

## ARTICLE

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**“DEAR SGANARELLE, WOULD YOU LIKE  
A CIGARETTE P(L)AIN PACKAGE?”  
A SOCIOLOGY OF TOBACCO PLAIN PACKAGING**

*Prezado Sganarelle, você gostaria de um pacote de cigarro?  
Uma Sociologia das embalagens de produtos derivados do tabaco*

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**ABSTRACT**

But what is plain packaging really? How does it work? And does it work? This paper analyzes the nature, workings, and implications of tobacco packaging through a close examination of what it is, what it promises, and what it actually does. It presents cigarette packs as a machine aimed at playing on consumers' cognition through visual impressions. The author first plays the devil's advocate by unveiling and discussing the possible negative or perverse effects of such packaging. A first effect is that plain packaging is modifying, but also endangering, marketing democracy by replacing the fight between private interests and the public good by a totalitarian reign of public policy. A second effect is generated by the first one in the form of the preference for hiding boxes, contraband cigarettes, alternative drugs, and so on. Ultimately, the author critically reflects on his own analysis and suggest that consumers should beware of the criticisms addressed to plain packaging: he explains why social scientists, no matter how sound their arguments may be, should take care to not become stupid by trying to being too smart.

**KEYWORDS:** Tobacco, plain packaging, criticism, corporate social responsibility, political consumption.

**RESUMO**

O que realmente é uma embalagem padronizada? Como ela funciona? Ela funciona? Este artigo analisa a natureza, o funcionamento e as implicações da embalagem de cigarros por meio de um exame detalhado do que é, o que promete e como realmente atua. Apresenta pacotes de cigarros como uma máquina destinada a atuar sobre a cognição dos consumidores através de impressões visuais. Em um primeiro momento o autor interpreta o advogado do diabo ao revelar e discutir os possíveis efeitos negativos ou perversos dessas embalagens. Um primeiro efeito é que a embalagem padronizada está modificando, mas também colocando em perigo a democracia no mercado, substituindo a disputa entre os interesses privados e o bem público por uma ação totalitária de políticas públicas. Um segundo efeito é decorrente do primeiro na forma da preferência por caixas ocultas, cigarros contrabandeados, drogas alternativas, e assim por diante. Por fim, o autor reflete criticamente sobre sua própria análise e sugere que os consumidores devem estar atentos às críticas dirigidas às embalagens padronizadas: ele explica porque cientistas sociais, independente dos argumentos que utilizem, devem ter o cuidado de não se tornarem estúpidos tentando ser mais inteligentes.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Produtos derivados do tabaco, embalagem padronizada, crítica, responsabilidade social corporativa, consumo político.

## Introduction

"Don Juan, Act I, A palace. Scene 1

**SGANARELLE, *holding a snuffbox.***

No matter what Aristotle says with all his Philosophy, there's nothing like tobacco: it is the passion of respectable men; and the man who lives without tobacco is not worthy to live. Not only does it replenish and relax the human brain, but it also instructs souls in virtue, for through it one learns how to become a sociable man. Haven't you ever noticed how obliging someone becomes as soon as he has some tobacco? And how happy he is to hand it out left and right, wherever he might be? Without even waiting to be asked, he anticipates the wishes of others: thus it is true that tobacco inspires sentiments of honor and virtue in those who use it. But enough of this. Let's pick up where we left off."

(Molière, Don Juan, Act I, scene 1, translated by Brett B. Bodemer, 2010, available at: [http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=lib\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=lib_fac)).

This incredible panegyric of tobacco delivered by Don Juan's valet Sganarelle opens Molière's famous play without any apparent connection to the great tragedy that follows (see the transition: "But enough of this. Let's pick up where we left off"). Is this tobacco presented without package? No, it's just the contrary and rather three times so. Here we have not one but three packages. Firstly, the material package of the snuffbox, which is a plain one without any words or messages. Secondly, the symbolic package of Sganarelle's words, which go from complete nonsense (his reference to Aristotle is false; Aristotle predated the introduction of tobacco in Europe) to high praise ("there is nothing like tobacco..."). Thirdly, the speech occurs between the cover of the play and the remainder of the text, a mythical and metaphysical tragedy about freedom, seduction, and death. The lesson is clear: tobacco is always packaged, whatever the package may be. Goods are never *just* goods; they can be goods or bads (Neyland and Simakova, 2010; Latour, 2014), depending on the medium that introduces and qualifies them (Hennion, Méadel and Bowker, 1989). This raises question concerning the proper packaging to convey the appropriate presentation of tobacco.

Since Molière, everything has remained the same and, at the same time, everything has changed. Things are still the same in that the individual physical pleasure associated with tobacco is still alive, as is its collective cultural dimension (for a delightful defense of cigarettes, see for instance Paul Auster's bewitching movie, *Smoke*). Similarly, transgression of social norms and wisdom is still there. If Sganarelle's pro-tobacco discourse awkwardly mimics Don Juan's provocations against decency and religion, modern tobacco makers still support the promotion of a dangerous vice through highly similar arguments. But things have also dramatically changed: the packages and the words are no longer the same as they once were. Plain packaging, in particular, is the very last manifestation of this story. It tries to go back from vice to virtue by shifting Sganarelle's Marlboro-like slogan—"the man who lives without tobacco is not worthy to live"—into its exact contrary: "the man who lives with tobacco is almost surely condemned to die..." for the good reason that "smoking kills." Thanks to modern packaging, we all know this lesson now.

But what is plain packaging really? How does it work? And does it work? In this paper, I will analyze the nature, workings, and implications of tobacco packaging through a close examination of what it is, what it promises, and what it actually does. I will present cigarette packs as a visual "captation" device (Cochoy, 2007a), i.e. as a machine aimed at playing on consumers' cognition through visual impressions. As a consequence, but also as an extension, of the recent fruitful call for "imagining" organizational settings (Mc Lean's et al., 2011), I will propose to conduct the study of cigarette packaging considering its workings,

i.e. through the mobilization and examination of a series of pictorial elements. I will first play the devil's advocate by unveiling and discussing the possible negative or perverse effects of such packaging. A first effect is that plain packaging is modifying, but also endangering, marketing democracy by replacing the fight between private interests and the public good by a totalitarian reign of public policy. A second effect is generated by the first one in the form of the preference for hiding boxes, contraband cigarettes, alternative drugs, and so on. Ultimately, I will critically reflect on my own analysis and suggest that consumers should beware of the criticisms addressed to plain packaging: I will explain why we, social scientists, no matter how sound our arguments may be, should take care to not become stupid by trying to being too smart.

## **I. From packaging democracy to sanitary totalitarianism?**

Modern packaging was invented by private companies as a way to fight product substitution and unfair competition from lower quality commodities sold in bulk, and to promote brand names and product quality through their direct display on the goods (Cochoy, 2014a). This said, it would be a great mistake to consider packaging as a wholly private device. From its very origins, packaging has become the site of a mixed economy, where free corporate messages are combined with mandatory legal mentions. Packaging was both a tool for and a remedy against fraud. It was a tool for fraud because packaging boxes, by preventing the direct evaluation of products before their purchase and consumption, hid their contents and thus favored deceptive practices. But it was also a remedy against the same practices; printing the brand details with a description of the product worked as a written contract between the supplier and the consumer. At the beginning of the twentieth century, very soon after the spread of packaging technologies and packaged goods (Twede, 2012) — see the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act in the USA or the 1905 Law on Fraud Repression in France — legal authorities took advantage of this implicit contractual dimension by imposing requirements on what must be mentioned, such as the producer's name and address, or the precise description of the nature, weight, and volume of the content. When such details became mandatory, packaging thus took on a public character. The regulations converted packaging into the first traceable device, thereby engaging the responsibility of the manufacturer and correspondingly protecting consumers from possible abuses.

From this point onward, packaging became a political arena, where private interests and public values compete for winning consumers' attention, much like opposing political parties struggle to gain the population's vote and then benefit from a given share of parliamentary seats (Cochoy and Grandclément, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Applying such view to the history of cigarette labelling has two advantages. First, it helps to establish cigarette packaging as a "captation device." (Cochoy, 2007a) "Captation" describes the action of "capter," a French verb meaning to "attract," "seduce," "captivate," but by no means "capture." Any captation attempt is about an effort to lure the target oneself without forcing him or her to come. This is the only acceptable and workable "attachment" strategy in politics and marketing, where forced votes or sales are legally forbidden. Voters and consumers are free to choose and should thus be convinced to make their choices by means other than violence and coercion. Captation often rests on the use of special devices (or "dispositifs") that play on people's dispositions. Packaging is one of such devices; it is a material entity which bets on its readers' dispositions. But the packaging of cigarettes is

<sup>1</sup> Packaging, as an area of dispute between private and public forces, might have this confrontational aspect because it may be the only "space" where public organizations can actually have any say over private organizations. In Brazil, for instance, different consumer organizations analyze product packaging to check if the information on the labels/package of products is in line with consumer protection codes. They do this because it is an inexpensive way of making such analyses. Unlike many international consumerist organizations that engage in product testing, these Brazilian organizations do not have resources to do so. I thank one of the reviewers for this remark.

particular to the extent that it is the place of captation and counter-captation activities. On the cigarette parliament, each party is playing the captation game differently. The conservative, or private, party of cigarette makers which has long dominated the scene, plays mostly on emotions and seduction, for example the French brands Gauloises and Gitanes, with their seductive female names, or Marlboro virile imagery, with the cowboy and his hat. On the other hand, the progressive, or public, party of public authorities, which gradually entered the game, tried to play on rational calculation by providing cold facts about the product's content, and later about its dangers ("smoking kills"), as de-captation strategies aimed at cutting the attachments between smokers and their cigarettes.

Evaluating how the power dynamic between public and private parties evolved is very simple: we just have to look at the packaged parliament over the long period and measure how the repartition of the seats varied. This can be done by counting the number of square millimeters occupied by each side (brand and logo on the one hand; sanitary messages on the other). These square millimeters are the equivalent of the number of seats in a classic parliament. Such examination demonstrates the clear turn around that has recently occurred, particularly after September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003, when the new European regulation imposing large black and white sanitary messages on cigarette packs was introduced (see figure 2).

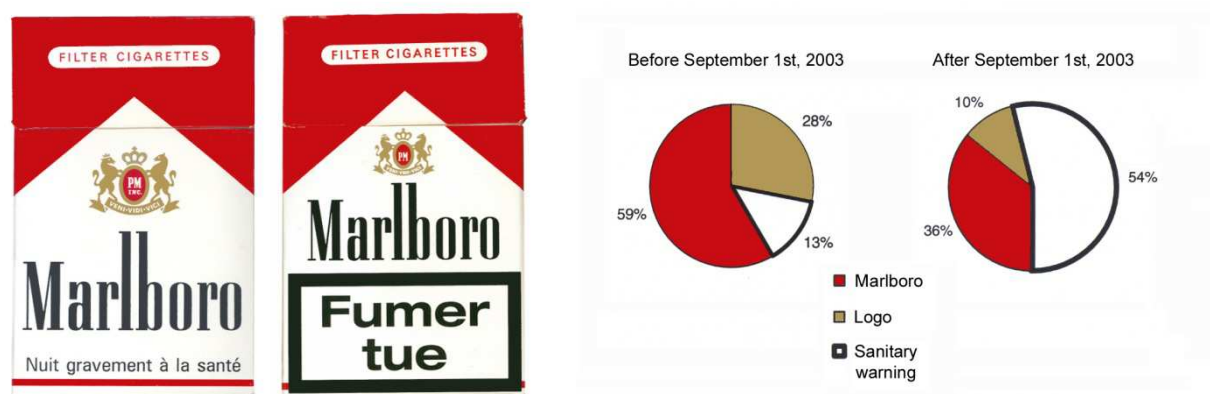


Fig. 1. Marlboro's parliament

It must be noted that if packaging looks like a democratic scene, it may be a blurred and ambiguous one. In their landmark book, *Acting in an uncertain world*, Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthes (2009) convincingly promoted "hybrid forums"; that is, political arenas distinct from classic parliaments where varied interest groups can debate hot issues and hopefully reach shared agreements thanks to this local, bottom-up, and interactive governmental device. A cigarette pack is both close to and far from a hybrid forum. It is close to it in the sense that it is not a classic "closed" parliament but a distributed and "open" one, available "in the wild" to everyone and thus equipped with the power to bring politics into people's real lives. Yet, cigarette packaging is far from hybrid forums in the sense that it gives no room for laymen's expression and interactive debates. But the more important issue lies elsewhere. In *Acting in an uncertain world*, hybrid forums are implicitly presented as places where the identities of participants are well defined, easily identified, and remarkably stable. No matter the subtleness of their positions and arguments, laymen, politicians, scientists or economic agents are supposed to be easily distinguishable from one another according to their clear distinct interests. The cigarette package, by contrast, promotes the understanding that we should beware of such surface identities.

The cigarette case shows that actors' identities may be blurred, or even cheated. It would be wrong to claim that regulation and the fight for health is on the public side only,

while the private side focuses exclusively on the promotion of cigarette images and individual pleasure. Sometimes, the most virtuous discourse is not promoted by the one we may expect. Surprisingly, cigarette makers may shift positions by playing the public sanitary game. Philip Morris did so by voluntarily supplementing the mandatory messages of public authorities with its own preventive schemes. Firstly, the company has issued a marketing code where it proclaims its Corporate Social Responsibility by advertising to adults only: “Philip Morris International is totally committed to marketing of its cigarettes responsibly. In that connection, Philip Morris does not market its cigarettes to minors. It is firmly of the belief that cigarettes should be consumed by adult smokers. Accordingly, all advertising and promotions should be directed towards adult smokers only, and not towards minors.” (Philip Morris’ Cigarette marketing code,<sup>2</sup> underlined in the original text). Secondly, this commitment, far from being restricted to a virtuous but ineffective intention, is implemented as a real, testable, and systematic policy. For instance, the message “for adults only” is printed on each cigarette pack. This is a voluntary statement, absent from the list of sanitary messages imposed by regulative bodies but very close to the regulatory statements in terms of style, intention, and content (see for instance the public warning: “smoking when pregnant harms your baby”). This raises a conundrum: why would a profit driven company act against its own interest by isolating possibly one of the most strategic market segments? The teenager segment is the market where the smoking habit develops most effectively<sup>3</sup> and may thus secure Philip Morris’ future profits. Are teenagers able to identify that it is the brand that is speaking to them? Are they sensitive to its message? Is Philip Morris’ act not too virtuous to be true? Should we not be wary of corporate rhetoric (Brownlie and Saren, 1992)?

In order to answer these intriguing questions, with the help of two of my former students, I conducted a survey among the pupils of a secondary school for vocational training in Toulouse, France ten years ago (Cochoy, 2014b). We obtained 282 answers from mostly male pupils (94%) aged between 14 and 23. The average age of the population was 17 years old, with 59% students under 18). Among several items about tobacco consumption, the respondents were asked about varied sanitary messages and their origin. The results were as counterintuitive as they were striking. When faced with the message “For adults only,” our young respondents predominantly attributed it to the law more often than true legal warnings such as “Smoking may reduce the blood flow and causes impotence” (67.8% against 46.7%). Even more surprising, 67.8% of the smokers were victims of this confusion, while only 52.9% of the non-smokers were unable to distinguish it from a true legal warning. Our respondents were obviously cheated; they took the company’s discourse for a public message. The abuse could go further still. By telling teenagers, who want to become adults, that “minors should not smoke,” doesn’t the message work as a perverse way to provoke transgression and entice them to smoke? The true meaning behind the message is clear. The company has found a way to engage the market it pretends to refuse. Despite, and perhaps because of, its exclusive sanitary warning addressed to minors, Philip Morris is a leading brand among teenagers<sup>4</sup>.

Phillip Morris’ marketing strategy is an illustration of the complex game of capture and counter-capture. George Stigler (1971) proposed the fascinating but discouraging theory of capture. This liberal theory hinders normative and virtuous political ambitions by demonstrating that public policies are nothing but the diverted expression of the private interests they derive from. Through lobbying, private parties capture the public authorities to obtain the regulations they wish. If capture theory is accurate, one would be better off not going through public policy but rather relying on the laissez-faire market, since the latter favors the expression of a wider range of competing interests. Hopefully the sanitary

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.legacy.library.ucsf.edu/documentStore/h/i/v/hiv19e00/Shiv19e00.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> For a review of the scientific literature on this issue, see [http://archive.tobacco.org/articles/category/nicotine/?starting\\_at=2655](http://archive.tobacco.org/articles/category/nicotine/?starting_at=2655).

<sup>4</sup> <http://yesmoke.eu/blog/young-adult-smokers-words-big-tobacco/>



warnings printed on tobacco packaging confirm that capture theory does not always work. Despite Stigler, there is little chance that restrictive and negative labeling have been obtained through company lobbying. However, the Philip Morris example shows that what lobbying misses to obtain upstream from regulators can be later gained downstream by playing on the language of regulation itself: a new game that I propose to name “recapture.” It is interesting to now consider what plain packaging is doing, or not doing, to this game of failed capture and recapture. Plain packaging introduces a dramatic change. It takes over the parliament to the point that the very idea of democratic contradictory debate disappears. By winning 98% of the seats, the public discourse overwhelms the corporate one, shifting from marketing democracy to sanitary totalitarianism! The public authorities engage in an interesting variant of what I previously identify as “counter-capture” (Cochoy, 2007b). By counter-capture, I refer to the strategy which consists of regulators allowing, even encouraging, private actors to voluntarily engage in self-regulation policies (see for instance how the European Union favored the development of Corporate Social Responsibility schemes [CSR] in the early 2000s), then developing new regulations thereby making mandatory what companies had done voluntarily (sadly enough, in 2006, due to a lack of will, the EU eventually renounced the project it had built over several years for CSR matters). Plain packaging introduces another kind of counter-capture, in which regulators fully appropriate corporate devices (here packaging) hence stopping companies from “recapturing” their previous attempts. But is such a game fair? Is plain packaging going too far? Should we not beware of political arenas where only one party has (and even confiscates) the exclusive right to speak?

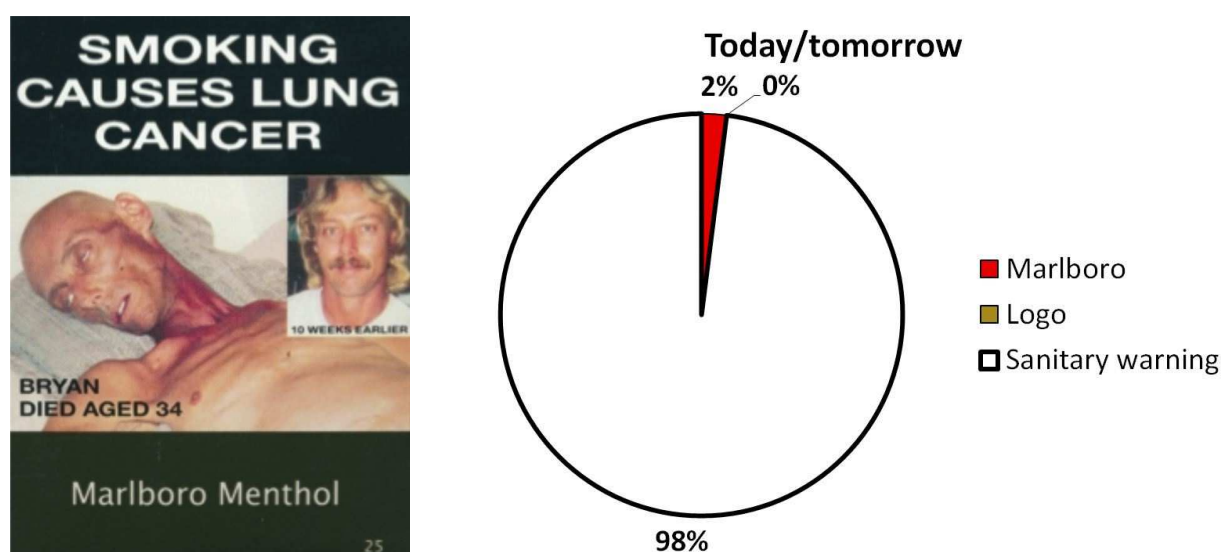


Fig. 2. Marlboro totalitarian plain packaging

## II. Plain packaging as a risky new “market agencement”

In order to answer these highly delicate and political questions, I would like to first explore the plain packaging logic at a more generic level, detached from the particular case of tobacco. To do so, I will refer to a scientific-artistic experiment that Catherine Grandclément and I had the chance to develop with the help of the artist Alexis Bertrand. This experiment was part of Bruno Latour’s exhibition, *Making things public*, presented in 2005 at the ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany (Latour and Weibel, 2005). The general purpose of the exhibition was to display a “parliament of parliaments.” The objective was to show that politics, as the effort aimed at assembling the public, was far from restricted to the classic institutions of representative democracy but was instead a pervasive and dispersed activity,

which may be traced in several places such as the screens of financial markets, the computer code of a voting machine, and so on. Our installation focused on shopping carts and packaging as distributed, mundane, and unknown parliaments (Cochoy and Grandclément, 2005). In the latter case, we submitted the iconic Kellogg corn flakes package, with its famous green and red roaster, to a set of special destructive but also creative operations. Two of these operations were trying to take Naomi Klein (2000)'s call for a "no logo" economy seriously, by applying it to our colorful branded cereal boxes, in order to see what it does and where it leads (both physically and cognitively). In other words, we practiced two distinct types of "logotomies."



Fig. 3. Making things public: logotomies © Alexis Bertrand

The experiment visible on the lower left image attempts to replay marketing history backwards, one by one removing each of layers of marketing from the fully contemporary package, with all its colorful logos, pictures and messages, to the mere designation of its generic content with color; then black and white words and images; then words only (product name and quantity); then plain mute plastic packaging; and finally the naked bulk product. The experiment displayed on the lower right image works from a set of ten corn flakes packages of different brands, from which we removed everything that was connected to these brands, from written messages to external qualification. We kept the images of the product itself as the simplest indication of the box content, in order to get as close as possible to the bulk product approach without abandoning the packaged economy.

These two experiments help understanding what plain packaging means. They do so along a dual Weberian comprehensive strategy, except that in this case the strategy goes along visual rather than mental lines and is focused on understanding objects rather than people, or rather on how people understand objects. On the first table, by retracing the development to fully embellished packaging backwards to its original plain form, we realize what it costs to abandon all that we have learnt, what it means to be deprived of the materialism we have grown to rely on in order to value the products, and what it means to lose all of the internal and external “qualculative” dimensions through which we choose our goods — i.e. the price and quality features on which we base our calculation (Cochoy, 2008). In this process, we go back from *testing* to *tasting*, i.e. assessing quality through a direct but highly partial and imprecise sensorial experience (tasting) rather than through a delegated systematic and standardized judgment based on measurements and laboratory qualification (testing). On the second table, by removing brand identifications and written messages from competing packages, we understand how difficult it would be to behave again as Buridan’s donkeys, i.e. as consumers obliged to choose between the same and the same (Cochoy, 2004). Without external qualification, the package economy, which is all about product differentiation, becomes pointless; either the goods are packaged and you need some means to distinguish them, or the goods are deprived of qualifications and you should remove the packages and sell the goods naked and mixed, displayed in bulk as a generic good placed in a single plain container.

But the detour through corn flakes packages points to the biggest difference between what a plain package truly is and what the so-called “plain packages” of cigarettes are. With the corn flakes experiments, we see plain packages as white boxes deprived of any information except the product name and volume in one case (left table) or the bulk generic product visual aspect in the second case (right table). As we can see, the plain cigarette packages of today are totally at odds with both variants. If they show the product name, or rather the brand, they don’t abandon the external images and other qualifications of the “testing” regime. On the contrary, they keep and even overplay them by displaying shocking pictures of possible diseases and emphasizing external testing-like sanitary information and warning. The only difference is that all the positive aspects of the previous packages have been removed and replaced by negative ones. The so-called plain cigarette packages thus have nothing to do with the “plain” idea. They should be more accurately renamed as “negative” cigarette packaging. In this respect, they are just another outcome of a process which started earlier in other markets. For example, the development of “negative nutrition” from the late eighties (Belasco, 1989; Levenstein, 1993), which led British authorities to highlight with yellow or red traffic lights the worse nutrimental components like sugar, fat or salt (Séguy, 2014) or the practice of “negative screening” in ethical finance, which consists of banning financial products which are associated with unethical businesses like the weapon, alcohol and tobacco industries (Waring and Lewer, 2004). What are the possible effects of such a subtraction, such a biased and incomplete presentation? Let’s evoke two of them.



Firstly, as we have established, the aim of plain packaging is not to bring us back to bulk tobacco. Cigarettes are still traditionally packaged and they are packaged in a negative way to provoke rejection. But what rejection? The official goal is, of course, to have smokers flee the cigarettes. But the smokers may rather flee the plain package, not the cigarettes themselves or the harmful practices associated with them. Two adaptive behaviors may occur there.

Smokers may first counter the cognitive dissonance between cigarette pleasure and negative packaging by playing the ostrich game. The idea is not to literally dig their head in the sand but to put the frightening package in a reassuring cigarette-box which ironically shifts the so-called plain packaging into a true one, with some exceptions for example when the case is decorated with nice colors and drawings. We realize that if removing the symbols from cigarettes puts on the forefront the disgust for tobacco-related illnesses, it also isolates the taste of cigarettes as one of the only remaining pieces of information available to the consumer, thus retaining the pleasure of tobacco consumption, while discarding the brand imagery. This is an ironic effect of plain packaging. By banning words and images but not the product itself, the packaging implicitly acknowledges that the product is not the main aspect; that people also consume words, symbols, and the social meaning attached to them; and that these elements possibly matter even more than the underlying addiction.

Secondly, smokers may also flee negative packaging by going back to bulk-like forms of the product like rolling tobacco, real bulk cigarettes that may be found on the contraband market, or even more dangerous alternatives like cannabis which, apart from its pharmaceutical versions, is sold without any form of legal packaging and sanitary warnings.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, negative cigarette packaging, instead of having a positive effect on it targets, may, at best, have no real impact or, at worse, favor more dangerous behavior. Here, we meet the tragedy of “contested markets,” as they are presented in a recent book edited by Philip Steiner and Marie Trespeuch (2014). On the one hand, and as the authors show, some markets are contested, based on the argument that some goods should not be marketed because they may harm part of the public (see tobacco, alcohol or pornography which are not suitable for children) or because they raise serious environmental or ethical concerns, like GMOs, surrogate mothers, and so on. On the other hand, it has often been argued that banning something from the official market is the best way to cause its proliferating on black markets, an unregulated market place with no taxes and no State input. In that sense, plain packaging faces a dilemma; being too negative may well be counter-productive. Recently, Michel Callon (2013) proposed the notion of “market agencements” to designate complex arrangements made of social and material entities which are assembled in order to attach or, as in the present case, detach a good to or from a given agency for a payment. Cigarette packaging fully meets this definition: it is a combination of cardboard, legal frameworks, corporate messages, words, images, sanitary warnings that, depending on their combination, may or may not facilitate the attachment between people and cigarettes. As we observed, such agencements are highly complex and fragile, depending on the given combination of the elements involved, they will either reach or miss their goal.

### **III. Discussion: please let's try not becoming stupid by being too smart**

We showed earlier that the evolution of cigarette packaging as a parliament went from marketing democracy to sanitary totalitarianism. But we should not forget that, even if the regulator takes full control of the package, the package and the cigarettes it contains are still there. Plain packaging is massively totalitarian in terms of political supply, but fully liberal

<sup>5</sup> Having such choice is, of course, the privilege of the wealthy. In some countries, poor smokers buy cigarettes by the unit and have thus no contact with cigarette packaging and are thus unaware of changes that might be associated with them. So instead of adopting a behavior in reaction to any subtractions, they are “immune” to such changes from the start. I thank one of the reviewers for this remark.

in terms of consumer choice. In other words, this device is highly ambiguous: it is about banning tobacco without banning it. Does it make sense? Why delete words and images but keep the cigarettes, if it is the latter rather than the former that harms smokers? If a product is bad, if smoking kills, if smoking is just a matter of consuming death, then why still sell it? In fact, what looks like nonsense on the surface is much more understandable when considering the underlying philosophy. Plain packaging may be taken as a variant of the nudge economy, which proposes a subtle articulation between the libertarian dogma of free choice and the public concern for people's health, along the assumption that consumers are not fully aware of the possible consequences of their actions but should keep their freedom to choose (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). In order to preserve the democratic principle of free choice but also simultaneously help people not to take decisions which may endanger their best interests, the Thaler and Sunstein propose to "nudge" them by devising special devices, like placing broccoli before the French fries in self-service school restaurants for instance. Plain packaging works along the same logic. It assumes that smoking or not smoking should remain an individual decision but it alters the appearance of cigarette packaging so that decisions can be made along another logic which prioritizes health concerns (the warnings come first on the package) over consumption pleasure (the cigarettes come next, once the package has been opened).

Let's put it another way. Banning the cigarettes would be acting along the contested market approach, which questions the "marketability" of some goods, at the risk of favoring the development of contraband alternatives. The plain packaging approach rather shifts from "contested" to "concerned markets." This latter notion has been recently proposed by Susi Geiger, Debbie Harrison, Hans Kjellberg and Alexandre Mallard (2015). The authors suggest that it could be wrong to assume radical opposition between the market economy and the "social society," for the good reason that any market situation combines resources taken from the two spheres. Thus, the question is not to contest markets and look for alternatives that either cannot be reached, prove limited, or can be countered by the proliferation of illegal versions of the markets one pretends to ban, but to be "concerned" about how to devise better market agencements (Cochoy, 2015a). Plain packaging is moving towards this. At first glance, it looks like a fully public and almost totalitarian alternative market but when taking a closer look at how it works, we realize that it still plays the market game by accepting the marketable character of tobacco but also nudging smokers to shift their practices in the "good" direction.

The problem however is of course to evaluate the way this is done. And I would say that the way this policy has been promoted appears quite questionable, at least to me. When one supports issues as undeniable as the noxiousness of tobacco, it is really a pity to do it backwards, shamefully, by using deception. Indeed, the irony of plain packaging is that the very means used for telling the truth about tobacco is itself a big lie. "Plain" packaging (in Anglo-Saxon countries), or "neutral packaging" (in France) has nothing "plain" nor "neutral" about it. A plain or neutral package is not a blank box without any message but rather a negative box which works hard to invert Sganarelle's eulogy about tobacco by deleting all its positive aspects and by replacing them with all its evils, and with these evils only (it just displays the health catastrophes it may lead to). In other words, plain packaging is as deceptive as tobacco; it is neither plain nor neutral, but fully talkative and partial. This reminds us of Barthes' mythologies, where the author explained how the French authorities, during decolonization in Algeria, considered it appropriate to invert the meaning of words by referring to what was obviously a true bloody war with the soft and harmless word of "pacification." About such usage, Barthes' warning is clear:

"Try as the official rhetoric will to reinforce the coverings of reality, there is a moment when the words resist it and oblige it to reveal beneath the myth the alternative of lie or truth." (Barthes, 1997, p. 109).

This warning may well apply to plain packaging also. If plain cigarette packaging wants to be effective, it should be fair. One cannot tell the truth through lies. The superfluous, deceptive and misleading “I” of “plain” should better be removed; the *pain* package should assume its status of a fully negative packaging. It should also accept what it tries to hide, that people are probably more willing to accept that smoking kills if one admits that it also brings pleasure and sociality.

This said, this point is a mere and peripheral detail since it focuses on the proper way to name the device, rather than the device itself and how to frame it. And as far as this second aspect is concerned, I would rather suggest having a try of plain packaging and waiting long enough before risking any judgment about its relevance and performance. Just like packages warn smokers against the dangers of cigarette smoking, I would like to warn my colleagues, the sociologists, against the risks of being too clever. In order to make clear the reasons behind such warning, I propose to make a detour through the sociology of food. This sub-discipline evidences a fight between social science and nutrition science. The latter focuses just on one single relationship, that between the eater and her food, and therefore restricts its statements and recommendations to matters of bad and good nutriments, their appropriate quantity, diversity and proper combination. By contrast, the sociology of food, which is particularly a developed and influential discipline in France, claims that eating practices entice much more complex relationships and dimensions than considered by the nutritionist approach. Feeding oneself involves not only the dyadic interaction between myself and my food, not only the chemical processes which occur in my body, but diverse cultural schemes, collective rhythms, social interactions, and sharing practices (Fichler, 1988; Poulain, 2002). Food consumption is even connected with technical artefacts, see how the kitchen table has been progressively abandoned for the sofa, the TV, the tray, and the consequences of such transformations (Kaufman, 2005). It is no coincidence that it is in the United States, that is, the country where people are sometimes “bowling alone” (Putman, 2000), and almost every day “eating alone, that food problems are at the highest level. Another argument against the nutritionist approach consists in unveiling the pressure of one lobby group behind another, a scenario which strangely echoes the fable of wolf and the little kid. If obesity is often denounced as an effect of agribusiness, this denunciation itself is supposed to be supported by the pharmaceutical industry (Poulain, 2009).

These brilliant fellow sociologists are of course fully right. Nutrition and obesity are linked to various interest groups. Food is not just a matter of chemical ingestion; it is a matter of culture, sociality, and collective behavior. And what is particularly interesting in our case, is that one could easily develop the very same arguments about tobacco, encouraged by Sganarelle who did it superbly, well before the invention of sociology: “Not only does [tobacco] replenish and relax the human brain [like nutrition], but it also instructs souls in virtue, for through it one learns how to become a sociable man. Haven’t you ever noticed how obliging someone becomes as soon as he has some tobacco? And how happy he is to hand it out left and right, wherever he might be? Without even waiting to be asked, he anticipates the wishes of others.” Like food, smoking is not a matter of isolated interaction between the consumer and the good but a wholly social practice, with its codes, networks, groups, and culture. It is both a matter of *qualculation* — i.e. valuing the product qualities along one’s individual preferences — and *calculation*, from the French verb “*calquer*,” i.e. copying, adjusting our consumption behavior to the those of our partners, and vice versa (Cochoy, 2008). We may even add that smoking may develop itself within legal framework but also does so through contraband. Ultimately, focusing on packaging only as the interplay between the smoker and the cigarette is not sufficient and could be misleading.

The most important issue is, of course, the performative power of plain cigarette packaging. Do people read packages? Do packages perform any of their warnings? Do people control their actions? These are delicate questions. Here, again, the parallel with nutrition could be fruitful. The opponents of nutrition argue that nutritional labelling has no

impact on obesity; they even claim that it is where the regulation is stronger — the US with the “nutrition fact scheme” (Frohlich, 2011) and the UK with the traffic light device (Séguy, 2014) — that obesity reaches some of its highest levels. If an image was needed to understand the discrepancy between labelling policies and their impact, I would say that regulators are like knights who are fighting about the best shape to give to wooden swords. The same could be said for plain packaging and cigarette smoking. Between 2012 and 2013, one year after the introduction of plain packaging in Australia, the sales of cigarettes had declined by 0.1% only. Another study based on the State of Victoria, published by the *British Medical Journal* also claims that the concerns of tobacco makers are groundless; plain packaging has not increased the incidence of contraband or counterfeited cigarettes (Vanlerberghe, 2014). Ultimately, in the food sector as in the tobacco market, the conclusion is the same. Plain packaging doesn’t produce any effect of any kind; it doesn’t work, or at least works very badly.<sup>6</sup> It appears as if plain packaging was exhibiting a similarly weak performance to commercial messages (Cochoy, 2015b). This weak performance is no surprise for commercials displayed from far away but is more discouraging for messages printed on the goods themselves, just before their consumption.

But then, there remains a mystery: why are some people fighting so hard something that supposedly works so badly? Because many actors probably guess that what seems to be inefficient in the short run is much more powerful on the long run. Over history, packaging proved able to deeply transform consumption and markets. Through what process and to what extent? A first answer is theoretical and relies on the “make-do” pattern identified by Bruno Latour. The author quotes a scene from the famous Spanish cartoon *Mafalda*. *Mafalda* asks her father, who is smoking on the sofa, “what are you doing?” The father answers: “As you can see, I am smoking.” And *Mafalda* replies: “Oh, I thought the cigarette was smoking you.” After this reply the father panics, take scissors, and cuts all his cigarettes.

Latour takes this funny scene on a serious ground to reflect on the concept of agency. He observes that neither the active form (“I smoke”) nor the passive one (“I am smoked”) can account for what is at stake in cigarette smoking. If we were fully controlling the action, it would be easy to stop and as we all know it is not. But, obviously, cigarettes cannot smoke us alone, since they need our help to buy, light and, smoke them. Hence Latour’s conclusion and proposition: we are not smoking cigarettes, and cigarettes do not smoke us, but cigarettes “make us smoke.” Beyond the active and passive forms Latour points at the existence of a third one, the “faire-faire” or “make-do” pattern which accounts for distributed agency (Latour, 1999). I submit that what is true for cigarettes can also be true for their containers. If cigarettes “make us smoke,” packaging makes us choose (Cochoy, 2004).

This theoretical scheme helps develop an understanding as to why plain packaging is badly performative: material containers like plastic bags or cardboard boxes cannot be accused of, or praised for, everything since they never work in isolation although they take their share, however modest, in the action (Hawkins, 2010). When action is not under the full control of the involved entities, it may be subject to leaks and overflows of varied extension. But whatever its extent, something is performed, as the long-term history of packaging clearly evidences it. A fascinating feature of packaging is its ability to work as a double screen. It is a screen in the sense that it acts as a hiding curtain that removes what it covers from sight, and other senses, but it is also a screen in the sense of a projection surface, where the product can be displayed, but displayed otherwise. Once packaged, the products cannot be tasted anymore but they can be “tested,” they can be presented and defined differently, not by the sensorial qualities experiences in their use, but by their legal, analytical, and chemical composition. In that sense, packaging paradoxically helps people to

<sup>6</sup> Specialists of neuromarketing have even claimed that warning messages and gruesome disease photos stimulated the subjects’ “nucleus accumbens,” an area of the brain associated with cravings, and thus enticed smokers to smoke more! (Lindstrom, 2008).



learn more about the products than what they could have learnt through a direct experience of them. For instance, consumers learn to like or dislike invisible, smell-less and tasteless substances, like vitamins, GMOs or nicotine. Without packaging, we get no nicotine, no tar, no carbon dioxide, no cancer, no death: just the pleasure of the smell, of the taste, of the smoke and of social life. Sganarelle's bulk tobacco is the exact opposite of the modern plain package. Depending on what one looks at, the perception of the product is turned upside down. The long-term transformation introduced by modern packaging is tremendous: there is no consumer that has not heard about the goods of vitamins and the bads of sugar, fat, or salt. There is no smoker that has not heard about the dangers of nicotine, tar, and carbon dioxide. If labelling doesn't matter directly, it has lateral long term effects. People know about what they ingest. In advanced countries with negative labelling, tobacco consumption has strongly decreased over the long period, even if the cause for this decrease is shared between several factors, like sanitary warnings and open discourse, but also, perhaps more importantly, the rise of cigarette prices.

## Conclusion

In the end, who should we listen to when plain packaging is under attack or scrutiny, and what should we say? I have myself raised several issues about the possible undesirable aspects and effects of plain packaging, like its deceptive character, its totalitarian aspect, and its unexpected tendency to favor alternative, and possibly more dangerous, practices. Moreover, I have even recognized that the immediate and sensorial pleasure and sociality of smoking could be stronger than long term abstract warnings. But it is very important to acknowledge that almost all the arguments I have independently developed, align with the arguments promoted by the tobacco industry. See, for example, the amazing memorandums written by Philip Morris to inform public authorities about its positions.<sup>7</sup> In the report, written for the UK government, the company quotes several studies denying any reduction of smoking prevalence in Australia since the adoption of plain packaging (p. 17); by contrast, it quotes others studies which show that illicit tobacco trade in Australia has increased (p. 22). Lastly, but not least of all, Philip Morris denounces the totalitarian aspect of plain packaging by stressing its supposed illegal character, with the argument that it infringes free trade principles and property rights (p. 4 sq.). We may both be right, but also fully disagree.

For long, we have lived with a division of tasks between laymen and social scientists. The first group was supposed to be immersed in action while the second was supposed to have time to be reflective and engage proper studies and thus help the former to get a clearer view about what they do and experience through life. This system is not valid anymore. When browsing the Internet on a subject like plain packaging, we quickly realize that the discussion is full of intellectuals, from every background, location, and discipline. We meet smart people on both sides of the debate but, based on this, we should admit that no additional cleverness is needed; it might well be even the contrary! As Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) convincingly argued, such situations should lead us to reinvent our duties. There are so many studies about plain packaging that it becomes vain to make any additional marginal contributions. I would even suggest a role reversal between the scientist and the politician, to speak in Weberian terms. We should better abandon science to laymen and experts, and have the social scientist become a politician. Or rather, we should invent a new science, with politics as its best guide to know what to write and what to do or which action to support. We should shift levels, by trying to be smart in another way. Instead of finding hard facts and developing clever arguments, we should shift from a fact- to a concern-oriented science (Latour, 2004; Latour 2014). To put it another way, we should go back to Aristotle. What is needed for issues like plain tobacco packaging, is philosophical essays more than empirical statements. When issues are controversial, science is of no

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.pmi.com/eng/tobacco\\_regulation/submissions/documents/executive\\_summary\\_of\\_pmnz\\_submission\\_on\\_plain\\_packaging\\_final.pdf](http://www.pmi.com/eng/tobacco_regulation/submissions/documents/executive_summary_of_pmnz_submission_on_plain_packaging_final.pdf);  
[http://www.pmi.com/eng/tobacco\\_regulation/submissions/Documents/UK%20-%20%20Standardised%20Packaging%20Submission%20PML.pdf](http://www.pmi.com/eng/tobacco_regulation/submissions/Documents/UK%20-%20%20Standardised%20Packaging%20Submission%20PML.pdf)

immediate help; therefore, we should be able to take decisions without waiting for certainties (Callon, Barthe and Lascoumes, 2009).

Being concerned is about judging science not on its accuracy, especially when it is controversial and laden with uncertainty, but based on who is talking and the values they are supporting. Smoking kills? Yes. Who fights plain packaging? Cigarette makers. This is enough to know which arguments to support and what to do. We don't have to look at such matters intellectually; we should better let people look at them when they are looking for cigarettes. We should have a try with plain packaging and see what happens. At least, we are quite certain that words and images will not harm as much as tobacco and this reassurance is enough to make the right decisions. Moreover, we should check who favors the arguments we promote and decide if these arguments should be kept on this basis, rather than on their supposed scientific relevance. It is much better not to simply say what your enemies like to hear. One has to let them fight for themselves, without supporting and legitimizing their claims with additional convergent arguments. In this respect, and despite the love we may have for our discipline, the best sociologist is the one who realizes that silence is sometimes better than science.

Here we meet Albert Hirschman's great lessons which should not be forgotten: in order to move forward, it is paradoxically better to obscure one's vision with a "hiding hand" capable to distract ourselves from the possible negative effects of our action (Hirschman, 1967). Not thinking too much is the best way to move forward; while imagining has always been one of the best rhetoric devices with which to refuse any change (Hirschman, 1991). Thinking too much, arguing too sharply, imagining possible unexpected effects and drawbacks about a given policy — like the supposed contraband effect provoked by to plain packaging — has always been the best way not to do anything (Hirschman, 1991). Once again, let's just a try, and hold on. Let's wish that Sganarelle, after two centuries of knowledge, discharged of his old-fashioned plain snuffbox and equipped with a brand new fully negative packaging, will not be as stupid as we might have thought:

"No matter what Sociologists may say with all their Social science, there's nothing like negative packaging: it is the reason for respectable men; and the scholar who doubts about negative packaging is not worthy to write. Not only does it replenish and warn the human brain, but it also instructs souls in virtue, for through it one learns how to remain a healthy man. But enough of this. Let's stop where we got now."

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