is too cursory for that. Callon instead marshals a different proof: the construction of a strawberry market in the Loire in the 1980s (1998a: 19-23), the research for which (cf. Garcia-Parpet, [1986] 2007) was, by Callon’s admission (2007: 335), formative to his conceptualization of performativity. Be that as it may, neither Callon’s (2005) nor Helm’s (2007) responses to Miller address the possibility that car sales may be inappropriate to their argument.

my respondents are more than capable of accounting for their experiences with concepts like cost-benefit analysis and long-term time horizons. So while it is possible to identify a disentangling moment *à la* Callon, this is neither a socio-technical operation nor act of conditioning relationships for calculative purposes. Quite the opposite, disentanglement signals the end of calculation or a necessary detachment of a secondary order: the elevation of entangled decision-making and-taking to a higher, *justificatory* plane of veridiction. The “economy of economic practices” as Bourdieu (2005: 8) calls it, is indeed more complicated than Callon lets on.

In which case, what I mean by economization differs from the ANT understanding. For Callon and his colleagues (cf. Muniesa, Millo & Callon, 2007: 3-4), economization is embodied in the variability of performativity; that is, in the contingency, path-dependency and disputability of “instruments for the calculation of prices, or rules that organize competition, or of accounting methods that identify and allocate profits” (Muniesa *et al*, 2007: 4; also cf. Callon, 1998a: 32). It is on the basis of these ongoing tensions and torsions in framing, so the ANT narrative goes, that we may analytically trace the path to becoming economic. No doubt such calculative jousting and jostling – ‘framing on the fly,’ we might call it – is important, especially in the context of automobiles, where

information is continually accumulated and evaluated. Yet I ultimately want to impress in these pages that economizing a major life purchase is associated with rather hard limits on calculativeness having less to do with uncertainty than 'enlightened' surrender. Or perhaps a better way of putting it, what I am after in this dissertation is a specific, seemingly contradictory trajectory of economization: an actor whose market experiences are hotly beholden to all sorts of extra-market factors, yet who *by force of necessity* adopts a cold, formalizing logic to interpret these experiences.

To understand economization and its attendant necessities, I submit we need to approach car purchases as an instance of power. There is nothing novel about this move, since popular culture already takes an exceptionally dim view of the automotive business: car salesmen are by default thought of as pushy and aggressive, if not downright deceitful. Phenomenologically speaking however, this presumption of sales power is only half-correct: those I interviewed did report a nagging sense of inferiority vis-à-vis their sellers, but never was the relationship considered coercive. Thus by 'power,' I mean asymmetry but not outright domination, for which reason I rely conceptually on Foucault, a running theme for whom concerned *subjectivation* (i.e. "the constitution of the subject's mode of being" [2010: 4]) under asymmetrical conditions. Rather than seeing



modern-day apparatuses of power as repressive, he argued they constitute an entire “technology of the ‘soul’” whose chief effect is the individual ([1975] 1977: 30; [1976] 2003: 30).

Economization is entangled in this ‘creative’ sense of power, the buyer adopting a disentangled disposition to account for the demeaning complicatedness of the acquisition. To become economic thus requires a self-flagellation of sorts, the inculcation of a quasi-formal sensibility whose purpose is to justify the buyer’s inferiority to herself, helping her grasp the magnitude of consequentiality of her choice. Economics, broadly understood, is what remains after the buyer has received a crash course on the worth of things, learning first-hand the meaning of that deceptively banal of maxims, *what the market will bear*. The vehicle itself plays a decisive role here, alternately a budgetary disciplinarian, embodiment of pecuniary agency and validation of one’s technico-financial gamble. As a *dispositif*, the car not only performs economy, as Callon reminds us, but also ‘governs mentality,’ paraphrasing Foucault. It is both an eco- and *anthroponomic* device.

Elaborating this argument will require weaving theory with evidence over the following six chapters. In the next chapter I discuss my underlying methodological choices and compromises. In Chapters Three and Four I build

the case against Callon's double movement postulate, demonstrating that car-buying calculativity remains an always entangled affair, formatted by dynamics that are decidedly extra-market and extra-calculative. The former of these chapters examines the importance of sociality – the 'fact' of human interrelatedness – as opposed to emotion or intellect, while the latter focuses on the gendering of calculation. The subsequent three chapters are devoted to moving us conceptually from entanglement to disentanglement via power, a move representing, I believe, a different way of bridging the age-old distinction between *substantive* and *formal* reason, to use Max Weber ([1922] 1978: 85-6) and Polanyi's (1957: 246-50) terms. The first step in the fifth chapter is to build a foundation on the existing, but phenomenologically limited microeconomic concept, *market power*, which is then reshaped in Chapter Six on a neo-Foucauldian anvil, giving way to a 'new,' more experientially relevant concept, *market/power*. Car-buying relations, to wit, are re-specified as pseudo-pedagogical relations of *government*, educative and asymmetrical in equal measure, underpinned by devices of measurement, calculation and competition. The seventh chapter catalogues the disentangling effects of market/power, which ironically amount *not* to an exhortation to calculation, but to responsabilization and acceptance of one's calculative handicaps. In the Conclusion, I consider the

potential effects of these effects, if you will: I pose the possibility that disentangled agencies are actually antithetical to haggling and negotiation.

The automobile, in sum, is a sociological Pandora's Box, containing an array of tropes central to the discipline and spanning the entirety of the micro-macro continuum: alienation, modernity, system, agency, materiality, economy, market, reason and power. And while economization is the name I christen this tropic box, what the box actually reveals remains an open question. I would like to think it is capitalism. Just maybe, to paraphrase Bourdieu (2005: 186, 6 respectively), knowing how car buyers become economic – how “they discover the rigours of economic necessity” in other words – “enables us to form a rough idea of what happened during the origins of capitalism,” when its dispositions were being forged concurrently with its structures. Whatever its epistemological potential, economization reminds us – something E.P. Thompson (1967) understood well – that appreciating economic processes necessitates a granular analysis pitched at that ambiguous place where external constraints are internalized into the recesses of psyche and self; where patterned market relationships are patterned into more or less coherent meanings of market. As ambivalent or precarious as this may sound, one would expect no less from a Pandora's Box.

## Chapter Two

# Problematics of Method

THE GOAL OF THIS CHAPTER IS TO PRESENT something more than a description of the data gathering process. Such an accounting would undoubtedly read as perfunctory or tedious worse still, tempting one ultimately to skip to the next chapter. What I instead have in mind makes hopefully for more rewarding reading: a discussion establishing limits around the main argument, troubling it before it is even elaborated. While this may sound self-defeating, my intention is to contextualize what I did by considering what I could have and ideally should have done. This amounts to no less than an alternate introductory chapter, one that couches the subject matter not in theory, literature or debates, but practicalities, setbacks and compromises. The title of this chapter is thus meant to capture 'problematic' in a double sense: not only was the conception and execution of the project difficult, but more generally, being methodologically pragmatic is fraught with epistemological tension.

## Buyer's Bias

The most peculiar aspect of this project is the privilege accorded to buyers – *buyer's bias* I am calling it. A buyer is anyone who acquires a car, new or used, but whose livelihood does not *primarily* depend on re-selling it (i.e. she is not continuously immersed in car markets). I make no distinction among buyers who lease, finance or pay outright for their vehicles, since the basic buyer-seller dynamic remains constant across them all (i.e. I treat 'purchase' as synonymous with all forms of acquisition). 'Bias' refers to the postulate that car markets are constituted neither by classes of vehicles,<sup>1</sup> relative strengths of manufacturers,<sup>2</sup> nor machinations of sales professionals.<sup>3</sup> They come into being via buyers'

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<sup>1</sup> Although a common market metric, there is little consensus with respect to the definition of classes. In Europe, passenger cars typically fall in size categories A to D. North American cars range from sub-compacts (e.g. Honda Fit, Ford Fiesta) to full size sedans (e.g. Chrysler 300, Nissan Maxima). The former corresponds to European B-class; the latter is non-existent in European automotive taxonomy. Matters become more complicated when sport-utility and luxury vehicles are given separate classes, the boundaries of which are hardly cut and dry. The *Canadian Black Book* (2012), this country's authority on used car values, currently recognizes no fewer than 17 classes.

<sup>2</sup> This too is a common way of knowing the industry, taking the form of a monthly statistical comparison of manufacturers. Strength is determined not so much by units sold, but percentage-change in sales compared to the same month the year previously. So while the approach is *externally* competitive, competition is posited as a function of *internal* performance. That is, manufacturers do not statistically compete against each other, but year-old images of themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Adopting this definition would take economization in a different, albeit fruitful direction: the framing of automotive desire, which presupposes a different structure of relations – no more a seller-car-buyer nexus, but a marketer-car-consumer one. The analysis would focus, in part, on understanding the marketing frame: how do marketers create categories of consumer choice, and how is the process influenced or mediated by the overall production process? The other part would examine the concrete effects of marketing: how well do real consumers conform to their

uncertainties, frustrations and perceptions of outcomes. Through semi-structured interviews, I have sought to follow buyers retrospectively into the rabbit hole of their transactions, discovering the wonders of the market as they themselves discovered them. Of course, such a bias implies a corresponding 'sales deficit,' an admission of ethnographic injustice to the market, which by definition requires a buyer *and* seller. This is a sticky predicament to be sure, but not fatal. As I show below, remaining parochial has lent this project a degree of epistemological flexibility which enriches the final analysis. None of this was planned however; these pluses and minuses are – or appear to be – quasi-accidents of the project's uneven history.

Originally this dissertation was to be an outlet for my lifelong fascination with the hyper-inflationary evisceration of Yugoslavia in the 1980s, prologue to its violent dismembering. The angle I settled upon was how the Yugoslavs, darlings of international banking, negotiated loans during the petrol-dollar frenzy of the 1970s. I envisaged a social history of financial clientelism focusing on an asymmetrical triangle of creditors, supplicants and the American state. Could these relations shed light on political outcomes in the 1990s, virulent not

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marketing images? What aspects of themselves do consumers see reflected in their vehicles? To what degree is this a case of *commodity fetishism*? I am unfortunately not convinced, based on my methodological experiences recounted below, that such a project is feasible.

only in the context of other state-socialist regimes, but the developing world too?

I believed I had stumbled upon a rich, under-examined topic.

After a period of due diligence, I unfortunately faced a dead-end: many of the parties involved have either died or are now untraceable; historians knowledgeable about my topic ignored requests to brainstorm; banking officials scoffed at the suggestion of researching deals long past. Moving forward, I chose to retain the basic question – *how do actors negotiate from positions of inferiority and to what effect?* – but searched for an alternate market relation, one more amenable to observation. Enter, eventually, automobile acquisitions.

Transposing the question to the theatre of car sales nevertheless begets a host of other questions. Notably, international financial negotiations are of explicitly geopolitical significance, whereas car negotiations are of an altogether mundane order of business. What, under such phenomenological circumstances, does the political look like? And even if the reader is willing to accept my answer – economization – just how important is this pseudo-pedagogical process in the grand scheme of things? The real pitfall here is therefore not the elision of sellers' points of view, but the potential for overstating the political, generalizing all consumer behaviour as an effect of power. Relying on buyer's bias as an *episto-methodic* lens, put otherwise, runs the risk of unduly seeing power

everywhere. I like to think I have taken care to avoid this, portraying buyers as beholden to the transaction, but not dupes. Only the reader can judge how well I tread this line.

Such thorny questions notwithstanding, the prerogative to follow buyers most closely resembles the tradition of *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in that I arrived at economization only after months of assembling, deconstructing and writing about the data, much like a sprawling topography that becomes more definite as one draws nearer. An open approach was really the only viable method, given I had no way initially of anticipating what people would disclose, or how their words could be interpreted politically. Rather than asking pointed questions about perceptions of power or economy, I learned to glean as much context as possible about informants' experiences, querying, among other aspects, their decision-making and -taking, when and with whom they shopped, and the tenor of conversations with salespeople. Out of this richness of data, in unexpected narrative corners, economization reared its conceptual head.

Yet this project is not a study in pure induction, as I relied always on theories and ideas to guide my interpretations: Callon's and Miller's obviously, but also those of Foucault and, to a lesser extent, Bourdieu, Polanyi and Weber. These are by no means obvious or even compatible perspectives by which to



interpret the buyer's lifeworld: Miller (2005: 3, 7, 11-2), for instance, may concede points to Callon, but apparently never to Foucault (cf. Miller, 1998: 205; 2002: 223). It is again up to the reader to decide whether this juxtaposition is playfully brilliant or a brilliant mess. Whichever the case, grounded theory, as I see it, is not an injunction against abstract theory, but carries rather a double theoretical obligation: one's concepts must be grounded in empirical realities, but one's sensitivity to reality must correspondingly be grounded in theory. If and when research begins to veer in unwelcome directions, an ecumenical commitment to theory – a nimbleness or facility with ideas – becomes indispensable to making the data 'sing' differently.

What I hope to have accomplished through buyer's bias is therefore neither deduction nor induction, neither theory-testing nor -building. It is something closer to exegesis: the excavation of an idea by way of faithful representation of empirical evidence, all the while remaining cognizant that ideas and evidence are seldom faithfully related. Or phrased in Foucauldian terms ([1978] 2000a: 241), what is contained in these pages is no less than a phenomenology predicated on "a maximum of intensity [of experience] and a maximum of impossibility at the same time." The underlying question is not,

*how does the subject found and account for her experiences? but the opposite: how do experiences wrench the subject from herself?*

## **The Car Buying Project**

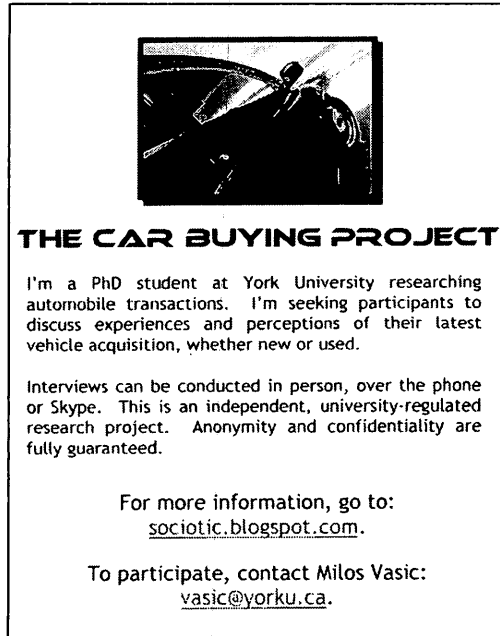
"Oh you're doing car purchases!" an acquaintance enthused at the outset of interviewing in January 2011, "You're not going to have *any* problems finding people to talk to." I hoped she would be right; that the topic would strike a chord in people, yielding a geyser of respondents. At the end of the day I am satisfied with how things unfolded, even if I never did hit a rich vein of interviewees. I see now my biggest mistake, undoubtedly attributable to inexperience, was the inability to foresee how much effort it would take to net participants. Promoting the project turned into six months of constant work, a cumbersome distraction at a time when the interviewing learning-curve was steep.

The recruitment plan I envisioned was two-forked. I would firstly tap into my network of family, friends and acquaintances, gradually snowballing the sample. Secondly and concurrently, I would advertise more formally and widely, which I saw as a necessary route to securing the participation of strangers, preferably jilted buyers whose stories of frustration would lend verve to the analysis. Making these avenues effective would require, I figured,

entrepreneurial flair, a comprehensive yet light-hearted approach I branded *The Car Buying Project*. Its centrepiece was a blog used previously in conjunction with teaching, re-commandeered and re-christened *Sociotic*. There I placed the call for participation (CFP) along with project musings and updates, phrased succinctly, eschewing jargon. Lastly, lest the blog become too focused on cars, I commented tongue-in-cheek on broader issues and current happenings – the more attention to the site and CFP, the better. The blog's built-in metrics were helpful but stressful in that regard: they allowed me to gauge the ebb and flow of my efforts – what was and not generating hits – but at the price of becoming obsessed by them.

I worked next on devising 'tokens' to feed eyeballs back to the blog. I mentioned the research profusely in face-to-face and Facebook interactions, the latter now serving an instrumental purpose. I 'plugged' the project on car web-forums, sales sites (e.g. Craig's List and Kijiji), and whenever a news item or editorial appeared about car buying. I printed fliers, posting them around the city of Toronto (see figure two below), on message boards in supermarkets and near displays for *Auto Trader*, a free weekly used auto classified (I sometimes stuffed flyers into individual magazines). I even approached dealerships explaining the project and asking to leave a handful of flyers at the welcome desk

Fig. 2: Recruitment Flyer



or customer lounge. Never was I denied save once, though I could never be sure if the flyers were actually being perused by patrons or trashed as soon as I left.

The last plank in the campaign was to attract the attention of a major automobile publication. After months of fruitless solicitation, I finally won the opportunity from *Toronto Star Wheels* to

submit an 800-word draft about the project. I can only assume the editor did not appreciate it, silence being the loudest form of rejection.

For all of these troubles reaching a wider audience, I was rewarded with zero interviews. By July 2011, I conceded defeat, abandoning the blog, stats, flyers, promotional pieces and social media. Giving up on the dream of an embarrassment of interview riches was a godsend in hindsight, for it afforded me the time to concentrate on the far more important task of data interpretation.

In the meantime, the strategy of recruiting through acquaintances was generating decent results, even if the snowball never did gain momentum: only nine of the 39 informants come from outside my circle of direct contacts; of these,

seven are separated from me by one degree, the remaining two by two.

Eventually I adopted another recruitment strategy, basically paying close attention to my surroundings. Each time I noticed someone with a new vehicle, such as a neighbour or parent at my daughter's school, I would strike up a conversation about the car, introduce the project and ask if they might consider participating. This proved effective though not foolproof: prospective interviewees often needed gentle reminders, but only so many before I understood their pledges would likely go unfulfilled. Because no interview was guaranteed, I considered every *N* a jewel.

My original hypothesis was that power in a car transaction looks something like cynicism, effecting in buyers sensations of futility mixed with dull rage (sensations I experienced, curiously enough, trying to entice participants!). The initial batch of questions, accordingly, erred towards themes of financial uncertainty, buyer's remorse and sellers' reticence, which I quickly realized were inappropriate, given that most respondents had far more prosaic tales to tell; a number of them even wondered openly whether their experiences would be of use. Thus began the task – at times fumbling – of recalibrating my questions and sensitivities to better capture these experiences. I found that a more spontaneous, conversational style of interviewing returned the richest results, especially since

most of the informants were known to me in one capacity or another. I allowed them the latitude of recalling their experiences as best as they could, while I allowed myself the latitude to interject sympathetically in their narratives, to be humorous and make exaggerated gestures of empathy. I went to pains, in short, to present a sense of openness; a sense that I understood and shared their viewpoints. Representing myself this way meant, on the one hand, I needed to shy away from overtly intrusive questions (e.g. how much did you pay?). On the other hand, it enabled me to elicit more candour and contradiction than otherwise, and it loosened informants up for the all-important question I reserved for the end: *who benefited from the transaction* (see Chapter Five)? There were a handful of times when it was obvious my friendliness was off-putting; in general though, the effects of this style, once I became comfortable with it, were beneficial: the questions declined in number, there was less exposition on my part and, most importantly, the average length of interviews more than doubled from 20 to 45 minutes (see Appendix for the schedule of questions).

So what is the profile of my sample of 39 souls? Really only one of the breakdowns is even: 20 new car buyers and 19 used. In terms of gender, the sample leans towards masculine, with 23 men and 16 women. In all other salient aspects, the sample is quite skewed. For instance, 26 reside in the city of Toronto,

versus four in Toronto's ring of suburbs, four in other cities in Ontario (one apiece in Hamilton and Ottawa, another two in Kitchener-Waterloo), three in rural Ontario and two in Vancouver, British Columbia. All but two are Caucasian. Also overrepresented are the perceptions of 30- and 40-somethings: at the time of interviewing, 19 were between the ages 30 and 39, 14 in their 40s, the remaining six 50-plus. Lastly, the interviewees are a relatively well educated and remunerated lot: all but three completed a post-secondary degree; 15 are professionals of some kind or holders of a graduate degree. None live in particularly precarious financial circumstances, with only two – both unattached – reporting annual household income less than \$40,000.

Given this socioeconomic skew, one would expect overrepresentation of vehicles typically favoured by the upwardly mobile, crossovers<sup>4</sup> and luxury vehicles, but these accounted for only 15 and 21% of the sample's acquisitions respectively. The former, in particular, pales in comparison to the nearly 30% of Canadians who opt for such vehicles (Cain, 2011). More interesting still, nearly

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<sup>4</sup> Crossovers, the fastest growing segment of new auto sales in Canada, are next generation sport-utility vehicles (SUVs). Essentially a SUV on a car platform, the idea is to reap the best of both vehicle types: higher driving position and all-wheel capability coupled with better fuel consumption. Alternately called compact utility vehicles (CUVs) or 'cute-utes,' they are a notoriously amorphous category of vehicle: typically resembling "tall wagons" (Leblanc, 2011) à la Honda CR-V, Ford Escape or Subaru Forester, in practice all manner of vehicles boasting features above and beyond regular cars are marketed as crossovers, from the Toyota Matrix (really a Corolla hatchback), to Kia Rondo (a short minivan) and Volvo XC90 (a large minivan substitute).

82% of the sample acquired a passenger car, of which 44% were compacts (e.g. Hyundai Elantra, Toyota Corolla). Percentages in the Canadian new-car-buyer population at large are traditionally 50 and 25 (Cain, 2011; Chrysler Group, 2012). So while the cohort is socioeconomically above average, their choices are *exceedingly* average. A random sample this is not.

There are two possibilities to explain such atypicality, not the least of which includes questioning the validity of sales figures to establish a baseline of normal consumer choice. That is to say, published stats measure new acquisitions only, whereas the sample here consists of new *and* used buyers, which correspond to different market situations. The latter is overwhelmingly larger in terms of volume: fully two-thirds of Canada's 4.45 million vehicle transactions in 2010 involved pre-owned cars (Romeo, 2012g; Toljagic, 2011c), a two-to-one margin. Breakdowns of this total are difficult to come by,<sup>5</sup> but it stands to reason compacts capture more than a quarter of the combined market since their relative abundance and affordability spurs more frequent turn-over. In other words, the sample's choices are perhaps more representative of the general population than at first glance, but probably not by much: a one-half market-share for compacts strikes me as excessive. On the other hand, sales data

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<sup>5</sup> More detailed metrics tend to be proprietary, requiring costly subscriptions to data services such as *DesRosiers Automotive Consultants*.



aggregate nationally, whereas my respondents are mainly residents of central Toronto, in what is commonly called the 'former' or 'old' city. Urbanites undoubtedly do drive smaller cars in numbers greater than suburban or rural Canadians, but again, likely not to the degree suggested by the sample. In short, interrogating the validity of statistics takes us only so far. I may not have the relevant data needed to pass judgement on the normality of the sample, but were they available, the sample would likely remain atypical.

I believe the sample's characteristics are ultimately a function of too narrow a recruitment process, such that I ended up mining a stratum of buyers who chose sub-compacts and SUVs in equal measure. These are, for all intents and purposes, young urban professionals and their arts-oriented, centre-leftist brethren, 'hipsters.' While I did not set out to attract so similar a group of respondents, their relative distinctiveness has proven analytically useful. Seen from the perspective of Bourdieu, one could say they constitute a class in the objective sense, a "set of agents...in homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogeneous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions..." (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984: 101). By extension, because classes differ in their experiences of market immersion, one could argue economization is a

socially contingent disposition, a class *habitus* or “socialized subjectivity” (2005: 211) with respect to major purchases.

As much as I am convinced this is so, I unfortunately cannot claim it in good conscience: because I did not intend to assemble such a homogeneous cohort, I have not gathered nearly enough data needed to justify their homology. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu and his colleagues probed participants’ lifestyles in excruciating detail, generating a range of data from political opinions and affiliations to mealtime habits. Bourdieu furthermore does not simply posit dispositional differences qualitatively, he plots them quantitatively via *correspondence analysis*, a technique assuming an isomorphic, one-to-one relation between “distinctive systems of dispositions ... [and their] social conditions of production” (1984: 261). The result is a map of constellations of dispositions fixed along axes corresponding to structures of capital (e.g. 1984: 262). Whatever the pros and cons of the approach, homologies are necessarily plural: one can only know a group’s homogeneity in juxtaposition to others. Since I am, of course, in no position to carry out such a proof, having nothing to compare against, the *habitus* argument must remain speculative at best. As much as this project is inspired by Bourdieu in general and *Social Structures* in particular, I am

afraid I must relegate him from conceptual spotlight until such time when a truly comparative study is possible.

In short, when I began researching I made the methodological 'choice' to favour buyers over sellers, which was something of a path-dependence carried over from previous incarnations of the project. But as things unfolded, it soon became apparent that another bias was also at play, for better and worse: namely, the pursuit of "a specific...trajectory of economization," as I called it in the opening chapter (i.e. disentangled dispositions from entangled experiences), which came about as a pragmatic, but unintended consequence of favouring a specific type of buyer. Do other types or classes of buyers experience different trajectories of economization? This is a question over which, for the time being, I can only salivate!

## **Seller's Deficit**

The decision to leave perceptions of salespeople aside is justified on the grounds my focus is on the *extra-occupational* emergence of economy: the agents I am tracking deduce economy without recourse to constant market immersion, in contrast to professionals whose calculative capacities are conditioned in the crucible of continuous competition. Yet forsaking the world of sales altogether is not a good idea either, for an important, early lesson in the buyer's education is

sussing cultural and fiscal logics to which she is not privy (e.g. how much wiggle room really is there in price, and why does the salesman *always* have to consult with the manager?). Understanding the buyer's burgeoning sense of economy, in other words, demands at least some elucidation of the socio-cultural terrain she interlopes. Of course, doing this right requires input from industry insiders, a quixotic chore at the best of time: as Mitchel Abolafia (1998: 77) reminds us, "Ethnographic research on the production and reproduction of market culture is inherently difficult." I endeavoured all the same.

I first approached a Mazda salesman with whom I transacted in 2010. I explained the project, emphasizing my aim was not to vilify the sales profession. Pensively he responded, "What you're doing is very important," and asked me to contact him the following week as his immediate schedule was in flux. That was the last I heard from him. Fortunately a promising lead presented itself shortly after at a GM dealership: while dropping off flyers, an eager salesman offered to be interviewed without prompting. Overjoyed but unprepared, I soon followed up, which, again, went nowhere. Requests for interviews likewise met with silence from the President and public face of TADA (Trillium Automotive Dealers Association), the provincial lobby for new car dealers.

Eventually an acquaintance working in an administrative capacity at Ford explained the probable cause for all this. In declining to be interviewed, she said the terms of her employment expressly forbid outside discussion of her job or the company's day-to-day operations. She and her colleagues are apparently regularly reminded of this prohibition. I can only presume similar policies exist across the industry; whether and with what force they extend to franchisees and their employees, however, is an open question. Fortunately in early 2012 I scored an interview with a recently departed saleswoman for a European luxury brand. Her insights appear sporadically throughout the chapters.

A sample of one is laughable however, for which reason the task of filling the deficit of cultural knowledge about car markets falls to a textual analysis of automotive journalism. By no means does the car press yield a treasure trove of accounts of actual economic behaviours, but reading between the lines reveals something perhaps more important: pronouncements of a normative nature, namely advice and descriptions of 'smart' buying. Better still, every so often excerpts of proprietary research are released, shedding valuable light on how car companies apprehend the buying population, divvying it up into progressively nuanced, actionable categories. When juxtaposed against informants'

experiences, these reveal an analytically intriguing tension between 'theory' and practice.

Since textual analysis represents the dissertation's secondary method after ethnography, I beg the reader's pardon for not having comprehensively canvassed the automotive mediascape. For reasons of economy of time and effort, I concentrated on *Toronto Star Wheels*, which bills itself as Canada's largest automotive publication (on what basis I cannot say). Appearing as a double section in the newspaper's Saturday edition, it comprises usually 40 pages of journalistic content, classifieds and paid advertising. An on-line version also exists ([wheels.ca](http://wheels.ca)), providing content above and beyond the print edition. The nice thing about *Wheels*, in contrast to smaller or more focused sites and publications, is that it goes beyond simply pre- and reviewing cars. It delves also into themes of automobility, albeit with the critical sensibility of a car enthusiast.

Pretty much all the chapters that follow are enhanced in some way or another by *Wheels*-oriented analysis or critique; Chapters Three and Six however, stand out. In Chapter Three I examine how car-journalists, mainly through their reviews, perform – in the ANT sense – car-buying and car markets. In Chapter Six I interpret a general sales orientation to the buying public by way of 'Dealer's Voice,' an outlet for the aforementioned dealers association, TADA. Authorship at

the time of writing is held by President Frank Romeo, who succeeded Sandy Liguori (presidency changes annually). 'Dealer's Voice' does not definitively convey the culture of car sales, but they do provide serviceable, at times brutally frank, approximations of it.

Much more could be written about the methodological quandaries outlined in this chapter – a problematic is, by definition, open ended – but I believe the discussion can be safely brought to a close. In general, doing this project has instilled in me the importance of nimbleness, playfulness and angularity – virtues I hope are reflected in the analysis to come. Such a spirit of resourcefulness comes, however, with a maddening limitation: I can point to the class-contingent nature of economization, but I cannot interrogate it. Surmounting this limitation, it goes without saying, will require working out the methodological kinks in subsequent rounds of research. Given the labour-intensity of recruitment, my goal would be to delineate a single, clearly contrasting class of buyers to the yuppies and hipsters – 'yippsters' – assembled here. I dare say construction workers, contractors and other established skilled-trade workers would represent the perfect foil. Demographically in Toronto at least, they are dissimilar to those I interviewed, tending to come from the ranks of Canadian newcomers. Moreover, unlike yippsters, I suspect they conform to

more typically American buying practices, acquiring bigger (categories of) vehicles as their credit lines and wallets expand. The car for them, we might hypothesize, occupies unique mental space, simultaneously an ambulatory work tool, a status symbol, passport to outdoor leisure and over-glorified cod piece (quite a few respondents, by contrast, professed an almost disdainful, “point-A to point-B” indifference to cars). If a diametrically different dynamic in the buyer-car-seller nexus is to be discerned, I would hope to find it in the experiences of these prototypically ‘manly men.’

Until then, let us begin to understand what it took for our cohort to become economic. The first step is to elaborate a certain economic reality: the reality, as Polanyi first coined it, of embeddedness.



## Chapter Three

# An Entangling Frame: Sociality

THE CALLON-MILLER DEBATE FROM CHAPTER ONE IS, at its core, an argument over the conceptual relevance of *homo economicus*. For Miller it is without anthropological merit, and in those rare instances where or when something approximating pure, disentangled action is the order of the day, enormous political investments have likely been undertaken to make it so (e.g. IMF structural adjustments [cf. 1998: 195-9]). These amount to no less than “the power to actualise the model of the market” (2005: 11). Callon (1998a: 19; 2007: 343), on the other hand, sees disentanglement as entanglement’s necessary other: disentanglement represents a momentary bridging of entangled but otherwise incompatible *actor-worlds*, giving rise to the condition of movement or circulation upon which economies are sustained. Disentanglement is therefore to entanglement as the synapse to the neuron or, to use an automotive simile, the clutch to the gear. Our job as social scientists is to understand the ways this

moment is formatted, or rather the conditions by which homo economicus is made empirically possible.

The purpose of this and the next chapter is to transpose this debate from the conceptual to ethnographic level. The interview data strongly support Miller's 'exclusively entanglement' thesis, which is to say purely technico-financial calculation is rare during the transaction (what happens afterwards is another matter [see Chapter Seven]). This does not mean the transaction goes unframed. Framing does occur, but the frame, rather than cleansing the calculative 'space' of non-technico-financial concerns, is primarily composed of them. And while these putatively extraneous factors vary greatly, I want to focus on two: in the following chapter I examine the specifically gendered nature of car sales, while presently I consider the importance of the buyer's sociality more generally. By this I mean the logic of her extra-market relationships – her connectedness to others and all that this entails.

### **Emptor Automobilicus?**

Before debunking disentanglement however, I first want to devote attention to assessing what disentanglement concretely means in context of car sales, or what a 'suitably' framed car consumer looks like. Because Callon himself has never attempted this – car sales, to reiterate, have never been his primary focus – it is

up to us to flesh out *emptor automobilicus*. Fortunately Callon does provide us with a point of departure: consumption, he observes, is framed primarily via consumerist associations and magazines, which serve the vital function of simulating an object's use, and in some cases even destroying it to set its limits. Such testing is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, "inform[ing] as well as forming the consumer-reader" (Muniesa & Callon, 2007: 177). Moreover, were Callon to revisit this topic today, he would presumably mention the migration of such publications online, which has precipitated a veritable explosion in lay- or user-generated feedback that rivals in importance the 'learned' opinions of expert reviewers. Fully 84% of American consumers say they are influenced by such evaluations (Romeo, 2012f).

By extension then, automotive journalism plays a central role in disentangling the complexity of the automobile and hence making the buyer economic. Car reviews offer prospective buyers a wealth of independent analysis, ranging from lists of options and price-points to assessments of what the car does well and badly. More important though is how this information is presented. Almost never are specifications merely laid out; they are compared and qualified against those of rival manufacturers. Case in point: Costa Mouzouris (2012) introduces the 2013 Hyundai Elantra Coupe – a sportier, two-

door variant of the Elantra compact sedan – as “a new addition to Hyundai’s lineup [whose] crosshairs are aimed squarely at the Honda Civic Coupe.” Does the basic, GLS model of the Coupe represent a good buy? Apparently so. “For comparable equipment,” Mouzouris reckons,

you’d have to opt for the Civic Coupe EX, which costs \$290 more than the Elantra GLS but lacks the Hyundai’s heated front seats and power sunroof. ...But you can’t forget the Kia Forte Koup, which is remarkably well-equipped at \$18,995 in the base EX trim [versus \$19,949 for the Elantra]. Add an automatic transmission and the power sunroof, however, and the price jumps to \$21,095. And the Hyundai still has more passenger and cargo space than either of those cars.

Elsewhere in the review, the Elantra’s road noise – essentially rumble discernible inside – is assessed against the Buick Verano, which, Mouzouris believes, provides the “benchmark for cabin calmness in affordably priced cars.” To know and evaluate a car, in short, is to contextualize it competitively.

The “comparo,” as it is called, is the cornerstone of automotive journalistic objectivity, so much so a reviewer may go out of his way to justify his comparative acumen. Why, for instance, is Peter Bleakney’s (2012) preview of the Cadillac ATS, a sports luxury sedan meant to outperform its German rivals, especially authoritative? “Having almost literally stepped off a plane after

driving a couple of BMW 3s in Germany,” he explains, “my *derriere* was in tune for a reasonably accurate *comparo* (4,000 kilometres and jet-lag notwithstanding).” The comparative moment of a review either makes or breaks it, for which reason the reviewer’s comparative imagination is arguably his most decisive attribute.

With respect to economy, which boils down to a vehicle’s value proposition or, as Mark Toljagic (2011a) uncomplicatedly puts it, “high bang-for-the-buck quotient,” this too is a function of comparison. Nothing is spared from the objectivizing gaze of a well-seasoned comparativist, not even the ecological virtues of hybrid and electric vehicles (EVs). Indeed for the value-obsessed reviewer, the mere suggestion of virtue is risible: Jim Kenzie’s (2011c) review of the 2012 Toyota Prius V, a larger version of the popular Prius hybrid, begins with the quip, “If you...want to show your neighbours how ‘green’ you are, you might just as well wear a sign around your neck reading, ‘I’d vote to David Suzuki if he ever ran for anything.’” “As for value,” Kenzie laments,

Prius V runs some \$5,000-to-\$10,000 more than [a] comparably equipped Mazda5, Kia Rondo, Hyundai Tucson, or gasoline VW Golf Wagon, to name but a few, and roughly equal to the Golf TDI Wagon [*i.e.* VW’s *efficient diesel burner*]. All of the competition vehicles are better performers, the VW TDI is comparable in fuel consumption and the others start

with several thousand litres of free gasoline in a theoretical storage tank in your garage. ...[I]n most cases, you will be driving your Prius V for a long, long time before the fuel savings start to make up for the price differential. And all that time, it will still be slow and noisy. Here – let me help you with that David Suzuki sign.

The chief benefit of comparing, as Kenzie illustrates, is that it provides the reader with a new conceptual toolkit – the image of “a theoretical storage tank” is particularly useful – allowing her to cut through preconceptions and marketing rhetoric to reveal the economic essence of an automobile. The art of comparing would seem to be guided then by a single axiom, namely, value is the only virtue.

Yet Kenzie’s review equally reveals that comparing is seldom black-and-white. Indeed, based on size, fuel consumption and price-point, the Prius V is thanklessly tricky to match on paper. Kenzie is right to emphasize the Golf diesel wagon, which comes closest on all three counts, but his other alternatives raise eyebrows: most glaringly, because of the Prius V’s “crossover-ish body” (i.e. it rides higher than a hatchback, but lower than a CUV), he identifies six CUVs,<sup>1</sup> which are inappropriate for two reasons. First off, unlike the Prius V, they are aggressively priced (i.e. they are decidedly non-premium vehicles). Secondly, I

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<sup>1</sup> There are 10 comparables in all. The six CUVs are: the Chevrolet Equinox, Ford Escape, Honda CR-V, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage and Nissan Rogue. The non-CUV alternatives include the Kia Rondo, Mazda5 and VW Golf Wagon, gasoline and diesel versions.

doubt anyone considering a Prius V would seriously entertain a crossover; despite advances in fuel economy, they are still SUVs at the end of the day and look every bit like one. Perhaps Kenzie felt compelled to include crossovers for better or worse, feeling there could be no meaningful comparison without them. Yet, the Mercedes B-class hatchback has been available in Canada for quite some time and resembles the Prius V far more than any CUV. The similarly priced Mercedes is also “crossover-ish,” and volume-wise it sits somewhere between the regular Prius and Prius V. Furthermore, one has to wonder why green vehicles did not make Kenzie’s list of alternatives. Would not the prospective Prius V buyer, likely a deep-pocketed *and* ideologically motivated soul, cross-shop these? I in fact suspect Toyota’s target audience here includes existing and potential ‘Prius-ers,’ but Kenzie does not directly address the question whether the V warrants the upgrade.

The point here is that different comparables can and do lead to different conclusions. For instance, in light of the Mercedes’ requirement for premium gasoline, which it consumes in not-so-frugal quantities, the Prius V’s lack of ride refinement may just look like an acceptable trade-off. On the other hand, analytically speaking, there are good reasons to preclude the B-class and Prius: the Prius V is neither in the same league of luxury as the Mercedes, nor size

segment as the Prius. All of this is to say *how* one compares is arguably as important as the comparison itself, if not more.

But let us not assume methodological quandaries such as these go unnoticed in the literature. *Wheels* recently published a letter from a reader chastising Kenzie (2012a) and his colleagues for fixating on drive-train and transmission options at the expense of “real useful info on new cars.” The reader contends that to be economically meaningful, reviews need to address things like maintenance costs and real-world fuel consumption, since Natural Resource Canada’s official figures of the latter are unrealistic. Kenzie counters by noting both maintenance and fuel are “relatively unimportant” compared with depreciation, the single largest expense of car ownership, and even this is not worth scrutinizing since used car prices – depreciation’s residual – are difficult to forecast. When all is said and done, Transport Canada numbers “may not be accurate, but they are at least comparable, vehicle to vehicle.” The aim of a review, he goes on to say, is to help ascertain “whether...the car should or should not be on the ‘shopping list’ for prospects *in its segment*” (emphasis added).

In other words – and here we arrive at the heart of the matter – a reviewer does not compare automobiles so much as conjure a segment of automobiles, defining its boundaries and technico-financial topography. Technical specs,



bewildering as they may be, are the stock-in-trade of reviews because they are tangible and eminently comparable. They open up the segment cognitively, rendering it actionable insofar as allowing the reader to deploy what Friedrich Hayek (1948: 35, 46-7, 84-5, 93) called “Pure Logic of Choice:” that is to say, technico-financial comparison makes possible a truly objective assignment of value, based *not* on the intrinsic properties of a car per se, but a car’s “significance in view of the whole means-end structure” in her mind (1948: 85).

Seen from an ANT perspective, it is only on the basis of meticulous, value-oriented identification of – *and with* – market segments that the buyer is able to disentangle the complexity of the automobile. The review invites the reader to distil her driving needs, thereby situating and simulating herself in the marketplace. She imagines herself a “hyperequipped consumer, an autonomous and independent consumer, wh[o] faces objects whose qualities are hyperexplicit” (Muniesa & Callon, 2007: 177). There is a double qualification at play here, that of the automobile and reader. The latter comes to embrace or disavow the automotive qualities in question, and in the process to know herself as a consumer, rendering her future decisions less risky. In ANT parlance, the review is a *market device* or *economic agencement*: as it renders things comparable and calculable, “[t]he same is done to persons (physical or moral), to their

reciprocal duties and to their relations to things” (Muniesa, Millo & Callon, 2007: 4).

Agencement here does not imply that a Pure Logic of Choice is cold, resembling some robotic ranking of preference. Indeed how could it? “Perhaps the most important thing to remember” Kenzie (2011a) observes, “is that you’re buying with your heart, not your head.” An optimal choice, he implies, is achievable by tempering the heart with head, a sort of calibration of “what you need, what you actually want, and what you can afford.” The calculus of car buying is, in truly economic rhetorical fashion, a balancing act, simultaneously hot and cold, visceral and factual, full of both emotion and rigour. It would appear then that Callon and Kenzie, stand-ins for ANT and automotive journalism, speak similarly about market immersion, frames being analogous to segments. Moreover, both presuppose rationality as a process of technical immersion: consumers are *rational*, willing to pierce through the technicality of the things in real time, so to speak, to uncover their particular means-end structure.

How well does this portrait of consumer as evolving comparativist correspond to ethnographic reality? To what degree does automotive journalism perform the actions of flesh-and-blood buyers? The answer is not promising:

only one person, DG (interviewees are identified by initials), approximated the ideal of a disciplined comparativist well-versed in the intricacies of his chosen segment – compact sedans. By this I mean he not only understood how hotly contested the segment is (“[in] the category that we’re buying,” he explains, “because gas is going through the roof, they’re all hitting [quality] like crazy”), he could also justify the superiority of his choice, the Elantra, in comparative terms:

It became pretty apparent that it was easily the best one. It was the best price, best financing, best rated – it just won car-of-the-year. It won safety awards, uh, it’s huge: it’s got more space inside then – in fact, the government doesn’t...categorize it as a compact because it’s so big.<sup>2</sup> ...But the reason it’s fuel efficient is that it doesn’t weigh anything. The thing’s light, light!

DG’s comparative prowess is, in any event, atypical in that he self-identifies – jokingly but equally proudly – as a “research guy” who would not even “buy a DVD player without researching it.” For the task at hand, he read and test-drove scrupulously if not obsessively, and when it came time to commit, he showed up at the dealership armed with 20 reviews on the Elantra and its competition.

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<sup>2</sup> One often reads about the Elantra’s comparative bigness (cf. Edmunds Inc., 2011; Flammang, 2011). Where this comes from, for fuel economy purposes the US EPA classifies cars based on cabin volume, according to which the Elantra is considered mid-sized. Yet the ‘upgrade’ is hollow, since even the sub-compact Chevrolet Sonic hatchback qualifies as mid-sized (DOE & EPA, 2012).

No one else was as 'segmentally' literate, though *BE* (initials of women respondents are italicized), did come close in terms of the explicitness of her decision-making frame. She rather ingenuously applied to her search for a new Subaru Impreza hatchback the ethical standards of her profession, engineering, with respect to bid tendering. She solicited quotes from three local Subaru dealers, expressly promising to each not to use the lowest to bludgeon another into a lower offer. The point of the tactic was to simplify the nerve-racking negotiations – “I was trying to keep my emotions of it” she says – which it did financially, but not relationally: one of the losing 'bidders' felt betrayed when he learned she had taken her business elsewhere, a sentiment he punctuated by hanging up on her.

### **Enter “Vroom Hilda”**

That DG and *BE* were the lone informants to formalize their frames – to impose, that is, an explicit principle to their decision-making and -taking – does not privilege their calculative capacities by any stretch, for not all frames are formal. *BE*'s case reveals in fact a multiplicity of interacting frames: obscured by her more formal, financial frame lay an informal, relational one which could not totally mitigate misunderstandings. Variations on this theme of relational ambivalence are so ubiquitous in the interviews one can comfortably posit an

inverse ordering of frames, the relational ones constituting primary points of reference. Most of these relational frames are informed by some notion of sociality, which I take to mean an amalgam of *prior* micro-relationships and identities that flow from them. More specifically, I want to emphasize in the remainder of this chapter that the determination of value, in the first instance at least, is fundamentally a problem of social, not technical immersion, a sort of internal negotiation with respect to one's face-to-face relationships and identities. It is this relational logic which provides the justificatory matrix of value.

There are two ways of tracing this logic. The first, which I would like to illustrate in some detail, requires digging – *à la* Polanyi – through the formal irrationality of a course of action to reveal the substantive reason animating it. Take CD, purchaser of a new Kia Rio5 sub-compact hatchback, whose pool of potentials confounded sub-compacts with compacts: “I was looking at the [Nissan] Versa, I was looking at the Honda Fit, I was looking at the Rabbit [*i.e. the fifth generation VW Golf.*], uh, what else – Mazda3. I guess all the usual sub-compacts at the time.” Formally speaking, CD had given herself a sizeable analytical handicap: compacts (*i.e. the Rabbit and Mazda3*) cannot compete with subs at the level of price while, conversely, subs typically cannot compete when it comes to room, features, performance or finish. Substantively however, she had

positioned herself within the frame of 'entry-level hatchback,' which from a lay perspective makes reasonable visual sense, particularly in North America where sedans and trucks have been the norm historically. Indeed, that *CD* never contemplated sedan versions of the Rio, Mazda3, etc., which are invariably priced less than hatchbacks, suggests that for some people, the distinction between hatchback and sedan is more decisive than sub- versus compact. It seems then to me that the more important question here is not, *how do buyers frame their choices?* – which in *CD*'s case invariably returns an unhelpfully unfavourable answer – but rather, *on what grounds do they perceive frames in the first place?* Only by posing this question can we begin to discern the sociality that underlies all automotive decision making- and taking.

I unfortunately did not pursue this line of questioning with *CD*, but did with others, notably *WB* (married, father of two), whose partner, an up-and-coming real estate agent, had recently touched a healthy batch of commissions. They decided to apply the 'winnings' towards refreshing the familial fleet with used, but luxury vehicles: she ended up swapping her VW Jetta for a BMW 3-series wagon, while *WB*'s failing Ford Explorer gave way to a Volvo XC90. As much as *WB* relished the prospect of a bigger, 'badder,' better crossover, he simply could not give himself licence to accept it at first:

I sort of felt like, 'Who the hell do we think we are buying two really nice cars within such a short period of time?' [*He clears his throat.*] I'm – like, I'm still used to going to my parents' house to help me pay for rent-money, you know? I'm still living in *that* world; I can't believe I'm married and I have children now and I live in a house that I own. So, the whole [*Pause.*] – that, that's – that's really weird. In my mind, I was like, 'What are my friends going to say?' Right? The fact that we're...yeah – [like], 'This feels really strange to be throwing this kind of money around.'

WB is hinting at something here that PP (married, father of one) demonstrates more fully. Basically, how one construes one's choices is rooted in what we might call *social sight*, in the sense both of 'seeing' (i.e. we identify with the choices of our family, friends and acquaintances) and 'being seen' (i.e. our choices are meant to project or say something about ourselves):

PP: We already knew that we were very interested in the Honda Fit. And we knew there were a couple other models of cars that we thought would be similar, like the Mazda3. Those were the two ones we went in primarily thinking we would investigate.

MV (author): And...why those two specifically?

PP: Yeah sure. The Honda Fit is a sexy little hatchback. It looks cool. We have a couple of friends who have one. We had a chance to see it inside and out and it's a very popular car in Vancouver right now so they're everywhere. And, uh, I think, you know, it's very – because it's catchy and a sexy little hatchback...it's easy to want one. So that's why the Honda Fit.

MV: OK.

PP: And the Mazda3 because we also have a friend who has a Mazda3...and we borrowed their car for a week, so we knew a bit about it. ...[T]hat was why we included it on our list. We knew it was a bit more expensive but we had sort of toyed with the idea of even getting a Mazda5 [*i.e. the van variant of the -3.*]. Are we going to have more kids? Probably, hopefully, and so then we – so that was why Mazda ended up in our conversation.

As with *CD*, choosing among the Fit, Mazda3 and -5 makes little, if any formal sense. Yet intuitively, they do hang together, each car appealing to a different dimension or possibility of self: the Fit to PP's aesthetic sensibilities, the Mazda5 to his desire for more children, the -3 a stepping stone to that realization.

In the ANT/car-journalistic portrayal of events, precision in comparison demands that such symbolic factors be suspended temporarily, disentangled or, as I have paraphrased Kenzie, 'calibrated with the head.' *CD* and PP's experiences, however, suggest the inverse: moments of comparison and calculation – culminating in the all-important question, what can I afford? – must never invalidate symbolic prerogatives. Put otherwise, it is sociality in the form of relationally contingent perceptions of self – potentialities of self projected and reflected in our immediate relationships – which ratifies market values, not the act of comparison. The outcome of PP's story bears this out: budgetary



constraints steered him to a used, but low-kilometre Nissan Versa hatchback, an incredible find representing something like a 30% discount over a comparable Honda Fit. Despite the savings, PP still had to convince himself he was making a good choice:

PP: [The seller] sent us a long e-mail...saying, 'You know, 10-5 [*i.e.* \$10,500.] is really firm....' AN [PP's partner.] and I just looked at each other and were like, 'You know what, we like this car and 10-5 is a fair price for it.' It's got nothing on it; it's got no kilometres on it, so—

MV: Yeah, what did it have again?

PP: In the end, I looked – 16-2 [*i.e.* 16,200 km.].

MV: [*Incredulous.*] That's it?

PP: That's it.

MV: And what year is it?

PP: 2010.

MV: [*As if disappointed.*] Oh 2010. OK, yeah it's new.

PP: It was new. So then also, the other thing is, reading on the way down, the 2010 standard, base-model Nissan Versa got a major upgrade from the older models. It actually came with a whole bunch of things standard, like ABS brakes and heated seats and power mirrors and power doors and air conditioning. So the base-model Nissan has a lot more than the base-model Honda, in terms of the bells and whistles. And so, that also appealed to me and I was like, 'You know, it's not a sexy car, not as

popular right now, but for a very decent price, you're getting way more. OK, it's not the Fit, but it's still a good hatchback.' ...For a couple days there...I was like, 'Oh wouldn't it be great to get a colourful Honda Fit – zippy little Honda Fit and zip around in that Fit!'

MV: [*Laughing.*]

PP: But reading the review on edmunds.com [*A respected US car website.*]...it said, 'The Versa is a practical car. And, you know, it's not – if you want something a little sportier, then turn to the Fit or its equivalents. But, uh, the Versa is perfectly acceptable as a little hatchback and so on.' And like, well, that's really what we want. That's really who we are. This is what we're in it for. And so, I felt really at ease with the decision at that point, because it was like, 'Yeah, we're being true to ourselves. This is what we want it for: we wanted to have a car, to be able to drive around, to be comfortable. We wanted it to be a hatchback. We wanted it to be manual, we wanted it to have air conditioning, and it's the right deal for us.' So at that point, that – that's kind of like when I was ready to do it.

The calculative device, the Edmunds review, played an important role here, though not in the formative sense of helping PP navigate the acquisition process. It instead helped him bring a satisfactory sense of closure to an experience which sapped large amounts of time, attention and effort, and exposed his initial lack of *savoir-faire*. It provided him a means of reconciling what he *had* to do with what he *wanted* to do, and in the process to glimpse another dimension of himself in

the Versa – a practical, sensible and reasonable self. The review did not refine the formal accuracy of his calculus, but rather increased its justifiability, facilitating its communication to himself and others.

For a great many buyers then, the act of framing is perfectly commensurable with substantively-oriented (i.e. extra-technical and extra-pecuniary) decision-making and -taking. Moreover, the absence of formal calculation does not vitiate the possibility of strategic calculation. This was particularly true for MP (married, father of two). In the following transcript he recounts how he felt after acquiring a used VW Jetta. Considered formally, his decision is an abomination: there is little here to suggest he thought about the implications, nor hint he undertook a reasonable assessment of his family's motoring needs. His explanations instead resemble a beautifully honest cacophony, alternately remorseful, comical, contradictory and sentimental. Yes, the Jetta is baffling, but it is also joyous:

MP: We got in it and we were just tickled pink. We were so excited because, you know, this was a quiet, smooth, safe, beautiful car. And we don't have many nice things – certainly not luxurious things – and to us this was like *luxury*. And you know, I still didn't really know in detail what I had bought. It wasn't until quite a while later that I realized I had alloy wheels, which look slick, but I don't actually like them because it's a much sportier ride–

MV: It is, it is, y-, y-, yeah–

MP: It's not a smooth, quiet ride; it's a hard ride. It's nice on the highway, but anywhere else it's kind of noisy in the city. And then realizing it was turbo, which I didn't really take in what 1.8T meant [*i.e. a 1.8-litre turbo engine.*]. You know, so it uses more gas, which is nice on the highway, but I'm not a highway driver–

MV: And as well, did they tell you premium for that one, premium gas?

MP: Oh yes, so I've got to use the most expensive gas, so now it's \$67 to fill up – the last time I filled up. Luckily I work at home, so we only fill up once a month. Not like the [neighbours] next to us – they've got their two kids, they live in Ajax [30 km from central Toronto.], they commute. They put in \$70 to fill up twice a week – twice a week! You know, that's six-grand a year in gasoline, a little bit more, I'm sure!

MV: Yeah, that's another story. Anyway, so, um–

MP: So in that respect, I'd have to say, overall, you know, at that point you forget about the money–

MV: [*Excitedly.*] You forget about it! Yeah, yeah, it's true, it's true–

MP: You're so happy, and I felt so safe, and I have to tell you something silly, but we also felt – well mostly me – that, you know, Gerard [*The family cat.*] had died the month previous, and we felt this was a last, some kind of love from Gerard that this car just came. I mean, I believe things come when they're needed anyway, but this car *just came* before the farm trip, at the right time. Even driving out to get the car

in the Golf [MP's *previous car.*], we all thought we were sad we were losing the [Golf], we'd hit a bump and I'd say, 'You see, this is why we need a new car!' It's costing 800-bucks, 9-, 1,000-bucks to do the shocks on the car. The body's falling apart, so, you know, it was tough.

mv: Did you name the car Gerard?

MP: No, we named it Vroom Hilda!

MP's strategic 'sins' are numerous at first glance. He admits he had a poor understanding of the car's technical and mechanical performance, followed by the unpardonable choice to "forget about the money" at the final stage of negotiation. More troubling still, his description is contradictory: he starts off extolling the Jetta's "quiet, smooth" ride, but then complains about its "noisy" and "hard" low-profile tires. Vroom Hilda is ultimately presented as a slippery object of purchase whose characteristics are not a function of the car itself, but MP's meandering narrative. Summarily put, MP's choice was formally irrational, if by that we mean the inability to satisfy clearly delineated needs for the lowest possible cost.

But in a broader sense, Vroom Hilda is thoroughly justifiable and justifactory. What I mean by the latter, it makes little difference that the 1.8T is a notoriously thirsty engine, since MP's fuel costs still compare favourably to those of his neighbours' grown children. He treats fuel consumption, in other words,

not as a characteristic in itself, but a means to valorize his life choices and situation (viz. an urbanite whose work and family require little commuting). And then of course, there is the animus MP purports the car to possess: its spiritual link to a recently departed pet; its providential intervention in the life of the family; its anthropomorphic engagement with the children. These benefits are quite literally priceless to the family's well-being.

Exigencies of family are indeed an often inescapable component of one's calculus. I am not referring to those banal, but complicated deliberations over what vehicle best accommodates  $x$  people – or  $x$  plus  $y$  in the case of growing families, or whether  $y$  warrants thinking about another type of car. Rather – and here we arrive at the second method of tracing the sociality of the transaction – I am saying we need to remain sensitive to all those relationships that get dragged into the choice in very consequential ways, such that the transaction becomes much more than an exchange of money for 1,800-odd kilos of metal, glass, plastics and rubber. Relations of family, friendship and work hang too in that balance.

No one exemplifies this predicament better than TK, who faced the delicate task of negotiating a used Honda Element crossover *and* her father's authority. On the one hand, her father's presence was indispensable, since he is quite

mechanically knowledgeable. But TK also found him a liability, chiefly because “he always thinks people are out to get him.” Over the course of a day, they drove around Toronto to test three different Elements. Of these, TK preferred the second, her father the first:

TK: The first vehicle, my dad was going, ‘Just get it.’ It was a good price, but I was like, ‘No!’ I didn’t like the way it sounded when it cornered, and the guy who was driving it, he was like, ‘Yeah, I’m just using it right now for my own purposes.’ Um, and it was dirty and it looked a little bit, like, abused – a little bit abused. And it didn’t sound great, and there was rust and stuff on parts of the body, so I was like, ‘I don’t think so.’ ...The second one was looking fine, very polished and buffed. [*Laughing.*] I was a bit suckered in by that I think! And then the third vehicle...had some major transmission problems or something.... And then I was kind of like, ‘Shit, I need a vehicle, I’m going to get [the second] one.’ My dad was like, ‘OK, I don’t know.’

MV: OK, I’m hearing your father wasn’t particularly enamoured by that second one, right? Or was he?

TK: Well, he wondered about – there was kind of a low vibration in the first gear that he wasn’t sure about, and also, we couldn’t get it up to speed, so he couldn’t do a real *test* test. Um, maybe also a little bit because the guy who was selling it was more ‘salesman-ey’ type – I don’t know.

The final decision, including how much to pay, was TK’s. This was agreed upon beforehand. So when they arrived back at the second seller’s office, TK’s father

excused himself, leaving her to conclude the deal. Yet he may as well have stayed, for, as TK alludes below, *his* misgivings could never be separated from *her* choice. I asked how this made her feel:

MV: Is it a bit like anxiety, or not?

TK: Um, [*Pause.*] yes, but only in the sense of, like, you just don't know what the outcome will be, and you don't want to make a big mistake with big money.

MV: ...And if I can ask, was it too – was part of the anxiety because, [*Hesitantly.*] it was your–

TK: Dad?–

MV: Your family's money?–

TK: No, because it's ultimately mine.

MV: OK, so that's the way you worked it out.

TK: Yeah, yeah, totally. But um, no, I just didn't want to have, like – I personally didn't want to regret it. And yeah, I guess I didn't want, you know, my dad sort of saying, 'Well, I kind of told you, if only you had a good feeling about that.' And I'm like, 'Well, I've got to trust myself.' You know, it's got to be – it's my money, it's my choice. I was hoping he would give me a bit of guidance, and in the end, it was totally my choice. So I kind of went against him.

MV: [*Chuckling.*] But did that make you happy, to go against him? ...Or not happy, but–

TK: Not happy, but yeah, like, it was good for me. I think it was good for me for, like, breaking away from, you know, the sort of like, the dependence–



MV: Sure, sure, yeah, yeah....

*TK's* attempt to finish my second question is revealing: whereas I was wrongly supposing her anxiety stemmed from financial dependency, in fact it was a sense of moral dependency, a perception of filial obligation not to contradict his opinion. In the moment of purchase, the car, her money, her choice and his disapproval become fused, as Miller would say, in an aesthetic total. Regardless of whether *TK* experienced the outcome as positive – liberating even – this was not a harmonious totality: indispensable as he was, *TK's* father unwittingly infused it with tension and agonism. *TK* may have made the right choice, but it was not guilt-free. Ties of blood, so the cliché goes, are indeed thick.

*SS'* calculus is not burdened by familial considerations, but burdened it is nonetheless. Every four years he acquires his colleague's off-lease Acura luxury sedan. On the expiry date of the lease, the two make the trip to the dealership where *SS* assumes ownership and his colleague obtains a new model. They have repeated this cycle three times now. *SS* likes the arrangement because it eliminates much of the time and guess-work that go into car hunting. There remains, however, an important residual unknown, namely their collegial relations:

mv: What would you say is the greatest obstacle or concern with respect to making this arrangement – like, what’s the biggest unknown, I guess? I know a lot of the unknowns – and that’s why you like this arrangement – a lot of the unknowns have been taken care of.

ss: Right.

mv: But is there still some–

ss: Oh yeah, I think there are still some unknowns that – you know, [*Chuckling.*] whenever you’re doing business with family or friends, it could be dangerous. [*MV laughs.*] ...[N]ow fortunately, you know, the cars have been reliable and so forth, but I still think [of] that kind of unknown – you know, is this going to jeopardize our friendship? That kind of thing.

mv: Sure.

ss: Um, so that, you know, at the end is it going to blow, or is it going to throw a rod or something like that... [Y]ou don’t know that with [any] car you purchase used, but uh, then I’ll have to look at him every day....

mv: Yeah, of course. So, but knock on wood, with these last three [cars]–

ss: Yeah. ...And the other thing too is, like, after he – you know...he’s in his seventies. Pretty soon he’s not going to be driving or getting additional vehicles, what am I going to end up having to do for [*Trails off, chuckling.*]?

mv: [*Laughing.*] Convince him to keep getting them!

ss: Yeah, 'Keep driving,' exactly! I don't want to pay 50-thousand for a car.

mv: I guess I should have asked this before: do you – have you done anything that, [*Pause.*] you know, to–

ss: Influence him? ...Well, I tell him I like the Acura! ...Sometimes he's thinking, 'Well, maybe this time it'll be a Lexus and a – or Infiniti,' then he always comes back to Acura. ...But uh, he's pretty much his own man, so he'll go his own way.

The arrangement has worked flawlessly thus far; SS certainly harbours no regrets.

Yet he and his colleague make for curious trading partners: the fact SS cannot

completely rid himself of the fear of a lemon – it bobs like a naval mine

somewhere on the ocean of their friendship – indicates they can never really be

quits of each other. Nor are they necessarily equal partners: SS has in a sense

become dependent on the arrangement, evinced by how irksome he finds the

prospect of acquiring a car independently. For the foreseeable future then, he has

left himself little choice but to trust that the arrangement will continue as always,

Acuras delivered in impeccable condition like clockwork. But as a consequence,

their camaraderie is bound in the car come what may, as if held in cosmic escrow.

By now I hope the message is unmistakable. Rarely do acts of framing come across as a cold calculus, a purely objective exercise in frugally matching a design or engineering spec to a preconceived need or desire. Neither is this a

primarily emotionally driven process. It is instead governed by the buyer's sociality: her calculus *must*, at some level, address the all-too-malleable 'pretzel logic' of face-to-face relations and contingent identities. At the same time, it must reflect the desire to communicate, as PP so aptly pointed out, the right- or truthfulness of the choice. To believe any of this is peripheral or can be framed out of consideration is a myth. Relational dynamics lurk always in the buyer's thoughts, if not as explicitly as the examples above, then implicitly in her fear of unknowns: fear of being proven technical illiterate, of not choosing sensibly enough or of being 'played;' all of which amount, should they come to pass, to a shameful inability to justify the choice to the audience that matters most: herself.

## Chapter Four

# An Entangling Frame: Femininity

### A White Man's Game?

I WANT TO PAUSE FURTHER ON THIS IDEA of an 'always entangled' market encounter, for it represents the central tenet of a good many economic sociologies. Entanglement – or *embeddedness*, to use the neo-Polanyian term – reminds us that it makes little sense to treat the economic as an ontologically distinct realm. As illustrated in the previous chapter, one cannot point to purely economic dispositions or dispositives, since in practice nearly anything in one's life can be mobilized in the service of economic calculation. The problem with this argument, empirically at least, is that it risks descending into tautology, for what constitutes an economic 'bed' can be amorphous. I dare say the previous chapter runs afoul of this: I go to pains to demonstrate the calculative importance of face-to-face relations and identities in contrast to impulse or

objectivity, which quickly balloons to include everything from lifestyle to symbolism and familial to collegial negotiation.

To make amends for lack of precision, I focus in this chapter on an especially decisive instance of sociality: femininity. This is not simply to make the pedestrian observation that women have particular motoring preferences, patterns or demands. My aim instead is to specify the social construction – the relationally contingent nature, that is – of feminine calculus (and unlike in the prior chapter, the emphasis here falls squarely on the buyer-seller interaction). Simply put, because women experience distinct impositions of uncertainty, they make distinct calculations and justifications of balance.

As important a factor is femininity, specifying it ethnographically is tricky because its other – masculinity – is difficult to trace: men cannot really speak to gender experientially, seeing as we are generally accorded the privilege of gender blindness. Granted, some of the pressure for men to get the acquisition right conceivably stems from perceived masculinist exigencies, but no one I interviewed admitted as much, and I chose in any event not to pursue the topic for fear of alienation. On the other hand, of the 16 women respondents, only six flagged the issues of gender unprompted, and even then not without ambivalence. For the remaining ten, depending on the tenor of the interview, I

broached the subject myself, asking if she felt treated differently because her sex, which yielded two more fruitful conversations. All of this is to say the pool from which to draw inferences is not particularly large, such that this chapter is not of an analysis of gender per se (i.e. a comparison of men and women's experiences), but an indication of a context of perception, fear and constraint largely foreign to men.

Much of what I have to say here is framed by and responds to Ian Ayres' (1991, 1995) research on gender and race discrimination in car negotiations, which, some 20 years on, remains a popular touchstone on the subject (cf. Archuleta, 2012; Goldman, 2012). Ayres did not specifically examine buyers, but attempted to model salespeople's behaviours via standardized field simulations of negotiations. His perspective is squarely quantitative-game-theoretic, which provides an instructive counterpoint to the qualitative-ethnographic approach here.

In his first round of research (1991), he assembled a team of six buyer-testers divided into three groups. Each dyad paired a white man with, respectively, a white woman, a black man and a black woman. Each dyad was then randomly assigned new car dealerships in and around Chicago, which they visited separately, often on the same day, to negotiate a new car. Testers were

trained beforehand to conform to a rigid bargaining script (cf. 1991: 822-4). Basically they were instructed to avoid 'chit-chat,' divulge as little information about themselves as necessary (viz. [s-] he would personally arrange financing), and proceed to ascertain the dealer's best price on the car they were shown with the lowest sticker price. This was when the test officially began. Whatever the salesperson's initial offer, testers countered with an estimate of the marginal or dealer's cost; that is, the price at which the dealership covers costs to the manufacturer, but makes zero profit.<sup>1</sup> From then on, testers utilized a 'split the difference' strategy: if the salesperson responded with a counteroffer of, let us say, \$2000 above margin, testers next offered \$1000 above margin. The test continued until either the salesperson accepted the tester's offer or refused to haggle further. If the former occurred, testers politely excused themselves before signing any paperwork ("Thanks," they were taught to say, "but I need to think about this before I make up my mind" [1995: 115n26]). If the latter, the salesperson's offer just prior to the break in negotiation was recorded as the final price (1991: 827n33).

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<sup>1</sup> To give some context, my sales informant explained that MSRPs at her brand are typically pegged at 7% above margin. That mark-up pays for everything from overhead costs to sales commissions.



Over a sample of 165 negotiations at approximately 90 dealerships, the results (1991: 827-9) are sobering to say the least. The white men fared the best by far, negotiating final offers that on average included \$362 of dealer profit. Next was the white woman at \$504, followed by the black man at \$783 and black woman at \$1237. The black woman, in other words, was asked to pay over three times the mark-up as white men. Race and gender, statistical regression revealed, accounted for 37% of the variation in profits (1991: 838-40), which in the context of social science represents a decent measure of robustness.

What is going on, Ayres (1991: 844-5, 847-50) surmises, is *revenue-based discrimination*. Sellers “are using race and gender as the basis from which to draw inferences about willingness to pay and [about] the amount of potential or actual dealer competition for black[s] and females.” Salespeople treat non-white-men, put differently, as a captive clientele on the assumption they are less knowledgeable about automobiles or have higher search and negotiation costs (i.e. they cannot afford to devote too much time to car hunting) (1991: 849-50). Such circumstances create “a virtual monopoly” (1991: 845): the salesman strategically supposes the price a non-white-man is willing to pay *at his dealership* is tantalizingly close to her maximum reservation price (1995: 127; also cf. 1991: 844).

Explained less economically, because profits in car sales are concentrated in relatively few transactions, salespeople are keenly attentive to buyers beholden to high mark-ups for whatever reason.<sup>2</sup> Selling cars cannot help but resemble then, in the initial moment of contact at least, a “search for suckers” (1991: 854; 1995: 127). The salesperson may understand not *all* black women are ripe for overcharging, just as a pedestrian understands not all young drivers are reckless; yet because a certain *proportion* of black women paid more in the past, the practice of fishing for reservation prices becomes perversely strategic (1991: 855). Ayers (1991: 872) backs this up with an anecdote: “My cousin,” one dealer explains,

owns a dealership in a black neighbourhood. He doesn’t sell nearly as many [cars], but he hits an awful lot of home runs. You know, sometimes it seems like the people that can least afford it have to pay the most.

If there is a research design weakness here, it is, Ayres (1991: 826) openly concedes, that the effects of race and gender are being inferred on the basis of a single tester per target group. To mitigate this, Ayres took extra pains to guarantee uniformity among testers, not simply with respect to bargaining script, but also appearance, demeanour, tone of voice, even how they entered

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<sup>2</sup> Car buying advisor James Bragg (2004: xv, 56) calls this “the 80/20 Rule of Life,” by which 20% of transactions account for 80% of dealer profits.

dealerships (1991: 825-6). Correct training can, however, do only so much.

Indeed the training may have worked too well: testers became well versed in the racial and gender problematics underlying the project, which itself carries the possibility of scuttling the reliability of results (1991: 824-5n27; 1995: 114n22).

For these reasons a follow-up study was conducted (1995), this time with 19 teams of testers consisting of five black men, seven black women and eight white women, and involving 404 tests at 242 dealerships (1995: 109, 113).<sup>3</sup> Ayers neither disclosed the nature of research to testers – saying only it had to do with how dealers negotiate – nor the fact they were being paired (1995: 114, 114n22). He also added another style of bargaining – a ‘fixed concession’ strategy that saw testers raise offers by 20% of the margin in each round – to test whether splitting the difference exacerbates price disparity (i.e. if dealers’ initial offers to non-white-men are systematically higher, then successively splitting the difference can only entrench the gap, if not widen it) (1991: 830-1, 831n42; 1995: 115, 119n35).

The results were as expected by and large, with price discrimination once again confirmed, stunningly so: *“without any negotiating at all, 43% of the white men obtained a better offer than their counterparts achieved after bargaining for*

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<sup>3</sup> Scheduling glitches saw 98 tests go unpaired. Elsewhere (Ayers & Siegelman, 1995) Ayers re-ran the regression on the remaining 306 tests, which returned similar results.

an average of forty-five minutes” (1995: 119-20; italics added). Likewise as expected, bargaining style proved statistically insignificant, as did a number of other control variables (1995: 118-9). So compelling were these findings, they were discussed in mainstream American media, by Oprah no less (1995: 143n108)!

### **A Bifurcated Calculus**

The reader can probably anticipate where my argument is heading, something along these lines: women buyers cannot hope to approximate the ANT ideal of a suitably framed agent because systemic price discrimination impedes accurate calculation. That is to say, women can never orient strictly to the technico-comparative task at hand because unlike men, they must also attend to and reconcile the price distortion they face. They are ultimately forced to develop sorts of market competencies scarcely acknowledged by Callon *et al*, namely rationalities under duress. Ayers himself hints at such rationalities in the proviso (1991: 854n109) that ‘suckers’ need not be irrational; paying higher mark-ups may be rational given prohibitively high search costs or an aversion to haggling.

I do not adopt this argument however, not exactly at least, for I am not convinced Ayers has demonstrated gender price discrimination (I am, of course, in no position to make claims about race). I say this because differences in results

between the studies cast some doubt. The ordering of discrimination altered for starters, with black men faring worse than black women: the former negotiated final offers \$1132 above those of white men on average, versus \$446 for the later (this confirmed Ayers' suspicion of bias of his initial black-man-tester, who was a former car salesman turned law student [1991: 828n36; 1995: 117n29]). Secondly, disparity for white women – \$216 above white men – was *not* statistically significant (1995: 116-8), which, taken with the revised ordering, contradicts a core argument in the first article, namely, the effects of race and gender discrimination are “synergistic or ‘superadditive’” (1991: 829). The second study suggests attenuation of the gender effect, but Ayers has nothing to say about this.

I am not the first to wonder about Ayers' certainty with respect to price discrimination. Richard Epstein (1992: 53) notes that whereas Ayers calculated price on the basis of accepted and refused bids, standard metrological practice is to exclude the latter. What proportion of Ayers' sample consisted of refused offers? At over 70%, it is not insubstantial (in the second study 25.6% of offers from white men were accepted versus 14.9% for non-white-men [Ayers & Siegelman, 1995: 312]). Ayers is confident these low levels of acceptance did not compromise the conclusions (Ayers & Siegelman, 1995: 312), but at a minimum they commit him to the rather awkward assumption that car hagglers eventually

acquiesce to sellers – after 45 minutes to be precise. Because, as Epstein remarks, there is no reason to believe acquiescence is inevitable, it is possible Ayers' tests overstate the degree of actual price discrimination (for Ayers' counterpoint, cf. 1994: 82). On the other hand Ayers may not be too far off the mark: he (1991: 856) presents potentially corroborating data from the Consumer Federation of America indicating that many buyers do not realize new car prices are negotiable – 61% among blacks in fact. Yet one can equally interpret this statistic against Ayers: if most blacks and white women do not haggle in the first place, the testers then comprised an unrepresentatively aggressive sample of buyers, which conceivably and ironically means Ayers is *understating* the prevalence of price discrimination (Ayers [1994: 83; 1995: 312] acknowledges a similar possibility). All of this is to say that after two rounds of incontestably path-breaking research in which dealer intransigence to social research was soundly circumvented, Ayers may have cracked the riddle of reliability, but validity remains an open question.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There may actually be greater concerns, namely counterfactuals: *Wheels* contributor Lorraine Sommerfeld (2011) summarized a study by market-research-behemoth *J.D. Power and Associates* indicating the gender profit gap in Canada is \$20, although there is still a difference in trade-in values of \$2,500 across all car classes (\$870 for compacts), due to men's preferences for pricier vehicles and a tendency to trade them sooner. Since I can find no other mention of this study anywhere – not even a press release – these results must be read *extremely* cautiously.

My sense is that the tests faltered because, as already mentioned, they were predicated on tester detachment. This was largely ethically mandated: because of the deception involved, steps needed to be taken to limit how much of sellers' time was wasted (1991: 822-3n18). Negotiations were scripted to last 10-15 minutes, with testers remaining 'in the field' for no longer than an hour (1991: 822n18; though in actuality most tests clocked in at around 35 minutes [: 833]). If and when sellers tried ensnaring buyers in banter, the latter were supposed to reply, "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm kind of pressed for time, and would rather just talk [about] buying a car" (1991: 826n29). Test drives, as such, were apparently not in the offing, which is a shame since they represent a decisive milestone in the history of a transaction: according to my sales informant, if *after* a test drive a customer was still in tow, "80% of the time or so they would end up buying." Among my respondents, it was not uncommon to be left unaccompanied on test drives – *PH* was handed the keys to a GMC Acadia for the better part of a day – suggesting many salespeople do not seriously engage customers until after a demonstration. The unwillingness of Ayers' testers to submit to tests likely ended the proceedings before they began, accounting, I imagine, for all the refusals.

So while the price discrimination argument may not be as watertight as one would hope, there is an alternate explanation, one perhaps not quite as headline-grabbing, that I believe is more analytically fruitful: "The relatively brief...time spent with black [women]," muses Ayers (1991: 832n46), "may indicate that salespeople were not bargaining seriously with them." This is to say, under general conditions of seller indifference, sellers are *more* indifferent to offers from women than men (Ayers [1991: 843n69], for the record, dismisses this argument on the grounds all testers offered to pay outright, a piece of information no liquidity-hungry dealer can afford to ignore). A seller, in other words, rejects terms from a woman not because he presumes to fish her reserve price with impunity, but because term-setting as such is not in the order of things; it contradicts what he knows about the nature of feminine calculativeness. I want to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter the consequentiality of this observation, or more to the point its performativity: in experiential terms, gender discrimination is real not because women pay more, but by virtue that their calculations are informed in one way or another by the perception they are being managed. This 'fact' of management constitutes the proper frame of the sales encounter.



What does it mean for a woman to be managed? To begin with, *OI* implies, it entails coming to grips with her own perceptions. Is she certain the seller is being condescending, or is it all in her imagination?

*mv*: Now, something you said actually just reminded me, did you ever feel that you were – that [the salesman] was treating you like a woman?

*oi*: Ah, you know what? I think I always feel that a little bit. [*Chuckles.*] And I think that's always my perception, but I don't know if that's because I'm sensitive or if it's really happening or not. But I often will get little comments, like, 'Oh well maybe you ask your husband about "blah, blah, blah."' So I don't know if – I mean, the answer's yes, but I don't know that's coming within me or if it's really happening. You'd need an objective observer to tell. [*Laughs.*]

*mv*: Well, this isn't about objectivity. This is about your perception.

*oi*: [*Pensively.*] Yeah. I guess a little bit – a little bit, but [*Pause.*] it's probably just coming from within me.

Even when a woman is certain she is being condescended to, it still may be unclear, as *SN* makes clear, what exactly about his behaviour is condescending:

*mv*: Did you feel...that the guy was sort of treating you as a woman buyer? Did you get that sense?

*sn*: Oh for sure. Yeah. I was a woman buyer, why would he treat me any other way?

*mv*: No, but was it – did you feel he was patronizing?

SN: There's a way people treat women buyers. It's a, um – [Long pause.] how can I characterize it? Ah, [Pauses again.] it's not obviously patronizing – it's very friendly. So it's more cozy than you would find a man being with a man. Ah, more accommodating; just a, you know, 'Let-me-take-care-of-you' kind of approach.

Such ambiguity accords with recent findings from US market research (cf. Ipsos Public Affairs, 2011; Business Wire, 2011). When queried about their latest automobile acquisition, 26% of women claimed it as a hassle (viz. it was neither quick nor easy nor effortless). Yet – and this is the interesting part – rates of dissatisfaction drop when the focus shifts to individual elements of the transaction: only one-in-seven took umbrage with price, trade-in values or trustworthiness of sales staff; only one-in-eight expressed doubt over financing; and, most strikingly, only one-in-33 felt disrespected. In other words, for a number of women little is tangibly amiss with the encounter, yet something intangibly off-putting remains. They appear to be making difficult reconciliations between what *is* happening and what *could be* happening, suggesting in turn a bifurcation of evaluative capacities: an orientation not simply to questions of price, but subtleties of word and deed that potentially mask something exploitative about the situation. Technico-pecuniary arbitration

thus includes a myriad of other arbitrations, forcing women to attend to aspects of the transaction that may be ancillary, but in no way inconsequential.

Which calculation is more taxing – a car's value proposition or a salesman's motives – is difficult to say, but the latter, *AN* explains, is incontestably the more vexing. *AN* is *PP*'s partner, whose dilemma over a Honda Fit versus Nissan Versa was previously recounted. At one point, frustrated by their lack of progress finding decently priced used specimens, they tried to end the ordeal by buying a new Fit. *AN* took the lead here, but it did not go well. She was expecting a hard sell but got instead a hard apathy every bit as discombobulating:

*AN*: I was desperate for a car so I was like ready to just, you know, spend more than what we had budgeted for and just get one. So [I go to] this Honda dealership, um, and I found that the car salesman was just like not, like anything I had expected because you always hear about the pushy, pervasive – not quite pervasive – um, pushy, what's the word?–

*MV*: Pushy's good, aggressive?

*AN*: Aggressive, yeah...not that he was–

*MV*: OK, well hold on. Take it back. So you walk through the door, what happens?

*AN*: ...When he met me...he was very just blasé, and he was like, 'Oh, we don't have any of those. We

don't have any Honda Fits....' It was just sort of like, 'OK, case closed, bye!' And I was like, 'That's so weird, aren't you going to try to sell me a car?' ...But you know, he just made me feel like – I just found the whole thing intimidating because I felt it was kind of like going into a hardware store or something, you know, being a woman? I really didn't know anything about cars, and I felt like he just knew that – just his tone made me feel kind of, you know, just naïve and stupid. So anyway, he was just kind of matter of fact. And I really wanted a car so I was like, just lingering around, kind of going, 'Come on, give me some hope! Like what's going on?' ...And it was me who was like, '...Are there any used ones around?'

MV: So he really didn't want to talk to you it seemed?

AN: [*Excitedly.*] Not really, like, I don't know, which is quite stupid because I was ready to buy a car. Like, I don't know if he thought that I was just, you know, one of those people who was wasting his time. But like I wasn't! Right? We were ready to buy a car! [*Laughs.*] So I found that weird. ...But then he was – which I didn't understand, because then he was like, 'Well, you know, go to this Nissan dealership here.' And then, so he listed me a bunch of other – like Mazda and Nissan. And then I was thinking, 'Well he must work for all of them, because why would he be sending me to other places to buy a car?'

MV: [*Chuckling.*]

AN: Just [in general], I was like, 'Forget it.' I'm not going anywhere this guy suggests because he just left a bad taste in my mouth.... I'm not going to let him get any kind of commission off me.

*AN*'s inability to read the salesman's demeanour (does he or his employer, as she suspects, work more than one side of the competitive fence, or does he simply think so little of her business?) seemingly confirmed to her the truth that car sales, like a hardware store, are antithetical to women's sensibilities.

Yet there is perhaps more to it than that. Specifically, I am willing to wager the unavailability of Fits was fallout from the Japanese earthquake of 2011, which severely cut export capacity (in late December of that year, right around the time our protagonists began car hunting, Honda announced steps to remedy the shortfall by switching production of Canada-bound Fits from Japan to China [Bunkley & Austin, 2011]). Had the salesman bothered explaining this to *AN*, rather than writing her off from the get-go, he may have caught the crucial cue she was a willingly captive buyer. Perhaps he is supremely inept; not every seller, after all, can read his mark like a book. Perhaps, to the contrary, he is supremely conniving: his dismissiveness, given conditions of genuine scarcity, may have been a ploy to spot the truly 'deserving' (read: desperate) buyer whose largesse will fatten his commission. Or perhaps – and this is where I place the bulk of my bet – he assumes that without available product, he cannot hope to manage her choice. That is to say, he may believe women are primarily tactile, not comparative decision-makers, for whom value is predicated not on

calculating features received for dollars spent, but considerations of comfort and ease-of-mind. AN's calculative dilemma, he probably reckoned, was not, *what 'density' of features can I afford?* but the more specific question, *with what trim level of Fit am I most comfortable?* Under the circumstances, he immediately realized he was in no position to 'help her help herself.'

Whatever the cause of this salesman's phlegmatism, the notion that women possess a gender-specific mode of automotive calculation, one predicated on risk- and anxiety-aversion, increasingly underlies the sales orientation to women. Academia and industry alike have taken a keen interest in this calculus, attempting to discover and quantify its essence. Women, so we now know, will pay twice the premium as men, \$1,353 versus \$666, to avoid haggling (Babcock & Laschever, 2003: 115-6) and are 40% more likely to accept a dealer's first offer (Bragg, 2004: 10). As a further consequence of finding negotiating distasteful, women make up only 36% of automobile registrants in the US, preferring cars on the lower end of the price spectrum (Hirsch, 2010; TrueCar, 2010; Tuttle, 2010). Yet on the flip side, women are quite diligent purchasers, tending to ask more questions about safety, history and functionality than men (North, 2012; Tuttle, 2012). A number of dealers have come to embrace and even cultivate this knowledge, all in the name of extracting competitive advantage by branding

themselves 'woman-certified.' Debbie Sguigna, manager at a Kia dealer outside Toronto, provided a rare glimpse of what this entails on *Dave's Garage* (2010), a radio phone-in program hosted by Dave Redinger and Alan Gelman:

ALAN: Alright, we have with us Debbie Sguigna from–

DAVE: And Mr. Seoul! [*A salesperson at the dealership.*]

ALAN: And Mr. Soeul. But we're going to talk about the [*Slight pause for effect.*] female side of things right now. Ah you know, when a lot of women walk into dealerships with their husbands for example, and maybe looking at a car – they, they don't feel good about it. They feel intimidated, but I understand there's a process now to make the women feel better when they walk into your dealership.

DEBBIE: Yeah, absolutely there is. All of the dealerships part of Car Nation<sup>5</sup> have become woman-certified....

ALAN: Woman-certified means what?

DEBBIE: Just exactly like you said. To make sure that when a woman comes into either our service department or sales department, that they feel very comfortable. Um, you'd never want them to feel intimidated, pressured. A woman is going to make a purchase decision based on completely different information than a man typically.

DAVE: Yeah!

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<sup>5</sup> Car Nation Canada currently owns eight dealerships representing four separate manufacturers, including Nissan, Hyundai-Kia, Ford-Lincoln and Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep.

DEBBIE: And you want to make sure that she feels good – that she knows that she's becoming part of a family–

ALAN: Right, and she's going to be respected of course–

DEBBIE: That's it–

ALAN: And you're going to answer any questions that they possibly have. [*Attempting to segue to a caller.*] OK, well, that's great–

DEBBIE: A lot of times when a husband and wife come in, you know, a lot of dealerships focus all the attention on the man, and they're not realizing that the woman needs to know just as much–

DAVE: Yes–

DEBBIE: And ask just as many questions.

DAVE: [*Attempting too to segue.*] Fascinating stuff–

ALAN: Now question: it's not just women who are woman-certified, correct?

DEBBIE: No.... Seoul just went through the training a few weeks ago.

DAVE: So there's actually a course you take?

SEOUL: Yeah, just a one day course. But it's actually pointing out the important stuff.... Especially, let's say, if the man cares about horsepower or the power, the woman cares about safety. So you have to cover both.... Talking about eye contact...talking about, like, how much attention to feel important and feel involved, [that's] very important for the purchase–



DAVE: Fascinating stuff. OK, now we're going to...talk to Patrick who's been hanging on for a second....

As presented then, woman-certification represents an engineered, albeit empathetic shift in structural dynamics, a win-win scenario eschewing the hard for the soft sell. The sales community now regards a woman's calculus, by way of analogy, as a fire in danger of snuffing, its logs needing rearranging to optimize the supply of oxygen. In contrast then to the blatantly patronizing attitudes of yesteryear, the new sales paradigm, guided by 'evidence-based' research, is a quintessentially Callonesque manifestation of framing aimed at assuring the conditions by which a woman can (re-) focus on what counts most – figuring out which car best suits her needs. How effective is this new orientation? If CD's testimony is any gauge, not very. CD, who so happened to buy a Kia (but not at Car Nation), ironically found her salesman's empathy as obfuscating as AN found the apathy of her's:

CD: I went out alone, [*Pauses.*] which I was concerned about because...I had this perception that they're sharks. Especially if you're a woman – a single woman going into a dealership – I knew I was at risk of being the prey....

MV: So tell me about that day. So you walk in–

CD: I walk in approached by the salesman. ...I was on guard because I know that I was waiting to be

pounced on. ...I'm very sensitive about how he approached me and [*Clears throat.*] because I was on guard – like I said – he kind of approached it delicately, kind of stand-off-ish, like, 'Let me know if you have any questions.' And I'm, 'OK.' So I go to him and I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm interested in test-driving that.' And he's like, [*Mocking earnestness.*] 'Oh great!' So then we jump in the car, uh – it felt good. It's what I expected. It was comfortable and–

MV: What, what – do you remember what kind of stuff was he telling you during the test drive?

CD: He was pretty quiet during the test drive, I guess because [*She chuckles.*] they're kind of like wary when they get into a car with a woman!

MV: Maybe.

CD: I think so. I got that impression. Then, he made it a point to compliment me on my driving–

MV: Really! [*Laughs in disbelief.*]

CD: Yeah, yeah! He's like, you know, in a surprised tone, 'You're a good driver!' And I'm like, 'Oh thanks!' [*Laughs.*] He made it a point to do that several times!

MV: [*Suppressed wheezing.*] Sorry, I shouldn't laugh.

CD: I know, it was kind of – [*Pauses.*] it pissed me off a little bit [*She laughs again.*]

MV: Yeah, it sounds pretty condescending–

CD: Yeah it was!

MV: But did he take the time during the test drive to kind of, to educate you about the car, to tell you

about the features? 'Oh, [*In an exaggeratedly slick tone of voice.*] look at the handling!'

CD: No, he wasn't into tech-talk. I suspect if I was a man, he would have been more into that. But he was more into pointing out the comfort features. You know, the ease of handling and, uh – it was kind of condescending. ... [Afterwards] we sat down at his desk and that was when he pulled out the chit-chat. And, [*Laughs.*] it was funny because he was kind of distracted at first and I'm like, 'What the hell is this guy doing?' He pulls out like a binder; he puts it away and he made it a big point to point out this binder that he was flipping through, and then he told me he was studying for his master's degree. [*Roaring laughter.*] Wait a minute! Let me back up a minute, because he asked me, like, what I do for a living.

MV: OK, yeah! That often comes in the conversation.

CD: ...I described it and he made it a point to say, 'Oh, you know, that's really impressive' or whatever. ...At that point...he's like, 'You know, I'm studying for my master's degree in, like, economics' or something like that. But I totally didn't buy it. I thought it was an act. It could have possibly have been – I guess he was just trying to relate to me. I got that impression.

MV: Yeah, yeah. But it seemed very disingenuous, uh?

CD: It did, it did! ...He didn't want me to assume that this was his primary job, and this was how he made a living. It was very odd, but he – a lot of our discussion was about that and not about the car. So, when it got down to–

MV: Sorry to interrupt. So it's almost as if he tried to make a point of, or try to show to you that he was a real person beyond just a car salesperson.

CD: Y-, y-, y- yeah. Like, he was an educated person. ...It seemed like it was his shtick, like he'd used it before. That's how it came across to me. But I'm like, 'Whatever. I just want to hear about the money!'

This last line belies, quite forcefully I would say, faith in disentanglement by playing to some essence of feminine reasoning. As much as *CD* may have wanted or tried, she could not "just...hear about the money" because her attentions were dragged into a sideshow of disingenuous empathy. Her experience moreover suggests that the entire woman-centric orientation may be perversely self-sustaining: by engineering an environment more conducive to feminine sensibilities, sellers are actually reinforcing the conditions of uncertainty that underlie the problem in the first place, making indispensable yet more interventions of empathy. What burdens and ultimately bifurcates a woman's calculative energies is therefore *not* of the age-old elision of feminine subjectivities on the showroom floor, but rather the presumption, curiously held over from the 'good old days,' that her subjectivities are a special object of sales framing.

Actual women buyers, as opposed to their statistical avatars who inhabit market research, would appear to understand this postulate well. *SN* gasped when I mentioned woman certification: "What do you mean?" she asked incredulously, "Their salespeople are certified in sensitivity training and that's the way they try to sell the car to people for as much money as they can possibly get? God help us!"

### **Strategizing Femininity**

So is it at all possible for a woman to refine or un-bifurcate her calculus? I can think off-hand of two manoeuvres. The simplest would be to avail oneself of one of the many internet-based services that mitigate the threat of being 'played.' These range from sites like CarCostCanada.com or unhaggle.com which disclose marginal costs, to LeaseBusters.com or LeaseTrader.com which facilitate peer-to-peer lease transfers (i.e. the 'buyer' simply assumes the 'seller's' payments – no negotiation necessary). Such services are apparently welcome relief to many women: according to LeaseTrader.com, 88.3% of their woman clientele expressly want to avoid dealership environments (Marketwire, 2009).

Alternatively, women can, within a dealer context, use femininity strategically as a sort of bargaining chip: when *DW* negotiated for a new Toyota Matrix, she successfully held firm on the trade-in value of her previous vehicle on

the grounds it was “driven by a woman.” Rather than worry about the possibility that the salesman perceives women as gentle or non-threatening, DW in other words used the perception as justification for a discount.

A more extreme example comes courtesy of SN and long-time friend WH, who along with SN’s husband (not interviewed) took the bold but risky step of dramatizing the acquisition. When it came time to commit to a used Subaru Legacy – SN had previously test-driven it – all three went along, each acting a different set of characteristics: SN was the demure wife, WH the abrasive husband and SN’s actual husband the dim-witted brother. In a nutshell, they decided to orchestrate a clash of gender stereotypes, which served as a “management device” to occupy the salesman’s attentions and nullify his bargaining position:

MV: So what gave you the idea to perform it?

WH: Well basically, when SN said, ‘Would you come with me, I need to buy a new car?’ I said, ‘Sure.’ And uh, I think [SN’s husband] wanted to come too, so it sort of became, well, ‘Who – am I coming as your friend?’ And I think SN suggested, ‘Well why don’t you come as my husband!’

MV: [*Laughing with SN.*] What gave you that idea?

WH: I can’t remember whose idea it was. ...We were just discussing how it is that three of us are walking in to buy a car. I mean, who are we?

SN: And it was decided that there needed to be someone who was going to be the major advisor, and usually it's the husband. So, and we figured *that* would be understood by the [sales-] people there. ...But it was decided that WH would be the most effective, because he is the best at bargaining with all of his experience in travel and stuff.

MV: [*Addressing WH.*] ...But why did you think that you playing the husband would, sort of, I don't know – that [the salespeople] would accept that more as opposed to [if] you were just a friend?

WH: ...I'm not exactly sure how it evolved, but...I remember discussing that [the salespeople], they're going to do the usual thing where you have a trade-in, and you're going to want to bargain. And [the salesman will] sort of reluctantly acquiesce, then go to the sales manager, and they're going to come back and start squeezing you for money. So I said, 'We need some management device of our own here.' ...So I'm going to be the husband who, [while] not a total jerk, just isn't...interested in this car. It's not for him – there's nothing wrong with the old car. [His attitude is,] I'm not really interested in being here, and I'm not happy with any of this stuff. [*Pauses.*] And why is your idiot brother with us anyway?

SN & MV: [*Laughing.*]

WH: So I was unpleasant, but not aggressively abusive or anything. So during the interaction, I actually tried to be pleasant, but my pleasantness itself was unpleasant if you know what I mean. ...So that was the vision. I would be that guy; she would be, you know, sort of the little women who needed and wanted a new car, and that was the bare bones of it.

MV: [*Addressing SN.*] ...So did you decide before how much talking were you going to do?

SN: It struck me that it would be very easy to play that role and I was just going to leave it to WH and ad lib.

Here is what transpired. SN took the lead nominally: it was she who conversed with the salesman, and it was predominantly to her that the salesman (re-) pitched the automobile in question. Pretend husband WH played his role sullenly at first, excusing himself at one point "to look at this other new model" to convey how much he was chafing at the emasculation of his purchasing authority. SN's real husband stayed silent, smiling bemusedly the whole time. When SN finally did broach price, the salesman immediately offered a symbolic \$200 discount (off an asking price of something like \$18,000). He assured them that while there could be little movement on price, he would give them top-dollar for SN's out-going car, also a Subaru. At that point WH became blustery and Janus-faced, repeatedly vetoing SN's attempts to acquiesce to the seller, but insisting all the while the decision was hers: he kept, as he put it, "trying to turn it over to her, but [then] taking it away from her." As if musing aloud, WH next flippantly proclaimed, "I wouldn't pay more than [x]," an amount which made the negotiation "jump from this little mincing to a different level." This was not received well, to which WH lost his temper. He stormed away, lashing out not at



the salesman or *SN*, but – with arguably more gravity – at the ‘idiot brother,’ snarling at him, “What are you smiling about?”

So far so good, but if the discount *WH* proposed was to be won, which it ultimately was, it would not be by bravado alone. When all was said and done, *WH*’s inability to stay seated may have persuaded the salesman to conclude the deal sooner rather than later, but equally convincing – or should I say conniving – proved *SN*’s representation of her own meekness: she sighed and rolled her eyes subtly when *WH* railroaded her decisions, and when he finally blurted his unconscionable offer, she acted “crestfallen” he would “disrupt the negotiation by something that radical.” After that, as we discover below, the sales staff appeared eager not simply to make the sale, but to do it *for her sake*:

*MV*: [*Addressing SN.*] OK, after [*WH*] left...you kept talking about–

*SN*: About...how I was going to deal with this intransigent person–

*MV*: Oh really–

*WH*: Oh OK, see I wasn’t there for that piece of the conversation. Enlisting an ally – very good!

*SN & MV*: [*Laughter.*]

*MV*: OK so, how did – what kinds of things were discussed then with the seller at that point?

SN: Um, just that it didn't – I didn't know, you know, how I could possibly convince him. ...I wanted the car [but] I wasn't sure...that I could get it.

MV: You represented yourself as in between a rock and a hard place, I guess.

SN: Right. So then I was very surprised when at the climax, which was that they gave us what we wanted – [*Addressing WH.*] what you wanted. And the guy came – I think it was his boss that came with him–

WH: It might have been. Somebody came up to get me and to bring me back to the negotiation.... And his position was continuously explaining how good a deal this was and how good the car was. And he was starting to – you could see he was trying to support it [but] SN didn't have much to say for that.

MV: [*Addressing SN.*] Oh so he almost tried to become – I guess so – he tried become your advocate.

SN: mm-hmm. ... [*Chuckling.*] I think he worried about me afterwards!

MV: But at no point did you...express happiness–

SN: Glee or anything–

MV: Glee that the deal went through?

SN: I think I said I was pleased.

MV: But you didn't show it.

WH: Well she has to show constraint in the face of this guy. You know, she doesn't want to set me off either.

In short, *SN* and *WH* brilliantly improvised a stick-and-carrot strategy: *WH* – irredeemably capricious – made it clear the sale was precarious while *SN* – voiceless and powerless – conveyed incompetence to represent herself. There is, of course, a beautiful irony in all this: whereas for many women a ‘knight in shining armour’ routine is likely to induce profound calculative dissonance, success here hinged on the calculation the salesman would be patronizing. The buyers effectively baited the sellers into a simulation of familial power wherein the latter were obliged to save the sale because *SN* was incapable of doing so.

Naturally *SN* has qualms about the deception she carried out, claiming to have “liked the poor guy we had bamboozled so terribly.” In the grand scheme of things however, what she did is justifiable on karmic grounds. She was, as she explains, simply repaying a modicum of dishonesty she had suffered in the past:

The problem is, of course, that this idea of dealing so duplicitously with someone is so against my general moral beliefs that it was very tricky for me to do it – and I wouldn’t have been able to do it had I not been screwed so frequently by car salesmen. ...I tend to be someone who tries to deal directly and honestly with people – and that’s my preferred mode. But I was right into it...because...I had figured that car salesmen deserved their own circle of hell. So this was, to me – was not morally reprehensible.

Above all, this justification reveals a fundamental link between SN's experience and those of the other women highlighted herein, which is the presumption, more or less objectively verifiable, of seller management. What sets SN apart is less a matter of guile or gumption, as if she and her co-conspirators are sociopaths willing to say or do anything to further their interests. No, unlike the others, SN took the presumption of management in another direction: rather than simply registering condescension, she acted to co-opt it, making it *perform* for her.

### **The Entangling Frame**

I could have concentrated in this chapter on patently obvious and demeaning examples of seller discrimination which are unfortunately all too common. I could have cited Ayers' (1991: 846n81) accounts of overtly sexist and racist attitudes his testers experienced in the field. I could have talked about LA, who when visiting a Toyota dealership with her husband, was awarded a cloth shopping bag to impress upon them the importance of their business. I could even have recounted the particularly nasty altercation I had the good fortune to witness between a salesman and pair of women customers. When I mentioned it later to another salesman at the dealership, someone I was hoping to interview, he began his dismissive interpretation of events with, "Oh, you mean those two dykes?"

Yet all of this is unnecessary, because whether women actually are being disadvantaged is, in a sense, immaterial; what really counts – what women are all too keenly aware of – is the *threat* of being disadvantaged. It is this possibility that informs a woman's calculus more than anything else. That is to say, a car salesman is rarely a superfluous, exogenous factor in a woman's final reconciliation; his language, gestures and implicit motives must be constantly interpreted and weighed against the suitability of a car and its price.

That femininity is so difficult to escape speaks to the more general contention that decision-making and -taking are neither disentangling nor aspire to be; courses of market action can never be justified in the final instance on purely formal or quantitative grounds. Something residual – incalculable but consequential – always crosses the threshold of transaction. This is, again, *not* to say framing does not occur. The simple architectural fact that many car transactions occur in the semi-private confines of an office or cubicle sufficiently frames the encounter. This act of framing, however, does little to simplify the complexity of the choice. Rather, much like the metal collar a dentist painfully fits onto a pathological tooth to facilitate its drilling, framing plunges the buyer deeper into that complexity, intensifying the gravity of the encounter and rendering the buyer's overall sense of inferiority all the more acute.

## Chapter Five

# From Market Power...

THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE IS STACKED against Callon's argument that disentangled calculation is indispensable to automobile transactions. Buyers and sellers can obviously count on the sorts of devices he mentions (viz. property rights, contract law) to disentangle future obligations (i.e. both parties undoubtedly want to be quits so as not to bleed money unnecessarily), but these are hardly the most decisive calculative moments involved. Moreover, based on the experiences recounted herein, instances of a formalizing calculus – Hayek's (1948: 85) "Pure Logic of Choice" foreshadowed in acts of framing – are not only rare, they are reducible to extra-calculative factors: DG's disciplined approach (see Chapter Three and again below) is, by his own admission, a product of obsessive-compulsive tendencies, while *PH*, the only woman to experience an acquisition free of both antagonism and gender discrimination ("With buying

cars,” she reflects stoically, “you never really know if you’re getting a lemon or not, so I...enjoy it as much as I can”), is herself a sales professional.

Callon’s ‘indictment,’ however, does little to conclude the matter, for simply pronouncing him wrong, *tout court*, leaves untouched the flood of market discourses predicated on disentanglement. Indeed, more than a few respondents, entangled as their calculations were, spoke of what they did in disentangling or quasi-formal terms. Another way of looking at it, the disentangling moment is real or consequential enough, but it does not lie where Callon would have us believe: it is not found in devices or even the transaction itself, but in justifications; in buyers’ attempts, that is, to bring certainty to their uncertain experiences of entanglement. In our quest then to specify economization – what it means to become economic – we are only halfway there, at a point of inflection: having demonstrated always-entangled practices, we are now faced with the conundrum of reconciling these with seemingly always-disentangling accounts thereof. The varieties of formal economic reasoning will be left for Chapter Seven, where they will be detailed, qualified and contextualized. My aim here and in the next chapter is to survey the empirical, theoretical and discursive grounds by which such reconciliation is possible. Making sense of this contradiction, I want to propose, requires us to revise car

transactions as relations of power. Power is perhaps the ultimate or most 'effective' of entanglements, seemingly extinguishing the perception of entanglement itself, an effacement Bourdieu (2005: 5) termed "*amnesia of genesis*."

## Childhood's End

What is this power that rewrites entanglement as disentanglement? As a first step, let us consider what it principally is *not* by way of a now-infamous episode in Canadian motoring history: in late 2009 Madeline Leonard of Orangeville, some 75 kilometres northwest of Toronto, approached her local Mazda dealer hoping to find new tires for her 2004 Mazda3, but ended up with a top-of-the-line 2010 Mazda6. The bill of sale indicated a list price of \$46,291, a \$4,500-protection-package (against rust and damage to upholstery, paint and windows) and 7.4%-financing over eight years with a final 'balloon' payment of \$7,000. After discounting the value of the Mazda3 she traded in, her total obligation, taxes in, was just shy of \$66,000. The deal did not sit well with her, especially when she noticed appreciably lower advertised pricing. She contacted OMVIC, the dealership industry's (self-) governing body in the province, which launched an investigation. They concluded she should have paid no more than \$41,000: not only was the MSRP on that trim level \$36,695 at the time; *not only* was the cost of package inflated by a factor of three, but to add insult to injury, the car she



received was a demonstrator showing 6,000 kilometres on the odometer (OMVIC, 2012: 4; Van Alphen, 2010a)!

Leonard characterized sales manager Mohammed (Moe) Shaikh as “slick.” She felt “overwhelmed and confused” by his fast talk (quoted in Van Alphen, 2010a), explaining in a TV interview uneasily but bitterly (Seattle, 2010), “I felt cheated and lied to and manipulated and conned [*She pauses and exhales.*] and pressured. ...He started pointing here and saying [*Indicating imaginary signature lines.*], ‘Initial this, initial that, initial that, sign here!’” Orangeville Mazda’s business manager Kien Trung retorted by suggesting Leonard was being spiteful: “We didn’t do anything wrong in the case of this transaction. We made a little bit of money on the deal. I guess she was not happy with it” (quoted in Van Alphen, 2010a).

What is most pertinent here, and on which the whole debacle revolved, is Leonard’s mental state. She is alternately described as “intellectually disabled” (Van Alphen, 2010a) or someone “who suffers from an unnamed mental disability” (Siler, 2010). “Leonard has a number of health issues,” expanded TV reporter Pam Seattle (2010), “including fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, depression and anxiety.” Leonard herself admitted to Seattle, “I was on a lot of medication [that day] and the side effects are [*Bobbing her head exaggeratedly.*] confusion [*She*

*makes a guttural sound.*] – all this stuff.” Likewise OMVIC, in suspending Shaikh and Trung’s sales licences for a year, noted Leonard “was not reasonably able to protect her interests because of her disability, ignorance of the market and her inability to understand the transaction.” Shaikh and Trung, the judgement went on to read, “knowingly and collaboratively exploited a person under disability and failed to accept responsibility of their conduct” (O’Keefe, 2012: 4).<sup>1</sup>

What we are dealing with here is coercion plain and simple: Leonard did not want the car (Seattle, 2010; Van Alphen, 2010a), but she could neither articulate nor impose her will. Leonard embodies, quite literally I would say, the deepest fear of every car buyer: the prospect of not simply ‘getting fleeced’ or ‘taken to the cleaners,’ but more humiliatingly, the substitution of one’s will for that of the seller; the sinking realization that one’s ability to recognize right from wrong has been dispossessed. On the surface of it, Leonard’s ordeal would appear to provide an ideal-typical illustration of power – an abuse of it actually – demonstrating absolute seller power. This is power in its most rudimentary

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<sup>1</sup> OMVIC also laid criminal charges against the two as well as the dealership (now defunct – Mazda terminated the franchise as soon as the story broke [cf. Van Alphen, 2010b]). Principal dealer Sunjeet (Sunny) Baines was implicated when he approved the loan even though Leonard is unemployed and subsists on disability pensions totalling \$1,850 a month. Baines eventually pleaded guilty, losing his sales licence, while his dealership (i.e. the business entity) was fined \$10,000 (Van Alphen, 2012). Trung and Shaikh, in addition to the suspensions, were fined \$5,000 apiece (Tremblay, 2012). As for Leonard, her obligation to Mazda was discharged and as a good will gesture, they let her keep the car (Van Alphen, 2010c).

conceptual form, something Foucault ([1976] 2003: 29) might have called *applicative* power, which treats “the individual as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom or some multiple, inert matter to which power is applied,<sup>2</sup> or which is struck by a power that subordinates or destroys individuals.” This is a repressive or negative power: “a power to say no,” in effect “render[ing] what it dominates incapable of doing anything...except for what this power allows it to do. ...All modes of domination ...are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience” (Foucault, [1976] 1978: 85). And as Leonard so unpleasantly discovered, it is also a highly personalized power inasmuch as it extracted from her specifically – her scarce income and dignity – much like a sovereign who exercises power in bodily form by claiming the lives of his subjects, whether directly through gruesome punitive spectacles (cf. Foucault, [1975] 1977: 3-6), or indirectly through conscription (cf. 1978: 135-6).

Yet with due respect to Leonard, her ordeal is of little use elucidating the power of a car transaction, representing, at best, power’s outer, arrogant limit. There are two reasons this is so. Firstly, no one to whom I spoke reported coercion even remotely similar to that endured by Leonard. This is, to be clear, neither to assume coercion in car sales is rare, nor to agree with Hayek (1960: 136)

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Soper’s prior translation, by way of Italian, does not say “applied,” but is equally evocative. She writes instead, “...on which power comes to fasten...” (Foucault, [1976] 1980a: 98).

that, “So long as the services of a particular person are not crucial to my existence...the conditions he exacts for rendering [them] cannot be called ‘coercion.’” Indeed, one could argue the deceptive practices of ‘curbsiders,’ unlicensed sellers who pressure unsuspecting buyers into un-roadworthy wrecks, constitute a type of coercion (on the perniciousness of curbsiding in Toronto, cf. Toljagic, 2012b; Stancu, 2012; Van Alphen, 2011a), but such themes unfortunately lie beyond the scope of data here. Secondly, one needs to be weary about generalizing from Leonard’s experience because of the idiosyncrasy of her capacities. Looking at the matter again from a Foucauldian perspective, if we are to identify a context of inferiority (*minorité*) in the buyer-car-seller nexus – and the data does warrant this – one cannot deduce it from a condition of, as Foucault ([1983] 2010: 28-9) put it, “humanity’s childhood” or “natural powerlessness.”

The accounts here therefore speak of inferiority, but not manipulation, which is to say a framework of power is very much discernible, but it does not include coercion. I want, as such, to synthesize an alternate concept of economic power, *market/ power*, from three principle streams. One of these, quite obviously, is the interview data; this is the empirical stream. The other two are theoretical, the first being the mainstream economic concept *market power*, with which I deal in the remainder of this chapter. The second, as signalled in the foregoing

discussion, is a neo-Foucauldian take on power (see Chapter Six). While my sympathies lean towards the latter (market/ power is a telling – and perhaps trite – play on Foucault’s *power/knowledge* duality), the spirit of this juxtaposition is *not* critical: a neo-Foucauldian lens may well correct the sociomyopia that is said to plague economistic gazes, but I avoid making that claim (mainly for reasons of pacing). I instead strive to show the two are curiously complementary: economics specifies a set of necessary conceptual components which, when they run their empirical usefulness, are extended by a neo-Foucauldian sensibility. Put simply, together economics and Foucault illuminate a fair portion of the phenomenological ‘elephant’ under investigation.

## **Market Power**

Power is something of a hidden concept in mainstream microeconomics (or *economism*). By this I mean it is of secondary importance, mobilized always in conjunction with other concepts, notably *market structure*, *competition* and *monopoly*. “The competitiveness of the market,” so tells us to an oft-prescribed textbook,

refers to the extent to which individual firms have... power to influence the price or other terms on which their product is sold. The less power an individual firm has...the more competitive is that market. The extreme form of competitiveness occurs when each

firm has zero power because there are so many firms that each must accept the price set by the forces of market demand and supply. [T]here is no need to compete actively since none has any power over the market (Lipsey, Purvis & Steiner, 1988: 220).

Seen from the flip side, David McKenzie and Dwight Lee (2006: 424) define *monopoly power* as “the conceptual opposite of competition. [It] is the ability of a firm to raise profitably the market price...by reducing production and, hence, market supply. ...In very general terms...a firm with monopoly power is a *price searcher*.” That is to say, unlike perfectly competitive actors who cannot tinker with prices in the pursuit of maximum profits, monopolists enjoy the latitude to manipulate price.

Two sociological observations are in order here. Firstly these definitions are very much rooted in Weber’s basic conception of power. Power (*Macht*), he said (1978: 53), is tied to domination (*Herrschaft*), which boils down to the realization of one’s will “despite resistance,” or more precisely, “the probability that a command...will be obeyed.” The less competitive a market, in other words, the easier it is for an actor to assert her interests on that market. This presupposes for all intents and purposes a zero-sum-like scenario by which, in extreme form, monopolist *x* wields power at the expense of consumer *y* and potential competitor *z*: the former freely sets prices, quantities and qualities

while the latter two, strictly speaking, exert no reciprocal influence. Power is thus necessarily differentially distributed, residing in *x* but not *y* or *z*, much like a scarce resource or prized property. That much is crystal clear in Lipsey *et al*'s definition above: *power*, the noun, is inextricably coupled with the verb, *to have*.

Secondly, power is akin to an articulation or lynchpin between agency and structure, denoting an actor's facility to suspend or bend the usual (i.e. competitively determined) constraints of the market. Another way of looking at it, power is the extraordinary ability of a monopolist to turn the dynamics of an entire market into a reflection of her own internal dynamics: "The demand curve facing a monopolist," explain McKenzie and Lee (2006: 431), "slopes downward, for it is the same as market demand." Lipsey *et al* (1988: 243; emphasis in original) are far blunter: "The monopolist *is* the industry." Power then is the ghost in the market machine, representing the personalization of impersonal market forces. Yet rarely is this personalization permanent, as when a monopolist's average costs decline in the long run, making it all but impossible for entrants to compete. Power instead typically "dissolve[s]" (McKenzie and Lee, 2006: 427) or "decentralize[s]" (Lipsey *et al*, 1988: 471) in the absence of state protection: substitute goods and services, dissimilar in form but not function, eventually appear, chipping away at the monopolist's perceived unassailability.

All things being equal then, power is entropic: the consequences of the impersonal *will to (maximal) profit*, to paraphrase Nietzsche, inevitably erode the personalized agency upon which market power rests.

Combining these two observations, market power is nothing less than the distribution of agency within a structure of market relations or the differential patterning of means to a basic end: profit maximization. Power therefore refers both to a 'thing' – a particularly invidious agency – and to a continuum of market structures which perform these agencies. Schematically, the continuum looks like a pyramid. At the top, agency is concentrated in a single seller or buyer (*monopoly* or *-sony* respectively); in the middle, it is wielded by a handful of sellers, who either act as one or compete via product differentiation (*oligopoly* and *monopolistic competition* respectively); and at the perfectly competitive bottom, agency is held by a de facto infinite number of hands, diluting power to the detriment of meaningful competition (cf. Lipsey *et al*, 1988: 220-1). Car sales occupy 'middle-imperfect' ground here: the jockeying of automakers to stand out in crowded segments attest to the monopolistically competitive nature of the new car business; as for used, though there are vastly more sellers, inherent supply limitations and variations mean these markets poorly resemble perfect



competition. Whether new or used then, sellers wield a clear, structurally enshrined advantage over buyers.

This thematic interplay between structure and agency is echoed in car-buying literature: James Bragg (2004: 3) contends that new car sales resemble a highly uneven playing field – a structural allusion if there ever was one – not simply because of the insuperable gap in knowledge between buyers and sellers, but because of the unidirectional patterning of information flows. Buyers, he says,

[a]re operating on unfamiliar turf, in a position of weakness, because we do it only once every few years. But those salesmen we have to negotiate with are on very familiar turf, the car store, and in a position of strength, because they do it every day. ...We make [their] job easier than it should be by giving them lots important information they can use. We tell them exactly which car we want, and how much we can pay per month, and which vehicle we're trading in. In return, they give us no information we can use, such as how much that car really cost them, how low they'll really go to sell it, and what our trade-in is really worth. As a result, a playing field that was uneven from the start tips even further toward them. And when the transaction is over, most of us don't know whether we got a good deal or got taken.

In other words, the structural bias of the transaction – the slant of the field, Bragg might say – is such that sellers exercise agency, but not buyers (since we are not

dealing with firm-on-firm competition, agency must be reinterpreted as the ability to deploy strategic calculation). Bragg's solution, something not totally dissimilar from *SN* and *WH*'s scheme (see Chapter Four), is to simulate a reversed market relation, one in which the buyer treats the seller as a captive client: "You will always get a better price on a commodity," he (2004: 49) goes on to remind the reader,

if you make it a competition between suppliers.  
Would a food company talk to just one sugar  
manufacturer? Would Random House contact only  
one paper company? Would an automaker get bids  
from just one tire supplier? Of course not.

The core of Bragg's method, briefly summarized, is a so-called "fax attack" (cf. 2004: 144-57) – I suppose 'e-mail attack' lacks rhyming ring – whereby the buyer solicits offers for a single vehicle (preferably a standard trim level with no add-ons) from as many dealers within a two- to three-hour driving range. He recommends sending 15 requests, which should generate seven or eight replies, all of them making it clear neighbouring dealers have been contacted. The point of the exercise is "to start a dialogue with several dealers" (2004: 150), ideally identifying those who, for whatever reason at that moment (e.g. undisclosed incentives to dealers) are willing to sell at or below marginal cost.

Bragg, in short, keeps in conceptual lock-step with market power: he claims buyers can boost their agency – their capacity to make happen the best possible deal – by adopting characteristics of a more powerful monop- or oligopsonist. This is not a recipe for the creation of agency where there was none before, less still a victory of agency over structure. Rather, it is a method for reversing or snatching, if only temporarily, an agency that is the natural by-product of imperfectly competitive market conditions. Such a proposal nicely illustrates market power's core problematic: the structural conditions by which one can or cannot meaningfully care for one's pecuniary interests.<sup>3</sup>

## **A Phenomenological Fitness Test**

So how well does all this stand up to empirical scrutiny? If truth be told, not too badly. When asked, *who benefited from the transaction?* – a deliberately open-ended question meant to probe perceptions of utility and accomplishment – five, maybe six respondents answered in ways affirming the discrete, structurally contingent nature of agency. Most exemplary is FM, a serial lessee of BMWs, who

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<sup>3</sup> All of this, interestingly enough, can be read through the prism of the Callon-Miller debate insofar as Bragg presents yet another device for disentangling one's calculus. In contrast to car journalists' path to disentanglement, predicated on consummate comparison, Bragg's is something like an application of Patrik Aspers' (2005: 35; also see Chapter One above) observation about market roles. That is to say, Bragg proposes to stimulate disentanglement by getting buyers to behave less like, in Aspers' terminology, "fixed role" actors and more "exchange role" actors who *trade* commodities.

is downright sanguine concerning his inferiority vis-à-vis BMW dealers. This, he makes clear, is a function of his inability to make money on the deal, in stark contrast to the role he occupies in his habitual market (putatively identified as antique sales):

FM: The seller always benefits more [*He chuckles.*]

MV: Oh you think so? OK.

FM: Well of course. The seller's out there to make money. He's making money – what do I benefit? I'm just leasing the car. It's not like buying, obviously – uh, you know, it's not that type of deal for me.

MV: OK, OK, alright–

FM: It's not like I'm buying, say [someone's estate] or [an antique]. Then I feel the deal's always better for me, right?

CG expressed the same sentiment: “Obviously the dealer benefited. The dealer's in business and he made a profit. I needed a car, I got a car. I don't class that as a benefit – I paid for it.” Likewise for DG whom we met in Chapter Three, it is difficult to see how buyers can ever benefit, given the relatively high prices for cars, used especially. Such agential emasculation, moreover, extends beyond the transaction. Reminiscent of an “economic trap” argument (Litman, 2009: 214; see

Chapter One above), the car according to DG is a permanent token of inferiority, precluding the possibility of ever making prudent financial choices:

DG: Well, that's an interesting question – like in the end – off the top of my head, they [benefited] because they're getting a whole lot of money, and even though I think it's a good deal, it's still a *crazy* amount of money. The whole idea of buying a new car is a little crazy and I will say we started looking very much at a used vehicle – that was my intention.

MV: So why?–

DG: [The] price of used vehicles is–

MV: Is through the roof–

DG: So high that the spread is like a thousand-bucks....

MV: So getting back to that question, so you think it was mainly the dealer that benefited? Do you think *you* got any benefit at all?

BJ (DG's partner): Well, we have a new car!

MV: [*Laughing.*] Other than that!

DG: We really like it. Uh, [*Looking over to BJ, shrugging his shoulders.*] no, no.

BJ: No.

DG: ... [T]hey're crazy expense; cars are ridiculous! I guess that must have come up in your research.

MV: [*Laughing.*] Yeah!

DG: Because I calculated it. It's like 10 to 12-grand a year to own and operate a vehicle. That's my calculation based on – for me, with gas, insurance, and repairs and tires and depreciation of the vehicle, because I do write it off. So *it's a big* bloody expense.

What stands out in these responses is just how antithetical they are to notions of coercion. Or rather, FM, CG and DG start off looking like victims of coercion inasmuch as they all but claim they are powerless, possessing little to no scope to effect financially better outcomes. Yet unlike victims of coercion, there is no remorse or agony about acquiescing – it simply *is*. Nothing personal about it, this represents for them a more or less irksome but necessary cost of transacting against well-capitalized sales machines. There is in these accounts, briefly put, a nonchalant internalization of market inferiority.<sup>4</sup>

Such unequivocal espousals of market power (-lessness) were, however, the exception among informants, which perhaps raises questions about market power's phenomenological fitness. At issue, as I see it, is not that the concept is empirically wanting, but rather that to register it in the first place requires immersion in economics or a related knowledge, something along the lines of what Bourdieu (2005: 200) called "'native theories' of strategic action." Indeed, if there is a commonality linking this camp of respondents, it is that they labour in

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<sup>4</sup> Never let it be said, as an aside, economism posits only "undersocialized" actors (Granovetter, 1985: 483). The portrait of power-mediated action is as "oversocialized" as they come.

highly economic actor-worlds: FM is a small business owner, CG a semi-retired real estate developer, DG an entrepreneur-cum-bookkeeper, PH a sales manager and DB (see conclusion) a stock broker.

By contrast, interviewees' collective thoughts on who benefited and how ran a wide interpretive gamut. Apart from the 'economicists' above, another group of four or five believed the benefits were equally split, an answer which, when one thinks about it, is disappointing inasmuch as it lets the speaker dismiss the oppositional dimension of the encounter. Another eight or nine said they benefited hands-down, couched purely in terms of agency or successful recalcitrance to the dictates of sellers. KA, for instance, believes he benefited because he resisted being talked into leasing a new Mazda3, an option he inferred was preferable for the dealership given how keenly the salesman insisted upon it. DW likewise benefited "for sure:" in 2008 she acquired a new, but out-going 2007 Toyota Matrix, priced at a slight discount compared to the 2008s. When the salesman advised her he could not find one – a ploy to squeeze her for more money by forcing her into a 2008 – she put her foot down and "made them work" to find the car for which she had signed. Then there is BU, an elementary school teacher. If a telos is to be gleaned from her history of buying cars, it is, she implies, a gradual capacity to escape from seller constraints:

**BU:** I do think, um, our sense of our own power has grown with each experience. Like, our very first car we bought – I think we got bamboozled [*She chuckles.*] because I had just finished my master's degree and I was heavily in debt with [student] loans. And I was starting to supply-teach, and you have to have a car for supply-teaching, and I had zero money and the banks turned us down for a loan. So we went to a dealership that would give us a loan, and the interest rate was really high that year – I think we took a loan for 11%–

**MV:** Oh boy!

**BU:** Yeah, and we just took it because it was somebody that was saying 'yes' when everyone was saying 'no.' ...Yeah we bought a Mazda – a used Mazda. And, like, the guy who sold it to us was very schmaltzy – he called me Sally the whole time. [*She laughs.*] And we just sort of went along and agreed because we needed the car and they were letting us have the loan.

**MV:** And what year was this?

**BU:** ...It was 1995. ...But anyway, like at this point I would not stick with a dealer who called me Sally and, you know, the way he talked down to me and everything.... [He] was very, sort of, the old, stereotypical, patriarchal, schmoozy guy. You know, we wouldn't deal with that anymore.

**MV:** I want to get back, you said...you feel that you have a greater sense of your own power with each transaction. Now what does that mean...?

**BU:** Yeah, well just, I mean, I am not a nervous little student anymore.... You know, I'm 42, I have a secure income and I know they need my business.



...And also just a sense of people too. Like the private transactions, they've all been lovely people, so you know – sort of looking for that as well – and if somebody isn't nice to deal with, it's like, 'Well, see you later!' ...We've got time; we can wait....

Amidst this triangle of economists, 'even-steven's' and 'conscientious resisters' like *BU* lies a 'mushy middle' who struggled with the question of benefit, understandably so: how can one, after all, give a black-and-white assessment of something shrouded in so much uncertainty, particularly when one's sense of self hangs in the balance? *SA*, for instance, did not know how to answer – or perhaps just did not want to – saying simply, "I don't know," with an audibly befuddled, embarrassed chortle. First-time buyer *HT*, who acquired an used Escape from a Ford franchisee, tried to articulate a surplus of benefit for himself, but there is hesitation and prevarication in his voice, as if he were trying to convince himself he really had "scored:"

I don't know, I guess, I would like to think I [benefited], but obviously they wouldn't have sold it for 14-thousand – I mean, you know, we heard [from sales staff], 'Yeah you're getting a great deal here, man,' [and] 'I love the vehicle; I'd keep it myself if I could,' you know, 'but-.' But, but, but, b-, but! ...For some reason this [vehicle] [*Pause.*], I don't know, it was, like, the cheapest one around. So no, I mean, at the time I felt like I really scored.

Ambivalent as they are, such experiences are important – and here I think we reach the phenomenological limit of market power – insofar as they challenge economic assumptions of agency in two ways. Firstly, they speak to the indiscrete nature of agency: benefit in these accounts is polyvalent and endogenous to actors themselves, necessarily meaning different things to buyers and sellers. For this reason it makes little sense to understand agency as a distributed property possessed more by one than another. OD, for example, having purchased a Toyota Echo in a private sale, may have lost out monetarily, but not with respect to spiritual well-being or sense of freedom:

OD: Ah that's a good question. Um, it's a bit tricky... because [*Exhales.*], you know, I could look at it from different angles. One angle, I would say I benefited because I had one of my better summers.... I was able to take it to visit family; I've never been able to do [that] before. ...That sense of freedom [*Pause.*]...I would see myself attached by – you know, I'd adhere to a sense of freedom with a car, but it was nice. It was very nice.

MV: ...Now is there an opposite angle to look at then?

OD: I would say, given the money I've spent on the car, all-in-all I ended up spending about \$1000 more in repairs and buying new tires and everything. So...in a sheer monetary respect – and I guess a consumer, buyer-seller relationship – he probably won out.

Secondly, flesh-and-blood actors, unlike their abstract counterparts, are not nearly as fatalistic about the prospect of agential emasculation. That much can, of course, be inferred from the apprehension in SA and HT's replies, but the matter goes deeper than that: people interpret asymmetry in very personal terms, which ends up distorting – fascinatingly so – the entire economic narrative of power. Take HD, whose reasoning at first glance is economic through-and-through: he treats seller superiority as a foregone conclusion, noting salespeople come armed with all sorts of knowledge by which to read buyers. That he himself negotiated a discount on a used Nissan Altima, employing a version of 'splitting the difference' – "sawing off at the middle" he calls it – was hardly an achievement, as if an act of recalcitrance achieved against the odds. To the contrary, it is further evidence of sales cunning:

MV: Did you ever get the impression that the seller was managing you in any way? And you can think of 'manage' any way you want.

HD: Yeah that's a hard one. I don't know! I personally think that – now that you ask the question – I think these guys are pretty good. The reason I say they're good is because they do this for a living. That's why the salesman always has the advantage.... So in that sense, yeah, of course they're managing [you]....

MV: OK that's an abstract notion of being managed. But did you feel it at the time?

HD: No.

MV: OK alright. So at any point then, did you feel like you were losing control of the negotiation?

HD: *[Long thoughtful pause.]*

MV: Or were things heading in a direction that you–

HD: Yeah, I was surprised at his resistance, I will say that. I was – he seemed really firm about what he wanted for the car....

MV: So...the simple fact that you got him to budge [on price] was an accomplishment.

HD: In a way, but I'm sure that if his strategy – you see, we don't know, like, in a sense...maybe he knew that I just didn't want to walk out of there. Like, that's, you know, part of salesmanship – I would think – is to know when the customer is going to leave.... I mean, because the rule of business is once a customer leaves – the rule in business is never let the customer walk out the door.

MV: Sure.

HD: That's the rule, right? ...[T]he longer you keep the customer in the store, the greater your odds. It's like exponential. Each five-minute interval, the chance of a sale goes up  $x$  percentage, right? So I'm not sure – I wouldn't underestimate the knowledge of salespeople just because they have *so many* interactions on a daily basis. You know, you could say the buyer has interactions, but the buyer's interaction's different: the buyer's always dealing with a different product, right? So even if you're an expert buyer...today I'm buying shoes, tomorrow I'm buying whatever. You're always flailing about,

trying to collect information, trying to find a baseline...so you're always struggling. ...It's the expert versus the dilettante.

Thus the dynamic of the transaction, the opposition of "the expert versus the dilettante" as he puts it, is a function of seller discipline on the one hand and buyer indiscipline on the other. Such a structuralist assertion is, to be sure, prefigured in the economism of FM and DG's comments. Yet what sets HD's account apart, as he admits below, is that his inferiority was not wholly determined by this dynamic; his own competencies played a crucial role:

MV: Are you the kind of person who enjoys haggling or negotiating in general?

HD: No I don't enjoy it.

MV: Really, OK, I thought you would have—

HD: No I don't see it as a game. But what I have learned is that if there's an opportunity to *do* so, over the years I've tried to take advantage of it, although I'm not — I don't think I'm very good at it. In fact, I don't think I'm good at it all, because I'm too quick to settle, you know, like? And I don't want to give offence either. I'm always, like, giving a number that doesn't, you know — so I'm always prefacing things by, you know, whatever. But, I mean, I try it. Like I try stupid gambits like, 'Well what if I paid cash?' or something, you know.

MV: ...So in the end did you feel like you paid a fair price — and whatever fair means?

HD: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think it was OK. I mean, you know [*Pausing with a guttural sound.*] ...if I was a real good haggler, I think I might have started at 4,000 for that car [rather than \$4,800]. Like retrospectively, because, you know, the car wasn't great–

MV: So retrospectively, you think you could have started *that* low?–

HD: Yeah–

MV: Like, you could have lowballed him that much?

HD: Well, now, that's surprising to you – I mean, it's not a question of lowballing, it's a question of what is the car really worth, right?

The buyer, HD is trying to tell us, is a dilettante in a double sense, vis-à-vis both the seller and, perhaps more importantly, herself. Put another way, that HD understands the transaction was stacked against him – that he was, put otherwise, unable to strategize in a manner commensurate with “what the car [was] really worth” – is not nearly as important as the fact he takes considerable responsibility for the lopsidedness of the opposition. It is as if his every step were a misstep proving the superiority of his opposite number, much like the novice tennis player who underwrites the victory of her opponent by continually hitting the net.

What emerges then in this and other dispatches from the mushy middle is a curious tension between agency and structure to which the market power concept is poorly attuned. Market power, as I have sought to demonstrate, infers subjective experiences of agency from objective, structural asymmetries; car sellers are strategic, it follows, because they occupy privileged roles (viz. technical scribe and acquisitional gatekeeper). HD's experience, however, *also* suggests an opposite line of explanation, whereby structural positions are inferred from the buyer's self-awareness of tutelage. Such explanatory fluidity signals less an empirical dead-end for market power than an opening to another avenue of analysis: the possibility that power does not simply describe the buyer's agency or cool lack thereof, but that it *works* on her agency. In which case, to continue following the trail of power of the buyer-car-seller nexus, we need not a new analytical gaze so much as a recalibration: rather than contenting ourselves to trace the *circumscription* of buyer agency, we need to locate its *constitution* at the point where subjective experiences of capability intersect with objective positions of inferiority.

## Chapter Six

# ...to Market/Power

### Why Foucault?

TO RECAP WHAT HAS BEEN SAID AND WHAT IS TO COME: when it comes to major life purchases like cars, disentanglement (viz. more or less deliberate, more or less formal calculation) is not meaningfully part of lived experience. This however does not mean it is negligible; disentanglement corresponds to an exercise in retrospective justification which can only be understood as an instance of power. At this point in the analysis, we have just discovered that the *market power* concept is of limited use elucidating this process. Something else is needed conceptually.

The 'something else' I am proposing is, I admit, unorthodox insofar as it is neo-Foucauldian. I say this because the dis- /entanglement dichotomy is central to many economic sociologies (cf. Krippner, 2001); can we not then dissect it within the confines of one or more of these? Why resort to Foucault? The long



answer is that economic sociology tends not to have a particularly robust appreciation of power. To survey the founding works of *new economic sociology* (NES), for example, one gets the distinct impression its practitioners sought to avoid it. For Ronald Burt (1992: 15), what comprises and animates trust, the *sine non qua* of a market relation, is difficult to generalize, but power is not part of the mix:

The matter comes down to a question of interpersonal debt. If I do for her, will she for me? There is no general answer. The answer lies in the match between specific people. If a contact feels that he is somehow better than you – a sexist male dealing with a woman, a racist while dealing with a black, an old-money matron dealing with an upwardly mobile ethnic – your investment in the relationship will be taken as proper obeisance to a superior. No debt is incurred.

It would appear, in other words, that the NES research agenda is framed by a very literal reading of equality (i.e. market actors trust each other because they are peers to each other), a postulate which may help to ground NES as a sub-discipline, but which helps us not one bit. Indeed, as a slew of critics have argued (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 114; Brint, 1992: 200-1; Fligstein, 2002: 70-1; Krippner, 2001: 795-6; Powell & Smith-Doerr, 1994: 371; Uzzi, 1997: 63), by placing such overwhelming emphasis on interrelational trust, NESers end up

underspecifying the 'content' underpinning these relations in the first place (e.g. themes of sociality and femininity highlighted earlier).

ANT likewise leaves something to be desired. Take the debate, unrelated to the Callon-Miller exchange, surrounding the first American auction for mobile phone frequency licences in 1994, an event that netted the federal government a windfall in the billions. The commonplace ANT interpretation (e.g. Guala, 2001; Muniesa & Callon, 2007: 182-3) is that the auctions were a successful example of performativity: because everything about them had to be written from scratch, from the rules to methods of bidding, they provided a rare opportunity for two competing camps, game theorists and experimental economists, "to construct the sociotechnological *agencements* that they believe[d were] compatible with their own models, statements and assumptions" (Callon, 2007: 341). Philip Mirowski and Edward Nik-Khah (2007) take exception, however, to the supposition the auctions were a success. The problem, they argue (2007: 203), is that ANTs define success exclusively by the criterion of "economic efficiency" – to wit, revenue maximization for the state – sidestepping the rather inconvenient fact that the auctions failed to meet a single objective stipulated by Congress at the outset. Put otherwise, ANTs neglect to see that the auctions were as much a political as an economic event, leading them to construe "the economists, telecoms, and

government officials as a single undifferentiated team united in pursuit of the pragmatic operability of a[n economic] 'machine.'" Yet "the telecoms," as political actors, "were unequivocally 'more equal' than everyone else" (2007: 211).

Latour is unmoved by their critique (2005: 63, 251), as he is in general by the political explanations of critical sociologists. "[A]bstain as much as possible from using the notion of power" he warns (2005: 260), which risks unrealistically positing invisible forces explaining asymmetries independently of sociotechnical networks. Power for him is an *explanadum*, not an *explanans*: there can be no 'powerful explanations' of asymmetries, for it is precisely power (viz. its mechanics, figuration and limits) that must be explained (2005: 63-4). Latour's political epistemology thus eschews themes of antagonism and inequity in favour of the more prosaic, but equally contestable task of mobilizing and maintaining associations; of the process, that is, of "unification of [a] collective into a common world acceptable to those who will be unified" (2005: 256).

While there is much good sense in all this, the injunction to dismiss the preoccupations of critical sociology, themes which, again, correspond to the content of relations, strikes me as needlessly stifling. Does not the more rewarding angle of attack lie between figurations and contents? Femininity in a

car transaction, let us remember, concerns both: one cannot fully understand how women's calculativities are framed without also taking account, from a sales perspective, of preconceptions about the rectitude of the undertaking nor, from the buyer's, apprehension over the prospect of being framed. If such dualities cannot be accommodated, I see no reason to drop anchor in ANT's epistemological waters.

Bourdieu's (2005) economic sociology, beginning from the premise that market relations *are* power relations, represents a more promising harbour. Markets according to him are fields of forces (2005: 199), which is to say they involve struggles among actors with differing means or strengths (*atouts*). An actor's position is determined not by any SES category or relation of production, but by the volume and composition of her *capitals*, embodied in a variety of objective (e.g. money, equipment) and subjective (e.g. goodwill, know-how) forms (cf. 2005: 2, 193-5, 233n2-3, 246n4-5). The uneven distribution of these "exert[s] a structural effect...weigh[ing]...on all the agents engaged in the field; and the worse placed they are within that distribution, the more it restricts the space of possibles open to them." Accordingly, "[t]he tendency for the structure to reproduce itself is immanent in the very structure of the field" (2005: 195, 196).

As much as I welcome his spotlight on power, I find Bourdieu's a poor guide to understanding the experiences recounted herein. The drawback is that Bourdieu ultimately took the passivity of consumers too much for granted, ironically cutting conceptually close to market power. For instance, Bourdieu explains the primacy of firms to structure markets by dismissively noting, "As for consumers, their behaviour would be entirely reduced to the effect of the field if they did not have a certain interaction with it (as a function of their – quite minimal – inertia)" (2005: 194). Elsewhere he bluntly posits consumers as doubles of their sellers, such that competition is a struggle among sellers for access to "clients occupying positions in social space homologous to the positions those producers occupy in the field" (2005: 208). What Bourdieu fails to convey in these passages is the variability or fragility of power, leaving us with the somewhat crude impression – Latour would no doubt agree – that the domination of consumers is a *fait accompli*, a seemingly natural or immutable phenomenon permeating the entire field.

Which brings us to Foucault. The virtue of his understanding of power is its versatility: unlike with Latour, asymmetry is retained as power's necessary condition, yet unlike with Bourdieu, asymmetry does not restrict, but rather creates or "operates on the field of possibilities" (Foucault, [1983] 2000d: 341).

That is, he wisely, if controversially disavowed power's link to domination, taking instead *government* as its primary matrix. This latter does not concern the State per se, but is analogous to *authority*, if not to the letter of Weber's definition (which "implies a minimum of voluntary compliance [or] an interest...in obedience" [1978: 212]), then very much in its spirit, for freedom, believed Foucault, is indispensable to government. "A power relationship" he wrote (2000d: 340), "can only be articulated on the basis...that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) is recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts." To put a finer distinction on the matter, *power* is the effectuation of dispositions and actions under conditions of largely legitimate asymmetry, while *government* is the specific relation, asymmetrical but free, by which this process unfolds:

The characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men's conduct – but never exhaustively or coercively. A man who is chained up and beaten is subject to force...not power. But if he can be induced to speak, when his ultimate recourse could have been to hold his tongue, preferring death, then he has been caused to behave in a certain way. His freedom has been subjected to power [and] submitted to government. If an individual can remain free, however little his freedom may be, power can subject him to government. There is no power without potential refusal or revolt ([1979] 2000b: 324).

At the end of day, it is this emphasis on freedom that makes Foucault's take on power so phenomenologically relevant to major life purchases. More precisely, the passage above encapsulates perfectly, I think, a fundamental tension experienced by all car buyers, namely influence from without and freedom from within. There are two ways of interpreting what this means. The first, more obvious option would be to say buyers are implicated in their inferiority: if, like dopes, they possess the potential to refuse but refuse to exercise it, they have no one to blame but themselves for the power over them. Or conversely we might say something more subtle is afoot: the governed consumer, a sentient being, is free to orient to market government in the manner of her choosing, even if that means rebelling against 'the tyranny' of market choices. What remains constant however, is her perception of inferiority, an inescapable fact for all intents and purposes, to which all her faculties must orient. We are hence not talking about an illusory freedom of the sort voiced in the critique that consumers may be free to choose, but their choices are circumscribed. What is being hinted at is instead a very real, very consequential freedom that looks like an open-ended, self-flagellatory dialogue – as we just encountered – with inferiority itself. It is the freedom, we shall see, to be one's own strict, but loving governor.

Appreciating freedom in this way allows us to transition from a predominantly structural analysis of automobile acquisitions to one rooted in subjectivity; a shift, that is, from market power to market/power. The former analytic, as explained earlier, construes power as a permanent, patterning, yet variable delimitation on agency rendered observable by degrees of freedom of interest-maximizing behaviour. In the latter, power is an accelerator, not a brake on agency. Market/power, in other words, begins from the premise that the essential character of market relations is (self-) governmental and its effects subjectivating. This is not, to be sure, like brainwashing: car buyers almost invariably find their inferiority irksome; some even scheme against it, as SN and WH successfully did in Chapter Four. But when all is said and signed, the experience of inferiority unlocks economic reason; it is the most effective mirror in which to see oneself as an economizing subject. The buyer therefore does not react *to* government; she is constituted *by* it. The disentangling moment, the culmination and highest expression of this constitution, does not transcend inferiority, it merely rephrases it in quasi-formal terms.

### **A Primer on Micro- and Macro-Physics**

But we are perhaps getting ahead of ourselves; until we have a better grasp of the parameters of Foucault's analytic, we cannot unlock anything.



At its core, Foucault's contribution to power lies not in the implied emphasis on authority, less still in any novel reinterpretation thereof, but in his focus on its techniques. What is historically distinct about modern power, he argued in *Discipline and Punish* ([1975] 1977, henceforth *D&P*), is the ubiquity of discipline: unlike in pre-modern societies, where subjects tended to observe the power of the sovereign only periodically in grand spectacles, disciplinary methods strive to exert perpetual effects. They do this by directing the physicality of actions. They take the body, in other words, as the primary object, treating it not

*en masse*, 'wholesale,' as if it were an indissociable unity, but...working it 'retail,' individually...exercising upon it a subtle coercion [and] obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body (1977: 137).

This consummate attention to the minutiae of action represents a *micro-physics* of power, "a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body" (1977: 139) which became commonplace from the Eighteenth century onwards, spreading from prisons to factories, schools, barracks, hospitals and vice-versa. Foucault's examples are humble but substantial: the "meticulous meshing" of a soldier's gestures to the operational specifics of a weapon (1977: 153); the veritable

“gymnastics” required for pupils to learn correct handwriting (1977: 152); the methodical, uninterrupted order brought to bear on plague-stricken citizens (1977: 195-7). All these exemplify an imposition of rhythms from without, ideally sustaining upon its imprint an automatic succession of actions from within (1977: 151-2). Those who dreamed, trumpeted and instituted these disciplines were thus guided by a double promise: the promise of a population of useful but docile bodies (1977: 138), full of improvable aptitudes yet willing to participate in regimes of dressage, hopefully accepting them as beneficial.

There are three corollaries that are helpful for thinking about market/power. Firstly, “[d]iscipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (1977: 170). Discipline, that is, is a “power [that] passes through individuals” ([1976] 2003: 29), for which reason the hammer or fist are inappropriate metaphors. Electricity is far more apt, connoting a circulation or current that shocks subjects into action. Attitudes, dispositions and potentialities are hence endogenous to power; they are not nurtured in some sheltered corner of lived experience, to be subsequently deployed in pursuit of power or against it. They are power’s direct effects, forged in the crucible of authority.

Secondly, discipline entails organization not simply in the sense of authority, but also time (i.e. the intensive use of timetables) and space (i.e. the strategic use of architecture). The ideal with respect to the latter is Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, a prison configured as a perfectly lit ring of cells surrounding an unlit observation tower. The arrangement maximizes both "axial visibility" and "lateral invisibility" (1977: 200): the gaze from the tower can be as macro- or microscopic as needed, while inmates see neither their minders nor, to the detriment of sedition, each other. The scheme moreover "automatizes and disindividualizes power," for the quantities and qualities of guards are superfluous in the final instance. What really counts is the inmate's "anxious awareness of being observed. ...He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it," so the logic goes,

assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (1977: 202-3).

The Panopticon, in short, promises self-normalization entirely by architectural means. Prisoners are literally forced to observe and censure themselves, the dark infinity of the all-surveying eye reflecting images of their own souls. Taken to its logical extreme, the Panopticon is really an *Autopticon*.

Lastly, power is synonymous with knowledge, which is to say disciplinary regimes construe the governed as objects of knowledge. Take the examination, perhaps the disciplinary institution par excellence, which differentiates and ranks all the while establishing a scale of adequacy, a single “normalizing gaze [that] makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (1977: 184). The examiner, be she a doctor or teacher, comes to carve a niche of authority, “a whole field of knowledge...destined and reserved for [her]” (1977: 186-7), while the examinee comes to know himself “in his own particularity.” This particularity is hardly a reflection of the examinee’s uniqueness (1977: 191-2), but is, let us not forget, an inherently comparative identity implicated in the elaboration of human topologies: the tracing, that is, of variations and ranges in ‘being’ – from excellent to poor, good to bad, normal to abnormal – upon which all administration is predicated. So goes the maxim, ‘Knowledge is power.’

These three corollaries are nevertheless not entirely unproblematic, the second particularly so. Basically, Foucault implied in *D&P* that the organizational potential of discipline is strongest when enclosed: prisons, barracks and factories are archetypal sites precisely because they have been framed from the outside world. An auto showroom, by contrast, violates this condition by a handsome margin, as do a great many other sales environments

predicated on freedoms of entry and exit. It is perhaps for this reason that so much neo-Foucauldian economic research is located within more or less formal organizations, problematizing discipline via accountability (e.g. McKinlay & Starkley, 1998; P. Miller, 1994; Winiecki, 2007). This line of research could comfortably encompass car sales, where discipline is far more conspicuous with respect to salespeople, not customers. Chandler Phillips' (2001: 4) exposé of a high volume dealership, for instance, paints a picture of hierarchical surveillance not unlike a Panopticon:

We sold new cars on our side of the building, and used cars were on the other side. In each of the front corners of the building were the new and used car 'towers.' These glassed-in offices were restricted to employees. Inside was a raised platform where the sales managers sat. When you went into one of [them], you found yourself behind a high counter, looking up at your bosses, like being in a courtroom or a police station. The sales managers are sometimes referred to as 'the desk.' Salespeople would say, 'You have to clear that deal with the desk.' Or, 'Who's on the desk today?'

This constant gaze, contrary to popular lore, is all but indifferent to buyers, who are generally looked upon as no better than fodder or throughput. The sole objects of measurement and motivation, alleges Phillips (2001: 5), are employees, who are as weary of the dealer environment as the customers they serve:

What the customer didn't realize was that the poor car salesman or woman was not really the enemy. The real enemy was the manager sitting in the sales tower cracking the whip. ...So that's why the car salespeople stick like glue to customers. Their fear of...managers is greater than their fear of offending the customers.<sup>1</sup>

How then is an institutionally open analysis of market/power possible?

How can we speak of buyers – not sellers – as governed if their confinement to sales spaces is fleeting at best? The rudiments of the analytical shift from intra- to extramurality are plain enough in *D&P*. Foucault, from the beginning, took an expansive view on the disciplines: he expressly noted at one point, “discipline *sometimes* requires enclosure,” and spoke elsewhere of their tendency “to become ‘de-institutionalized,’” as when Christian schools started supervising pupils’ parents, or when the hospital came to be conceived “as a base for the medical observation of the population outside...” (1977: 141, 211-2, emphasis added).

These scattered references, however, amount to little more than an oblique suggestion of a wider framework of power. It was not until the *biopower* lectures of 1978 (2007) and -9 (2008), when Foucault started mentioning government by name, that an extramural imperative took shape. Very briefly put, he sought in these lectures to problematize the historicity of government, to trace the rise of a

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<sup>1</sup> Car dealers in general take surveillance of their assets seriously: as Sandy Liguori (2011g) notes, “it’s not uncommon for a modern dealership to have more than 100 surveillance cameras monitoring activity inside and outside...24 hours, seven days a week, 365 days a year.”

new art of government circa the Eighteenth century breaking with the principle of sovereignty: no longer would the reason of State be intrinsic to itself (i.e. no more would its sole purpose be to perpetuate sovereignty); its concern henceforth would lie with the maximization of forces of living, productive populations, be they students, wage-earners or a nation. One of the chief drivers of this new governmentality was the political-economic 'discovery' of the irreducibility of society itself, which was purported to possess "a complex and independent reality [with] its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibilities of disturbance" ([1982] 2000c: 352). The prerogative of a governor, as such, is *not* to penetrate the ontologies of his subjects, but to know and frame these ontologies. His artfulness is less a matter of leading subjects directly as 'conducting their conducts' or, as alluded to earlier, of "operat[ing] on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself" (2000d: 341). The history of expansion of the modern State is thus written not in terms of society's *etatization*, (2007: 109), but rather the State's own *governmentalization*, the piecemeal but continuous identification of disciplinary mechanisms and technologies as its own (2000d: 345; 2008: 77).

In short, with biopower Foucault finally made good on the promise to deliver "a generalizable...way of defining power relations" (1977: 205). We begin

to discern a more or less continuous line of conceptualization from the disciplines to biopolitics, the latter's dream of administering life itself breathing fire into the extension of regimes of training throughout the modern Western body politic (2007: 107). The idea of government is, of course, the analytical lynchpin: it is the shuttle linking micro- and macro-physical histories; the door by which to exit or re-enter disciplinary enclosures; the archetype of all relations of power.

Just how successful is Foucault's analytic of power overall? How well does it capture a free-floating power exercised through and by mobile subjects? Greg Elmer (2003: 234-5) is not totally convinced, feeling the image of the enclosure dominates still. This may in turn cast doubt on the sociological appropriateness of Foucault's historical approach, something Steven Lukes, himself a formidable student of power, strongly believes. Lukes (2005: 93) finds that Foucault's image of disciplinary society "conveys a one-sided, monolithic image of unidirectional control." He goes on to accuse Foucault of overindulging in idealized forms of discipline, thereby violating the cardinal Weberian injunction to put them to an empirical test (2005: 93, 158n23). Foucault was merely "a genealogist," he observes, "concerned with the historical recovery of the formation of norms...and as such ...had no interest in...examining variation, outcomes and effects: he just asserted that there were such effects" (2005: 98). At



best, Foucault only “begin[s] to explore subtle forms of the securing of willing compliance” (2005: 106).

Such a critique, though pointlessly pugilistic, points rightly nonetheless to the pitfalls of too literal or mechanistic a reading of Foucault in general and *D&P* in particular. If all we do is modify his intramural categories to this or that extramural context, we risk routing our efforts in one of two equally uninteresting directions: either we strain to find some correspondence between intra- and extramurality, a false difference in degree or form, or we end up embellishing the tautology that the difference is, in fact, in kind. Take Ashlee Humphrey’s (2006) translation of the Panopticon to on-line shopping, which unfortunately manages to rut itself in both directions: she claims on the one hand that prisoners, patients and pupils are “uncannily applicable to the domain of consumer behaviour” (2006: 308), yet her analysis is riddled with qualifications acknowledging that the consummate judging of disciplinary regimes “is a step removed” from the consummate profiling of e-marketing (2006: 301, also cf. 300, 303, 305). Humphreys perhaps should have taken heed of Foucault’s (2000d: 342-

3) own warning that it is folly to extrapolate from intramural settings armed only with the concepts and categories found therein.<sup>2</sup>

All of this is to say, rather than judging Foucauldian thought as either supremely impotent or full of potential to model the human condition, we should see it as an invitation to push or even transcend it, one which Gilles Deleuze ([1990] 1992) gladly accepted in a short adieu to Foucault. According to Deleuze, we have passed into an era of socio-political order characterized no longer by discipline, but *control*. The difference being, whereas disciplinary spaces are analogical, veritably moulds of each other, control implies “a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (1992: 4, italics in original). In Deleuze’s pithy articulation of control – a term which, Alain Beaulieu (2005: xiii) rightly notes, Foucault used infrequently – we finally have a way of thinking about power that breaks the constraints of architecture (Elmer, 2003: 239, 241-2; Marks, 1994: 98). The disciplines enclosed subjects for a lifetime, but discontinuously so (1992: 6), requiring them always to begin again, “from

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<sup>2</sup> This sort of re-working of the Panopticon is not without precedent in the neo-Foucauldian literature (e.g. Fiske, 1993: 85). Quite aside from intra-/ extramural quagmire I raise, Elmer (2003: 232-3, emphasis in original) takes these revisions to task for misreading the importance of Panopticon, which derives its effects *not* from observation – Humphreys (2006: 302, 304) claims that “scopophilia” sustains the e-Panopticon – but “from the architectural arrangement of light which *suggests* panoptic surveillance” (also cf. Foucault, [1977] 1980b: 148).

school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory" (1992: 5). Thanks however to the computerized metrology – autopoietic and ceaseless – regimes of control put the onus on subjects to subject themselves, providing techniques to modulate one's own care, but never turn it off. Thus education is replaced by permanent training (1992: 5); the finite gradations of a pay-scale by seemingly limitless schemes of bonuses and incentives (1992: 4); physical presence in regulated spaces by regulation of debt (1992: 6). If the animal symbolizing the disciplines is a mole, it is the serpent that carries the banner of control (1992: 5).

Deleuze, of course, was not alone to tinker with Foucault's categories of power. Right around the same time, Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (1990: 9, 2, *italics in original*) set about revising governmentality to mean "*government at a distance*" – an adaptation and, if I do say so, improvement on Latour's (cf. 1987: 219-32) "action at a distance" concept<sup>3</sup> – characterized by "the self-regulating capacities of subjects, [who have been] shaped and normalized in large part through the powers of expertise." Or as Rose summed it up elsewhere (1999: 154), the key vectors of advanced liberal governmentality are "autonomization plus responsabilization." Like Deleuze then, Miller and Rose are trying to blow

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<sup>3</sup> Latour (1987: 191) first mentions "action at a distance" in conjunction with the Seventeenth century debates on – and really as a metaphor for – gravity. In subsequent writings Latour drops the phrase in favour of a single-word term, *translation*, referring to the process of linking actants to form viable networks of action (2005: 108).

the 'traditional' Foucauldian limits on power's currency: they envision a thoroughly mobilized theatre of power, lodged squarely inside the heads of subjects, shoehorned there by a range of techniques and technologies.

This insight puts us in good stead to advance a political phenomenology of markets, setting out, as I see it, two epistemological guidelines. Firstly, we are not dealing with the power of indoctrination or ideological discipline, as if markets possess some blanket logic determining experiences from the outset. Market/ power needs instead to be understood as a rhizomic authority embodied in devices and discursivities alike, a "technology of thought" (P. Miller & Rose, 1990: 5) lending itself to variable justifications of truth and praxis. In essence, all the putatively disentangling entanglements described in previous chapters, from car reviews to woman-certification, are instances of market/power. These devices, I hope I sufficiently demonstrated, do not predispose buyers to think or act a certain way, but they do conjure possibilities of action; they organize, that is, a context or basis for experience to which buyers seemingly must orient.

In which case – and this is the second guideline – more than a little care needs to be observed specifying the context involved. We are, no doubt, dealing with a political context or 'theatre,' but in what sense is it political? Government-at-a-distance, as a phrase, evokes a master animating puppets by invisible strings

and gears, an image raising the spectre of desires and calculativities being manufactured by large corporate interests. That sort of political critique, implying passive consumers and a penetrative marketing behemoth in the final instance, will not do. It fails, as Michael Shaoul (1997: 74) reminds us, “to perceive...power [as] a relational[ly] multidirectional phenomenon,” no matter how often or eloquently it may be asserted consumers are not dupes. So while market/power’s political moment may not be ‘real’ (i.e. consumers are not literally controlled by commerce at large) it just might be “irreal,” a curious term Rose (1999: 32) uses to convey the technical or material sub-structures of lived experience (cf. Goodman, 1978; Hacking, 1988). Government is therefore rendered present *not* by the relation between or among actors, but the relation of an actor to a device: control “becomes real,” to paraphrase Rose (1999: 32), “by harnessing itself to a practice of inscription, calculation and action.” This does not imply that flesh-and-blood governors disappear or that devices exercise authority autopoietically. It suggests rather an interesting mediation between governors and governed, an ambiguous estrangement – but never elision – of one from the other.

It seems to me the more rewarding program of research points towards an interrogation of irreality, or basically a problematization of mediation: what are

the devices involved, how do they work and how do the governed orient to them? And perhaps most importantly, who or what exactly governs this process? Allow me then in the remainder of this chapter to begin addressing these questions by honing in on the uneven topographies of control wrought by calculativity: its strategies, justifications and unanticipated reversals of fortunes. What is at stake is nothing less than a form of government that is to market action as DNA is to life.

### **Games of Irreal Government**

But again, I am getting ahead of myself. All of this may sound nice, but how are we to see the government embedded in market devices? What is irreality's point of empirical entry? The answer is oppositionality: if, as I am alleging, the proliferation of car-buying devices constitutes an ensemble of control, then we should be able to discern in them the thread of some underlying "system of differentiations;" power, after all, cannot exist otherwise (Foucault, 2000d: 344). Decidedly, these are not oppositions characterized by conveniently observable, openly antagonistic relations (e.g. over-zealous sellers versus naïve buyers), but take rather a more subtle, ambiguous operational form: an "antagonism of strategies" Foucault (2000d: 329) called it, a juxtaposition of latently conflicting interests within manifestly unified calculativities. We cannot, as such, take the

promise of devices to create 'communities' of calculative affinity at face value; declarations of this sort should not merely be met with scepticism, they should send us scrambling to trace the fault lines that are likely spreading surreptitiously but in plain sight throughout these brave new actor-worlds.

As luck would have it, the retail car business is rife with such triumphal proclamations. "*Knowledge is power*," writes Terry O'Keefe (2012: 1, italics in original) of OMVIC, Ontario's auto sales regulator, "and knowledgeable consumers are good for business." Indeed, he continues, a different mindset is currently taking root in auto sales:

[M]ore and more it is understood that a knowledgeable customer is the route to a successful and positive trans-action. Transparency reduces stress. Customers who know what to expect from a dealer's advertising and disclosures [and] who have realistic ideas about what a vehicle should cost...may actually be the customers who are most forthright and who are genuinely seeking a fair deal for both themselves and the dealer.

What O'Keefe is describing here is nothing shy of a paradigm-shift aimed at establishing levels of "[t]ransparency" hitherto unknown. Buyers, according to this new way, can no longer be considered semi-literate walking chequebooks; a successful transaction now demands they be treated as capable commercial partners with every right to relevant technico-pecuniary information. "The age

of the savvy, well-informed car shopper is here to stay,” prophesizes Sandy Liguori (2012a), past president of the Toronto area dealers association. “When customers are sufficiently informed about their options,” he enthuses (2011b), “they make better decisions.” GM Canada President Kevin Williams is even more bullish: “The customer is the CEO” (quoted in Van Alphen, 2011b). Where, in short, marketing was traditionally predicated on differentiable consumers, current marketing wisdom sees only pseudo-producers or *prosumers* (for a critical etymology of the term, cf. Zwick *et al*, 2008: 164-7, 186-7n2-3).

As far as can be determined in Liguori’s editorials and those of his successor Frank Romeo, such ebullience is attributable to three market devices. The first, not surprisingly, consists of third-party e-utilities: “Thanks to technological innovations, consumers now have access to thousands of credible sources to help them make informed buying decisions” (Romeo, 2012f). One of the more transformative tools, notes Romeo (2012b), is CarProof, a service launched in 2000 providing vehicle insurance and registration histories to anyone with an internet connection, vehicle ID number (VIN) and credit card. *De rigueur* in second-hand transactions today, such information was in the past privy only to dealers in a form that was not nearly as comprehensive.



The second corresponds to transformations in sales space and praxis.

“Today’s facilities,” Liguori (2011e) opines, “are architectural wonders compared to the modest facilities that were built decades ago.” Dealerships are becoming “state-of-the-art extensions of the brand, complete with natural lighting, in-house cafés, boutique-style parts departments and drive-through service bays – all geared toward the needs of today’s consumers” (Liguori, 2011f). Alongside these changes, dealers have “jacked up the size of [their] workforce and armed them with the tools to win customers – and keep them” (Van Alphen, 2011b). Many of these tools are as plain as they are precise: a strategic arrangement of well-stocked umbrella stands can, we are told, win the battle for hearts and minds.

The third device represents perhaps the grandest of market triumphs: dealer self-regulation, which in this province is embodied by the aforementioned Ontario Motor Vehicle Industry Council (OMVIC). The council’s mandate, defined by a provincial act (the MVDA of 2002), reads like a veritable market manifesto: OMVIC is to “maintain a fair, safe and informed marketplace in Ontario by protecting the rights of consumers, enhancing industry professionalism and ensuring fair, honest and open competition for registered motor vehicle dealers” (quoted in Romeo, 2012d). And as we saw in the Orangeville Mazda fiasco in Chapter Five, OMVIC has real juridical teeth, a fact

which, according to Liguori (2011a), has made “the retail automobile sector...one of the most heavily regulated industries in Canada” (also cf. 2011d; 2012c; 2012b; 2012e).

Taken as a whole, these devices have made possible an era of post-antagonistic sales, an attenuation of market power itself as harder, narrower limits now exist on sellers’ agencies. The “pushy deal-making” of yesteryear has been finally transcended (Liguori, 2011a; 2012e), along with all those attitudes and practices responsible for “creat[ing] more than one generation of cynical customers looking for trust anywhere” (Van Alphen, 2011b). To this still-weary public, Liguori (2011e) offers the following “straight advice: Get to know your dealership and its staff. After all,” he adds,

these folks are your mothers, fathers, siblings, neighbours and friends. These trained professionals know your vehicle better than anyone, and their primary mandate is to look after you, the customer. ...The automotive expertise found within a dealership is aimed squarely at making your car-buying experience as pleasant as possible.

“Relationships,” that is to say, “are the heart and soul of most successful businesses and dealerships are no exception” (Liguori, 2012d; also 2011b, in which the more telling phrase, “a trusting relationship,” is used). Relationship-formation is as critical a factor as pricing, if not more, for how are buyers to make

informed decisions without personalized guidance in the first place (Liguori, 2011c)? Romeo (2012e) makes a similar observation: salespeople have become “vital” allies for buyers, who today risk “information overload.” Salespeople mitigate “paralysis and confusion” by “help[ing] analyze the facts and reviews and explain the incentives, options and features that are available.”

Put otherwise, outright buyer-seller antinomy has given way to pseudo-pedagogy, something I experienced firsthand when a salesman I was hoping to interview informed me, with pride no less, he is actually a *consultant* (Romeo [2012c] calls salespeople “facilitator[s]”). In that regard, the spirit of openness fostered by the above-mentioned devices goes further than simply compelling sellers to disclose pertinent information. They work also to make buyers themselves ‘open,’ rendering their experiences knowable and actionable in their entirety. As Romeo (2012a, italics added) explains, every moment of buyer-seller interaction is a teachable moment, an invaluable opportunity to imprint or embody a buyer’s experience: “In my opinion, a great dealership experience encompasses *all points of contact* between dealership personnel and the customer, including the initial greeting...the sales process, vehicle delivery experience, complaint handling, and after delivery follow-up.” In addition to this intensive attention to experience, there is, of course, the entire metrological dimension of

the transaction: buyers' opinions are solicited, tabulated and interpreted in ever finer detail, the ultimate goal of which is, quite literally, to capture these opinions as strategic assets. The Ford Flex crossover, for example, may sell comparatively few exemplars, but it is valuable nonetheless, representing, in Ford marketing-speak, a top "'conquest' model" boasting the highest proportion of first-time Ford owners across the sales line-up (Kenzie, 2012b). The message I think is clear: moving cars off the sales lot is merely a means to an end, namely, the immersion of buyers in metrologically mediated relationships, be they with the dealer or brand, which come to impose a kind of infrastructure on their sovereign choices.

So while antagonism may no longer characterize buyer-car-seller nexus, *agonism* is alive and well: sellers may not be looking to fleece buyers, but there remains an irreconcilability of interests belying the rhetorical implication of collaboration (on agonism as constitutive of political action, cf. Foucault, 2000d: 342-3, 348n3; Mouffe, 2005: 19-21). The interviews are full of invocations of games, dances and the like, all of which speak to the agonistic nature of the purchasing experience. These are not games, to be clear, in the game-theoretical sense of the term: they do not refer to situations of mutually oriented, but always economizing courses of action yielding statistical models of outcomes. 'Game'

denotes instead an instrumentality of performance, a tacit understanding the encounter consists of a play of malleable, if not artificial representations. SN and WH obviously treated the whole of their acquisition as a game – audaciously at that. But for the most part, the game is perpetrated against the buyer, engendering in her an uneasy but unverifiable sensation that something is happening *to* her, not *for* her.

These games, I want to emphasize, correspond to techniques of government, one of the more important of which was already flagged by Liguori: his much touted “trusting relationship.” HR, whose latest car is an Audi S4 sport sedan, used to have a relationship with his local GM dealer, but eventually came to see his loyalty for what it truly was: an uncomfortable “game” to serialize his business:

HR: [My last GM vehicle] went off-lease, and every time it had gone off-lease before, General Motors had this really nice way of telling you that, you know, uh, ‘We’ll do lots for you!’ ‘We will give you \$1000 against – because you’ve been such a great customer – \$1000 off the new vehicle.’ ‘We’ll give you this, we’ll give you that;’ and uh, ‘We’ll make it painless for you, because you’re already our customer; you already have a lease with GMC.’ And it’s very simple to just switch it over and carry on with a brand new car. Well, the last time this happened, and it got me into a Trailblazer. Um, I had no intention of buying a SUV, but once I drove it, I thought, ‘OK,’ and

depending upon one's circumstances, you sort of – this was the least painless way of getting into a new car at the time. I then made the decision I wanted to break with General Motors, and I ended up buying [the Trail-blazer] off the lease at the end, at great expense–

MV: OK, yeah I can imagine–

HR: Because everything had to be fixed to the point where, you know, it was like a pristine automobile again. And on top of that, when I bought the Audi...I traded [the Trailblazer] in...so I was willing to, sort of, accept less than what the car was worth to me, just to get away from this constant – what do you do call it – like a turnover of lease, from lease to lease to lease. This is why I ended up buying the [Trailblazer] and financing it for a short time...I did it to get freedom! [*Laughs, along with MV.*] ...But [for sure] the biggest thing that I noticed over the last few years...was this little game they play...to make it so encouraging – so convenient to simply roll [the lease] over to another one. And it shouldn't be that way!

For HR trust has scarcely anything to do with “longstanding friendships, similar experiences, common dependencies... [or] active creation of new social relations” (Granovetter & McGuire, 1998: 166-7). Trust feels rather like, in a word, unfreedom, a distinctly demeaning deference to the familiar chiefly to the dealer's benefit. And though only an implicit dependence, breaking it nevertheless required very explicit effort at, HR reminds us, “great expense.”

The other anthroponomic game I heard lots about was the annoying ritual at the transaction's climax whereby the salesman shuffles to and fro between the buyer and his superior(s). What is so galling about this game is its patent absurdity, coming across as a cheap, transparent trick to dictate the financial negotiation: the salesman leaves periodically, only to return with new conditions to which the buyer must respond (choice sales phrases like, "I have to go in and talk to my manager" or "Oh yeah, let me just go upstairs" are, according to BJ and DG, common opening gambits in this game). Yet this "dance," which DG says is the root of so much distrust, was oddly recounted as empowering by others: the cynicism with which they spoke of its artificiality strongly implies, it seems to me, pride at having seen through it, a minor but thoroughly gratifying victory against a well-tuned sales machine. In MP's words:

And so [at the end], you know, he did his typical thing – 'I'll have to see' – and he goes in, and it's all glass offices so I can see to the third room down and, you know, he's just BS-ing the appearance he's talking with the guy. And he comes back and he says, 'Well, something, something' and he, you know, he made it look like it didn't work and he put out his hand and he said, [*In a hoarse voice.*] 'You got yourself a car!' ...And they do that thing. Nothing surprised me and, you know, he said, 'It's because you're the first [sale] of the day' or something...! [T]he first sale of the day at one in the afternoon? That seemed odd.

DW likewise read her salesman's antics like a book:

DW: [The salesman] basically said, 'I'll need to go talk to' whoever it is they go talk to when he leaves. I'm pretty sure they just walk around the corner and just stand there for a few minutes by themselves—

MV: [*Laughs.*]

DW: [They] play with their phone or something. So, he came and he said, 'Well, we looked at your car [*i.e. DW's trade-in*] and we can offer you' – I think it was, they ended up offering me, initially, \$2000 for it, and I was like, 'Are you kidding me?' ...So I did talk them up; they gave me three-grand as a trade-in for it.

MV: OK, so did they, did they relent after you—

DW: There was negotiation! [*She chuckles.*] There was a lot of, 'Oh I have to go back now and talk to *that guy.*' ...Um, I would say that happened maybe three times.

CV and his partner AA were subjected to the same treatment when they acquired a new Fiat 500 subcompact. In the transcript below CV, himself a salesperson (but not automotive), admits the game really is poppycock. But he also points out that it serves a purpose beyond insulting the buyer's intelligence. It is meant, confirms AA, to keep the buyer "realistic:"

cv: Now that I'm doing sales myself, like when I'm talking to a customer, I'm like, 'Yeah, yeah, just give me your number, you know, of what you want to pay, and I'll take this to finance and I'm going battle



on your behalf' – type-thing – 'and I'll come back.' I hang up the phone, I crunch the numbers – we don't have a finance department–

MV: [*Laughs heartedly.*]

CV: I crunch the numbers myself...and I know what'll win the deal. So I'm talking to the customer directly; [the bosses] don't know who the customer is, and the rapport you have with them and stuff, so what will actually win the deal. And I think maybe that might have been going on [with our Chrysler salesman]. Like, he's given a range; he goes around the corner to the coffee room for a second, writes down another number and comes back. So I'm kind of sceptical of the whole process.

AA: [The salesman] makes it seem like he's not making the decisions; he's just the go-between.

MV: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, y- yeah–

AA: Yeah. Whether or not that's the case, we don't really know. But he's saying, you know, he's being realistic, he's saying, 'You know what, I think you have to move this amount in order for them to say yes. You know, I'll take this back to them, but they're probably going to come back with this.' So he's like, he's like being as realistic as–

CV: Either it's a really, like, shady process or it's a really–

AA: Upfront?–

CV: Black-and-white process. Yeah.

I like AA and CV's allusion to the game's duality, this inability to distinguish between its "shady," possibly abusive artifice and its "[u]pfront," deal-making virtue. It is as if they are saying this: the basis of the transaction consists of a relationship whose basic parameter is equality insofar as transactors enjoy a "rapport." Of the two however, the salesman possesses the superior calculative agency – only he knows "what will actually win the deal" – which makes for a precarious situation: the buyer cannot always be counted on to see reason (viz. how much "to move" to secure a deal), while the salesman cannot openly impose his calculativity, which risks breaking the condition of equality. The salesman hence resolves the tension by importing a higher level of authority to the relationship – the discretion of the sales manager. In effect, he governs by proxy by invoking the distant, but pointed scrutiny of "*that guy*," who may or may not reveal himself in the denouement of the deal. This game, in short, along with all the other devices described above, lays bare the central truth that car buyers are *never* beyond the pale of government.

## **Entanglement with the Self**

In lieu of a conclusion neatly summarizing the ubiquity and importance of government, I want to close by acknowledging I have avoided, purposely I admit, one of the central questions posed earlier: across all these instances of

irreal, mediated government, *who governs the buyer?* The answer, if we think hard about it, is variable. Sometimes, as just described, it is the salesman who furtively creates and seizes the opportunity to demonstrate economic reason. Sometimes, if things get complex or go awry, the sales manager may step out of the shadows to oversee the buyer's tutelage personally (see *Lj's* story in the next chapter). I suppose there is even an argument to be made that marketers, by measuring buyers' courses of action, play an important role governing buyer's calculativities. Assuming, however, a smooth transaction free of overt conflict, I would like to suggest there is another master whose authority trumps the marketer, manager and his minions: the buyer herself.

*Self-government* here, to belabour the point, has nothing to do with the buyer's liberation *from* power, as if her invidious technico-pecuniary capacities no longer have to stand exposed against a profit-hungry calculative behemoth. To the contrary, *self-government* has everything to do with her attachment *to* power: the first effect of all the facts and figures, techniques and technologies, and games and umbrella stands she encounters – devices which coat the walls of her calculations like so many layers of uneven paper – is to plunge her deeper into the behemoth. Thus the proliferation of devices does not overload her calculative capacities so much as amplify her appreciation of the latter in the first

place. Increasingly entangled in a relationship with herself, she becomes a *bifurcated* subject, both student and sergeant to the minutiae, intricacies and formalities of calculation. This internal bifurcation – this distinctively Escheresque form of entanglement – is, I think, evident in HD's testimony in the previous chapter: he does not simply profess inferiority, he does so instrumentally, strategically, *reasonably*. Moving forward to the next chapter, I hope to demonstrate that this relation of self-control, -training, -flagellation or whatever we wish to call it, is written in largely quasi-formal, disentangling logic. Disentanglement, in other words, is borne of this highly powerful – and power-*full* – entanglement, namely that with the self.

## Chapter Seven

# Disentangled Enlightenment

SOMEWHERE NEAR THE START OF CHAPTER FIVE I made a rather glib remark to the effect that power is the ultimate entanglement because it destroys all memory of itself; I called this, “amnesia of genesis,” borrowing from Bourdieu (2005: 5). Then in the last sentence of the preceding chapter I ostensibly qualified this by saying only a particular kind of power triggers this amnesic movement – the entanglement with the self. I want to connect these two statements in this, the final chapter, thereby fulfilling my central promise of demonstrating a different conceptual relationship between entanglement and disentanglement.

We can begin articulating this difference by briefly revisiting the standard ANT conceptions of disentanglement and economization. For Callon (cf. 1998a: 15-9; Callon *et al*, 2002: 197-8), the former refers to the moment of detachment of a thing from its habitual entanglements for the purposes of knowing and acting on it as an alienable, fungible object of market activity. Comparison shopping is

perhaps the most obvious example: similar goods from different suppliers, each an idiosyncratic, potentially unfathomable product of its supplier-world, are beheld and evaluated in the buyer's calculative imagination on the basis of a handful of criteria, if not one: price. This act of contextual shearing *economizes*, rendering economy present, in a double sense. Firstly from a microsocial perspective, it puts into action variable means-ends orientations (viz. minimum cost for maximum gain), which vary insofar as calculativities are formatted and distributed differentially. Secondly and macrosocially, the sum total of calculative interactions helps to establish an entire institutional realm – an economy writ large – of market relationships, circulating commodities and mobile values. Devices are the lifeblood of this duality, facilitating calculation and, by extension, movement of marketable things. In brief, Callon's portrait of economization is of an ongoing, real-time process of socialization dependent on the quantities and qualities of the devices and, Bourdieu might have added, capitals at hand.<sup>1</sup>

Based however on the data here, I would say something is sorely missing from this portrait, namely issues of government, an omission begging the larger question, *how does power change our understanding of economization?* Above all, I

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Brian Singer for helping me see this duality.

want to show in the pages to come that the entanglement with the self revises, but does not vitiate disentanglement. That may appear to contradict everything I have written until now; have I not, one may ask, sought to belie the vacuity of the “Pure Logic of Choice” (Hayek, 1948: 85) implicit in Callon’s analysis? Indeed I have, but if truth be told, themes of dispositional purity are prevalent in the interviews; something approximating a strictly number-driven logic is, at any rate, evident in the cases below and need to be accounted for. In dissecting these power-laden paths to disentanglement, I want the reader to see – and this is the crux of the difference of I spoke of earlier – that they have nothing to do with calculation in the final instance.

## **Responsibilization**

But let us not plunge headlong into disentanglement’s a-calculative moment. Let us instead approach it from another, neo-Foucauldian angle: responsabilization.

Foucault’s (2010) first lecture of 1983, his penultimate year of life, centred on Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay, ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ (*‘Was Ist Aufklärung?’*). Kant understood the Enlightenment as humanity’s exit (*Ausgang*) from a state of self-incurred tutelage (*Ummündigkeit* or *minorité* in French), such that to the question, *what is distinct about the age of Enlightenment?* Kant responded with the profound yet equally empty answer, *movement towards Enlightenment* (cf.

Foucault, 2010: 37)! We need not delve too deeply into either Kant's text or Foucault's interpretation thereof. I wish simply to pick up on the following assertion, something Kant treated as self-evident, concerning the proper balance between freedom and obedience, or as Foucault (2010: 37, also 32-3, 39) put it, "distribution of government of self and government [by] others."<sup>2</sup> Basically, Kant said that under conditions of tutelage there is too much obedience, making it impossible for us, inclined as we are to laziness and cowardice (*Faulheit und Feigheit*), to use reason (*Räsonnieren*) to relate to one another. But even in an enlightened society, whereby a public sphere of universal rationality has been politically safeguarded, obedience is still unavoidable in the private realm, which Kant took to mean the family, factory, military, State and so forth. To wit, Kant endorses wholeheartedly the necessity of limits on reason, or rather – and this is our point of departure – there can be no reason without some asymmetry of relations.

Is buying a car 'enlightening?' Very much so, but that is not really saying much. If, following Foucault's argument, we wish to understand enlightenment in the context of major life purchases, we then need specifically to enquire on the

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<sup>2</sup> The actual line is, of course, "government of self and...of others" ("*gouvernement de soi et...des autres*"), but I have taken the liberty of replacing the second "of" with 'by' (i.e. '*par les autres*') to emphasize that others are governing the subject, and not the other way around.



buyer's exit from tutelage. To begin with, let us recall that the acquisition, as a relational phenomenon, is *irreal*, which for our purposes means that authority is vested in calculation and its attendant devices rather than the persona of the knowledgeable seller. This condition is important because the sheer density and intensity of car-market devices, coupled with the buyer's relative inexperience with them, renders the acquisition principally an encounter between two agencements: the buyer who chooses, calculates and commits a pecuniary pledge, and – again – the buyer who ratifies everything the former does. Put allegorically, car-buying devices raise a screen around the buyer, the effect of which is not protection against sellers' potential shell games, but sensitization to her own calculativeness. Tutelage, as HD reminded us in Chapter Five, is expressed always in terms of calculative 'noise,' which may be indicative of uncertainty (i.e. too many unpredictable variables), but which in the accounts below is linked, I think, to a deeper discomposure: governmental collapse, or the complete superimposition of government of self with government by (dispositivistic) others.

The concrete sign of this confusion is, as I have now contended more than once, the self-flagellation to which HD, again, tipped us off. Politically speaking, this represents a fascinating twist on agonism as described in Chapter Six, a

thorough decoupling of angst (e.g. feelings like “waiting to exhale,” a pithy description courtesy TK) from oppositionality. Now I should say no one to whom I spoke remained oblivious, not for a minute, to the irreducibility of his or her interests to those of an opposite number; the frequency of references in Chapters Four and Six to games and perceived insincerities speaks amply to this recognition. Yet for the following informants, it would appear that the game of strategies took a backseat to a more complicated game of responsibility: part of the effort required to suss their opponents was reflected back onto themselves, turning into an introspective expenditure of, as Nietzsche ([1887] 1967: 59) put it, “labor...by man upon himself.” Their agony is consequently phrased not as a clash, but a growing pain, a seemingly necessary identification with the sales imperative as a prerequisite of ‘smart’ consumption.

First-time buyer KA’s account succinctly encapsulates this paradoxical fusion of strategy and responsibility. When we last left him in Chapter Five, KA, flush with cash from a recent inheritance, had just blown off a “doofus” salesman who tried to ensnare him in a lease. The silver lining of the experience was that it served as a “dress rehearsal” for the next encounter with a far more amicable salesman who, KA believes, “had my interests – sort of, well he portrayed that – that he had my interests at heart. Like, he knew that I had the cash and he wasn’t

going to screw with me about the leasing and everything.” But there was something else to this salesman’s people-skills, namely an uncanny ability to make KA feel like a salesman himself:

MV: Now, did you ever get the impression that any of these [sales] guys – that you were being managed...?

KA: Well, at the time, no. I don’t think that way. The guy who I dealt with...was a good guy. Well, he was a good guy to talk to because he was – he knew what he was doing, in a sense of, if he was playing me, he knew how to do it perfect. He was a very good, sort of, *let-you-talk-yourself-into-buying-the-car* salesman. You know, but not like, you know, pushing you. He just let it happen as opposed to the other guy.

KA is understandably coy with respect to being managed; no one, after all, wants to admit they were played. Then again, there is something nonsensically authentic about what he is saying: KA *knows* the salesman is a shark, full of cunning, but cannot *feel* the bite of his cunning; all KA senses is the weight of his own decision. It is not so much that the salesman’s agency operated as an invisible hand (though I like when KA says, “He just let it happen,” an opportune turn-of-phrase translating into French as, “*Il m’a laissé faire*”). Rather, I think KA looks upon the adroitness of his ‘governor’ as something to aspire to; something with which he must make peace in order to feel good about his choice.

For LJ, by contrast, the play of governmental games got so out-of-hand, it triggered something like full-blown Stockholm syndrome. Her acquisitional odyssey began at a Mazda dealership outside Toronto, where the principal dealer is a long-time family acquaintance. LJ had always fancied the idea of a pick-up truck, but believed it would prove impractical to ferrying her young nieces about, so she “had kind of given up on that dream” in favour of a hatchback. She was not taken by the latest-generation Mazda3, which left her contemplating the smaller Mazda2 which she liked but did not love. She went away that day feeling apathetic, but returned several days later determined to investigate all her options. This time around, the owner’s son with whom she had previously dealt passed her off to a woman sales rep, someone LJ had never met and who clearly “didn’t know what she was doing.” LJ was miffed at first, but then something extraordinary happened, thanks in no small part to the saleswoman’s ineptitude – the dream of a truck was rekindled:

LJ: I sat down with her and we were going to pull up the numbers [on the Mazda2, -3 and -5], and I said, ‘Well you know, what I’ve always wanted is the little truck [*i.e. the Mazda B2300*]. I test-drove one, like, three years; I used to borrow my old friend’s, like years ago; I love those little mini-trucks.’ And she said, [*mocking incredulity*.] ‘Oh yeah, really, really, I can’t believe you like that!’ And then she said, ‘Well, we’re not making them anymore–’

mv: That's right, that's right. They've discontinued them haven't they?

LJ: Yeah! But she said they're great trucks; they go forever. ...Anyways, basically she was like, 'Well, I'll look into the truck too. This is what I'll do: I'll go upstairs and I'll give it to so-and-so and he'll run it through a machine, and I'll get you, you know, [*She sighs, making sure she says the following correctly.*] 72-, 84- and 96-month terms; the run-down on the -3, the -5, the -2 as well as [*in unison with mv.*] the truck.'

mv: ...Yeah, OK.

LJ: ...I said to her, 'Yeah, but I can't get the truck because I can't put kids in it.' And then she said, 'Yeah you can! I have one. Of course you can, it's all the same rules as, um, a child seat in the back of a car!' ...So, then it was on the table again – the truck; that's how that happened. And then I was like, [*emphatically.*] 'Huh! Alright, like, let's do this!' I got excited, and then she came downstairs and said, 'Oh I'm so sorry, because they're not making the truck anymore, I've checked the entire system, you know – Canada-wide – and none exist. And I just thought–

mv: [*Disappointed, in sympathy.*] Oh–

LJ: [*Bitterly.*] That was bullshit! [*mv laughs.*] And I was like, 'I think...you can't access them or don't want to because you'd rather sell me this other [car].'

mv: Did you actually say that?

LJ: No.

mv: OK, but that's what you thought.

LJ: Yup. ...So basically, I was like, [*As if disappointed.*] 'Really? Are you sure about that?' You know, like,

'Hmm, that's really disappointing because that's the one I really want.' ...So she knew she would've had a sale, had she, you know, hustled to find it. ...Essentially that's my take on it. And what happened was, she kind of screwed up...[because] I said, 'You know, [*LJ giggles slyly.*] I'm just going to write down these numbers.' And she kind of – like, I was writing down the quote she had given me on the truck before she found out that one didn't exist. And I said, 'Oh I'm just going write down all these numbers on my own piece of paper here.' And she could tell I was writing it down – there was like this subtext – [*Slight pause for effect.*] because I was going to figure it out myself!

MV: Yeah!

LJ: ...And then she says, 'You know, I know you're really disappointed' – this is where she screwed up – 'I know you're really disappointed about the truck, but you know, I just don't think you're going to find it.' And so I smiled to myself and thought, 'Ha, my instincts were right. It *does* exist!' ...And so, because I'm stubborn, I was like, 'Am I really doing this just because it was a challenge?' And then I'm like, 'No, no, I've wanted a truck for over, like, ten years–'

MV: [*Chuckling.*] The problem with the truck, though, is that the colours aren't as nice. Like, you're probably – you probably got a gray or a black or a white–

LJ: Oh no, no!

MV: No? Oh OK, it gets better!

LJ: It gets better! Sorry, this is a long story–

MV: [*Laughs.*] I love long stories!

To cut her long story shorter, *LJ* went home – this was a Thursday evening – to tackle her task with a level of gusto few of us will ever know: she printed a list of some 80 Mazda dealers, and over the course of the next day she contacted each and every one of them. At first she would simply ask about the truck, but soon she had gleaned so much information (e.g. dealership *x* was offering a “loyalty” top-up on trade-in values for desirable vehicles; near-zero-percent financing at dealership *y*; an electric-blue-coloured model at dealership *z*), her inquiries turned into demands (i.e. she wanted blue, the loyalty rebate and \$*x*/month for 84 months). She squeezed her interlocutors for increasingly advantageous terms and to her surprise, they were acquiescing: to a sales manager in Toronto, she made an off-the-cuff reduction of the term to 72 months (at the same monthly payment of course), which he accepted without flinching. *LJ* had effectively improvised a wicked variation on, the reader might recall, James Bragg’s (2004: 144-57) “fax attack:” she literally had every Mazda dealer in the province chasing for her one of the two last remaining new, blue B2300s *in existence*. She knew, moreover, she had hit rock-bottom price-wise, since no one else was willing to match the 72-month term agreed to by the Toronto manager. She was even advised by more than one Mazda rep to accept Toronto deal, because the dealership in question was sure to lose money on it.

*LJ* felt “empowered” by all this, so when the Toronto manager phoned Saturday morning to ask, “Listen, if I find this [truck] for you today, are you going to come in today [to sign]?” she committed without hesitating. But on her way to the city that afternoon, the gravity of her unplanned pointedness began to dawn on her: she was about to make a deposit and sign over ownership of her current car, all without ever laying eyes on her prize nor, more importantly, test-driving it. Despite how enviable the numbers looked on paper, she realized she had no grounds to trust the manager. “Suddenly,” she admits, “I had a pit in my stomach. ‘Oh God,’ [I thought], ‘is he going to screw [me]?’”

*LJ*’s fall from strategic grace was swift. Upon inspection of her trade-in, the manager deemed its condition ineligible for loyalty, a blow which would adjust *LJ*’s monthly burden in the dealer’s favour. She did not agree with the manager’s math – she believed the new, readjusted payment should have been \$5 less per month – but her attempt to negotiate this point was stonewalled. Yet even at this higher amount, *LJ* left Toronto that night knowing she had still scored the best deal possible, by a comfortable margin to boot. This comfort unfortunately evaporated the following Monday when the manager announced to her the truck had been sold from under him. Apparently, he was only in a position to “lock” the truck in when he received the necessary funds from the



financing company, which, because they are closed Sundays, did not process *LJ*'s credit until Monday. In the intervening period someone else claimed the truck, presumably with a cash offer.

To say *LJ* was "freaked out" by this news would be an understatement. For the next few days she felt "pretty sick" and suffered from "anxiety dreams." Her initial, heated response was to hold the manager "ethically responsible" for the debacle, since she had signed an agreement of purchase. She demanded he procure for her at no extra cost the very last blue specimen, located in Hamilton some 80 km away, identical to the one she had lost in every respect save one: it had air conditioning. The manager promised to contact his equal in Hamilton to inquire on their truck, but so distrustful had *LJ* become, she actually phoned Hamilton herself to verify he had phoned (apparently he did not)!

Wallowing in distress and suspicion, she nevertheless "thought about it rationally," at which point she experienced something of an epiphany that diametrically changed her interpretation of events:

*LJ*: At the end of the day, I was like, 'Well, I could just say he's lying and he's playing me and just go get my deposit back'.... But then I don't have this truck that I want, and the colour I want and the price I want. So...I kind of got my head together and was like, 'Well hold on a minute,' and I heard him out. Like, he let me rant and scream and say, like, 'Listen,

you already made that extra four bucks off of me!  
[*She makes barking noises.*] I did the math! [*She chuckles.*] [But then] I just said, like, 'Tell me what's up?' And he was good, he was very good actually. He was really – he's like, very diplomatic, well educated. ...We had a good rapport when I met him. I was like, 'OK, he doesn't seem shifty.' I want to think he is, but I actually think he's telling the truth. ...So, you know, like, I trusted him. Like I say, [at the first visit] I kind of d[id]n't want to; your instinct is to think that they're, you know, screwing you. But [I] left going, 'I kind of believe him!'

MV: What was his story then? What was he saying?

LJ: He was like, 'Listen, I completely agree with you. This is brutal. Absolutely I will refund you everything. Like, I can't get the car; they say they don't have it there.' He was like, 'The deal is...how does this benefit me? I wanted to sell you the truck. I stayed late for two-and-a-half hours. Like, I'm not lying to you here!' ...Which logically, I was like, 'Well, that makes sense and he could be telling the truth, because why wouldn't he want to make the sale with me?' Basically...he knows I've got all these other dealerships offering me trucks–

MV: [*Slightly incredulous.*] Yeah but at the same time, you'd think that they would – that that's not the way it would work. Like, if [the truck] was...within their own network, [he could simply say] 'OK, I'm reserving this one–'

LJ: Yup! ...You would think that, but he said the same thing. He's like, 'this is the way it works–'

MV: OK, alright, alright. Alright, so I guess you just have to accept it at some point.

*LJ*: Well at the end of the day I could say he's lying, and he's screwed me over and I should just go get my money back.... Or I could, you know, trust him. And we sat there and, like, we yelled – we had it out – and then we sat, we talked calmly, and I was like, 'Well that's possible.' And he said, 'Basically, you have to relent on either the colour or [A/C].'

In the end *LJ* made the only reasonable choice possible under the circumstances: she paid more for air conditioning.

What *LJ* is describing is nothing short of a minor, yet seemingly necessary miracle: no longer ambivalent about the derailment of the deal, she came to accept and even represent the manager's position without reservation. At peace with the force of his logic, she was able to understand the perspicacity of concession, learning in the process the meaning of Emile Durkheim's ([1893] 1984: 158) famous maxim, "[I]n a contract not everything is contractual:" she came to see that despite her signed agreement, it was *her* responsibility – not his – to bend to save the sale.

None of this, however, came automatically or easily. Her catharsis, as revealed below, required cultivation by intense self-work:

*LJ*: I kept thinking [for some days later], somehow, [*She laughs sheepishly.*] um, somehow I could – I could have gotten him down lower. And I knew logically and rationally I was being kind of neurotic, like I was–

MV: [*Excited, as if LJ had confirmed a hypothesis.*] You know what? Thank you! I always feel that, not just for cars—

LJ: Really?

MV: Yes!

LJ: OK, because I was like, 'I've got to let it go, man!' Like, everyone I talked to was like, 'You got an *amazing* deal!' But I was still like, 'he screwed me—'

MV: It's never enough—

LJ: 'I *know* he screwed me!' You know? I had this feeling. ...And I was like, 'What is this about?' ...In the end, when I look back...when I really did the numbers and compared it to everything else every other dealer offered me, I still got a great deal. But I was still like, 'I still feel I could have gotten him down, like, five dollars!' [*She giggles.*] Which is like, 'Let it go, right? Chill out!'

MV: ...Now were you, like, constantly redoing—

LJ: [*Totally anticipating the question.*] Yes—

MV: The numbers?

LJ: Yes, but I'm, you know, obsessive about numbers. [*Pause.*] I don't know, it was interesting, psychologically. ...[A]ll week, I was like, 'Wow, this has really rocked me.' You know, like, I'm really fighting to trust and not be taken advantage of. So I was really, like, 'What is this about? ...Why is it so important for me...?'

LJ is reminding us that strict calculation is of little calculative comfort. Unlike those chronicled in Chapter Three for instance, people whose deliberations were

fixed by extra-calculative considerations (e.g. PP or WB's social sight; MP's familial reason), LJ had no such luxury. Free of these social qualifications, her calculus was for all intents and purposes infinite, irresolvable and anxiety-inducing. Her experience conforms to and confirms Daniel Miller's (2002: 231; 2005: 6) assertion that in the thick of market action, a dedication to disentanglement *à la* Callon (viz. elaborating a frame conducive to numbers and numbers only) is more likely to complicate, not simplify, matters. Such a frame, LJ struggled to learn, left intact perhaps the most damning of entanglements – her own approbation, which she would have to appease, if not by crunching numbers then some other means.

### **“Individual Enrichment”**

I have lingered on LJ's heady rise and fall from 'sharkdom' because it lays bare a particularly telling duality: hers is a story of anguished, seemingly inevitable self-entanglement, but of self-awakening and -awareness too, a narrative of metamorphosis turning on her appreciation and subsequent acceptance of futility. Only when, in other words, she assumed responsibility for her inferiority could she gain a measure of certainty. Futility proved revelatory – liberating even –because it gave her leave to *stop calculating*. This theme of wilful calculative atony is not unheard of; it was presaged in Chapter Five by the 'economicists,' the interviewees with the keenest and longest-trained market

instincts, who collectively alluded to the importance of recognizing when one has no calculative leg to stand on. There is very much then, it seems to me, a moment of futility-filled disentanglement here, specifically from calculation, which becomes the basis by which to know oneself as a 'truly' economizing subject. Disentanglement is therefore not the process of framing by which the buyer "can be quits" of her seller (Callon, 1998a: 19), but rather the moment when, principally for the sake of attaining some quantum of dispassion, she calls it quits from calculation. Phenomenologically speaking, she does not simply register feelings of uncertainty or inferiority in this moment, she takes ownership of them. She grasps the pointlessness of begrudging her lot, swallows wounded pride and begins a program of illumination of the order of (market) things. She embarks on a path Bourdieu (2005: 8) dubbed, with just a hint of sarcasm, "individual enrichment."

Interpreting disentanglement as calculative disengagement naturally has implications for what we mean by economization. Most importantly, we begin to see that the irreality of calculation, in all its lush socio-technicality, is but the proximate ground of economization. To be or become quintessentially economic – to impress upon oneself, that is, a more-or-less formal econo-mentality – hinges instead upon justifications, reasons or silver-linings for one's futility that makes

excessive deliberation superfluous. Such a disposition, which is only implicit in *LJ*'s narrative but explicit in *OM*'s below, involves not simply facility with quasi-formal conceptualization, but above all strategic reflexivity with respect to time: the buyer hedges her definite, but unmanageable feelings of inferiority with an indefinite, but far more malleable logic of expectation. In essence, a truly disentangled orientation temporalizes the transaction, stretching its moment of vindication forward – the cliché, 'a marathon, not a race,' is apt here – and giving rise to the anticipation that today's folly will be tomorrow's good sense.

I qualify econo-mentality with descriptors like "more-or-less" because, as we shall shortly see, its formality need not necessarily be articulated precisely nor stand up to logical scrutiny; what counts is not the elaboration of *the* truth, but *a* truth. We are hence not dealing with *rational* discourses so much as *reasonable* ones (cf. Bourdieu, 2005: 9): that is to say, disentangled commonsense is less a series of positive statements rendering reality falsifiable – though it may be deployed that way – than an attempt to formalize one's intuitions and hunches, incorporating them into some putatively grander plan. Reason, in short, serves as a micro-history of the future, a narrative by which to interrogate possibilities of self.

Interrogation of the future was precisely what OM was forced to do when he, much like *LJ*, hit the limits of his quite intricate calculativity. An up-and-coming financial worker and self-proclaimed “economics guy” who strives “to reduce borrowing costs at all costs,” OM and his partner devised a bold plan to finance their major life purchases: they would meet their car and mortgage obligations with a single, low-interest (perhaps 2%), house-secured line-of-credit (LOC). The scheme undeniably rations their monthly burden: it means that instead of forking over their full,  $\$x$ -mortgage- and  $\$y$ -car-payments, they can get away with any portion thereof, starting at, if they really want,  $\$0.02x$  and  $\$0.02y$ . Basically, the scheme is a device mediating them from their obligations, allowing them to wrack up debt on their existing debts.<sup>3</sup>

After test-driving Subarus, Hyundais and Volkswagens, OM and his partner set their sights on the prize-jewel of the Canadian VW fleet, the Golf diesel wagon, which is longer than its hatch-backed cousin but with a vastly cleaner engine. Still, the wagon was prohibitively expensive, even with their LOC-‘screen’ in place. To make it palatable they would need to score 0%-

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<sup>3</sup> OM claimed he had difficulty getting salespeople to understand his regime, and I must admit I too needed clarification. What puzzles me, though I did not press him about it, is their plan to pay down the LOC. I suspect they are counting on future windfalls, perhaps OM’s annual bonuses or, assuming that Toronto’s seemingly ever-appreciating real estate market does not falter, a tidy gain on the sale of their residence. Whatever the expectation, I think it is clear OM has a higher risk-tolerance than most.



financing as opposed to 1.9% (0% was only offered on the gasoline wagon), as well as a discount on the purchase price. A sales rep at the downtown Toronto dealership was taciturn – he apparently “wasn’t showing his cards” at all – and though a salesman at another Toronto dealer was more accommodating, he ultimately balked at OM’s offer. Undaunted, OM’s partner, tearing a page from *LJ*’s playbook, phoned every VW dealer from Oshawa to Niagara. She hit pay-dirt when someone in Hamilton “was willing to give a substantially better deal.”

Wielding this new offer like a bludgeon, they went back to the taciturn salesman to cajole him into negotiation, as if to say to him, “OK, you made us do our homework...why do we have to go to Hamilton to make this happen?” And while the salesman was now decidedly more gracious, he was not gracious enough. But rather than walk away yet again, OM and his partner acquiesced:

At the last little bit, um, we weren’t quite at what we wanted. And so there was a little bit of, like, basically going back and forth with numbers written down on a piece of paper, um, that in the end, we just said, ‘Fine, we’ll just end this now!’ [*He chuckles lightly.*] ...We said, ‘Let’s go with it’ because the amount of money we were actually going back and forth over was not particularly substantial in the grand scheme of things.

As then with *LJ*, OM clinched a deal only by surrendering calculative control in the final instant, justified by recourse to that great arbiter of reason,

“the grand scheme of things.” I can only assume OM appreciates the finality brought about by their sensible act of genuflection. But finality does not necessarily mean certainty, for OM appears to be quite ambivalent about how things transpired:

MV: Now what was the overriding emotion that you felt during this entire process?

OM: Mm, [*Four seconds of silence.*] hmm, uh, [*Seven more seconds.*] I don’t know. Um–

MV: Like, was it exciting? Was it, sort of, anxious?

OM: ...So I would say, probably, uh, it was by and large a little bit more exciting from my wife’s point of view.

MV: OK.

OM: Uh, I was a little bit more Mr. Scrooge–

MV: [*Chuckles.*] OK–

OM: For awhile, but when I started realizing that we were actually going to get this car, I was pretty excited. Um, [*Pause.*] and then–

MV: So the fact that you – I mean, because I guess, when you started to realize that you were going to be paying a bit more than what you wanted, like I guess that was–

OM: A lot more, yeah! [*He chuckles; MV chuckles hard.*]

MV: I guess that was, sort of, for you – I mean, I guess, was that a bitter pill to swallow or, you know?

OM: Well, it just was like, 'OK, where do we stop then if we're just going to blow our budget out of the water?'

MV: Yeah, OK, alright. Now, do you feel in the end that you paid a fair price, and you can think of 'fair' anyway you want to?

OM: Yeah, uh, *[Pause.]* I – we don't regret the purchase.

MV: ...God, I mean, considering how little that thing consumes, yeah, I wouldn't regret it either!–

OM: Yeah–

MV: *[Laughing through the words.]* Have you even filled up the tank since you've gotten it?

OM: Yeah, not very often. So yeah, like, we're very happy with the car. Uh, the cost does seem, like, a little steep, but if this car lasts as long as they say it will last, then it should be a good purchase.

MV: *[Seeing an opportunity to play Devil's Advocate.]* Yeah, I've got to [say] – not to be a downer though, VWs and Audis can be, depending on the actual car that you get, they can be glitchy.

OM: *[Not sure what to make of the comment.]* Right, yeah.

MV: *[Realizing how condescending it all sounds.]* Yeah, like I mean, anyways–

OM: That's the, uh – time will tell.

MV: *[Trying, but failing to extract foot from mouth.]* Yeah, time will tell. And I guess you've got –

Volkswagen's got a pretty good warranty these days,  
I'd imagine.

OM's self-effacing hesitancy is to be expected: given the intricacy and intensity of his financial regime, he is the kind of person who absolutely needs the objectivity of facts and calculations, a point reinforced by his tongue-in-cheek identification with Scrooge. Through this experience though, OM has been made to come face-to-face with another economic fact: one cannot calculate oneself out of a position of inferiority (a lesson coincidentally not dissimilar to Scrooge's epiphany that slavishness to calculation cannot expunge karmic debts). So in the wake of OM's reasonable abandonment of calculation, he has had to adopt a different, perhaps more uncertain but assuredly incontrovertible, measure of value – *the future*.

"Economics guy" or not, OM now understands what it feels like to stand exposed and disentangled, with no calculative prostheses, before that horizon.

Calculatively 'light' as this journey into the future may be, there is weightiness to it nonetheless, namely the persistent reminder that one's car constitutes a crucial marker of powerlessness over one's financial destiny. The automobile – any automobile – by virtue of its technical complexity and propensity for pecuniary 'absorption' threatens always to twist one's fiscal

trajectory, proving positive, most of all to oneself, that one is a slave to circumstance.

This is the burden currently weighing on HH and his partner as they soldier forward in their red VW Rabbit (i.e. a fifth-generation Golf), a car they leased new in 2007, a few years into their relationship. The acquisition was an important milestone financially, downsizing their collective burden from two cars to one, as well as symbolically, signalling a definite “evolution of the relationship.” HH’s business-savvy father was “the silent partner” of the transaction, steering them to a VW dealer with whom he enjoyed an “on-going relationship,” and scoring a partial tax write-off by assuming title of the lease in his company’s name. HH felt a little sidelined by his father’s involvement, as if the deal was “a foregone arrangement,” but he ultimately did not mind: he now had a brand-new, well-equipped, “peppy” car for essentially half the monthly cost.

Flash forward four years to the end of the lease, and much has changed in their circumstances. They have moved, for starters, to a bigger house, raising their carrying costs across the board (i.e. mortgage, taxes, insurance, etc.). More ominous to their financial prospects though, they have a child with another on the way. Given these realities, the Rabbit’s non-negotiable buy-out price of

\$15,800 strikes them as a king's ransom. They knew in 2007 they were "paying a premium" for the Rabbit, but now they are realizing just what that means.

The lease anniversary fast approaching, they tried to take stock of their options, pondering the question, "What's the best way to spend that money?" It quickly dawned on them however, they had no options apart from their Rabbit, for to spend less – even a little less – would entail unacceptable sacrifices: either they would have to downsize to a sub-compact (and even the compact Rabbit, HH concedes, is less than ideal for transporting their proliferating parenting paraphernalia) or upsize to a used, but mechanically uncertain and ethically questionable CUV. They decided to proceed with the buy-out, financing it, like OM, through a LOC. This uncomfortable choice now taken, HH was next faced with yet more irksome choices, notably an \$800-brake-job without which the Rabbit would not pass its safety inspection. HH could have shopped around for a more reasonably priced mechanic, but dealing with the regulatory and financial minutiae of the takeover was becoming so time-consuming, he simply and sensibly thought, "God, let's just get this over with!"

It was only after the paperwork was signed, delivered and registered that HH really took stock. The parameters of his deliberations, similarly again to OM,

had less to do with present-day concessions and impositions as with, he says, “a long game” of expectations:

HH: The financing [of] it – you know, [that’s] another storyline.... I think we–

MV: Is it a bit stressful?

HH: [*Circumspect.*] Ah, a little bit. I mean we’re – I think this is kind of the high watermark of our debt load–

MV: Mm, uh-hmm–

HH: \$16,000 is kind of like [a lot]...[*Playback is garbled.*] and hopefully [we] won’t be spending any [more] money, you know. ...And uh, in the past I think we were playing fast and [loose] with [our] finances, you know? ...But it just kind of now added up, and now we’re like, ‘Hey, wait a minute!’ We really need to keep our eye on the ball because, you know, the short game has turned into a long game [in the sense that] we have a child and are expecting another.

MV: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. ...Now, uh, so then what would you say – OK, I’m piggy-backing on what you just said – what was the overriding emotion you felt during – [*Pauses to reconsider the question.*] well let’s take both: was what, if you can remember back in 2007, what was the overriding emotion then [as] compared to now?

HH: Uh, I – you know, back in 2007, I was like, ‘Sweet! New ride! [MV chuckles.] Oh it drives great!’ You know, everything worked and, you know, [it had] heated seats and it was very – the car’s shiny red! You know, it was, like, a bit campy [MV chuckles]

*again.*] ...It's pretty luxurious in its own kind of way–

MV: Sure, no! Yeah, yeah, definitively, definitively!

HH: ...And this time around there's really none of that. You know, it's like, [*Deliberately flatly.*] 'OK, I've got a car that works [and] I'll be paying for it for a long time.' And after all the contemplation...I've found out how much the car will cost over the next two-and-a-half years with regards to servicing and scheduled – [*Searching for the right phrase.*] whatever – check-ins?

MV: Yeah, yeah, yeah–

HH: To find out, you know, 'OK, so the car's going to cost this much [in maintenance and] it's only the things that go wrong that [we'll] get serviced'.... And the idea [is] that we'll sell the car in two-and-a-half-year's time, uh, because at that point...I project it'll have [about] 100,000 km, and I figure that, you know, psychologically a buyer is more interested in a car that hasn't [reached 100,000] – better at 95 than 105. ...Until that time, you know, I think we can sell it for about 10,000-bucks, you know, and uh, that's not a bad value because it will depreciate, whatever, two-and-a-half-grand a year, and you know, that seems appropriate. So there's all these calculations and permutations that kind of worked out.

MV: Yeah, now when would you–

HH: [The thing] about that, right now, it's like, 'OK, we've got a car; it's fine and, you know, we don't have to make a decision...for a little while.'

MV: Yeah, now when would you say you, kind of – uh, you developed this sense of, like, time-horizon?



Like, was it, you know, when it came time to buy out this car, or were you kind of thinking like that back in 2007, or just after you leased the car?

HH: No, it was only now. ...It was only now when we were kind of number-crunching, going, 'OK, what – at 16-grand, you know, what kind of condition is it in?' ...[But] my projections are only good as long as we don't damage the car during that time. Like, if there's no accident we're paying for or excruciating interior damage...the car will be worth roughly 10-grand.

At first glance HH's appreciation of the future, full of "calculations and permutations," appears to contradict my contention that disentanglement is necessarily post-calculative. Yet his calculus is not actually calculative, odd as this may sound. What I mean, his detailed number-crunching is not comparative; he makes no attempt, put otherwise, to evaluate the technico-pecuniary essence of his Rabbit against an ontological backdrop of like-cars. His newly-acquired quantitative outlook is instead oriented solely to interrogating himself and his lot as a constrained, reactive actor. What he is crunching are not numbers rooted in hard, present realities, but in malleable anticipations that justify the frustration of unexpectedly finding himself in a financial marathon seemingly without end. In that sense, whether HH actually does some day fetch \$10,000 is immaterial. What is far more consequential to his sense of market-self

is the ability to articulate a reasoned, rationing assessment of an agony directed at nobody but himself.

Neither HH nor OM, as the latter expressly points out, “regret the purchase.” For CC however, remorse proved a fateful route to disentanglement. A life-long all-wheel-drive (AWD) enthusiast with two teenaged children, large dog and penchant for outdoor recreation, he came to realize the practicality of a minivan capable of accommodating humans, dog and gear comfortably. At the time only Toyota offered an all-wheel minivan, the Sienna, but only at its top-most, ‘Limited Edition’ trim level – a \$50,000 proposition. He and his partner spent three or four weeks “soul searching,” trying to decide if a top-of-the-line Sienna was what they wanted or needed. The Honda Odyssey was comparably priced, but not only did it lack AWD (this has since become an option in the current generation, introduced six months later), it was not nearly as nicely finished. What the Odyssey did have going for it however, was a \$6,000 rebate, which focused CC’s calculation to the following question: “OK, over the eight or nine or ten years that I own [a Sienna], is it worth \$6,000 to me, and in the end I decided it was.”

To lend this decision confidence, CC took the added precaution of becoming a member of the Automobile Protection Association (APA), an

organization which, beyond its consumer advocacy efforts, allows members to buy cars at select dealers at set prices with the marginal costs fully disclosed (a bit like websites like CarCostCanada.com or unhaggle.com). CC took full advantage of this service, going so far as to arrange test-drives at his house, thereby avoiding the pressures of the dealer environment. Yet for all his due diligence, CC has gotten precious little from driving “the tank,” as he now calls it, save the important self-discovery he is not really into cars:

I’ve realized that, um, that I’m not a car guy, that the next vehicle I own I’m not going to go top-of-the-line and I’m not going to go – I’m never going to be a guy who buys Audis. I’m never going to be a guy who buys BMWs. I just simply don’t get enough pleasure out of that, [and] that when I sort of think about other things that I’ve purchased where a year later I still think, ‘Oh yeah, that was worth absolutely every penny,’ I don’t feel that way about my car. I feel that way about my espresso machine! [MV *guffaws*.] Every time I turn that on every morning, I think, ‘That was worth every penny that I paid for!’ But when I think about my car, when I get into it, I thought, [With a *chuckle*.] ‘There’s 50-grand down the tube that I could have much rather have spent on holidays or another espresso machine!’

While it may be tempting to dismiss CC’s sudden indifference to cars as the sour grapes of an upwardly-mobile coffee addict, there is more to his story. Notably, CC couches his epiphany in quasi-formal terms, allowing him to see that used cars will always represent for him the more prudent choice:

cc: In retrospect, I probably should have gone second-hand, and I'm kind of kicking myself a bit now that I didn't just save myself a bunch of money, uh, and find a low-mileage 2010 Toyota Sienna that was all-wheel drive. Um, and, yeah, so I've sort of learned that lesson; it was an expensive lesson to learn. But it's interesting, I was having a chat just the other week with a friend of mine who has a Land Rover – pretty much went through exactly the same kind of thought process that I did. You know...he's a guy like me; he's very, very physically active.... But what he decided to do, he said, 'You know what, I don't drive it very much,' which is the same with us, we're actually very low-mileage drivers. And he said, 'So, I didn't want all of the depreciation to be on my wallet, I want it to be on someone else's wallet.' So he went out and he bought himself a Land Rover with 200,000 km on it for \$5,000, and he loves it. He thinks it's a great vehicle, and he doesn't worry about it; he doesn't – he lets his dogs go in the back and doesn't worry if they get it muddy or anything else, because all the depreciation that's happened on that vehicle–

mv: Has happened–

cc: Has already happened. You know, he's probably going to be able to sell it in five years for 3- or 4,000. It's going to have cost him a couple thousand dollars to own that vehicle. Versus me, where it's going to have cost me 30- or 40,000 to own that vehicle. So, he made the smarter decision, and I kind of realize that.

The moral of CC's story is this: his calculations amounted to nothing more than a necessary, but insubstantial prologue; the far more valuable economic work (viz. his appreciation of depreciation) was undertaken only afterwards,

when he came to regret his calculativity. The key transformational moment was, of course, when he swapped stories with his Rover-er friend: hearing about his financial acumen, CC learned to place a monetary value on the hollowness and shame he felt about his Sienna and, more importantly, to convert his gnawing lack of *savoir-faire* into a future program. Will this newfound, quasi-formal sensibility guarantee satisfaction the next time around? Not necessarily.

Formalized justifications are seldom foolproof, a fact CC's reasoning demonstrates in spades: at 200,000 km, his friend's Rover is entering a period of use-life requiring mechanical attention that will likely far exceed "a couple thousand dollars," not to mention the added time and stress dealing with such potentialities.<sup>4</sup> But that is not really the point. What counts here is CC's capacity to deconstruct subjective qualities through the prism of 'objective' concepts. In the end, only by regretting but accepting the ignominy to which he was led by his calculus was CC able to begin understanding himself as a consumer – to apprehend, that is, the ebb and flow of his preferences or *opportunity costs* –

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<sup>4</sup> These potentialities must be taken seriously, since the Rover brand routinely scores last in *J.D. Power and Associates'* Vehicle Dependability studies (Toljagic, 2013), an all-important metric of reported customer problems. Car journalist Mark Toljagic (2012a) does not mince words: "An editor once asked me to name the worst vehicle of the past decade. It took all of 20 milliseconds to reply: Range Rover's Freelander" (known today as the Land Rover LR2). MG Rover used to make engines of such legendary poor quality, Toljagic quips, the company "almost single-handedly led to England's de-industrialization." Similarly, when another of my informants, WB, mused to his mechanic brother he was considering a used Range Rover, his brother informed him flat-out he would "never, ever" service it!

divining in the process the logical rudiments of another history of another, future transaction.

Above all, what links the interviewees recounted in this chapter – though KA perhaps expresses this commonality less obviously – is the beautiful paradox that in their attempts to affirm a purely disentangled, quantitative calculativity, they were all driven by epiphany to leave calculation behind, adopting in its stead a forward-looking, quasi-formal and thoroughly justificatory mode of reflection. The epiphany in question, moreover, was always the same: in all these accounts the catalyst for formal economic reason was internalization of the asymmetry of the encounter – an act of inward inflection of the agonistic impulse – coupled with transcendental-like acceptance of calculative impotence. In short, there can be no appreciation of what it means to economize a major life purchase without a prior appreciation of one's inferiority; without, that is to say, first assuming responsibility for one's own tutelage. In which case (and not unlike Kant), I am afraid I can only offer a tautological (yet hopefully profound) answer to the question of economic enlightenment. How does the car buyer become economic? What is the way out of her structural position of tutelage? Simply: she accepts the necessity of tutelage. Or as 'economist' PH so wisely remarked

back in Chapter Five, “[Y]ou never really know if you’re getting a lemon or not, so...enjoy it...!”

## Conclusion

# Death of the Dicker ?

### The Buzz Saw of Embeddedness

IF THERE HAS BEEN AN OVERARCHING THEME TO THIS DISSERTATION, it is that economic reason, as anticipated by legions of heterodox scholars, is “an ‘emergent, interpretive and performance process’ rather than an objectively calculating exercise” (Spotton Visano, 2006: 29; also cf. Biggart & Beamish, 2003: 456). This notion that *actual* reason is animated by something other than objective, ahistorical reason is, let us not forget, what links all non-economistic economic epistemologies. This is *the embeddedness thesis*. Car purchases, given the complexities and intensities of the ‘something else’ involved, provide a near-perfect illustration of embeddedness: the machinations and deliberations required to drive away with an automobile of one’s own, as we saw in Chapters Three and Four, are so indissociable from intersubjective concerns, there are no



grounds to speak of a purely economizing, truly dispassionate disposition to major life purchases.

Yet as intellectually satisfying embeddedness is as a foil to the experientially shallow, disentangled logic of economism, we would do well not to let embeddedness spoil our critical faculties. To wit, demonstrating the conceptual superiority of embeddedness is comparatively easy; what is decidedly less easy is using embeddedness to explain the reality – or *irreality*, as the case may be – of disembeddedness. Such an apparently contradictory exercise is critically indispensable if polemically thankless insofar as it exposes oneself to the ludicrous charge one has mistaken an ideological construct for something solid or essential. Arguably Polanyi, the belatedly original champion of embeddedness, attempted this in the fifth and sixth chapters of *The Great Transformation* ([1944] 2001), only to be wrongly convicted in retrospect of “leav[ing] the core of the market unchallenged” (Lie, 1999: 219; for a more nuanced take on Polanyi’s treatment of disembeddedness, cf. Jessop, 2001: 214-5; Block, 2003: 294-6). Callon, I suppose, is up to something analytically similar, raising the hackles of critics like Miller and, least of all, me. If the history of the embeddedness concept teaches us – or condemns us to – anything, it is that there

is *no* polemical high-ground to be won by it. Embeddedness is a fool's concept, but it is vital concept nonetheless.

I fully applaud, in which case, Callon's attempt to recover disentanglement by rearticulating embeddedness. What I disagree with – specifically when it comes to car purchases, a domain he mentions by name (1998a: 18-9) – is the bed he posits for it: economics writ large (1998a: 30), by which he means calculative framing. Framing, of course, is hardly unimportant when it comes to buying a car, evinced by the fact pretty much everyone chronicled herein engaged in some variation thereof: they compared cars, crunched numbers and turned to one or more devices to arrive at a decision. These calculative experiences, however, were only rarely undertaken in the spirit of truly value-oriented calculativity. I would argue rather that the economizing performativity of which Callon speaks comes only to the fore *after calculation*, when the buyer realizes that the lopsidedness of the encounter makes any more calculating pointless. Phrased differently, if we want to get at the performative foundations of a purely numbers-driven disposition, we ultimately need not expend too much effort rooting about the vicinity of calculativity. What we should be excavating instead are the means, truths and histories by which a buyer comes to take responsibility for the asymmetrical oppositionality of the

market. Learning to balance this oppositionality within oneself – making of it a series of quasi-formal principles by which to conduct one's conduct – this is economization writ perfect.

So with what then is disentanglement entangled? What is the bed of disembedded action? The short answer is market/power, an incitation to self-government which, I have tried to specify, is hardly repressive, but not empowering either. What this means, though the buyer comes to know a sense of constructive agony in the hunt for a car – an irreconcilability of interests sharpening her propensity for strategy and tactics – this petty pathos, given enough calculative 'rope,' becomes *autopetal* or self-seeking: her strategic faculties cease to suss the seller, only to be redirected themselves back onto her own subjectivity. The automobile then, which in the lead-up to its acquisition consumes so much cognitive fuel, serves a reflexive function: a market *actant* if there ever was one, the car ends up converting all the *intersubjectivities* swirling around her choice into an *intra*-intersubjectivity, awkward as that may sound. 'Real' entanglements lose their semblance of exteriority but not their consequentiality; they become virtual entanglements, beholden only to a seemingly objective logic of inevitability and necessity one has the duty to

impress upon oneself. The end-game of market/power, if we really think about it, is to govern oneself in accordance with market power.

## **The Buzz Saw of Negotiation**

I want to close with a few thoughts on a theme I touched upon but did not take up: the art and science of haggling. Of the 35 interviewees I asked, *are you the kind of person who enjoys haggling?* 21 said they unequivocally dislike it, which is more than twice as many – nine – who purported liking to haggle, with the remaining five expressing some form of ambivalence. The vagaries of sample size notwithstanding, my informants' decided distaste for negotiation flies in the face of recent American market research suggesting otherwise (cf. Zak, 2010): we are apparently living in a golden age of car-haggling, with over 44% of new car buyers now negotiating against initial offers. Those paying outright demonstrate the greatest proclivity to haggle, followed by those who finance and lessees (66.1%, 48.2% and 17.8% respectively; the former two are all-time highs).<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> My cohort contains another, perhaps greater statistical surprise: among the hagglers, women outnumber men five to four, which contradicts the widely reported feminine aversion to car-negotiation (cf. Bragg, 2004: 10; *Dr. Phil*, 2004; Lazarony, n.d.; Tuttle, 2012) first confirmed by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever (2003: 115-6; see Chapter Four above). Then again, scratch the surface of their proof and we see it is far from valid: Babcock and Laschever mention only a study which to this day remains unpublished (lead researcher Devavrat Purohit's 2011 CV confirms as much); worse still, they admit in an endnote (2003: 196n4) that the lopsided gender differential of which they speak is "not in the paper but came to us in a personal communication" with a secondary author.

research goes on to attribute the rise of assertive buyers – echoing Liguori and Romeo’s editorials in Chapter Six – to the internet and social media, which have made car pricing transparent, all the while miraculously deescalating buyer-seller hostilities.

Whatever the statistics involved, trying to understand the reality of haggling by tallying numbers is, I am afraid, a wasted effort. The question, *how many people ask for a discount?* does nothing to get at the fragility and, dare I say, symbolic impossibility of car-haggling. The question pales, moreover, in comparison to questions about the making and staking of discount-claims in the first place. What are the parameters of these claims, who governs the parameters and how do actors orient to them? These are the sorts of mundane but consequential problems with which my informants grappled, each from a different perspective and in a decidedly different way.

“Canadians do not know how to haggle. They’ve got no freaking clue!” This is the opinion of DB, a man whose lack of knowledge about cars is more than compensated by a preternatural instinct for turning a quick buck. One night at a party someone happened to mention a gentleman – an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance – desperate to unload his recently departed mother’s barely driven Mazda3 sedan, a ‘Touring Edition’ model containing

amenities over and above the top-most GT trim-level. DB salivated at the opportunity to flip the vehicle, towards which end he secured a hastily approved, but ridiculously usurious – 30%! – LOC at HSBC (DB in fact devoted a good chunk of interview-time railing against the bank’s ethical bankruptcy). He next wasted no time tracing the trail of connections back to the gentleman, himself elderly and who, DB immediately understood, was a “sitting duck” with “no game” – a so-called ‘easy mark.’ DB was thoroughly opaque from the get-go, misrepresenting himself and his interest in the -3, plying the old man with niceties and taking him on “emotional odyssey” designed to convince him to drop the price from \$6- to \$5,000. It worked.

Because DB knew interest on the LOC would accrue as quickly as cab fare, he took the liberty of listing the -3 for sale even before visiting the old man. There was an unexpected problem though: the gentleman’s mother may not have driven much, but she had sliced noticeable gashes into the car’s body which would require repairs. So began “a whole education” for DB by a cadre of morally dubious but trustworthy mechanics, body specialists and used car salesmen. The most important lesson he learned – veritably the first rule of ‘curbsiding’ or illegal motor vending – is not to sign the transfer portion of a car’s ownership card. That way when DB later sold the Mazda to the sister of his

brother-in-law, it appeared that *she* had bought it for \$5,000 from the old woman's son, a move saving her some \$1,200 in HST (Canada's VAT).

As for DB's interaction with his sister-in-law-removed, he thinks he may initially have mentioned \$13,500 as a price, an "utterance" that was hardly "contractual" but most definitely strategic, for the next time they spoke, he demanded \$16,500 on the grounds the car was listed for that amount on-line and generating interest. The first part was true, the second not as much: serious interest in the car had in fact started to wane, since at that point it had been on the market for a couple of weeks. Wanting however to put the transaction to rest, he gave her an firm offer: "I'll give it to you for \$14,000," a de facto fictitious \$2,500 discount that "made me look good with the family" to boot. A few days later, standing together at a bank teller's wicket to finalize the deal, she pulled a cheque out of her purse with DB's name already written on it, but not the final amount. "14,000?" she asked. "She was looking for a dicker," DB opines, but unfortunately for her, his understanding of closure clearly does not include concession.

DB is ultimately wrong to belittle the lack of negotiating savvy of his opposite numbers and Canadians in general. If anything, his story merely confirms the structural truth that representations inside a buyer-car-seller nexus

are so very hard to interrogate and even harder to reverse. So while DB's sister-in-law-removed nominally scored a sizeable discount, some of it was debatable, some of it punishable by law, and none of it of her own making. In which case DB, the supremely self-serving gatekeeper of discounts that he is, is in some perverse sense a harbinger of the 'new' sales paradigm lauded in Chapter Six, the one which basically assumes agency is strictly a function of the rather passive task of seeking pricing transparency. Yet once this transparency has been duly 'inculcated,' it becomes, much like DB's firm offer, a rigid script requiring no further agential effort insofar as it specifies precisely the point to which discounts can be claimed. I obviously would have liked to have interviewed DB's sister-in-law-removed – harbinger of 'brave new buyers' – but in her absence a comment by DG more than sums up the spirit of the age: "My form of negotiation is research."

Even when a buyer does author her own discounts, she is almost *never* in a position to divine fully the play of technical, financial and regulatory frames that may or may not re-justify her hard-won fruits. I think of *IS* and her partner, who were forced to haggle with a Ford saleswoman over a number of issues vis-à-vis a used Focus wagon, namely rust – here *IS* was able to knock \$100 off the price – as well as an excessive "'admin fee.'" The dealership in question was demanding



\$300, which to *IS* did not “sound reasonable,” particularly when someone at a prior Ford dealer informed her – and this was the first she heard of it – that he would waive the fee, which is commonly \$150. The saleswoman ultimately agreed to \$150 and the sale proceeded (all of *IS*’ dickering occasioned the quip, “Some people want a Caddy for motorcycle prices!” from the principal dealer’s father, a retired man who apparently has nothing better to do with his Saturdays then hang about his old workplace).

As *IS* recounted the admin-fee-fiasco, I kept tight-lipped – which was difficult for me – because I knew there was an official regulation concerning this, but could not remember exactly what. I subsequently learned that car dealers in Ontario *must* communicate ‘all-in’ pricing, above and beyond which they are forbidden to add anything except taxes (cf. Toljagic, 2011b). Was the original \$300 admin charge part of the all-in price, which is fine and legal, or was it an add-on? If the former, *IS* rightly saved \$150; if the latter, she was fleeced \$150. The truth can only be found – and I suspect *IS* is oblivious to this, as would be practically everyone else – in the minutiae of ordering of line-items on the bill-of-sale. My point is, assuming one is not prepared to go to the deceptive lengths of DB, SN or WH, *truly* successful car-haggling requires the foresight and fastidiousness of a forensic auditor. *IS* may say, “when it comes to finances...it’s

more [about] the big picture as opposed to, 'I just like negotiating,'" but really, what the big picture looks like is anybody's guess.

And that, indeed, is the rub of car-haggling: we may want and try to get the best deal possible, but most of us are painfully and ambivalently aware we cannot know what this mythical deal is. As *CD* nicely sums it up, car deals are necessarily win-lose propositions for buyers:

*MV*: So then in the end...do you feel that you got a deal?

*CD*: I think it wasn't a *great* deal, but I didn't get – I didn't feel ripped off at the end of it. ...I felt that I haggled my way up slightly, like, in terms of the trade-in and...[window] tints. ...Like, I felt like I was [*Pause.*] – it was an OK deal, it wasn't great. But I felt kind of satisfied afterwards.

*MV*: Well OK, [*Chuckles.*] OK so, it's – what I'm hearing from you, it's a bit of both, like–

*CD*: Yeah!–

*MV*: You're happy but, I don't know, you're not! I'm, I'm kind of getting mixed messages – well not mixed! I mean, that's normal I guess; mixed messages are normal, but [*Trails off.*]

*CD*: Uh I guess, [*Pause.*] I don't know, like, what's a great deal though? Like, how do you know you've gotten a great deal on a car?

*MV*: Yeah, that's actually one of my questions, [*Laughing through the words.*] how do you figure out what's a good deal?

CD: Exactly! ...But how do you know? Like you don't know, and you just – you go in [and] you're expecting to be – [*Pause.*] you're expecting to get the shit-end of the deal!

The only certainty about a car negotiation, CD is saying, is its inherent uncertainty. And even when one does know about cars, as does LT, the lone interviewee one could call a car aficionado, ambivalence can never be dispelled. LT, who lives in Toronto, arranged to meet with the seller of a 1990 BMW 318 – a E30 in Bimmer-babble – who drove all the way from Ottawa, some 450 km away. LT's negotiating problem was obviously not one of technical or mechanical illiteracy – immediately upon inspecting the car he could tell it was a well-loved specimen. His handicap was ironically the exact opposite: LT quickly realized – and no doubt the seller too – that their shared literacy and enthusiasm for BMWs constituted a tacit obligation between them. LT truly did want the car – after all, the pool of quality E30s from that generation is dwindling fast – and they truly did haggle, finding a mutually acceptable price. And yet, LT still feels something about the negotiation was forced, as if it was not truly a negotiation: "It's almost like, [true] haggling is like, 'I don't really need this car; I really don't want this car or care if I get it. So you better give it to me for a good price or I'm leaving.' But

this one was harder to do just because of the circumstances. ...When you're invested in it, it's harder to [haggle]."

So if haggling for a car is symbolically impossible for those occupying positions of minority, what is the solution? What links, put another way, my observation that so many people hate car-haggling to the more general finding haggling has never been healthier? It is, if I may say one last time, economization, that moment of disentanglement or release from all calculative worries and concerns. HD, commenting on haggling in general, said something very insightful: "to pay full price is to have no regrets." Extending this line of reasoning, I would say that the purpose of becoming economic is always to take the sting out of our choices, not just at full price, but any price really. This is obviously not to say that car buyers, as if risibly vain, need discursively to deny or conceal the uncomfortable truth they are incapable of making smart choices. Rather, the exhortation to economy springs from a very different, yet very human motivation all the same: *hope* – Pandoric hope at that – or the promise of perfectibility in an ocean of imperfection. As Bourdieu (2005: 6) so rightly noted, the field of economy is not so much a world of calculations as "a universe of belief" requiring its newcomers, like any religion, to submit to "enforced conversions."

## **Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

How many times in your life have you acquired a car?

Was the vehicle you most recently acquired new or used?

Did you lease, finance or buy it outright?

How long did the process take (i.e. from the moment you realized you needed or wanted a new vehicle to its delivery)?

What research did you do? How did you know what vehicle you wanted?

Tell me about the process of acquiring your latest vehicle. How did it happen?

What was the final deal, and how did you arrive at it?

What was your greatest concern or obstacle with respect to making a choice? In other words, what was the greatest unknown in your mind?

Do you enjoy haggling or negotiating?

What was the overriding emotion you felt during the transaction process?

How satisfied were you with the deal? Was it fair? What constitutes a fair deal?

Fairness notwithstanding, could or should you have paid less?

Who do you think benefited more in the transaction?

Did you have a more or less defined 'game' or strategy? If so, what was it? How successful was it?

Did you ever mentally rehearsing conversations with sellers beforehand?

Did you ever get the impression a seller was trying to manage you? If so, how?

Did you feel at any point like you were losing control of the transaction or negotiation? How so?

Is there anything else about the transaction you would like to add?

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